7-25-2025

Intrinsic Motivation Teaching Experiences of Middle School Educators 4 Years After the Pandemic

Carmy Aristor
Walden University

Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Carmy Aristor

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. Ethel Perry, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty
Dr. Silvia Bigatti, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2025

Abstract

Intrinsic Motivation Teaching Experiences of Middle School Educators 4 Years After the Pandemic

by

Carmy Aristor

MA, Nyack College, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

August 2025

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the educational landscape, significantly impacting middle school educators' intrinsic motivation to teach. While research has extensively addressed the immediate impacts of the pandemic on education, there remains a gap in understanding how middle school educators make sense of their intrinsic motivation teaching experiences 4 years after the pandemic. Grounded in intrinsic motivation as the conceptual framework, the purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the intrinsic motivation teaching experiences of middle school educators 4 years after the pandemic. The central research question examined the lived experiences of intrinsic motivation in teaching among middle school educators 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants comprised 10 middle school educators who have taught continuously since the pandemic's onset. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and were analyzed using Smith and Nizza's seven-step thematic analysis approach to identify patterns in how teachers made sense of their motivational experiences. Six themes emerged: sustaining intrinsic motivation through student-centered purpose, maintaining intrinsic motivation through competence building, ability to adapt to change, anchoring intrinsic motivation in professional identity and purpose, compartmentalizing external pressures, and reinforcing intrinsic motivation through community and relationship-building. Findings from this study can inform the development of targeted support strategies for maintaining teacher motivation and retention, ultimately contributing to positive social change through enhanced educational stability and effectiveness in middle schools during periods of significant disruption.

Intrinsic Motivation Teaching Experiences of Middle School Educators 4 Years After the Pandemic

by

Carmy Aristor

MA, Nyack College, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

August 2025

Dedication

To my husband, Ernst Bernard Aristor, whose unwavering love, encouragement, and steadfast belief in my dreams and ability made this journey possible. Thank you for being my anchor through every challenge and celebrating every milestone along the way.

To my children, Nia Christine Howard and Aaron Seth Howard, may this serve as a reminder that with hard work, persistence, determination, and the support of those who love you; the sky is the limit. Dream boldly, work intentionally, and never doubt that anything is possible when you set your mind to it.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I thank God for His grace, strength, and guidance that sustained me through every challenge and triumph along this path. His unwavering presence provided the foundation upon which this achievement was built.

I extend my sincere appreciation to my dissertation committee, whose expertise and dedication were instrumental in shaping this research. To my Chair, Dr. Ethel Perry, thank you for your exceptional guidance, scholarly wisdom, and unwavering support throughout this process. Your high standards and constructive feedback challenged me to produce work of the highest quality. To my Second Committee Member, Dr. Silvia Bigatti, your expertise and insightful contributions enriched this study immeasurably. The knowledge and guidance you both provided were invaluable in bringing this research to fruition.

I am grateful to the middle school educators who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights as participants in this study. Your willingness to reflect on your professional journeys and dedication to your students made this research possible. Your voices and experiences are the heart of this work.

To my village of family and friends who have cheered me on throughout this entire process, thank you for your encouraging words, prayers, and belief in my ability to reach this milestone. Your support carried me through moments of doubt and celebrated with me in moments of joy.

Thank you all for walking this transformative journey with me.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Intrinsic motivation, a cornerstone of self-determination theory (SDT), refers to engaging in an activity for the inherent satisfaction and enjoyment rather than for external rewards or consequences (Deci & Ryan, 2008). This form of motivation is characterized by a sense of volition and personal interest, driving individuals to pursue activities that align with their values and interests (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In education, intrinsically motivated teachers may find fulfillment in the act of teaching itself, deriving pleasure from facilitating student learning and growth (Jang, 2019). Intrinsic motivation is fundamental to SDT, serving as a mechanism through which individuals regulate their behavior and interact with their environment (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), the development and maintenance of intrinsic motivation are contingent upon satisfying three primary psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the need to feel in control of one's actions and decisions, experiencing a sense of volition in one's behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence involves feeling effective and capable in one's interactions with the environment and experiencing opportunities for growth and mastery (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness encompasses the need for meaningful connections, a sense of belonging, and social support (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the educational context, these needs translate to teachers having the freedom to make pedagogical decisions (autonomy), feeling confident in their teaching abilities (competence), and experiencing positive relationships with colleagues and students (relatedness; Pressley & Ha, 2021; Trinidad, 2021). When these psychological needs are met, educators are more likely to

experience intrinsic motivation, leading to greater job satisfaction, enhanced teaching effectiveness, and increased resilience in the face of challenges (Chang et al., 2022; Kraft et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic presented as a significant challenge.

The COVID-19 pandemic, first reported in the United States in January 2020 (Zviedrite et al., 2021), has had a profound impact on all aspects of society, including education. By May 2024, it had claimed over 1.1 million lives in the United States alone (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). In response to the pandemic, unprecedented nationwide school closures were implemented between February and June 2020, affecting nearly 50 million K-12 students, including over 11 million middle school students (Zviedrite et al., 2021). These closures, lasting 8 to 13 weeks, represented the broadest educational disruption in U.S. history (Baker et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021; Fox & Walter, 2022). To maintain educational continuity, school districts rapidly transitioned to distance learning programs (Kotowski et al., 2022). The pandemic's impact on education has been far-reaching, forcing a rapid and large-scale adaptation to new modes of teaching, and presenting unique challenges for educators.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on educator mental health have been widely explored during and after the pandemic in the United States and internationally (Hargreaves, 2021; Santiago et al., 2023; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022); however, educator intrinsic motivation has not received as much attention within the United States. This study examined the lived experiences of middle school educators in the United States, focusing on their intrinsic motivation to teach in the post-pandemic context.

The present chapter introduces the study's focus on middle school educators' intrinsic motivation teaching experiences 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic. It begins with a background discussion on the impact of the pandemic on education and the concept of intrinsic motivation. The chapter then presents the problem statement, highlighting the gap in understanding how middle school educators make sense of their intrinsic motivation teaching experiences in the post-pandemic context. Following this, the purpose of the study and the research question are outlined. The chapter introduces the conceptual framework based on intrinsic motivation within SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). It then describes the nature of the study, employing an IPA approach. Key terms are defined, and the study's assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations are discussed. The chapter concludes by addressing the significance of the study, emphasizing its potential contributions to educational practice, policy, and positive social change in supporting teacher intrinsic motivation and retention in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented disruption in the education sector, altering the landscape of teaching and learning (Anderson et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021). As schools abruptly transitioned to remote and hybrid learning models, educators were thrust into a new paradigm that demanded rapid adaptation and innovation (Pressley & Ha, 2021). This shift in educational delivery methods challenged teachers' technological competencies and tested their pedagogical flexibility and resilience (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). The necessary changes during the COVID-19 pandemic

extended beyond instructional modalities, encompassing interconnected challenges that impacted educators' professional experiences and potentially their intrinsic motivation (Wright et al., 2023). Thus, there is the need for a deeper understanding of how teachers have navigated and continue to navigate this transformed educational landscape (Pressley et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2023).

The information collected from this study is valuable for several reasons. First, it will inform educational stakeholders, policymakers, and practitioners about the challenges faced by educators in maintaining their intrinsic motivation 4 years after the onset of the pandemic. Second, understanding what intrinsically motivates educators facing ongoing challenges will help school leaders and policymakers better support teacher persistence and effectiveness. This, in turn, will contribute to improved teacher retention rates, which is crucial given the current teacher shortage crisis (Bryant et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). Lastly, by retaining experienced, passionate teachers, this research indirectly facilitates students' academic success, thereby contributing to positive social change in the education sector (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Wright et al., 2023). Ultimately, this study is needed because it bridges a critical gap in our understanding of long-term teacher intrinsic motivation in the face of unprecedented educational disruption, offering insights that could shape the future of education and ensure the resilience of our educational systems in an ever-changing world.

Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the educational landscape, affecting middle school educators' intrinsic motivation teaching experiences. While research has

extensively addressed the immediate impacts of the pandemic on education (Anderson et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021), there remains a significant gap in understanding how middle school educators make sense of their intrinsic motivation in their teaching experiences 4 years after the pandemic. This gap is relevant given educators' ongoing challenges, including adapting to new teaching modalities, addressing widened learning gaps, and navigating evolving school policies (Wright et al., 2023).

Recent studies have highlighted the critical role of teacher motivation in educational outcomes and teacher retention (Kraft et al., 2021; Trinidad, 2021). However, these studies have primarily focused on short-term effects or general teacher populations, leaving a gap in our understanding of middle school educators' experiences over an extended period. This research problem is significant within the field of psychology, as it intersects with crucial areas such as teacher well-being, professional development, and student achievement (Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021).

The relevance and urgency of this problem are highlighted by the current teacher shortage crisis and the ongoing challenges in education post-pandemic (Bryant et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). Understanding the concepts that sustain or diminish middle school educators' intrinsic motivation over time is crucial for developing effective strategies to support teacher resilience and retention. This aligns with recent appeals in the literature for studies that focus on teacher motivation over a longer period of time because of a major educational disruption (Kulikowski et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2023).

Addressing this research problem is not only timely but also essential for

advancing the field of psychology. It provides insights that can inform policy decisions, shape professional development programs, and contribute to school leaders' ability to create a more supportive and sustainable educational environment. By focusing on the intrinsic motivation of middle school educators, this study remains grounded within the discipline of psychology while offering practical implications for educational practice and policy.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the intrinsic motivation teaching experiences of middle school educators 4 years after the pandemic. I have employed the IPA design approach providing an in-depth exploration of the experiences of educators, and detailed analysis of the intricate facets of their intrinsic motivation teaching experiences in the specific context of middle school education 4 years after the pandemic (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Research Question

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of intrinsic motivation in teaching among middle school educators 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

The concept that grounded this study is intrinsic motivation, supported by SDT. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for inherent satisfaction and enjoyment rather than external rewards or consequences (Deci & Ryan, 2008). According to SDT, individuals experience motivation when they perceive autonomy in their actions, have opportunities to cultivate and demonstrate their competencies and establish

meaningful connections with others. The conceptual framework of intrinsic motivation relates to the study's approach by providing a lens through which to examine the intrinsic motivation experiences of middle school educators 4 years after the pandemic.

For instrument development, the framework guided the creation of interview questions that explored educators' experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their teaching roles since the pandemic. For example, how have changes in teaching modalities affected teachers' sense of competence or how new school policies have impacted their perceived autonomy?

Regarding data analysis, the IPA provided a structure for interpreting educators' responses, allowing for identifying themes related to intrinsic motivation and its components (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This approach helped understand how the pandemic and subsequent educational changes have influenced teachers' intrinsic motivation through the lens of SDT. A more detailed analysis of the conceptual framework and its application to this study is provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

An IPA approach was employed to address the research question in this qualitative study. I selected this design because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meaning they ascribe to these experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA is particularly suited to this study as it enabled a detailed examination of how middle school educators interpret and make sense of their intrinsic motivation experiences in the context of teaching 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic. Studying intrinsic motivation encompasses how middle school educators perceive

autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their teaching roles and how they interpret any shifts in these perceptions, considering the significant educational changes brought about by the pandemic.

The methodology for this study involved collecting data from 10 middle school educators who have been teaching both during and 4 years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I recruited participants using purposive sampling to ensure they met the criteria of having experienced educational changes throughout the pandemic period. Data were collected through semistructured interviews, allowing for a flexible exploration of participants' experiences while ensuring topics related to intrinsic motivation are covered. Interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom software, each lasting 30-60 minutes. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis using the Smith and Nizza (2022) seven-step thematic analysis. This methodology aligned with the study's aim to understand middle school educators' intrinsic motivation experiences in the post-pandemic context, providing rich, detailed insights that inform educational practice and policy.

Definitions

Autonomy: Refers to the need to feel in control of one's actions and decisions, experiencing a sense of volition in one's behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Competence: Refers to feeling effective and capable in one's interactions with the environment and experiencing opportunities for growth and mastery (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A qualitative research approach

examining how people make sense of their life experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Intrinsic motivation: The performance of activities for their inherent enjoyment and interest (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Middle school educators: For this study, middle school educators are defined as teachers who work with students typically between the ages of 11 and 14, corresponding to Grades 6-8 in the United States education system (Schaefer et al., 2016).

Post-pandemic context: Refers to the period following the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically 4 years after its onset. This context encompasses the ongoing changes and adaptations in the education sector resulting from the pandemic (Wright et al., 2023).

Relatedness: Refers to the need for meaningful connections, a sense of belonging, and social support (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-determination theory (SDT): A macro theory of human motivation that posits that individuals experience motivation when they perceive autonomy in their actions, have opportunities to cultivate and demonstrate their competencies, and establish meaningful connections with others (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Teacher burnout: A state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that can result from long-term job stress (Pressley et al., 2021).

Teacher retention: The ability of schools or educational systems to keep teachers in their positions over time (Rosenberg et al., 2021).

Assumptions

A fundamental assumption is that participants would provide honest accounts of

their lived experiences with intrinsic motivation in teaching. This assumption is crucial for the study's validity, as the IPA approach relies on the authenticity of participants' narratives to capture the essence of their lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Another assumption is that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted middle school educators' intrinsic motivation teaching experiences. This assumption is based on literature documenting the immediate effects of the pandemic on education (Anderson et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021) and is necessary for justifying the focus on the 4-year post-pandemic period.

Scope and Delimitations

My research focused on the intrinsic motivation experiences of middle school educators in the United States who have been teaching continuously from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to 4 years post-pandemic. I chose to address the gap in understanding the long-term effects of the pandemic on teacher motivation, particularly in the middle school context where educators face unique challenges (Styck et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2021). The study was delimited to include 10 middle school educators who met this criteria, excluding educators from elementary and high school levels and those who have not been continuously employed throughout the specified timeframe. Focusing on middle school educators in the United States may limit direct transferability to other educational levels or international contexts.

Limitations

I acknowledge several limitations in this study that require careful consideration. First, maintaining participant confidentiality while providing rich, detailed accounts of

individual experiences presents a challenge. To address this, I used pseudonyms and reviewed transcripts to remove any identifying information (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

My background as a psychotherapist introduced potential insider bias when examining intrinsic motivation. To mitigate this, I engaged in reflective journaling and maintained awareness of my potential biases throughout the research process.

The lack of generalizability of the findings presented another limitation. The small sample size, although consistent with IPA, did not allow for broad generalizations to the larger population of middle school educators. Additionally, the volunteer nature of participant recruitment may have introduced self-selection bias, as those who chose to participate may differ in meaningful ways, such as levels of motivation or reflective capacity, from those who did not choose to participate.

Significance

This study has the potential to significantly contribute to advancing knowledge in understanding the long-term effects of major disruptions on teacher intrinsic motivation. Focusing specifically on middle school educators' intrinsic motivation 4 years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research addresses a crucial gap in our understanding of how sustained educational changes affect teacher intrinsic motivation over time. This knowledge is valuable given current ongoing educational challenges and teacher shortages (Bryant et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023).

The study's findings could advance educational practice by providing insights into the concepts that sustain or diminish middle school educators' intrinsic motivation in the face of prolonged challenges. This information could be instrumental in developing

more effective strategies for supporting teacher resilience and retention. For instance, if the study reveals specific aspects of autonomy, competence, or relatedness that post-pandemic changes have particularly impacted, educational leaders could use this information to tailor professional development programs or adjust school policies to better support these areas of teacher motivation.

Summary

This chapter introduced this IPA study aimed at exploring the lived experiences of middle school educators in the United States, focusing on their intrinsic motivation in teaching 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic. The research problem addressed a significant gap in our understanding of how educators make sense of their motivational experiences in the context of prolonged educational disruptions, particularly in the middle school setting. The study was informed by the concept of intrinsic motivation which is the lens used to explore the participants' teaching experiences.

Building on this foundation, Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to this study. The literature review delves deeper into the conceptual framework of intrinsic motivation and its application in educational contexts. It explores existing research on teacher motivation, with a particular focus on intrinsic motivation among middle school educators. The chapter will also examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, highlighting the unique challenges faced by middle school educators.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Although the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on educator mental health have been widely explored during and after the pandemic in the United States and internationally (Hargreaves, 2021; Santiago et al., 2023; Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022), educator intrinsic motivation has not received as much attention within the United States. The specific research problem addressed through this study is the lack of understanding regarding the experiences with intrinsic motivation for teaching of middle school educators 4 years after the pandemic (Bottiani et al., 2019; Kulikowski et al., 2021). The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the experiences with intrinsic motivation for middle school educators 4 years after the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers faced a variety of issues. For example, educators experienced heightened stressors linking their personal and professional lives, greater concern for their students' overall well-being, and frustration with administration regarding COVID-19 pandemic safety protocols (Clemons et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2023). Educators also dealt with the need for rapid adaptation to new modes of teaching (Anderson et al., 2021). While the return to classrooms aimed to restore academic progress and provide social-emotional support, new challenges emerged around widening achievement gaps, mental health issues, and school staffing shortages (Wright et al., 2023). Even during normal times, teachers need to be intrinsically motivated to do their work.

Intrinsic motivation refers to motivation that is internal to an individual or created

from internal factors (Causgrove & Zimmer, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is a key component to understanding human behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Middle school educators have to navigate unique challenges associated with the adolescent development stage. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these educators also had to navigated the particular challenges that emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bishop, 2021; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). The convergence of these challenges makes the exploration of intrinsic motivation in the context of middle school educators post-pandemic particularly significant. Therefore, the focus in this study was on intrinsic motivation among middle school educators in the context of the challenges faced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The present chapter consists of a review of the literature on the key themes associated with the research problem and the conceptual framework, including educator motivation, factors related to intrinsic motivation during COVID-19, historical overview of middle school education and educators, contemporary challenges of middle school educators, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and educators. The chapter is organized as follows: following the literature search strategy, the conceptual framework of the study is introduced, which is based on the concept of intrinsic motivation from SDT (Deci & Ryan,1985), is discussed. Next, a review of literature on themes connected to the research problem is presented, including educator motivation, factors related to intrinsic motivation during COVID-19, historical overview of middle school education and educators, contemporary challenges of middle school educators, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and educators. The chapter

concludes with a summary.

Literature Search Strategy

In order to identify the relevant literature, several databases were used, including Google Scholar, SAGE Journals, ERIC, APA PsychInfo, EBSCO, Scopus, and JSTOR. Additionally, the references used in studies similar to the proposed research were scanned to identify further relevant literature for inclusion in the review. Several key terms were used to find relevant studies in these databases. The key terms used, either alone or in combination with each other, were as follows: *middle school, educators, teachers, education, challenges, COVID-19 pandemic, educator motivation, teacher motivation, mental health, teaching experiences, self-determination theory, qualitative, resilience, student engagement strategies,* and *intrinsic motivation*.

Several criteria for inclusion and exclusion were applied to select the studies for the review based on the results obtained across the databases. In order to be included in the review, the potential study was required to be published in a peer-reviewed journal or, if a book, be published by a reputable academic publisher. Further, it was required that the studies be published in English. Studies that were not peer-reviewed or available in English were excluded. Preference was allocated to studies published in the last 5 years to ensure the latest findings were reflected in the review, although some seminal studies were also included.

The search process included using the key terms and their combinations across the databases, then screening the results obtained by their titles to determine their relevance to the proposed research. Next, the selected studies were screened further through their

abstracts to determine their suitability for inclusion in the review. In total, 100 studies were reviewed, of which 87 (87%) were published between 2019 to 2024.

Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framework is intrinsic motivation within SDT. SDT was developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2008). In this section, the concept is introduced, its historical background provided, and the application of the concept in relevant studies in the existing literature is discussed. Additionally, the suitability of the concept to form the conceptual framework for the study is shown.

Introduction

Within SDT, the well-being and performance of employees are influenced by the kind of motivation they have concerning the activities related to their jobs (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In SDT, the motivation types are differentiated, and it is asserted that different categories of motivation are associated with different consequences, concomitants, and catalyzers (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Motivation, within SDT, is intrinsic in cases where the driver of an activity is inherent satisfactions obtained from the activity itself rather than by an external reward, negative or positive, that is dependent on the activity's completion (Deci & Ryan, 2008). As a theory of motivation, SDT has been applied across various contexts, including physical activity, healthcare, parenting, and education (Vallerand et al., 2008). SDT presents a rich theory of motivation with broad applicability.

The notion of intrinsic motivation is fundamental to SDT. Intrinsic motivation is one mechanism through which an individual's behavior is regulated (Causgrove & Zimmer, 2020). Intrinsic motivation refers to an activity's performance due to its inherent

satisfactions (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Activities, such as those emerging from curiosity and play, which are not dependent on external pressure or incentives but enable joy and satisfaction on their own, represent intrinsically motivated behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Intrinsically motivated individuals experience excitement, personal accomplishment, skill exercise, and enjoyment (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Through the notion of intrinsic motivation, SDT presents a nuanced perspective on motivation.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), three primary psychological needs must be satisfied in order to develop intrinsic motivation: the need for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. SDT integrates the view that basic psychological needs are fundamental to understanding the satisfaction and support required for developing intrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). It is asserted that basic psychological needs exist for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, all viewed as universal and essential sources of nourishment for mental health and the growth of intrinsic motivation (Causgrove & Zimmer, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2008). By satisfying basic needs, individuals experience greater well-being and vitality (Vallerand et al., 2008). Therefore, when an individual's needs are met, they are often more receptive to intrinsic motivation.

The component of autonomy refers to the need of an individual to be in charge of the direction of their life (Causgrove & Zimmer, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2008). It describes a feeling of volition as well as internal locus of causality with respect to one's actions (Ryan & Deci 2000). Rather than resulting from external pressure, autonomy is associated with the sense that one's action result from one's self (Vallerand et al., 2008). The discovery of this need was based on the empirical observation that intrinsic

motivation may be undermined when individuals are provided with external rewards that are not conducive for intrinsic motivation, such as deadlines, goals that are imposed, pressured assessments, and threats, for engaging in behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, strategies for supporting autonomy and facilitating intrinsic motivation include enabling choices, allowing individuals to self-determine the behavior they desire, and acknowledging individuals' feelings (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The component of competence refers to the ability to engage in a behavior successfully (Deci & Ryan, 2008). It describes a sense of efficacy and mastery with respect to one's activities and the ability to accomplish one's goals (Causgrove & Zimmer, 2020). In order for motivation to be intrinsic, it is important to accompany competence with autonomy (Vallerand et al., 2008). Competence can be enhanced to facilitate intrinsic motivation through the provision of skills and information needed to take part in a particular behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The component of relatedness has a more interpersonal dimension (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It describes the degree to which an individual feels connected to other people, belonging to a community, and having caring relationships (Causgrove & Zimmer, 2020). It reflects the need for security and intimate personal relationships (Vallerand et al., 2008). Based on empirical findings, relatedness has been found to be not as essential as competence and autonomy for intrinsic motivation, since some behaviors can be carried out in isolation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, its proposition can facilitate intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Thus, intrinsic motivation is enhanced through the conditions that enable a sense

of competence, relatedness, and autonomy (See et al., 2022). In the specific context of educators, findings from the literature suggest that competence belief in teachers is associated with classroom management, job satisfaction, student engagement, and enthusiasm for a job among teachers (Layek & Koodamara, 2024). Teachers' autonomy is associated with support for student autonomy, which increases their motivation (Yildiz & Kiliç, 2021). Likewise, relatedness is associated with collaboration with colleagues and professional development (Baroudi et al., 2020).

Application

Researchers have applied the concept of intrinsic motivation from SDT in several contexts, including education. For example, using a Delphi method and an expert panel of 34 participants, Ahmadi et al. (2023) developed a classification of the behavior of teachers that aligned with SDT, providing a list of 57 teacher motivational behaviors with terminology, including allowing student choice and providing rationales for the psychological need of autonomy; providing optimal challenge and praising effort or improvement for the psychological need of competence; and asking about students' feelings, welfare, and progress as well as showing affection for the psychological need of relatedness. In their study, Banerjee and Halder (2021) examined the influence of support for teacher relatedness, structure, and autonomy on motivation in the context of middle school students. Their findings showed the essential role of support for enhancing and increasing motivation among teachers. Fradkin-Hayslip (2021) focused on teacher autonomy and motivation, finding it associated with relatedness, competence, and job satisfaction. Another application of SDT was by Liu et al. (2019), who examined the

antecedents of the motivational strategies teachers used in the classroom, finding that the perception of self-determined motivation in students, perceived job pressure, and autonomous causality orientation of teachers affected the satisfaction of their needs, which in turn positively affected their autonomous motivation. As these studies demonstrate, SDT can be useful in examining themes related to intrinsic motivation among teachers. Findings show that among teachers, intrinsic motivation is associated with teaching effectiveness and facilitating students' intrinsic motivation (Jang, 2019).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

In this section, a review of the literature on the research problem is presented. This includes literature on educator motivation, including definition of educator motivation, measurement of educator motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation among educators, predictors of motivation in educators, motivation and performance among educators, motivation and well-being among educators, and factors related to intrinsic motivation during COVID-19. Additionally, as the focus of this study is on middle school educators, the review also includes a historical overview of middle school education and educators, contemporary challenges of middle school educators, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and educators.

Educator Motivation

Motivation of educators has been a significant area of research. Researchers have studied motivation as a possible factor contributing to teacher shortage through teacher attrition in early career, aging of the teacher workforce, lack of balance between the demands made upon teachers and the reward, limited job security, limited opportunities

for career development, and low status. In this section, the nature of educator motivation is examined through its definition, measurement, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, motivation predictors in educators, the relationship between motivation and educator performance, and the relationship between motivation and well-being.

Definition

Researchers have defined teacher motivation in various ways. Motivation has been identified as what supplies individuals with reasons for initiating an activity, the duration for which they will engage in that activity, and the intensity with which they will make an effort for that activity (Filgona et al., 2020). Motivation refers to an internal state responsible for arousing, directing, and maintaining an individual's behavior (Slemp et al., 2020). Thus, teachers' motivation concerns the factors that attract individuals towards the teaching profession, which determine the duration of retention in teacher education and teacher profession and the degree of their engagement with their teacher education and teacher profession (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Teacher motivation is characterized by the factors responsible for individuals' attraction to and retention in the teaching profession.

The motivation to enter and remain in the teaching profession has several dimensions. Teacher motivation is shaped by individuals' inner aspirations regarding teaching others, sharing knowledge, shaping values, and helping the community progress (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Filgona et al., 2020). However, the external environment of an individual is also a key influence on teachers' motivation, affecting their performance and persistence (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Another dimension of teacher motivation is

the motivation to remain an educator over a long period of time (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Slemp et al., 2020). Further, the demotivating aspects of the teaching profession also shape motivation, leading to disinterest, alienation, and frustration in different career stages (Filgona et al., 2020). While the inherent interest of an individual may influence their decision to select and remain in the teaching profession, the effort shaped by external factors may affect the intensity of motivation that a teacher experiences (Slemp et al., 2020). Research on teacher motivation describes the various dimensions that shape an individual's decision to enter and remain within the teacher profession and the intensity of their effort.

Measurement

Researchers have used several motivation measurement tools in the literature on teacher motivation. The Work Tasks Motivation Scale for Teachers (WTMST), developed by Fernet et al. (2008), is the most widely used teacher motivation measurement tool. The WTMST helps determine the level of motivation in educators based on the concepts of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), in which motivation modalities are placed on a continuum between two extremes characterized by self-determination (Criado-Del Rey et al., 2024). In the WTMST, motivation in teachers is measured through a focus on the different kinds of tasks teachers encounter in their day-to-day work (Fernet et al., 2008). The tool measures motivation through a 90-item scale, focusing on six tasks involved in the teaching profession: teaching, evaluating, preparing classes, complementary tasks, administrative tasks, and classroom management (Criado-Del Rey et al., 2024). The WTMST has been used widely in the literature on teacher

motivation.

Other motivation measurement tools have been discussed in the context of teachers. These include the Mertler's (2001) Teacher Motivation and Job Satisfaction Survey, involving 12 questions evaluating teachers' motivation and its association with job satisfaction. Choi (2014) developed the English Teacher Motivation Scale, which shows motivation to be a multidimensional construct, involving intrinsic compensation, negative influences, school leadership, and teacher efficacy. In addition to the popular WTMST, other evaluation tools have also been developed in the literature on teacher motivation.

In addition to SDT, researchers such as Paul Pintrich have provided significant insight into motivation through the lens of goal orientation theory and self-regulated learning. Pintrich (2003) emphasized that motivation is influenced by both one's beliefs about their competence and the value they attach to a task, aligning with expectancy-value frameworks. He also developed the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), which offers a validated way to measure intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, goal orientation, and learning strategies.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

The notions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have been found useful in the research on motivation, including in education. Intrinsic motivation describes the performance of activities for their inherent enjoyment and interest (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Activities, such as those emerging from curiosity and play, which are not dependent on external pressure or incentives but enable joy and satisfaction on their own, represent

intrinsically motivated behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Among teachers, intrinsic motivation is associated with teaching effectiveness and facilitating students' intrinsic motivation (Jang, 2019). Intrinsic motivation is enhanced through the conditions that enable a sense of competence, relatedness, and autonomy (See et al., 2022). Competence belief in teachers is associated with classroom management, job satisfaction, student engagement, and enthusiasm for a job among teachers (Layek & Koodamara, 2024). Teachers' autonomy is associated with support for student autonomy, which increases their motivation (Yildiz & Kiliç, 2021). Likewise, relatedness is associated with collaboration with colleagues and professional development (Baroudi et al., 2020). In the context of teachers, intrinsic motivation has been recognized as a significant factor.

Intrinsic motivation is contrasted with extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation refers to behaviors carried out not for the satisfaction associated with them but for other reasons (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Extrinsic motivation is divided into four sub-types, namely external regulation, which refers to behaviors that are driven by punishments and rewards imposed externally; introjected regulation, which refers to partially internalized extrinsic motivation where the regulation of behaviors occurs through such internal rewards as self-esteem related to success and through the avoidance of guilt, shame, and anxiety related to failure; identified regulation, which refers to the conscious identification of an individual with an activity's value leading to greater willingness towards action; and integrated regulation, where an individual not only identifies with and recognizes an activity's value, but also find the activity to align with their core values and interests (Calkins et al., 2023; Jang, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Extrinsic motivation has been

recognized to be complex and multi-faceted.

Similar to intrinsic motivation, researchers have studied extrinsic motivation in the context of teachers. In the literature, researchers have noted that most teachers are motivated to enter the teaching profession not because of the possible material benefits but because of their inherent interest in teaching (Chan et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021). Nevertheless, assessment scores, job security, feedback, and autonomy have been discussed as extrinsic factors that may motivate teachers to leave their jobs (Calkins et al., 2023). Extrinsic motivators for teachers may also involve the supportive resources available (Chan et al., 2021). Further, the motivation level of students may also be viewed by teachers as a factor of extrinsic motivation (Pressley & Ha, 2021). Extrinsic motivators may also negatively affect teachers' motivation, such as when the achievement scores of students, over which teachers do not have complete control, are used to determine the competence of teachers (Pressley et al., 2021). Measures aimed at supporting teachers' intrinsic motivation, such as developing competence and autonomy through recognition and provision of resources, can also enhance their extrinsic motivation (Pressley et al., 2021; Trinidad, 2021). Extrinsic motivation can influence teacher behavior, especially by negatively affecting teachers' well-being.

Predictors of Motivation in Educators

Various predictors of motivation for teachers have been discussed in the literature. Teachers' autonomy in selecting teaching methods, programs, and materials and determining discipline and organization in the classroom have been mentioned as significant determinants of teacher motivation (Chan et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021).

Researchers have also noted satisfactory professional relationships, working environment, teacher evaluation, professional input, teacher development, and leadership as significant predictors of teacher motivation (Chang et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021). Other determinants of teacher motivation include self-realization, institutional support, financial benefits, altruism, calling, and intellectual simulation (Trinidad, 2021). Several predictors of motivation for educators have been discussed in the literature.

While teachers often derive motivation from the intrinsic values associated with teaching, researchers have also noted factors that may undermine motivation. Teachers have been found to experience higher work stress levels than other professions, which is associated with demotivation and attrition (Kraft et al., 2021). Teacher motivation may be hindered by factors associated with conflicting and ambiguous role demands, variety in teaching routine, evaluation, professional development, mastery of technology adopted for teaching, determination of educational outcomes, and how the aims of education are determined in a society (Pressley & Ha, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). Stress, restricted autonomy, inadequate self-efficacy, discipline challenges, insufficient career-related structures, the repetitiveness of content, and limited opportunities regarding intellectual development have also been noted in the literature as factors that may hinder motivation in teachers (Kraft et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021). Researchers have identified factors that may predict motivation and demotivation in teachers, which may influence teacher retention and attrition.

Motivation and Performance among Educators

Researchers have examined how teachers' motivation influences their

performance. Teacher motivation has been found to be crucial in enhancing the classroom's effectiveness (Pressley et al., 2021). Teacher motivation enhances teacher retention, and extended experience in work has been found to help develop effective relationships between students and teachers and obtain support and acknowledgment from parents and colleagues (Kraft et al., 2021). Further, experienced teachers demonstrate better task proficiency, broader knowledge and skills, specialized expertise, and a deeper understanding of their field, which results in greater effectiveness and value of the teachers in their role (Chang et al., 2022; Trinidad, 2021). Teacher motivation is a significant factor in the performance of teachers.

Researchers have examined how teachers' motivation may influence teachers' performance. Teacher motivation has been found to influence the instruction quality of the teacher through the styles of teaching, approaches used for education, and instruction behaviors (Chang et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021). The instructional quality of teachers, which is determined by the extent to which teachers encourage comprehensive rather than surface-level learning in students, has been recognized as influenced by teachers' motivation, with intrinsic motivation more consistently associated with a comprehensive education approach (Kraft et al., 2021; Trinidad, 2021). Relatedly, an autonomous style of motivation in teachers is associated with a student-centered style of teaching, while non-autonomous motivation in teachers has been found to be associated with a teacher-centered style of teaching (Kraft et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). Thus, the findings from the literature support the link between teachers' motivation, especially intrinsic motivation, and teachers' effective performance.

Motivation and Well-being among Educators

In the literature, researchers have considered the role of motivation in the well-being of teachers. A significant threat to teachers' well-being, emotional exhaustion, is significant concerning teacher motivation (Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2022). Teachers who show higher degrees of intrinsic motivation, possessing a feeling of purpose and passion concerning teaching, demonstrate lower vulnerability to emotional exhaustion (Ingersoll et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2020). Greater resilience has been reported among intrinsically motivated teachers when coping with the difficulties encountered in teaching (von der Embse & Mankin, 2020). Teachers' intrinsic motivation works as a protective factor for them, helping them deal with stressors more effectively while decreasing the likelihood of experiencing emotional exhaustion (Yang et al., 2021). The motivation of teachers, particularly intrinsic motivation, helps them against emotional exhaustion.

Teachers' motivation helps generate a positive work environment. Intrinsic motivation of teachers, in particular, has been found to encourage a positive environment in the classroom with engagement, creativity, and enthusiasm (Califf & Brooks, 2020). This results in lower stress and emotional exhaustion among teachers (Farmer, 2020). Teachers who obtain fulfillment from their jobs are more likely to maintain their commitment and energy, which improves their well-being (Bardach et al., 2021). Teachers' motivation has also been associated with students' motivation, which may further improve teacher well-being by improving students' engagement in the classroom (Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2021). Thus, in the literature, researchers have highlighted the different ways teachers' motivation interacts with teachers' well-

being.

Factors Related to Intrinsic Motivation During COVID-19

Researchers have considered factors related to intrinsic motivation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from the literature show that intrinsic motivation in teachers significantly decreased work-related stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, while extrinsic motivation through external regulation increased it (Pressley & Ha, 2021). For teachers, the performance of instruction digitally presented a psychological challenge (Kraft et al., 2021). Extrinsic motivation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic underwent significant alteration due to the change in the school environment as well as motivational factors as a result of the transition to distance learning (Chang et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021). While extrinsic motivation increases stress, intrinsic motivation decreases stress (Pressley & Ha, 2021). Thus, the altered work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic had different impacts on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Researchers have also considered motivation and resilience in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic among teachers. Findings show that intrinsic motivation in teachers emerged as a significant predictor of teachers' resilience and flexibility, as teachers who were intrinsically motivated viewed the distance education approach as interesting, creative, innovative, and a challenge that could influence their personal development (Chan et al., 2021; Trinidad, 2021). Extrinsically motivated teachers may have responded to the mandatory use of digital tools with frustration and anxiety in the absence of sufficient capabilities (Chang et al., 2022). While extrinsic motivation has been recognized as significant, it is viewed as being lower in quality and has a weaker link to

teacher resilience during COVID-19 than intrinsic motivation (Pressley et al., 2021; Trinidad, 2021). Thus, intrinsic motivation is a significant factor concerning teachers' resilience and flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Historical Overview of Middle School Education and Educators

In this section, a historical overview of middle school education and educators is presented. As the focus in the proposed study is on a research problem regarding middle school educators' intrinsic motivation teaching experiences, without a brief overview of the historical context, the evolution of present problems for middle school education and educators cannot be adequately contextualized. Therefore, in this section a historical context of the problem is presented through a discussion of the evolution of middle school education and educators.

For the more significant part of the 19th century, the school system in the United States was dominated by two significant periods of schooling. These periods include high school, which lasted 4 years, and elementary school, which lasted 8 years (George, 2011). Through 8 years of elementary school and 4 years of high school, most pupils could obtain vocational training and basic skills, while a minority of students obtained college preparation (Schaefer et al., 2016). This system failed to adequately meet the developmental and educational needs of growing adolescents, leading to educators making significant efforts in subsequent decades towards adequately addressing the schooling needs of young adolescents (Smith & McEwin, 2011). In the next century, these efforts were made.

At the beginning of the 20th century, educational paradigms shifted. In the early

20th century, reforms in schooling targeted the roles and relationships between high school and elementary school (Weilbacher, 2019). Calls to restructure the existing arrangement of 8 years of elementary school and 4 years of high school to address the developmental requirements of young adolescents came from prominent educational committees (Schaefer et al., 2016). In 1909, a key milestone in middle school development occurred with the establishment of the first junior high schools involving grades 7 to 9 (Anfara, 2001). In the early days, junior high school curricula focused mainly on vocational programs for pupils about to enter the job market and advanced academic programs aimed at students about to enter college (Beane et al., 1992). Gradually, the aims expanded to address young adolescents' particular academic, personal, and social requirements (George, 2009). Thus, in the early 20th century, the curriculum and educational settings began to be reformed to fit students' needs better.

However, the role of junior high schools was not always agreed upon. In the middle of the 20th century, the function of junior high school came under scrutiny, and questions began to arise regarding whether they adequately addressed the requirements of young adolescents (George, 2011). Junior high school-related reforms grew out of the discussions related to these questions, paving the way for the rise of middle school (Schaefer et al., 2016). In response to criticisms, the first middle school was established in 1950 in the school system of Bay City, Michigan (Smith & McEwin, 2011). With the advent of the first middle school, educational paradigms for young adolescents expanded.

The movement for middle school grew rapidly. The exponential growth of middle schools was observed in the latter part of the 20th century (Schaefer et al., 2016).

Historians generally view the early 1960s as the period when the modern movement for middle school began with the suggestion for the term “middle school” by Alexander et al. (1968). In the 1960s and 1970s, researchers working in education shared ideas that led to the emergence of the middle school (George, 2009). Following its emergence, the middle school movement grew rapidly.

Questions had been raised before regarding the education of young adolescents through junior high schools. The proposal to alter the name of junior high school to middle school came from Alexander et al. (1968), who is generally viewed as the father of the middle school movement. Alexander et al. (1968) suggested building a middle school on the foundations that existed with junior high school, involving guidance programs, vocational arts, exploratory education, and a core curriculum while adding interdisciplinary learning and team teaching and removing practices from high school such as subject matter orientation and competitive sports. These suggestions were pivotal in the middle school movement.

Changes to the middle school paradigm were once again renewed in the 1970s. In the 1970s, the movement for middle school grew, with efforts directed toward defining, identifying, and naming what middle school meant (Schaefer et al., 2016). In the journals, researchers discussed how middle school presents a new, innovative, unique, and successful approach to preparing young adolescents (Weilbacher, 2019). Educators focused on the disadvantages and advantages of middle and junior high schools, with some arguing that the former were more effective while others argued that they were similar (Smith & McEwin, 2011). From the middle to the late 1970s, middle schools

operating across the United States increased, crossing 4000 (Smith & McEwin, 2011). Leaders of the movement began focusing on issues related to professional development and preparation of teachers in the specific context of middle schools (Weilbacher, 2019). Scholars also discussed the middle school curriculum as well as the role of teachers in its development (Schaefer et al., 2016). Other aspects discussed in this early period of the middle school movement included leadership, the nature of the period of young adolescence, exploratory programs, flexible scheduling, and physical education (George, 2011). These changes characterized the middle school movement in the 1970s.

In the 1980s, the middle school movement entered a more advanced phase. In the 1980s, policies and practices unique to the middle school level were developed (George, 2009). A report published by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in 1986 included middle school policy and education recommendations (Smith & McEwin, 2011). Middle schools continued to increase throughout the decade.

Additional changes occurred in the 1990s. In the 1990s, the members of the middle school movement sought to deliver blueprints regarding effective concepts for middle school (Smith & McEwin, 2011). A follow-up report from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in 1995 recommended additional middle education reforms (George, 2011). The focus in this decade was on the organization and process of middle school (George, 2009). In the 2000s, the middle the school movement focused on creating blueprint related to exemplary middle schools, but with the sense that the concept's promise had yet to be fulfilled (Smith & McEwin, 2011). The 2010s continued to witness research agendas, and pedagogies focused on middle grades, which were

informed by global practices while actualized at local levels (Weilbacher, 2019). These changes have continued shaping the current landscape of middle schools in the United States.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Weilbacher (2019) noted a number of barriers in achieving the mission of the middle school model. Weilbacher (2019) noted promising developments for distinguishing middle schools as their own educational entity, including increasing attention to emotional and social needs of adolescents and lesser obsession with testing and standards, while noting the less promising area of complete curricular reform to make it more responsive. Weilbacher (2019) also highlighted the force of the high school-driven and departmentalized curriculum, lack of teachers who could provide an alternative approach, narrowing of curriculum with literacy and math dominating, and the sidelining of teachers from the process of planning the curriculum. The primary challenge, Weilbacher (2019) noted, was the status quo of inconsistent efforts towards satisfying the developmental needs of middle school students and an outdated school curriculum that failed to consider their needs. The primary challenge of middle school educators, of addressing the unique needs of middle school students while dealing with the challenges posed by existing structures, continues in the contemporary era, exacerbated by the influence of the particular challenges associated with COVID-19 pandemic, affecting teacher burnout, student motivation, teacher retention, and protective factors, as discussed in the next section.

Contemporary Challenges of Middle School Educators

In this section, contemporary challenges relevant to middle school educators are

reviewed. Researchers have noted that middle school is a unique period due to the status of the students, who fall between adolescence and childhood (Styck et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2021). At this stage of development, it is not merely particular academic skills and content that students must learn, but also discover what interests them, learn to be able to believe in themselves, shape their character, and develop critical social and humanitarian skills (Styck et al., 2021). Findings from the literature suggest that, compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, middle school students experienced greater stress associated with schoolwork compared to elementary students (Styck et al., 2021). Findings from the literature also suggest that middle school students experienced a decrease in parental support and an increase in impulsivity, depression, and bullying victimization (Walters et al., 2021). For these reasons, teaching students at this stage can be challenging for educators, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges related to teacher burnout and teacher retention are discussed in this section. Teachers' protective factors and administration's role are also reviewed.

Teacher Burnout

Researchers have noted the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on middle school teachers' burnout. While high degrees of burnout was already a significant problem among middle school teachers before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic and its associated social restrictions added more stressors to the job of teaching (Kotowski et al., 2022). Specifically, high degree of work-family conflict and low proficiency in online teaching contributed to middle school teachers' burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to greater turnover intentions, lower work commitment,

more anxiety and depressive symptoms, and lower wellbeing (Chang et al., 2022; Trinidad, 2021). The problem of teacher burnout has been found to be worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic among middle school teachers (Chang et al., 2022).

Teacher burnout is a multifaceted issue. Burnout is characterized by engagement erosion resulting from occupational stress over the long term, conceptualized as involving decreased personal accomplishment, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion (Kaufman et al., 2022). The core aspect of burnout, emotional exhaustion, is characterized by chronic fatigue, debilitation, sense of being worn out, and energy loss (Leech et al., 2022). In the specific context of middle school teachers, depersonalization is characterized by cynical or negative attitudes with respect to students as well as colleagues, which may result from work-related emotional demands that may prevent the teacher from the capacity to respond to students' needs (Mullen et al., 2021; von der Embse & Mankin, 2020). Decreased accomplishment involves negative self-assessment and the sense that the teacher cannot do their job meaningfully and effectively (Trinidad, 2021). Therefore, burnout can influence not only the wellbeing of the educator but how well they can do their job.

The literature on teacher burnout and COVID-19 pandemic illustrates many adverse outcomes. For example, studies show that burnout is negatively associated with teacher's self-efficacy (Yang et al., 2021). Teacher burnout has also been found to be negatively associated with teacher's job satisfaction and the subjective health of the teacher (Pressley & Ha, 2021). Burnout in teachers is also positively associated with intention to leave the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2021). Therefore, many negative

outcomes can be affiliated with educator burnout.

The causes of burnout are not static. Researchers have studied the causes of burnout among teachers, including middle school teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the causes mentioned are problems related to students' disruptive behavior (Kaufman et al., 2022). Teachers' inability to control students' behavior may result in defeat and absence of authority, leading to significant stress responses (Chang, 2020). Findings also show that teachers may experience anxiety and uncertainty even in anticipation of disruptive behavior from students, which may deplete them with energy (Fox & Walter, 2022). Controlling students' behavior requires significant energy, effort, and time (Chang et al., 2022). Thus, classroom management can significantly influence educator burnout.

Although student behavior contributes to teacher burnout, it is not the only contributing factor. Teachers may also experience burnout in relation to workload and time-related stress (Herman et al., 2021). Teachers have been experiencing more assignments and a higher speed of working (Fox & Walter, 2022). Findings show that teachers view these developments as reducing the time for recovery and rest (Kwon et al., 2022). Pressure related to work and time is associated with the dimension of emotional exhaustion (Pressley et al., 2021). Workload in teachers has also been found to be associated with depersonalization (Kraft et al., 2021), leading to cynical or negative attitudes with respect to students as well as colleagues (Chan et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2020). As depersonalization has been described as a key characteristic of burnout, workload has been found to be a significant challenge related to burnout in teachers.

Another challenge for middle school teachers that may contribute to teacher burnout concerns students' motivation. Lack of attention from students has been associated with teacher burnout (Yang, 2021). Lack of motivation from students has been considered related to problems related to discipline, with the latter's association with burnout more frequently discussed in the literature (Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2022). In addition to emotional exhaustion, teachers' perceptions of the lack of motivation among students have also been associated with teachers' motivation to depart from the profession (Califf & Brooks, 2020). Student motivation has also been associated with teacher burnout through the lens of teacher self-efficacy. A lack of motivation among students may be viewed by teachers as a personal failure in their job (Farmer, 2020). This may lead to low self-efficacy related to teaching.

Additional sources of burnout among middle school teachers have been discussed in the literature. These include interpersonal conflicts with colleagues, parents, or students; lack of balance between teaching resources, such as instructional materials, and teaching demands, such as the demands from the administration; and absence of constructive time with their colleagues (Pressley et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Further, the absence of support from the administration may also contribute to teacher burnout (Kwon et al., 2022; Yang, 2021). Teachers working with low-income or minority students may experience additional stressors, such as those related to educational reform that may increase workloads, problems related to remuneration, low autonomy, and recognition, few professional development opportunities, challenging working conditions, and absence of a voice (Chang et al., 2022; Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2022;

Pressley & Ha, 2021). Researchers have found burnout to be one of the key causes of middle school teachers' attrition, and its prevention as a key for teacher retention.

Teacher Retention

Teacher shortages are common in the United States (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Rosenberg et al., 2021), and many countries are expected to undergo significant teacher shortages in the near future (Moser & Wei, 2021). The shortage of teachers is a significant problem. The increase in student enrollment and the significant number of educators arriving at retirement have been described as primary drivers of the teacher shortage (Bryant et al., 2023). Additional factors, such as the decreasing popularity of the teaching profession and a significant number of teachers with qualifications prematurely leaving the profession, have also negatively influenced the availability of teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022). Shortage of teachers makes teacher retention a critical challenge.

Previous efforts have been made to try to reduce teaching shortages. For example, significant policy efforts have been directed toward attracting new teachers and retaining existing teachers (Bryant et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). Retention of teachers is broadly understood as a critical step in solving the problem of the shortage of teachers since increasing the recruitment of new teachers may not be enough to address the problem if attrition remains high (Rosenberg et al., 2021; VanLone et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding the causes of attrition is vital to staving this problem.

Previous literature has explored teacher attrition. In the literature, researchers have examined the factors associated with teacher retention and attrition (Moser & Wei,

2021). Findings show that workload is one of the key factors associated with a teacher's decision to exit the teaching profession, and it is one of the significant threats to teacher retention (Lachlan et al., 2020). Teachers consistently report that unmanageable workload is one of the main reasons for leaving the profession (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Frequent alterations to the school curriculum, excessive time spent on evaluations, and higher accountability measures such as inspection cycles have gradually increased the workload among teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). Many teachers remain unwilling or unable to work long hours to meet the high workload levels, finding their jobs unmanageable (Bryant et al., 2023). Decreasing workload has been cited in the literature as a primary way of decreasing teachers' average hours of work, enhancing their work satisfaction, and improving their retention rates (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023).

In addition to workload, unsuitable working conditions also negatively influence teacher attrition. Work conditions have been shown to affect teacher retention significantly (Rosenberg et al., 2021). Teachers are more likely to remain in schools whose working conditions align with them and where they obtain support and stability (Moser & Wei, 2021). Additionally, ensuring teachers are recognized for their work and providing them with higher levels of autonomy or appreciation is significant for retention (Lachlan et al., 2020; Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022). In contrast, teachers are more likely to leave when they feel unappreciated.

As stated previously, workload and unsuitable working conditions contribute to educator attrition. However, frequent top-down alterations result in teachers lacking

control, which increases their stress (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). Teachers are more likely to leave when colleagues and leaders do not provide support (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). In school work cultures where there are conflicts with colleagues, poor behavior of students, low investment in teacher development, and micro-management, teachers are less likely to remain (Rosenberg et al., 2021). In the literature, opportunities for professional development, effective leadership, support from mentors, and supportive work conditions have been found to effectively reduce teacher attrition (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Rosenberg et al., 2021). For retention, a school work culture founded in mutual respect and trust is essential (Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022). Thus, leadership and colleague relationships can also influence educator retention.

Researchers have found administration support to be associated with many teacher-related outcomes. One of the most common causes of teacher attrition discussed in the literature is the lack of support from the administration (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Lack of support from administration involves leaders at school having priorities that compete with each other and being inattentive or not available for the needs of the teachers (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). When there is a lack of support from the administration, school leaders rely on the teachers' expertise rather than sharing relevant feedback (Kaul et al., 2020). In contrast, supportive school administrators assist teachers by helping them manage their workload, creating a positive school culture, involving them in decision-making, managing student discipline, and developing a safe working environment (Bailey & Schurz, 2020; Kaul et al., 2020). Administration support is thus a critical factor in teacher retention.

Various other factors also influence educator attrition. Other relevant factors for teacher attrition include financial compensation (Bryant et al., 2023). Although many teachers do not describe compensation to be the leading cause for leaving the profession, as teachers generally do not enter the workplace for the financial compensation it provides, declining pay and availability of jobs with higher status may discourage new graduates from continuing a career in teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Rosenberg et al., 2021). Compared to the factors contributing to teacher attrition, teacher retention is facilitated by several protective factors.

Protective Factors

In the literature on teacher stress, several protective factors have been discussed. Protective factors for school teachers decrease the likelihood of various adverse outcomes, such as stress (Chang et al., 2022). One of the most significant protective factors for school teachers is interaction with peers (Fox & Walter, 2022). Positive peer interactions have been discussed as a significant shield for teachers against stress (Kraft et al., 2021). Cooperating, supporting each other, willingly collaborating, providing help, and maintaining a positive attitude have been discussed in the literature as protective factors against peer interaction stress (Chan et al., 2021). Teachers also report effective communication with peers to develop trust, which is a significant protective factor (Trinidad, 2021). These protective factors are the most frequent in the literature on teachers.

Other protective factors have also been discussed. Another protective factor discussed in the literature concerns the perceptions and mindset of teachers (Baker et al.,

2021). A teacher who accepts situations and circumstances as out of their control may experience a stress reduction (Trinidad, 2021). Teachers may find their challenges more manageable by focusing on what is within their control (Kraft et al., 2021). Teachers must also be aware of the feelings and thoughts that cause stress to make events easier to manage (Fox & Walter, 2022). Teachers may also experience self-efficacy through a mindset that views teaching as their life's calling (Chan et al., 2021). Such a mindset may help them overcome difficulties and persevere against challenges (Baker et al., 2021). These protective factors are significant for teachers in maintaining their well-being.

Efforts toward maintaining one's health and mental wellbeing also serve as protective factors for teachers. By balancing their work-related responsibilities with activities focused on wellbeing and health, teachers may find a protective factor for stress (Chang et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021). Physical activities like swimming and running may help decrease stress (Kraft et al., 2021). Sports, such as football and basketball, which involve teams, may be preferable to some teachers (Chan et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2021). Irrespective of the kind of activity preferred, efforts towards health and wellbeing have been described as significant protective factors against work-related stress.

Support from the administration is an important protective factor. Practices by administrators, such as showing trust, enabling collaboration in decision-making, demonstrating empathy, communicating, and being considerate regarding the needs of the teachers, may serve as an important protective factor for teachers (Chan et al., 2021; Kotowski et al., 2022). Thus, various protective factors have been mentioned in the

literature.

Coping is another of the significant protective factors for school teachers. Coping involves strategies teachers may use to decrease the intensity of episodes of stress and to recover their cognitive and emotional resources (Fox & Walter, 2022). Researchers have reported several such strategies teachers may use in the literature, including solving problems, obtaining emotional and social support, exercising, developing meaning, confrontation, and relaxation (Walters et al., 2021). As a protective factor, the different coping strategies are divided into active and palliative coping strategies (Baker et al., 2021). The following paragraphs will discuss each type of coping strategy.

The first type of coping strategy is active coping. Active coping strategies focus on removing the stress-inducing source (Toropova et al., 2020). Such strategies involve seeking solutions, obtaining social support, managing priorities, and organizing time (Herman et al., 2020). Active coping strategies are contrasted with palliative coping strategies, which do not involve directly acting on the stress source but focus more on decreasing the negative effects of the stress source (Toropova et al., 2020). For example, individuals may engage in avoidance acts, such as greater smoking or drinking, as palliative coping strategies (Baker et al., 2021). A number of coping strategies have been mentioned in the literature.

Active coping strategies have been discussed in the literature. Findings from the literature on teachers suggest that active coping strategies, especially seeking social support, are more often associated with measures of wellbeing, such as lower absenteeism and higher job satisfaction (Fox & Walter, 2022). On the contrary, palliative

coping strategies have not been found to contribute to positive outcomes (Pressley et al., 2021). Avoidance strategies, such as increased drinking, are not effective in the restoration of a positive mental state (Walters et al., 2021). Concerning long-term effects, active coping strategies are more effective for wellbeing, while palliative coping strategies may be more effective in the short term by securing self-esteem and reducing stress intensity (Baker et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2021). Thus, various coping strategies have been discussed in the literature on middle school teachers as a significant type of protective factor.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Middle School Education and Educators

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt across all facets. The first case in the United States of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which is the causative agent of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), was reported in January 2020 (Zviedrite et al., 2021). COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020. As of May 2024, a total of 1,189,603 deaths in the United States have occurred due to COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). The rise of COVID-19 resulted in the wide-scale utilization of nonpharmaceutical interventions to slow the disease.

The interventions also included prolonged closures of schools. In February 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) posted the first guidelines aimed at K-12 schools to provide guidance on school closures when COVID-19 cases were found among staff, students, as well as visitors (Chang et al., 2022; Kotowski et al., 2022). School closures associated with COVID-19 in 2020 between February and June

represented the first nationwide school closure implementation in the United States as a nonpharmaceutical intervention (Baker et al., 2021; Fox & Walter, 2022). The school closures were also the broadest in terms of the number of students and schools affected (Chan et al., 2021). In this period, almost all K-12 public schools in the United States were closed for 8 to 13 weeks (Zviedrite et al., 2021). These closures affected nearly 50 million students in public K-12 schools, including more than 11 million middle school students (Zviedrite et al., 2021). The COVID-19-related school closures have been regarded as unprecedented in the history of the United States.

School closures related to COVID-19 resulted in continuity of learning through other means. Following school closures associated with COVID-19, the most significant transition to different forms of distance learning occurred in the United States (Kotowski et al., 2022). In response to the disruption that occurred to normal school functioning, which was unprecedented, school districts in the United States deployed distance learning programs in order to maintain the continuity of education, despite many of them lacking plans for such provisions (Chan et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2021). During school closures, school districts continued to provide educational services and other services that students depended upon, such as subsidized programs for food (Baker et al., 2021; Fox & Walter, 2022). During school closures, continuity of services remained a significant priority of school districts.

The school closures associated with COVID-19 presented several challenges related to learning. In addition, students, educators, and parents also experienced difficulties due to the sudden transition of learning out of school and the deadly nature of

the pandemic (Chan et al., 2021; Trinidad, 2021). The literature shows that many parents were concerned with the negative impact of education obtained during the school closures (Kraft et al., 2021). Teachers also reported low morale among both students and teachers compared to before the pandemic (Chan et al., 2021). Teachers also reported lower student engagement (Baker et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2021). Limited resources restricted the development of procedures and policies related to physical distancing in schools, and schools experienced significant challenges in the development of online content, providing staff training, and ensuring access to high-speed internet and technology (Fox & Walter, 2022; Pressley et al., 2021). The closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many challenges for all stakeholders in education.

Researchers have discussed barriers and disparities related to the transition to distance learning during the pandemic. Insufficient access to reliable internet and digital devices, inequity related to meal access, and challenges related to the implementation of new strategies for online learning have been mentioned in the literature (Baker et al., 2021; Chang et al., 2022; Kraft et al., 2021). For populations with lower socioeconomic status as well as for ethnic and racial minority populations, pre-existing inequities made school closures and transition to distance learning more challenging, with unmet educational requirements, limited childcare, and lack of free meals reported in the literature (Chan et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). Various barriers affected the general and more vulnerable populations during the transition to distance learning during the pandemic.

Researchers have also discussed the impact of the transition on teachers.

Restrictions related to COVID-19 for teachers resulted in two major transformations in their profession, which occurred suddenly and continued for a significant period (Baker et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2021). The first was teaching from home rather than schools, while the second was through online, remote communication technologies rather than face-to-face (Lepp et al., 2021; Phillips, 2020). During the closures, teachers had to teach from their own homes while also providing care to members of their families, making it challenging to develop a balance between duties related to work and family (Chan et al., 2021; Ingersoll et al., 2021). With respect to teaching, the lack of sufficient infrastructure, training, and preparation has been mentioned in the literature as a significant challenge teachers experienced regarding distance education during the pandemic (Yang et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2021). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic required significant teacher adjustments during the transition to distance learning.

The consequences of the additional challenges teachers experienced on their mental health have been a significant concern. In the literature, researchers have discussed an increase in depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder among teachers (Fox & Walter, 2022). Compared to before the pandemic, greater anxiety was found among teachers, with female gender, younger age, African American ethnicity, having children, pre-existing chronic illness, depression prior to the pandemic, and low income serving as risk factors and significant contributors to anxiety (Farmer, 2020; Yang, 2021). A greater degree of fear related to the pandemic was associated with greater stress levels (Chan et al., 2021; Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2022). Exhaustion and stress related to the work also contributed to burnout among teachers (Chang et al., 2022).

Emotional exhaustion significantly predicts teachers' intention to leave the profession (Baker et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers thus extended to their mental well-being as well.

As the schools partially or fully reopened, teachers' experiences were characterized by worry for students' well-being. Teachers experienced uncertainties, mainly due to a lack of clarity regarding guidelines from the authorities (Pressley & Ha, 2021). Findings on teachers during re-openings show a significant concern for the students, both concerning the health of the students and the possibility of learning loss (Baker et al., 2021). Teacher concerns shifted to efforts at closing the academic gap and ensuring the students' well-being and welfare needs were met (Ingersoll et al., 2021). During the pandemic, teachers had to extend beyond their traditional roles (Pressley et al., 2021). Reports on teachers' experiences after re-openings suggest a desire for normalcy, with clear structures and routines (Chang et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). Findings from the literature thus show that following school re-openings, teachers experienced concern for students and hoped for a sense of normalcy, highlighting the significant disruption the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon their professional and personal lives.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter presented a literature review, synthesizing findings on concepts related to the research problem and the conceptual framework. A discussion on educator motivation (Filgona et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020) followed by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on middle school education and educators was discussed next

(Chan et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). Developing from a historical overview of education in middle school and the middle school movement in the United States (Schaefer et al., 2016; Weilbacher, 2019), the review focused on contemporary challenges in middle school. These included discussions on teacher burnout (Fox & Walter, 2022), teacher retention (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Rosenberg et al., 2021), and protective factors (Kraft et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). Factors related to intrinsic motivation during COVID-19 were discussed next, where it was found that intrinsic motivation is a significant factor in relation to teachers' resilience and flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chan et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). Although research has been conducted on factors related to intrinsic motivation during COVID-19 (Kulikowski et al., 2021; Panisoara et al., 2020), educator intrinsic motivation has not received as much attention within the United States, which presents a gap in the literature that is addressed in this study. The methodology for this research is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Method

As established in Chapter 1, the purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenology study was to gain an understanding of the intrinsic motivation teaching experiences of middle school educators 4 years after the pandemic. In Chapter 3, the research methods for the study are discussed in detail. Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of the qualitative methodology and interpretive phenomenological research design. Second, the role of the researcher is discussed. Third, key aspects of the study's methodology are presented, including the population and sample, the data collection instrument, the data collection, and the data analysis. Fourth, issues of trustworthiness are presented, followed by research ethics. Chapter 3 concludes with a summary of key points.

Research Design and Rationale

To reiterate, this study addressed the central phenomenon of middle school teachers' intrinsic motivation to teach in the post-pandemic context. The study was guided by a single research question: What are the lived experiences of intrinsic motivation in teaching among middle school educators 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic? The research methodology used in conducting this study was that of qualitative research. Qualitative research is descriptive and exploratory in nature (Liamputtong, 2020). In a qualitative study, the researcher is typically concerned with understanding a broadly defined central research phenomenon (Hennink et al., 2020). The exploratory aspect of qualitative inquiry derives from the research approach's open-ended nature (Liamputtong, 2020). Simultaneously, the descriptive aspect of qualitative

research aligns with and derives from its subjective nature (Hennink et al., 2020). A qualitative researcher seeks to understand the central research phenomenon through open-ended exploration of the experiences of study participants who have firsthand experience with the phenomenon (Liamputtong, 2020). Additionally, qualitative inquiry typically captures important aspects of the research context surrounding the phenomenon (Hennink et al., 2020).

A qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study for several key reasons. First, the study is exploratory in nature, as the research purpose was to explore and gain an understanding of the intrinsic motivation teaching experiences of middle school educators 4 years after the pandemic. Second, the research question guiding the study is an open-ended question of *what*. Third, the study addressed a central phenomenon: the intrinsic motivations of middle school teachers following the pandemic. The study was contextual in terms of focusing on states in the eastern United States. Finally, intrinsic motivations are a deeply subjective topic that can only be understood through subjectively oriented research methods.

A multitude of specific qualitative research designs exist within the overall methodology. The specific research design for the study was interpretive phenomenology (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that involves a deeper focus on the subjective aspect of qualitative research, with the researcher paying special attention to the participants' lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Phenomenology offers an unparalleled depth compared to other qualitative research designs, allowing a researcher to delve deep into the lived experiences of the study participants (Smith &

Nizza, 2022). Within the phenomenological universe, interpretive phenomenology focuses on understanding the specific experiences individuals undergo and the process of creating meaning in connection to those experiences (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Interpretive phenomenology has a greater focus on interpreting the participants' experiences, not merely documenting them (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

Overall, a phenomenological design was appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, the study addressed a deeply individual and subjective topic: intrinsic motivation. The subjective depth of phenomenology's exploration of participants' lived experiences is appropriate with the subjective depth of the topic. Second, the focus on lived experiences in a phenomenological design allowed for a deeper exploration of the topic than would other qualitative designs. This richness helped to fully address the breadth of a complex topic such as intrinsic motivations for teaching. Finally, the interpretive approach was specifically appropriate because it allowed for a more practical interpretation of the study's results. Such practical interpretation helped ensure the study's results can be applied.

Role of the Researcher

The overall role of the researcher in qualitative research is to serve as the instrument of data collection for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As such, I acted as the human data collection instrument in this study. In this capacity, I forged a working relationship with each participant. I was the participants' point of contact for the study and engaged with each participant from the point of recruitment through any post-interview interaction, additionally I collected data from the participants by engaging in

one-on-one interviews.

My role in the research was that of an impartial observer. I used reflexive practice to minimize my biases to act in this role. Reflexive practice involved identifying my biases and attempting to be cognizant of those biases throughout the research process. The following biases were accounted for through reflexive practice. Overall, I have been a psychotherapist for 12 years. As such, I am interested in why people think, feel, and behave the way they do. This interest fuels my passion as a therapist. It is a personal and professional curiosity. As such, I may have a potential insider bias when examining intrinsic motivation. In addition, I have a secondary potential bias as a parent. My son was in middle school during the pandemic, and I witnessed his teachers' challenge in educating in the midst of the changes: from in-person to virtual and back to in-person. Overall, I believe everyone experiences change in motivation at times, external factors significantly contribute to fluctuation in motivation. Intrinsic motivation supersedes external factors. I used reflective journaling to manage these biases.

Methodology

The research methodology reflects key components of how the study was conducted. The methodology includes the population and sample, the data collection instrument, the data collection, and the data analysis. The following subsections will address each of these elements in turn.

Participant Selection Logic

A study population is all the individuals who are of interest when conducting a study (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). Within an overall population, the target population

reflects the narrower population from which participants are recruited (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). In this research, the target population was middle school educators who were employed through the pandemic and continue to be employed 4 years later in the United States. The inclusion criteria will be (a) being a middle school educator, (b) having been employed during the pandemic, (c) still being employed now, and (d) teaching in the United States.

A sample reflects those who are actually recruited (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). In qualitative research, the sample size cannot be determined in advance. According to Smith and Nizza (2022), a good sample size to aim for is 10-12 participants. The sampling strategy was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves using participants that provide the most insight to the study based on the shared experience (Stratton, 2021). A purposive sampling strategy is appropriate as it allowed my existing contacts with schools to be used for recruitment. Snowballing also increase the likelihood of engaged participants as contacts recruited more participants.

Instrumentation

There was a single instrument of data collection for the proposed study, namely qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews involve collecting data from participants in a one-on-one setting (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). An interview can be physical or virtual, but it involves the researcher asking the participant a number of open-ended questions (Ruslin et al., 2022). For the study, the specific interview style was semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews afford a strong mixture of flexibility and structure (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In a semi-structured

interview, the interview is guided by an interview guide that is developed in advance by the researcher (Ruslin et al., 2022). I produced an interview guide which contained a set of preliminary interview questions. However, I also had the opportunity to go beyond the interview guide, asking follow-up, probing, and clarifying questions as needed (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Researcher Developed Instrument

As with most qualitative instruments, I developed the instrument of data collection myself. The instrument was developed carefully referencing the research question guiding the study. According to Smith and Nizza (2022), an effective interview guide consists of open-ended questions in order to capture the participants' experience. To ensure the interview guide was appropriate to answering the research questions, I conducted a pilot study with 2 friends who did not meet the inclusionary criteria for the sought-after study participants. The questions on the interview guide addressed the three components of intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence and relatedness. The first set of questions assessed the component of autonomy, the second set of questions assessed competence, the third set of questions addressed relatedness and the final set of questions addressed intrinsic motivation.

To ensure content validity, the feedback from the dry run regarding the research instrument was carefully synthesized and used to improve the interviews to ensure that they are both adequate and complete in terms of their ability to answer the research question. The volume and content of the field test results were used to assess the interview questions' ability to answer the research question and make further revisions as

needed. These steps ensured the interview guide was appropriate to gathering the data needed to address the research question.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Data collection for the study proceeded as follows. First, prior to any data collection, IRB approval was sought before conducting the study. Any changes needed to secure IRB approval was made. Once approval was obtained, a recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) was distributed. The flyer was created in e-mail form. The recruitment e-mail contained key information about the study, including the research purpose, who is eligible to participate in the study, what participation will entail, and my contact information.

Teachers were provided with an informed consent form. An interview was scheduled once they read, accepted, and e-signed the informed consent form. Interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom software. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes and were audio recorded. The recording and transcription of interviews were carried out using Zoom functionality. I then reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. Participants were e-mailed a copy of their transcript, to edit or make corrections as appropriate.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis for the study was carried out using Smith and Nizza's (2022) method of qualitative thematic analysis. Data analysis was conducted with the assistance of NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The analysis proceeded as follows.

The first step in thematic analysis is to build familiarity with the data (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In this step, I carefully read and re-listened to each transcript multiple times

to build familiarity. I grounded the analysis in the data by establishing a solid understanding. The second step involved creating exploratory notes, which were my initial reactions to the transcript (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Following Smith and Nizza's (2022) framework, these notes were categorized as descriptive (focusing on content), linguistic (examining language use), or conceptual (interpretative and questioning). This multi-layered approach allowed for a more in-depth and nuanced view of the transcript. I then formulated experiential statements that capture the participants' meaning of the experience (Smith & Nizza, 2022). These statements represent more complex ideas that address the research question. At this point in the analysis, I aimed to capture the data's psychological essence, moving to a higher level of abstraction while remaining grounded in the participant's account.

The fourth step involves finding connections and clustering the experiential statements (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I compared the statements to the data and group similar or connected statements. This process helped identify patterns and relationships within each participant's experience. Steps 1-4 were repeated for each case, maintaining the idiographic focus of IPA. A table of experiential themes was developed for each participant, ensuring that individual experiences were fully explored before moving to cross-case analysis.

Once the analysis is complete for each case, I conducted a cross-case analysis to find common patterns or differences within the participants' experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This step involved comparing and contrasting themes across all cases to develop a deeper understanding of the shared experiences while also noting unique variations.

Then, the final step was to compile the report (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In this step, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 were drafted to present and interpret the results.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness represents the reliability and validity of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Trustworthiness comprises four dimensions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section addresses those dimensions.

Credibility

Credibility is similar to quantitative internal validity (Johnson et al., 2020). As such, credibility reflects how well the study coheres. I sought to ensure credibility will be assured in several ways. Firstly, the central components of the study, from the problem through the methods, were developed in careful alignment. Second, I used participant transcript review to ensure the responses to the interview question are what participants intended to convey. Third, I performed several validation steps during data analysis to ensure the results reflect the data collected.

Transferability

Transferability is similar to external validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, transferability reflects how well the results transfer to other contexts. However, qualitative results are, on the whole, not generalizable (Johnson et al., 2020). Instead, to create transferability, I described the study setting and the overall context within which the study was conducted in this chapter. This rich context description will help readers understand where else the results might apply.

Dependability

Dependability is similar to reliability (Johnson et al., 2020). As such, dependability reflects how well the findings can be replicated. The main strategy I used to achieve dependability in the study was to document the study in this chapter carefully. Careful description of the methods and the analysis together serve to create a roadmap that can be followed by any future researcher seeking to replicate the study.

Confirmability

Finally, confirmability is similar to objectivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As such, confirmability reflects how demonstrably unbiased the results are. I used two strategies to achieve confirmability. First, I used quotations from the data to reinforce assertions where possible. Second, I used careful reflexive practice, in the research process to ensure that the effect of my biases on the research process is limited to the extent possible. I engaged with reflexivity through reflective journaling and ongoing awareness of my biases.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical research practices were adhered to at every stage of the research. Participation in the study was fully voluntary, and no coercion was employed. IRB approval was obtained before any participants were recruited. Participants reviewed and accepted the terms of informed consent to participate in the study. Participants were free to withdraw their data from the study at any point before publication by contacting the researcher. All participants were treated respectfully throughout the research process.

To protect the participants' data, all data collection was confidential. Each

participant was assigned a codename to protect his or her confidentiality. Any potentially identifying information was redacted from the data prior to analysis. Data is stored securely. When not in use, virtual data is stored on an encrypted external drive. The external drive and any physical copies are kept in a locked desk drawer. All data will be preserved for five years following the publication of the study then destroyed by burning. Due to careful ethical measures, the study is of minimal risk.

Summary

In summation, this qualitative interpretive phenomenology study aimed to understand the intrinsic motivation teaching experiences of middle school educators 4 years after the pandemic. The study addressed the central phenomenon of middle school teachers' intrinsic motivation to teach in the post-pandemic context. The study was guided by a single research question: What are the intrinsic motivation teaching experiences of middle school educators 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic? This chapter discussed the research methods by which the research was carried out.

The research method for the proposed study was qualitative, with an interpretive phenomenological research design. The overall study population was middle school educators who were employed through the pandemic and continue to be employed 4 years later, while the target population was all middle school educators who were employed through the pandemic and continue to be employed 4 years later in the United States. A preliminary sample size of 10-12 participants is proposed. The sampling strategy was purposive sampling. There was a single instrument of data collection for the study, namely qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Participants participated in virtual

interviews lasting 30-60 minutes. The interviews were be audio recorded, then transcribed. Data from the study was analyzed using thematic analysis. The next chapter, Chapter 4, presents the results of that analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the intrinsic motivation teaching experiences of middle school educators 4 years after the pandemic. This study involved the use of the IPA design, particularly the process developed by Smith and Nizza (2022). The sample of the study as well as the data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness processes are described in this chapter. The highlight of the chapter is the presentation of the study results. The experiential statements and themes for each participant are reported, followed by the presentation of the group experiential themes. The results were developed from the data through the guidance of the sole primary research question of this study: What are the lived experiences of intrinsic motivation in teaching among middle school educators 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic?

This chapter begins with a summary of the pilot study, followed by a presentation of the setting, participant demographics and a description of the data collection process. Next, the data analysis procedures are detailed, and evidence of trustworthiness is discussed in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The central section of this chapter presents the results, including individual participant narratives and the emergence of group experiential themes. The chapter concludes with a summary that transitions into the interpretation of results in Chapter 5.

Pilot Study

To ensure the interview guide effectively addressed the research questions, a pilot study was conducted with two individuals who did not meet the inclusion criteria for the

main study participants. This process allowed for a preliminary evaluation of the interview guide's suitability. Each interview lasted an average of 30 minutes, which provided sufficient time for the participants to engage with the questions and offer meaningful feedback. The pilot participants indicated that the questions were well-aligned with the research aims, affirming that the interview guide was appropriate for gathering relevant data.

Based on their feedback, a key suggestion was to provide a clear explanation of the core concepts at the start of the interview, specifically autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This clarification would ensure that participants thoroughly understood these foundational components and could respond more effectively. The feedback addressed the briefing portion of the interview guide, highlighting the importance of clearly outlining these concepts before proceeding with the interview questions. Incorporating this feedback not only helped refine the interview process but also enhanced the clarity and focus of the research question.

Setting

Prior to the study, educators formally consented through email confirmation by directly responding "I consent" to the provided documentation. This digital consent process ensured clear documentation of participants' willingness to engage in the research while allowing flexibility in the recruitment timeline. Interview scheduling accommodated participants' availability, with multiple time slots offered across different days of the week to maximize participation and minimize disruption to educators' professional responsibilities.

Participants were instructed to choose quiet, private locations for their interviews to maintain confidentiality and reduce distractions. All sessions were conducted online, and each participant's private setting was verified at the beginning of every interview. Audio recording permission was verbally confirmed at the start of each session, following ethical research protocols and IRB guidelines.

Demographics

The sample of the study consisted of 10 middle school educators who were employed through the pandemic and continue to be employed 4 years later in the United States. The participants have diverse backgrounds as educators. They taught in various locations—New York, Florida, Cleveland, and Maryland—with experience ranging from 10 to 26 years. The participants taught subjects such as English, English Language Acquisition (ELA), geography, history, all core subjects in self-contained classrooms, social studies, health education, speech and math. All the participants confirmed that they taught middle school students, with some teaching sixth to eighth grade students, while some taught in a single level. Two participants have experiences in teaching in special education. Additionally, two participants had additional roles outside of teaching which were being an intervention specialist and being an instructional coach.

Data Collection

After receiving approval from Walden's IRB # 01-09-25-0669688, I initiated my study on (January 10, 2025). The data collection method was individual semistructured interviews audio recorded via Zoom. All 10 participants were interviewed. The process started after obtaining the IRB approval. The IRB approval included the endorsement of

the interview protocol (see Appendix A), which was developed by me. Once all permissions and approvals were secured, the participant recruitment began. A recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) was sent to the e-mail of the professional networks. I received several e-mails from middle school teachers who expressed their interest in joining the study. These potential participants were asked about the following to confirm that the met the inclusion criteria of this study: (a) being a middle school educator, (b) having been employed during the pandemic, (c) still being employed now, and (d) teaching in the United States. Ten potential participants who volunteered met these inclusion criteria. These teachers were asked for their preferred interview schedule via the Zoom platform and were briefed about the contents of the purpose and nature of the study, and the terms and conditions of participation stipulated in the informed consent form. I also answered any questions the participants had about the study and the data collection process. The participants were then requested to sign the informed consent form via replied email indicating "I consent." All 10 participants consented before their scheduled interviews.

During the interview session, I used the interview protocol as a guide to maintain similarity in the briefing, debriefing, and questions asked to the participants. The briefing entailed reviewing the description of the study and the data collection process, informing the participants about the concepts within the study including intrinsic motivation, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and answer any other questions they had before the interview questions were asked. Next, using a semi structured format, I asked the questions in the protocol as well as probing questions when necessary. The interviews lasted for 30-51 minutes with a total of 406 minutes and an average of 41 minutes. Only

one remarkable incident happened during the interviews. Participant 3 was originally scheduled for an interview in the morning, but they became unavailable and rescheduled to a later time on the same day.

The debriefing involved thanking the participants and informing them of the transcript review process. The participants were told to expect an e-mail containing the transcript of their interview within 24 hours after the conversation. They were asked to review the accuracy of the transcripts including misspellings and the information captured in the data. The participants were also informed that they can add or change their responses as they saw fit to increase the accuracy of the data in reflecting their insights. The data collection proceeded exactly as outlined in the methodology section of Chapter 3, without any deviations or modifications. Throughout the process, no unexpected situations or complications arose that might have affected the quality or consistency of the data gathered. The final transcripts consisted of 22-40 pages with a total of 307 pages and an average of 31 pages. The descriptive information of the interview data is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Information of the Data

Participant	Length of Interview in Minutes	Length of Transcript in Arial, 11 pt., single-spaced
1	46	36
2	41	33
3	30	22
4	36	32
5	35	32
6	51	40
7	31	28
8	50	34
9	50	28
10	36	22

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedures were based on Smith and Nizza's (2022) IPA. This process involved four steps: building familiarity with the data while creating exploratory notes, formulating experiential statements, finding connections and clustering experiential statements, and compiling the table of person experiential themes (Smith & Nizza, 2022). These steps were repeated across all the participants, and then a cross-case analysis was conducted. The data analysis process is described in this section.

The first step was to build familiarity with the data while creating exploratory notes. This step involved multiple rounds of reading the interview transcripts to make first impressions about the data. These documented impressions served as exploratory notes that were categorized into linguistic or how the statement was said, descriptive or what the participant said, and conceptual or what the statement might mean (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The second step was to formulate experiential statements. This step involved extracting key insights in the exploratory notes to reflect the participant's lived experience. An example of the exploratory notes, original transcript, and experiential statements from Participant 1's interview is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Excerpt from Participant 1's Data and Analysis

Experiential Statements	Original Transcript	Exploratory Notes
addressing individual needs	"Oh, well, when they came back after, and we started to do hybrid in Florida. And we had these students at home and the ones in front of me. I knew I had to reach both audiences. It was the 1st time I was ever doing that. I had to set up the camera, the mic. I watched a lot of videos to see how I could do this."	Participant 1 had to quickly adapt to hybrid teaching. They recognized the need to address the different learning environments of students at home versus in-person. Statement showed a focus on individual student needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
adjusting the curriculum for the students	"So I had issues with, okay, I have to go back and teach from the very paragraph writing sentence topic sentence. So I had to. These were my 6th graders at the time when I came to New York I was doing 6th grade, but I realized I had to go back to elementary stuff to teach, so I had to adjust my lesson, adjust the curriculum that was presented so I could meet my students and bring them up."	Participant 1 identified a gap in student learning. They made a decision to deviate from the standard curriculum to address the students' foundational skills. This shows a willingness to adapt instruction to meet students where they are.
administrators acknowledged their mistake	"because they're realizing the scores started to dip and and it also they presented us with a study that every school that implemented wit and wisdom. The scores went down for the 1st 3 years. So we questioned that. And we're like, why should we use something that's going to allow our kids to go down? And then it's going to affect our ratings as teachers. So now, when the principal is seeing that the scores are really going down under her watch, she's like, Okay, I'm giving you back control of your class, giving you back control of your curriculum. Change it how you want to change it! But you cannot go fully away from it. So now I'm getting back some control."	Participant 1 reported a power dynamic where administrators initially imposed a curriculum that proved ineffective. The acknowledgment of the error and the return of some control to teachers suggests a struggle for autonomy and a need for teachers to have input in instructional decisions.
administrators acknowledged their mistake	"but then, in mid October, when they realized that all the teachers are saying that the pacing is pacing was off, it wasn't matching the State curriculum. Now they're telling us. Okay, do what you need to do to get these kids ready for the state exam. So now they're giving me back my power."	Participant 1 described how administrators initially set a curriculum pace that did not align with student needs or state standards. The fact that administrators later adjusted their approach may indicate a recognition of their misjudgment.

Next, the third step was to find connections and clustering experiential statements. This step involved grouping experiential statements with similar meanings into clusters that represented patterns in the participant's data. The fourth step was to compile the table of personal experiential themes. These themes represent a high level of concepts reflecting the participants' lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This step entailed searching for connections across experiential statement clusters to find overarching patterns. The fifth step was to conduct Steps 1-4 for all participants. All the participants' personal experiential clusters and themes are presented in the results section.

The sixth step was to do a cross-case analysis to determine group experiential themes across the 10 participants' data. This analysis entailed the use of Excel to create a cross-tabular report of the themes that occurred across all the participants to determine the group experiential themes. The cross-case analysis comparing group experiential themes with personal experiential themes is presented in Appendix C. This comparative table illustrates both the shared aspects of participants' experiences and the distinctive ways individuals interpreted and made meaning of these experiences. Particularly, no discrepant cases emerged during analysis, indicating strong consistency in the fundamental aspects of participants' reported experiences despite variations in personal interpretation. Following this comprehensive analysis, I proceeded to the final phase of writing up the complete study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness in qualitative studies represent the rigor of the research methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Trustworthiness is determined by four dimensions:

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent of confidence in the accuracy of the study results capturing the participants' perceptions and experiences (Johnson et al., 2020). Meeting the credibility dimension began with aligning the components of the study to create a continuity from the research problem, purpose, and question to the methodology and the results. Credibility was also established through the member checking process which involved the participants' review of the accuracy of the transcripts in terms of representing their insights. The participants were made aware of the member checking process in the debriefing during the interviews. Another way of establishing credibility was using Smith and Nizza's (2022) IPA process. The data were processed into exploratory notes, experiential statements, personal experiential themes, and group experiential themes to reflect the results being grounded to the participants' lived experiences through their own words.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the applicability of the study findings to another context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This chapter includes a description of the sample and the research procedures for readers to decide the applicability of the results. Excerpts from the data and descriptions of the contextual details of the results are also provided for readers to have an understanding of the depth of the participants' experiences and evaluate whether the results are relevant to another setting.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the study results over time (Johnson et al., 2020). Thick descriptions of the research process are provided so that researchers who replicate the steps can expect similar results. Any remarkable incident was included in the report, as well as the scope and limitations of the study. The research materials such as the interview protocol and code book are attached in the appendices for future researchers' reference.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent that other researchers can validate the study results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To minimize bias, I kept the exploratory notes, experiential statements, and themes as grounded to the participants' words as possible. The use of NVivo qualitative data analysis software aided with minimizing bias through side-by-side panels containing the transcripts and the hierarchy of the exploratory notes, experiential statements, and themes. I also practiced reflexivity through the use of journal to document how decisions were made for the study. All the decisions were aligned to the elements of the study.

Results

The results are presented first according to the 10 participants' personal experiential themes, then the cross-case group experiential themes. Each participant's lived experience is described. This description was developed from the primary focus of the participants' interview data combined with the my exploratory comments and the personal experiential themes. The cross-case group experiential themes emerged from

cross-tabulating the experiential themes across all the participants, and where common results emerged, themes were formed.

Participant 1

The primary focus of Participant 1's interview was on instructional practices and student support, along with navigating administrative constraints during the COVID-19 era. Participant 1 geared towards descriptions of being oneself as a teacher who is concerned with how they are teaching and how to best support their students while also dealing with the stresses of COVID-19 and administrative directives. The data, as seen in Tables 5 and 6, appeared to show that Participant 1 was driven by a sense of responsibility and commitment to student learning especially when faced with the obstacles brought by the pandemic. They are also motivated by student-centered practices particularly in promoting learning continuity and addressing individual student needs.

Table 3

Participant 1's Clusters of Experiential Statements

Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement	Personal dedication to teaching beyond duties when needed	Adaptation in response to evolving conditions	Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement	The social context affecting practice	Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control
– Addressing individual needs – Adjusting the curriculum for the students – Allowing students to talk – Being present for students to create a safe space – Ensuring learning continuity – Helping students	– Doing what was needed – Firm with students when needed – Intended to help students become successful – Teaching efforts yielded good exam results of the students – Used standards	– COVID era was a chaotic time – COVID era was challenging and stressful – COVID isolated people – COVID was uncertain – Implementation of hybrid learning – Students were provided with devices for	– Engaged in self-reflection when students pushed back – Engaged students through creative solutions – Learning as they go – Practice	– Cooperation of the parents – Involving parents to help the students – Mutual respect with students – Rapport with students – Colleagues worked	– Cannot achieve desired outcomes – Cannot deviate from standards and curriculum – Have to follow district mandates – No instructions from administrators

retain information – Helping underprivileged students – Listening to students' needs – Meeting students at their level – Understanding individual differences among students – Used group work to encourage students to participate	as a guide to instructions	remote learning – Teachers had no choice in teaching remotely	produced good results – Perceived competence from maintaining standard	together	– Questioning instructions that affected their ratings

Table 4

Participant 1's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19, hybrid learning, remote teaching).	Driven to adapt to changes
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement.	Motivated by professional growth and efficacy
The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Participant 2

Participant 2's interview was primarily focused on adapting to the impacts of COVID-19 and utilizing resources, especially technology, in addressing student needs. They were also inclined to grow in their teaching profession. Participant 2's data showed their motivation to seemingly stem from their desire for professional growth and building self-efficacy in teaching. Participant 2 specified being able to keep going during and after

the crisis brought by the pandemic through seeing their students' positive response to their efforts. They also revealed their interest in continuing to develop new skills to become a more effective educator. These results are summarized in Participant 2's clusters of experiential statements and personal experiential themes found in Tables 7 and 8.

Table 5

Participant 2's Clusters of Experiential Statements

Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement	Personal dedication to teaching beyond duties when needed	Adaptation in response to evolving conditions	Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement	The social context affecting practice	Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control
– Addressing individual needs – Dealt with students lacking social skills – Dealt with students' motivation and behavior challenges – Dealt with students' problems with keeping focused – Helping students develop important skills – Meeting students at their level – Understanding individual differences among students – Used digital tools to engage students	– Doing what was needed – Have to follow district mandates – Intended to help students become successful	– COVID era was a chaotic time – COVID era was challenging and stressful – COVID isolated people – COVID challenges took time from instructions – Problems in the difference between in-person and online classes – Students' preference for remote learning and digital tools	– Built resilience – Developed positive outlook post-pandemic – Motivated by students' response to their efforts – Perceived competence growth from experiences – Received digital skills training – Received professional development – Received resources for teaching – Selected lessons	– Lacked training to feel adequately competent – Led to teacher shortage – Limited resources – Parents' lack of cooperation – Teacher shortage affected scheduling and role – Technical problems –	– Co-teachers' willingness to help – Mutual respect with students – Rapport with students – Shared resources with co-teachers – Trusted by administrators ratings

Table 6

Participant 2's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19,	Driven to adapt to changes

hybrid learning, remote teaching).	
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement.	Motivated by professional growth and efficacy
The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Participant 3

Participant 3's emphasis during the interview were the act of balancing instructional practices and student support while navigating administrative pressures, and leveraging resources and technology to overcome the barriers brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 3's responses showed a teacher who was driven to address the needs of the students while also satisfying the directives of the administration. The participant disclosed the use of resources and technology, as seen in Table 9, to be an effective teacher. Participant 3 appeared to be motivated by a sense of advocacy for their students, as they were driven to let students meet grade expectations and receive the support they needed, even when they had to deviate from the district-mandated curriculum.

Table 7

Participant 3's Clusters of Experiential Statements

Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement	Personal dedication to teaching beyond duties when needed	Adaptation in response to evolving conditions	Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement	The social context affecting practice	Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control
– Being present for students to create a safe space – Dealt with students' problems with keeping focused – Differentiated instructions	– Intended to help students become successful	– COVID era was challenging and stressful – Students not showing up to class – Students were academically	– Built resilience – Perceived competence growth from efforts from desire to help students – Validation of method in	– Colleagues worked together – Rapport with students – Teachers had resources for collaboration	– Parents' lack of cooperation – Pressured to meet test scores for district budget

– Ensuring learning continuity – Giving students incentives – Intention to let students meet grade expectations – Involved students in their education – Listening to students' needs – Reached out to students – Showed grace and leniency – Students were provided with the resources they wanted – Understanding individual differences among students – Used alternative platforms to address students' needs	behind – Technical problems	motivating students

Table 8

Participant 3's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19, hybrid learning, remote teaching).	Driven to adapt to changes
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement.	Motivated by professional growth and efficacy
The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Participant 4

Participant 4's primary focus during the interview was building student support through strong relationships and navigating the school and community context. The participant, however, revealed facing challenges in administration and collaboration.

Participant 4's clusters of experiential statements and personal experiential themes (see Tables 11 and 12) showed their commitment to the community and a strong desire to make a difference in their students' lives. This sense of purpose sustained them through the challenges of the pandemic.

Table 9

Participant 4's Clusters of Experiential Statements

Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement	The social context affecting practice	Adaptation in response to evolving conditions	Personal dedication to teaching beyond duties when needed	Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement	Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control
– Affected by students' struggles – Being patient with the students – Being present for students to create a safe space – Held students accountable – Meeting students at their level – Relationship with students built on trust	– Built relationship with co-workers – Community-based programs – Cooperation of the parents – In touch with the community – Intention to make a difference in the community – Motivated by students' response to their efforts – Parents' lack of cooperation – Pre-pandemic positive experiences	– COVID era was challenging and stressful – Implementation of hybrid learning – Preference for in-person classes	– Doing what was needed – Intended to help students become successful	– Blamed for COVID-related issues – Felt discouraged by changes – No communication from administrators – No instructions from administrators – No support for parents to help their children – No support from administrators – No support from government – School shootings – Students were academically behind	– Perceived competence growth from experiences – Approval of plans presented to administrators – Had a leadership role

Table 10

Participant 4's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19, hybrid learning, remote teaching).	Driven to adapt to changes
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement.	Motivated by professional growth and efficacy
The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Participant 5

Participant 5's interview primarily focused on leveraging their professional experience and adapting instructional practices and student support in the face of COVID-19 impacts and administrative changes Participant 5's data revealed them to be a teacher who had to quickly adjust and modify their teaching methods to adapt to the changes brought by the pandemic such as the implementation of remote and hybrid learning, and the gradual return to in-person classes. Participant 5 appeared to be motivated by a combination of professional responsibility and a desire to connect with students. The challenges of remote learning and administrative changes tested them, but also built their resilience. The participants' experiential statement clusters and personal experiential themes are presented in Tables 13 and 14.

Table 11

Participant 5's Clusters of Experiential Statements

Focused on actions centered	Motivation and reflection	Adaptation in response to evolving	Personal dedication to	The social context affecting practice	Constraints, expectations,

around student learning, well-being, and engagement	regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement	conditions	teaching beyond duties when needed		and challenges outside of the teacher's control
– Addressing individual needs – Being present for students to create a safe space – Dealt with students' motivation and behavior challenges – Meeting students at their level – Understanding individual differences among students – Used alternative platforms to address students' needs – Watched students change	– Built resilience – Confident in one's abilities – Felt competent from training – Learning as they go – Practice produced good results – Received digital skills training – Reflected on practices – Returned to calmness after COVID – Suggestion that teachers can decide autonomously when trusted by administrators – Used existing skills to cope	– COVID era was a chaotic time – COVID was uncertain – Easier to connect with students in in-person classes – Preference for in-person classes – Students not showing up to class – Technical problems – Tried to make experiences fun	– Doing what was needed – Intended to help students become successful – Used standards as a guide to instructions	– Colleagues worked together – Communicated issues – Cooperation of the parents – Co-teachers' willingness to help – Involving parents to help the students – Rapport with students – Working with parents	– A gap in relationship with students – Cannot deviate from standards and curriculum – Changed administrators – Drifted away from colleagues – Had health concerns – Have to follow district mandates – Teachers had no choice in teaching remotely

Table 12

Participant 5's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19, hybrid learning, remote teaching).	Driven to adapt to changes
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement.	Motivated by professional growth and efficacy
The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Participant 6

The interview with Participant 6 has a primary focus on refining instructional practices and enhancing student support. Participant 6 repeatedly described their practices

of reflecting on their teacher experience and utilizing resources and technology to help support students. These results are found in Participant 6's clusters of experiential statements and personal experiential themes shown in Tables 15 and 16. The data showed Participant 6 as a teacher valued self-improvement to effectively teach their students. Thus, I derived Participant 6 to be motivated by a desire for professional competence and a focus on positive student relationships. They are driven to improve their practice and create a supportive learning environment.

Table 13

Participant 6's Clusters of Experiential Statements

Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement	Adaptation in response to evolving conditions	Personal dedication to teaching beyond duties when needed	The social context affecting practice	Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control
– Dealt with students' problems with keeping focused – Engaged students through creative solutions – Focused on the positive aspect of relationship with students – Having independent activities – Letting students solve problems – Meeting students at their level – Showed grace and leniency – Understanding individual differences among students – Used digital tools to engage students – Used group work to encourage students to participate	– COVID era was challenging and stressful – Gradual return to school – Problems in the difference between in-person and online classes	– Intended to help students become successful – Requiring more effort to teach students – Selected lessons	– Rapport with students – Took control of schedules and classes	– Students were academically behind

Table 14

Participant 6's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19, hybrid learning, remote teaching).	Driven to adapt to changes
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and	Motivated by professional growth and

improvement.	efficacy
The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Participant 7

Participant 7 repeatedly discussed the struggles during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were focused on providing student support. The specific struggle shared by Participant 7 was navigating administrative challenges while adapting to the impacts of the pandemic. Participant 7 appeared determined for professional growth as they built oneself through these experiences. Participant 7's data also revealed their sense of duty in their role and the practical necessity of having a job especially during the challenging time of the pandemic. These experiences are shown in Tables 17 and 18.

Table 15

Participant 7's Clusters of Experiential Statements

Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control	Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement	Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement	Adaptation in response to evolving conditions	Personal dedication to teaching beyond duties when needed	The social context affecting practice
– Cannot achieve desired outcomes – Did not feel confident due to lack of experience – Did not want to disappoint supervisors – Hard to build relationships online – Needed a job to sustain life – No instructions from administrators – Parents' lack of cooperation	– Being present for students to create a safe space – Dealt with students' problems with keeping focused – Engaged students through creative solutions – Firm with students when needed – Held students accountable – Meeting students	– Perceived competence growth from experiences – Received professional development	– A gap in relationship with students – Approval of plans presented to administrators	– Dedicated to fulfill role – Intended to help students become successful – Selected lessons	– Colleagues worked together – Rapport with students – Trusted by administrators

– Several distractions to teaching – Students not showing up to class – Students were academically behind – Technical problems	at their level – Modifying instructions as needed – Reached out to students – Used digital tools to engage students

Table 16

Participant 7's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19, hybrid learning, remote teaching).	Driven to adapt to changes
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement.	Motivated by professional growth and efficacy
The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Participant 8

Participant 8's lived experiences primarily focused on fostering collaboration with co-workers and parents, and enhancing student engagement during and after the pandemic. Participant 8 specified using resources and technology to help their students adapt to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their education. Participant 8 seemed highly motivated by a strong belief in the importance of collaboration and advocacy for students. They were driven to create a supportive and connected learning community. These experiences are shown in Tables 19 and 20.

Table 17

Participant 8's Clusters of Experiential Statements

The social context affecting practice	Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement	Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement	Adaptation in response to evolving conditions	Personal dedication to teaching beyond duties when needed	Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control
– Administrators facilitated connections among teachers – Administrators provided resources – Administrators provided support – Built relationship with co-workers – Communicated issues – Cooperation of the parents – Co-teachers' willingness to help – Involving parents to help the students – Working with parents	– Advocating for students – Allowing students to talk – Being patient with the students – Being present for students to create a safe space – Dealt with students' problems with keeping focused – Meeting students at their level – Reached out to students – Understanding individual differences among students – Used alternative platforms to address students' needs	– Confident in one's abilities – Felt competent from training – Learning as they go – Perceived competence growth from efforts from desire to help students – Perceived competence growth from experiences – Received professional development	– COVID was uncertain – Implementation of hybrid learning – Preference for in-person classes	– Dedicated to fulfill role – Doing what was needed – Intended to help students become successful – Selected lessons	– Administrators did not listen – Parents' lack of cooperation

Table 18

Participant 8's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19, hybrid learning, remote teaching).	Driven to adapt to changes
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement.	Motivated by professional growth and efficacy

The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Participant 9

During the interview, Participant 9 primarily focused on navigating instructional practices and administrative constraints while addressing student support and adapting to COVID-19 impact. Participant 9 also revealed experiencing challenges with limited resources and technology use. Participant 9 noted trying to provide the best education for their students. Participant 9's motivation seemed to be tested after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but they are still driven by a sense of responsibility and a desire to impart foundational skills to students. The challenges of the pandemic and resource limitations may have affected their overall sense of efficacy, as shown in their clusters of experiential statements and personal experiential themes in Tables 21 and 22.

Table 19

Participant 9's Clusters of Experiential Statements

Adaptation in response to evolving conditions	Personal dedication to teaching beyond duties when needed	Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement	Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement	Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control	The social context affecting practice
– COVID era was challenging and stressful – Flexibility of working from home – Got used to situation – Problems in the difference between in-	– Dedicated to fulfill role – Firm with students when needed – Imparting basic skills through homework – Intended to help students become	– Addressing individual needs – Being present for students to create a safe space – Engaged students through creative solutions	– Built resilience – Developed positive outlook post-pandemic – Learning as they go – Perceived competence growth from experiences	– Cannot deviate from standards and curriculum – Decreased confidence due to student outcomes – Felt complacent due to low expectations – Hard to build relationships	– Colleagues worked together – Mutual respect with students – Rapport with students – Working with parents

person and online classes – Students not showing up to class – Students were academically behind	successful – Selected lessons	– Showed grace and leniency – Students' different levels of competence – Students' mental health issues – Tried to make experiences fun – Understanding individual differences among students	– Recognized for work	online – Led to teacher shortage – Limited resources – No communication with parents – Not technologically savvy – Students did not retain information

Table 20

Participant 9's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19, hybrid learning, remote teaching).	Driven to adapt to changes
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement.	Motivated by professional growth and efficacy
The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Participant 10

Participant 10 primarily talked about prioritizing student support and building relationships during their interview. The participant shared that these priorities would help them adapt their instructional practices to the challenges of COVID-19 impact. They also disclosed using resources to their advantage, as seen in the clusters of experiential statements and personal experiential themes shown in Tables 23 and 24. Participant 10 appeared concerned about their students' well-being especially during the shift to online

classes. This sense of care and concern for their students motivated them throughout the disruptions and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 21

Participant 10's Clusters of Experiential Statements

Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement	Adaptation in response to evolving conditions	Personal dedication to teaching beyond duties when needed	Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement	Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control	The social context affecting practice
– Addressing individual needs – Affected by students' struggles – Being present for students to create a safe space – Differentiated instructions – Engaged students through creative solutions – Helping underprivileged students – Involving parents to help the students – Meeting students at their level – Prioritized students' well-being – Reached out to students – Showed grace and leniency – Students were provided with the resources they wanted – Used digital tools to engage students – Working with parents	– COVID was sudden – COVID was uncertain – Gradual return to school – Problems in the difference between in-person and online classes – Students not showing up to class	– Dedicated to fulfill role – Intended to help students become successful – Modifying instructions as needed	– Built resilience – Developed positive outlook post-pandemic – Learning as they go – Perceived competence growth from experiences – Recognized for work	– A gap in relationship with students – No connection with colleagues – Parents cannot commit to children's schooling – Students were academically behind	– Connected with close colleagues – Rapport with students – Preference for in-person classes – Description of level taught – Description of role – Description of subject taught – Description of years of teaching experience

Table 22

Participant 10's Personal Experiential Themes

Experiential Statement Clusters	Personal Experiential Themes
Focused on actions centered around student learning, well-being, and engagement.	Driven by student-centered actions
Adaptation in response to evolving conditions (e.g., COVID-19, hybrid learning, remote teaching).	Driven to adapt to changes
Motivation and reflection regarding effectiveness, skill, and improvement.	Motivated by professional growth and efficacy
The social context affecting practice	Influences of community, relationship-building, and resources
Constraints, expectations, and challenges outside of the teacher's control.	Struggling with external pressures
Personal dedication to teaching, going beyond duties when needed.	Having a sense of responsibility and commitment

Group Experiential Themes

Six group experiential themes emerged across the data collected from all 10 participants. This is summarized in the cross-tabulated data in Table 25. While the group experiential themes developed collectively, each participant has their unique was of experiencing student-centered practices, professional growth, adapting to changes, sense of responsibility and commitment, struggles, and community engagement with relationship building. This sub-section contains the description of the group experiential themes to capture the essence of the participants' lived experiences, especially of intrinsic motivation 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 23

Cross-case Analysis to Develop Group Experiential Themes

Group Experiential Themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Sustaining intrinsic motivation through student-centered purpose	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Maintaining intrinsic motivation through competence building	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Ability to adapt to change	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Anchoring intrinsic motivation in professional identity and purpose	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sustaining intrinsic motivation by compartmentalizing external pressures	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Reinforcing intrinsic motivation through community and relationship-building	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Group Experiential Theme 1: Sustaining Intrinsic Motivation Through Student-Centered Purpose

All 10 participants shared their experiences of their drive to take student-centered actions after going through the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants reported showing concern for their students' well-being and academic success. Their concern was characterized by data showing their heightened awareness of student needs, adapting their teaching methods and providing emotional support. This theme explores how these educators navigated the complexities of teaching by prioritizing their students' needs.

All 10 participants shared their actions that showed their motivation to help their students succeed. At the onset of the pandemic, eight participants noted that they became patient with their students especially in showing them grace and leniency as long as the students show their effort to complete the required work. Participant 3 specified:

> I will always provide opportunities if they're struggling, and you know I never close an assignment and say, this is a deadline. I would leave my assignments open because I know what we were up against…and it was a struggle… this assignment is always open whenever you give it to me. I'm going to grade it. But you, you know I need you to complete the assignment.

Some participants such as Participant 1 and 4 showed patience in dealing with their students' behavior. Participant 1 shared:

> So, once again, I had to be patient. I had some students who were very explosive. They cussed out teachers, cussed out the principal…we really sat down and reflected, we realized that this child, like others, had been home for two years… I had to make sure to be relatable. I had to remember that everybody's situation is different and treat them accordingly.

By treating students "accordingly," six participants described their creative ways of engaging each of their students' interest in class and met the students at their level. The participants shared that they adapted their instructional methods and used various teaching resources to engage their students. Participant 1 articulated, "I realized I had to go back to elementary stuff to teach, so I had to adjust my lesson, adjust the curriculum that was presented so I could meet my students and bring them up." Participant 2 noted the use of technology in a way that resonated with students, which they found effective during and after the pandemic: "We still use digital engagement platforms like Kahoot or Quizlet, some of the gamified ways to learn and teach the students that really engages them." Participant 3 disclosed the need to understand student interests to maintain engagement. Participant 3 stated, "We decided that we were going to add materials that would motivate our scholars, materials that would make them interested and want to come."

The participants also discussed providing support for their students. Participants 4 and 6 revealed showing their support through upholding student accountability and checking on their students' academic progress and well-being including outside the classroom setting. Participant 4 shared, "I had to check on my students because...I spent

emails. You know, when I was seeing them outside at the record store urban market, yes." Participant 2 showed a dedication to emotional well-being: "I remember a student who had lost a parent during that time...we found books and stories and art opportunities for him to retell the story through art, because art was really something he connected with." The participants referenced understanding their students' and their families' struggles especially during the pandemic. Participant 10 described their awareness of the financial situations of some families and helped struggling students with the materials needed in class. Participant 10 elaborated:

> If I wanted to do an activity that involved skittles, I couldn't just let parents know on whim that I needed them to get their kid a bag of skittles. I would have to either ask them if they had the money to buy it, and to make sure that they had it for ready for that period of class that particular day, or I would make, I would buy skittles and put it in a Ziploc bag, and then leave it at the front office so that parents can pick it up.

The collective lived experiences of the 10 participants showed a focus on student-centered practices in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were driven by their heightened awareness of their students' multifaceted needs which led to adaptability, empathy, and resourcefulness to help support their students. Their support were for academic instruction as well as for emotional well-being, logistical challenges, and individual learning styles. Through acts of patience, creative engagement, and proactive support, they were able to prioritize the needs of their students for academic success and overall well-being 4 years after the pandemic.

Group Experiential Theme 2: Maintaining Intrinsic Motivation Through Competence Building

All 10 participants reported finding motivation in professional development and a sense of efficacy. The participants shared being driven to seek opportunities to improve their teaching skills, learn new technologies, and enhance their ability to positively impact student learning. They noted that these improvements can help them become more effective educators especially while facing the struggles in teaching 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nine of the 10 participants shared that they were driven by their perceived confidence in their own competence as a teacher 4 years after going through the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants described their competence to be rooted in past successes, adaptability, and a growth mindset. Participant 1 stated, “I felt comfortable in what I was doing, because I knew that through my practice I produced good results, so I knew that I was trusted by my administration to roll out a plan that would possibly work.” Participant 1 indicated confidence derived from a history of positive outcomes. Participant 7 shared their experience of developing confidence in their ability to adapt to the challenges of online teaching: “If you can teach online, you can teach anywhere, and you can do anything.” Participant 10’s success with using technology resources contributed to their increased confidence in their teaching competence: “Now my competence, I feel, has grown so much greater, because now I know how to do a lot of things using technology which I really didn’t...before.” Participant 8 also acknowledged the initial challenges of teaching during the pandemic but noted the importance of continuous learning and

development among effective educators. Participant 8 specified:

> I think again it goes back to just making sure that I was again taking advantage of the professional developments that I was given, even doing like my own research...to make sure that my toolbox was full. So I wouldn't, you know, on top of all the craziness that I would feel, you know, comfortable.

On a similar note, Participants 2, 7, and 9 stated that they had moments in which they felt a lack of confidence because of lacking experience, training, or achievements of their desired student outcomes.

Eight of the 10 participants described motivation from being able to make decision autonomously as part of their professional growth and teaching efficacy. Autonomous decision-making appeared highly valued by the teachers 4 years after the pandemic as the described several students to be academically behind and needing tailored instructions. This autonomy manifested in various forms including designing schedules and curricula to choosing technological platforms and leading professional development. Participant 1 stated, "So I took the liberty of organizing schedules for the teachers, which worked...So that was me, you know, taking control. I was in control of my class." Participant 6 shared practicing some degree of autonomy: "I was also able to, to a pretty significant extent design my schedule...I was able to serve a decent chunk of the students that had previously been participating, and I was actually pretty proud of that." Participant 3 acknowledged the constraints of a district-mandated curriculum but also stated that they decided to practice autonomy for the benefit of their students. Participant 3 noted, "I'm going to teach to the standards that they're requiring, but I'm

going to go out, and I'm going to find materials that are of interest to my scholars, that they can relate to, that they can make connections." Participant 3's statement showed a commitment to tailoring instruction to meet the specific needs and interests of their students despite the presence of a structured framework. Participant 8 discussed having the autonomy to choose the platforms that best suited their students' needs especially during the pandemic. Participant 8 shared:

> Early on in the pandemic it was definitely trying to figure out what platform I was going to use. We had a choice to use Zoom with our students or Google meet...I chose to do like that online type of classroom type of thing, just to kind of maintain that connection with them.

The participants reported finding motivation in professional development, a sense of efficacy, perceived competence, and autonomous decision-making in their teaching 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic. Their drive to improve teaching skills and positively impact student learning was developed from the data. The data revealed that the participants were confident because of past successes and adaptability. For the participants, adaptability also meant having the opportunity to make decisions autonomously to implement tailored instructions that met the actual needs of their students. Being able to decide their lessons and materials autonomously helped increase their teaching efficacy.

Group Experiential Theme 3: Ability to Adapt to Change

All 10 participants described experiences of rapid, sudden, and big changes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, all the participants also shared the

lived experience of adapting to those changes. This theme captured the participants' experiences of adaptability and resilience, showing motivation for proactive approaches in learning new skills and adjusting to evolving circumstances.

The 10 participants indicated their strategies in adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic which reflected their motivation to support their students' academic success and well-being regardless of the situations affecting them. The participants reported embracing new technologies, adjusting teaching methods, and showing resilience in the face of unprecedented circumstances. Participant 2 expressed the resilience gained during the COVID-19 period: "COVID taught me that we could get through anything...The environment might not be ideal. The situation might not be ideal. You are going to face challenges, but it doesn't mean that you can't still reach your students." The participants shared that they were motivated to seek new ways to engage students in altered learning environments. Participant 6 explained, "I had to make up a bunch of stuff in order to figure out how to motivate kids in a virtual setting." Participant 8 shared this similar need for flexibility and understanding to support their students. Participant 8 stated, ""I feel like it was just, you know, trying to be as understanding as you could."

Group Experiential Theme 4: Anchoring Intrinsic Motivation in Professional Identity and Purpose

All 10 participants revealed that they were driven by their sense of responsibility and commitment to their students and their profession. The participants shared their understanding of their role as educators and a dedication to ensuring student learning. This theme also showed the importance of extrinsic motivators alongside intrinsic

motivators such as salary and recognition to sustain middle school teachers 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic.

All 10 participants described their experiences that they felt motivated to fulfill their responsibility to teach their students regardless of the circumstances. Participant 04 expressed that their "purpose in life is to educate" and was dedicated to the community. Participant 07 shared that they were passionate about teaching, stating, "I'm just more passionate about it, like I don't care if it's one student in my class that I connect to. But I know I'm trying to do my due diligence to teach these kids." The participants shared that the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath were challenging, but they persisted to help their students become academically successful. Participant 07 acknowledged the unexpected nature of the pandemic but affirmed their commitment to fulfill their role: "This is something that I signed up for, because it was before the pandemic had no idea this was about to happen. But I'm like I'm going to finish this out, and I'm gonna see this through." Participant 08 expressed a similar sense of duty: "This is what I'm called to do. So I'm going to do it...I know that I was called to educate for such a time as this, and so I'm going to do my best to educate." Participant 10 indicated that their motivation to teach remained constant throughout the pandemic: "The motivation did not change during the pandemic."

The participants also specified examples of their strategies that showed their commitment to teaching. Participant 10 reported their concern about the students' knowledge gap and felt responsible to help their students catch up to their supposed academic level. Participant 01 expressed pride in their students' achievements: "Each

year, my students outperform the district and the city." Participant 1 added they were committed to helping students prepare for any test increasing their information retention: "I use strategies to help my students actually retain the information…So that I can prepare my students to give them what they want, so they could also be successful." Participant 2 revealed a different approach by balancing traditional methods with modern pedagogy. Participant 2 specified, "I try to have a balance between both, because I think the old school paper pencil is still important...but balancing it with what the kids connect with." Participant 3 was more focused on committing to new teaching strategies than traditional ones as they stated, "[I am] always seeking new and improved ways to teach." Participant 3 expressed feeling responsible to reach each of their student. Participant 05 showed their commitment by delivering certificates to students' homes and wanting parents to see their children achieving.

The participants' words and practices evidenced their sense of responsibility towards their role as teachers. They expressed their love for their job, and reported examples of diverse strategies that helped their students. They remain committed to teaching and helping their students succeed through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its outcomes.

Group Experiential Theme 5: Sustaining Intrinsic Motivation by Compartmentalizing External Pressures

All 10 participants noted experiencing times of discouragement as they faced external pressures that affected their teaching in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants specified struggles with administrative demands, teacher shortage, and the

challenges of online teaching. The participants also revealed a lack of external support including parents, the district, and the government.

The participants expressed that they felt a lack of external support, which contributed to their discouragement and decreased motivation. Participant 2 described frustration with parental involvement: “There were many times when parents would not log on with their students...we really had no control over whether or not we would be able to complete our job for the day.” The participant’s lack of control over parents’ cooperation was also echoed in another statement: “You really lost the motivation to put in that same level of effort. And it was discouraging to log in in the morning, and maybe one student showed up for the day.” Participant 3 questioned the issue of accountability and parental roles. Participant 3 stated:

> At what point do we stop holding educators accountable and start holding parents accountable? Because if the parents are not playing a meaningful role in the lives of their children, there is only so much more that an educator can do.

The participants also reported struggles with the district and state restrictions affecting their teaching and their motivation. Participant 1 described the challenges with a new structured curriculum mandated by the district: “This curriculum...does not align with our state standards. It does not prepare our students to be successful on our exams… They want us to stick to fidelity and have it authentically...Don’t divert, don’t cut anything out.” Participant 1 shared that this curriculum conflicted with their preferred teaching methods. Participant 3 noted the pressure associated with these mandates. Participant 3 shared:

> If schools aren't performing at the rate that the district would want you to perform, then they're going to make you a targeted school for instruction that's on the district level. And then, if they notice that you're still not performing, they're going to let the state take over. So for me, I feel that the pressure is all because of budget and money.

The lack of administrative support also emerged as a concern. Participant 4 noted, "The issue for me was administration not having communication." The participants revealed that administrators acknowledged teacher input but ultimately retained the authority to make final decisions. For instance, Participant 1 noted, "They supported me in the fact that...it made sense to them. So they okayed it." However, Participant 1 also disclosed that this support had limits: "In mid-October...they're telling us, 'Okay, do what you need to do to get these kids ready for the state exam." The participants described that their administrators were being affected by performance pressures, which added to their own struggles as administrators attempted to address the test score problems. Participant 3 elaborated, "It was not based on me to decide what the curriculum would look like...we have to get the final go ahead from administration."

The participants' lived experiences showed the external challenges educators faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants reported that they felt moments of discouragement especially when they dealt with administrative demands, staffing shortages, the difficulties of online teaching, and a perceived lack of adequate support from parents, districts, and the state. The combination of restrictions imposed by external entities and having little input in decision-making processes further contributed to their

lack of motivation.

Group Experiential Theme 6: Reinforcing Intrinsic Motivation Through Community and Relationship-Building

All 10 participants shared their drive for community engagement and relationship-building. The participants stated that they were motivated by a desire to create a supportive learning environment with connections with students, colleagues, and parents. The relationships built by the participants sustained them during and post-pandemic.

The 10 participants shared their experiences of good relationships on their motivation for teaching. The participants recognized the value of strong connections with both students and colleagues. Some participants perceived that good relationships meant having better support. Participant 2 disclosed the benefits of existing bonds especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic: “I think I had a good relationship, especially with the students who I was going into COVID already having established a relationship pre-COVID.” Participant 1 specified being able to open up to someone about their experiences which saved them from feeling discouraged about teaching: “We would talk about things, and you were always there to help and support them. So, you know, the connection was good.”

Nine of the 10 participants described role of support systems in navigating teaching challenges. The participants noted support in various forms including administrative support, resource sharing, and community connection. Participant 2 articulated the importance of resourcefulness and collaboration: “There were times when administration would provide digital resources, but for the most part, we would have to

find our own, and we would share amongst each other." For Participant 5, strong community ties influenced their motivation. Participant 9 shared similar beliefs:

> We'd have meetings like, okay, so what are you doing? That's working... I really like old people, so like the old teachers in my building. I knew they were struggling, so I would check on them and try to show them how to use technology to make their lives easier.

The participants collectively perceived that community engagement and relationship-building in education were important for teachers' motivation. The participants indicated valuing commitment to fostering supportive learning environments, where connections with students, colleagues, and parents. These community ties were seen as important in navigating both typical educational challenges and extraordinary crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants added that their relationships were built on mutual respect and support which helped them motivation and commitment to teaching after going through the COVID-19 crisis.

Summary

The results of this study revealed the variety of teacher motivations and experiences after the pandemic which included shared concerns and individual preferences across the 10 participants. All 10 participants sustained motivation through student-centered purpose through prioritizing student well-being and adapting their teaching to meet evolving needs. The participants were also driven by competence building, seeking to enhance their skills and efficacy in the face of unprecedented challenges. Additionally, the participants were sustained by their sense of responsibility

and commitment to student learning despite administrative hurdles and resource limitations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The importance of community and relationship-building also emerged as a motivator for all 10 participants as they focused on fostering strong student support networks and collaborative environments.

The conclusions of the study are also presented in the next chapter. Across all participants, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for significant change. Middle school teachers were forced to adapt to new teaching methods and environments and some of the changes remained and were helpful while others hindered the intrinsic motivation to teach. Chapter 5 will build upon these insights by presenting a thematic interpretation of the findings, drawing connections to the existing literature and conceptual framework, and offering conclusions that inform future research and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative IPA study aimed to understand middle school educators' experiences with intrinsic motivation for teaching 4 years after the pandemic. By exploring these experiences through the lens of key concepts of the SDT, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, I aimed to understand how teachers make sense of their intrinsic motivation for teaching within the challenging post-pandemic educational landscape. The findings from this study revealed important insights as six group experiential themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) sustaining intrinsic motivation through student-centered purpose, (b) maintaining intrinsic motivation through competence building, (c) ability to adapt to change, (d) anchoring intrinsic motivation in professional identity and purpose, (e) sustaining intrinsic motivation by compartmentalizing external pressures, and (f) reinforcing intrinsic motivation through community and relationship-building. These themes aligned with and extended the literature on teacher motivation while providing new perspectives specific to the post-pandemic context.

This chapter interprets the results presented in Chapter 4, connecting them to existing literature and the conceptual framework. The study limitations are presented, followed by recommendations for future research. The chapter also highlights the implications of the findings for positive social change in educational policy, educator support, and school leadership practices. The conclusion section presents the key insights from the study and the significance of understanding teacher intrinsic motivation in the post-pandemic educational context.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study was conducted to address the gap in understanding the long-term experiences of educators 4 years after the pandemic. The existing research emphasized the need to ensure student motivation to learn and lacked attention to the educators' intrinsic motivation to teach. Research that included educators focused on immediate experiences, without addressing their long-term experiences regarding intrinsic motivation (Pressley & Ha, 2021).

As mentioned, six group experiential themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) sustaining intrinsic motivation through student-centered purpose, (b) maintaining intrinsic motivation through competence building, (c) ability to adapt to change, (d) anchoring intrinsic motivation in professional identity and purpose, (e) sustaining intrinsic motivation by compartmentalizing external pressures, and (f) reinforcing intrinsic motivation through community and relationship-building. The following sections provide is an interpretation of the results for each theme.

Group Experiential Theme 1: Sustaining Intrinsic Motivation Through Student-Centered Purpose

All 10 participants sustained their motivation through student-centered purpose by prioritizing student well-being and adapting their teaching to meet evolving student needs. This finding aligns with previous research by Pressley et al. (2021), who found that teachers' intrinsic motivation connected to their ability to support students effectively. This study's participants' heightened awareness of student needs, adaptability in teaching methods, and provision of emotional support reflect the findings of Fradkin-

Hayslip (2021), who described this as teacher autonomy manifesting through student-centered practices.

The participants' focus on student-centered approaches went beyond academic concerns to address students' socioemotional needs, which became more pronounced during and after the pandemic. This confirms the findings of Chang et al. (2022) that teachers who maintain student-centered practices during challenging times demonstrate greater resilience and motivation. The participants showed remarkable creativity in engaging students and addressing learning gaps, which supports Trinidad's (2021) assertion that intrinsically motivated teachers find innovative ways to reach students even in adverse circumstances.

Group Experiential Theme 2: Maintaining Intrinsic Motivation Through Competence Building

Maintaining intrinsic motivation through competence building reflects the participants' drive to enhance their teaching skills, learn new technologies, and improve their ability to impact student learning positively. This finding directly connects to SDT's "competence" component (Deci & Ryan, 2008), where individuals are motivated by opportunities to cultivate and demonstrate their capabilities. The participants' reports of increased confidence stemming from pursuing new teaching modalities support Jang's (2019) assertion that perceived competence is a key factor in sustaining intrinsic motivation among teachers.

Significantly, participants expressed that autonomous decision-making was crucial to their sense of professional efficacy, particularly when tailoring instruction to

meet diverse student needs. Yildiz and Kiliç (2021) found that teacher autonomy is associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction. However, the data also revealed that some participants experienced diminished confidence due to limited training or lower-than-expected student outcomes, highlighting the vulnerability of teacher efficacy during periods of significant educational disruption, as noted by Wright et al. (2023).

Group Experiential Theme 3: Ability to Adapt to Change

All participants described experiences of rapid, sudden changes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic that required significant adaptation. Their ability to adapt to the changes; proactive approaches to learning new skills and adjusting to evolving circumstances demonstrate resilience and align with Kraft et al.'s (2021) findings, which identified resilience as essential for teacher motivation during educational disruption. The finding that teachers were motivated to seek new ways to engage students in altered learning environments supports Chan et al. (2021), who claimed that teacher adaptability is linked to intrinsic motivation.

The participants' adaptation experiences align with Pressley and Ha's (2021) assertion that intrinsic motivation helps teachers navigate challenges more effectively than extrinsic motivation. Those who viewed the pandemic challenges as opportunities for growth rather than insurmountable obstacles demonstrated what Trinidad (2021) described as the protective function of intrinsic motivation during times of significant stress.

Group Experiential Theme 4: Anchoring Intrinsic Motivation in Professional Identity and Purpose

All participants' described a sense of responsibility and commitment after the pandemic which anchored their intrinsic motivation to teach. The participants' statements about fulfilling their duty despite challenging circumstances demonstrate the power of what Calkins et al. (2023) identified as integrated regulation, where an activity aligns with core values and interests. This internalized sense of purpose helped sustain their intrinsic motivation, allowing them to remain committed to their roles.

The participants acknowledged the extrinsic factors of salary and job security; however, they expressed that their primary motivation stemmed from a sense of calling and purpose in their work. This aligns with Trinidad (2021) which identified altruism and calling as significant determinants of teacher motivation. The finding that teachers maintained their commitment throughout the pandemic supports the assertion of Chang et al. (2022) that purpose-driven teachers demonstrate greater resilience during educational disruptions.

Group Experiential Theme 5: Sustaining Intrinsic Motivation by Compartmentalizing External Pressures

All participants reported experiencing external pressures that affected their teaching, including administrative demands, teacher shortages, and challenges with online teaching. The participants' descriptions of frustration with minimal parental involvement, district restrictions, and lack of administrative support further align with Pressley et al. (2021) observation that work stress among teachers is often associated with

factors outside their direct control. Despite these challenges, most participants maintained their intrinsic motivation by compartmentalizing the external pressures and focused on maintaining their relationships with parents, students and administration. Maintaining these relationships enhances intrinsic motivation thus supporting Pressley and Ha's (2021) finding that intrinsic motivation significantly decreases work-related stress during challenging periods.

Group Experiential Theme 6: Reinforcing Intrinsic Motivation Through Community and Relationship-Building

The theme of community engagement and relationship-building highlights the importance of supportive professional connections in sustaining teacher intrinsic motivation. Participants valued strong relationships with students, colleagues, and parents, which aligns with the "relatedness" component of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The finding that these relationships sustained teachers during and after the pandemic extends Baroudi et al. (2020) research on the importance of collegiality and professional development for reinforcing teacher motivation.

The participants' emphasis on building supportive learning environments with students, peers, and parents characterized by mutual respect and care reflects what Fox and Walters (2022) identified as a significant protective factor. This level of attention proved to help sustain intrinsic motivation during a time of uncertainty.

Interpretation of Findings for Conceptual Framework

This study revealed six group experiential themes that can be effectively analyzed through the lens of SDT and its three key psychological needs: autonomy, competence,

and relatedness. Regarding autonomy, the themes; Maintaining intrinsic motivation through competence building and Ability to adapt to change, reflected how middle school educators experienced intrinsic motivation in teaching through autonomous decision-making during and after the pandemic. Participants who had freedom to adapt their teaching methods or select their digital platforms expressed greater motivation, while those facing rigid curricula reported decreased motivation.

The concept of competence connected with the themes, Maintaining intrinsic motivation through competence building and sustaining intrinsic motivation through student-centered purpose. Teachers who mastered new technologies and teaching modalities reported increased confidence. Professional development opportunities that helped teachers build new skills shaped their sense of efficacy. However, some participants experienced decreased confidence when student outcomes didn't meet expectations, and technical problems without adequate training initially threatened their sense of competence, highlighting the dynamic nature of this construct as teachers navigated pandemic-related challenges.

The Reinforcing intrinsic motivation through community and relationship-building and sustaining intrinsic motivation through student-centered purpose themes aligned closely with the relatedness component of SDT. Strong collegial relationships provided essential support during challenging times, while meaningful connections with students remained a primary motivator even during physical distancing. The creative methods they developed to maintain connections during remote learning demonstrated relatedness' central importance to intrinsic motivation.

The findings of this study extend SDT by illustrating how these core psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) interacted within the unique context of the post-pandemic teaching experience. Interventions supporting teacher motivation should address all three psychological needs, with particular attention to fostering school cultures that promote teacher autonomy, provide opportunities for competence development, and strengthen professional relationships for sustained intrinsic motivation.

Limitations of the Study

A primary limitation of this study is the lack of generalizability of the findings. The small sample size, although consistent with IPA, did not allow for broad generalizations to the larger population of middle school educators. Additionally, the volunteer nature of participant recruitment may have introduced self-selection bias, as those who chose to participate may differ in meaningful ways, such as levels of motivation or reflective capacity, from those who did not choose to participate. As such, the results should be understood as in-depth insights into the lived experiences of the specific participants, rather than representative of all educators.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout this study, and pseudonyms were provided for all participants. A reflective journal was kept throughout the process to mitigate the biases of being a psychotherapist. Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of middle school educators' intrinsic motivation in the post-pandemic context, contributing to the understanding of how teachers navigate unprecedented educational disruptions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for future research are proposed to enhance our understanding of teacher intrinsic motivation. First, researchers should prioritize recruiting more diverse samples of educators across geographical regions. This diversity would enhance the transferability of findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of teacher motivation across different geographical and educational settings.

Another consideration would be researching teachers' experiences across different grade levels (elementary, middle, and high school). Exploring the experiences of educators across the different grade levels would provide insight into the various teaching experiences. It would help identify unique challenges and motivational factors specific to each educational context, informing targeted support strategies

Implications

Intrinsic motivation is a significant concept in the psychological field. According to Deci & Ryan (2008), intrinsic motivation contributes to the performance of employees. The findings of this study have significant implications for positive social change on the individual, organizational and policy level. These implications extend beyond the individual classroom to impact the broader educational landscape and society.

On the individual level, this study highlights the importance of maintaining student-centered practices, fostering professional growth, and building supportive relationships as sources of intrinsic motivation. Recommendation for teachers is to intentionally cultivate these aspects of their practice to sustain their motivation,

particularly during challenging times. The findings also emphasize the value of teacher adaptability and resilience, suggesting that developing these capacities can enhance teaching effectiveness and satisfaction.

Organizationally, the study emphasizes the critical role of supportive leadership in fostering teacher intrinsic motivation. Administrators can create conditions that support teachers' autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs by providing opportunities for meaningful collaboration (relatedness), recognizing teacher efforts (competence), and involving teachers in decision-making processes (autonomy). The recommendation for practice is that administrators prioritize creating school cultures characterized by trust, respect, and shared purpose to sustain teacher motivation and commitment.

At the policy level, policies should be developed that support teacher autonomy, provide adequate resources, and create opportunities for meaningful professional growth. Consequently, the findings suggest that rigid curricular mandates and excessive accountability measures can undermine teacher intrinsic motivation, highlighting the need for more flexible approaches that respect teacher professionalism and judgment.

Additionally, a recommendation for practice is teacher preparation and certification policies explicitly address the development of intrinsic motivation and resilience among teachers. Programs should include opportunities for reflective practice, collaborative learning, and the development of adaptive teaching strategies to prepare new teachers for the challenges they may face in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

This study contributes theoretically to the conceptual understanding of the

importance of intrinsic motivation teaching experience, suggesting that intrinsic motivation is a protective factor during challenging times when external pressures become overwhelming. This phenomenon warrants further conceptual exploration to understand how intrinsic motivation can be sustained during periods of significant educational disruption. Empirically, the study reinforces previous research by Deci & Ryan (2008) that intrinsic motivation contributes to employee performance, specifically applying this to the educational context.

Overall, this study's implications for positive social change center on recognizing that teacher intrinsic motivation is a significant educational resource that must be nurtured and protected through intentional practices, policies, and systemic support. Enhancing educational outcomes and fostering more successful schools for all students begins with cultivating environments in which teachers can thrive and remain intrinsically motivated.

Conclusion

Through an IPA approach, this study explored the lived experiences of middle school educators' intrinsic motivation to teach 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed six group experiential themes that capture the essence of these experiences: Sustaining intrinsic motivation through student-centered purpose, Maintaining intrinsic motivation through competence building, Ability to adapt to change, Anchoring intrinsic motivation in professional identity and purpose, Sustaining intrinsic motivation by compartmentalizing external pressures, and Reinforcing intrinsic motivation through community and relationship-building. These themes illustrate the

complex interplay of internal motivation and external factors in shaping teachers' professional experiences in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

The findings highlight the remarkable resilience and commitment demonstrated by middle school educators despite significant challenges to their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs. Their continued focus on student well-being and learning and their dedication to professional growth and adaptation speak to the enduring power of intrinsic motivation in sustaining educational practice during times of unprecedented disruption.

However, the findings also reveal the vulnerability of teacher motivation to external pressures such as administrative demands, resource limitations, and lack of support. These pressures threaten to undermine the qualities that make teachers effective: their creativity, adaptability, and commitment to student success. This tension between intrinsic motivation and external constraints represents a critical challenge for educational stakeholders seeking to support teacher effectiveness and retention.

The implications of this study extend beyond understanding teacher experiences to inform practices and policies that can foster more supportive and motivating educational environments. Schools and districts can nurture the intrinsic motivation that sustains effective teaching and promotes positive student outcomes by creating conditions that honor teacher autonomy, enhance competence, and foster meaningful relationships.

As we navigate an educational landscape post-pandemic, this study offers insight into the lived experiences of those most responsible for educating the next generations. This study contributes to understanding teacher intrinsic motivation as a crucial factor in educational resilience and effectiveness. Exploring the experiences of middle school

educators in the post-pandemic context provides valuable insights for research, practice, and policy aimed at supporting teachers in their essential work. As we continue to face educational challenges and opportunities, teachers' intrinsic motivation remains a vital resource that must be understood, valued, and nurtured for the benefit of educators, students, schools, and society.

References

Adams, N., Little, T. D., & Ryan, R. M. (2017). Self-determination theory. *Development of Self-Determination Through the Life-Course,* 47–54. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1042-6_4

Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, *4*(10), 1358–1367. https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441

Ahmadi, A., Noetel, M., Parker, P., Ryan, R. M., Ntoumanis, N., Reeve, J., Beauchamp, M., Dicke, T., Yeung, A., Ahmadi, M., Bartholomew, K., Chiu, T. K., Curran, T., Erturan, G., Flunger, B., Frederick, C., Froiland, J. M., González-Cutre, D., Haerens, L., … Lonsdale, C. (2023). A classification system for teachers' motivational behaviors recommended in self-determination theory interventions. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 115*(8), 1158–1176. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000783

Alexander, W. M., Prescott, D., Hines, V. A., Compton, M., & Williams, E. L. (1968). *The emergent middle school*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Anderson, R. C., Bousselot, T., Katz-Buoincontro, J., & Todd, J. (2021). Generating buoyancy in a sea of uncertainty: Teachers creativity and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.614774

Anfara, V. A. (2001). *The handbook of research in middle level education*. IAP.

Bacher-Hicks, A., Chi, O. L., & Orellana, A. (2023). Two years later: How covid-19 has

shaped the teacher workforce. *Educational Researcher*, *52*(4), 219–229. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x231153659

Bailey, J. P., & Schurz, J. (2020). COVID-19 is creating a school personnel crisis. *American Enterprise Institute*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606250

Baker, C. N., Peele, H., Daniels, M., Saybe, M., Whalen, K., Overstreet, S., & The New Orleans, T.-I. S. (2021). The experience of covid-19 and its impact on teachers' mental health, coping, and teaching. *School Psychology Review*, *50*(4), 491–504. https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966x.2020.1855473

Banerjee, A., & Chaudhury, S. (2010). Statistics without tears: Populations and samples. *Industrial Psychiatry Journal*, *19*(1), 60–65. https://doi.org/10.4103%2F0972-6748.77642

Banerjee, R., & Halder, S. (2021). Amotivation and influence of teacher support dimensions: A self-determination theory approach. *Heliyon, 7*(7). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07410

Bardach, L., Klassen, R. M., & Perry, N. E. (2021). Teachers' psychological characteristics: do they matter for teacher effectiveness, teachers' wellbeing, retention, and interpersonal relations? An integrative review. *Educational Psychology Review*, *34*(1), 259–300. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09614-9

Baroudi, S., Tamim, R., & Hojeij, Z. (2020). A quantitative investigation of intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing teachers' job satisfaction in Lebanon. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *21*(2), 127–146. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2020.1734210

Beane, J. A., George, P. S., Stevenson, C., & Thomason, J. (1992). *The middle school -- and beyond*. ASCD. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED343254

Bishop, P. A. (2021). Middle grades teacher practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. *RMLE Online*, *44*(7), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2021.1959832

Bottiani, J. H., Duran, C. A. K., Pas, E. T., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2019). Teacher stress and burnout in urban middle schools: Associations with job demands, resources, and effective classroom practices. *Journal of School Psychology, 77*, 36–51. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2019.10.002

Bryant, J., Ram, S., Scott, D., & Williams, C. (2023). K–12 teachers are quitting. What would make them stay? *McKinsey Quarterly*. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/k-12-teachers-are-quitting-what-would-make-them-stay

Califf, C. B., & Brooks, S. (2020). An empirical study of techno-stressors, literacy facilitation, Burnout, and turnover intention as experienced by K-12 teachers. *Computers & Education*, *157*, 103971. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.103971

Calkins, L., Wiens, P., Parker, J., & Tschinkel, R. (2023). Teacher motivation and self-efficacy: how do specific motivations for entering teaching relate to teacher self-efficacy? *Journal of Education*, *204*(2), 427–438. https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574221142300

Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). The trouble with teacher turnover:

How teacher attrition affects students and schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *27*, 36. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3699

Causgrove, J., & Zimmer, C. (2020). Self-determination theory. Routledge Handbook of Adapted Physical Education, 296–312. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429052675-23

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). *COVID Data Tracker*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, CDC. https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker.

Chan, M., Sharkey, J. D., Lawrie, S. I., Arch, D. A., & Nylund-Gibson, K. (2021). Elementary school teacher well-being and supportive measures amid covid-19: An exploratory study. *School Psychology*, *36*(6), 533–545. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000441

Chang, M.-L. (2020). Emotion display rules, emotion regulation, and teacher Burnout. *Frontiers in Education*, *5*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00090

Chang, M.-L., Gaines, R. E., & Mosley, K. C. (2022). Effects of autonomy support and emotion regulation on teacher burnout in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.846290

Choi, S. (2014). A measure of English teacher motivation: Scale Development and preliminary validation. *Advanced Science and Technology Letters*. https://doi.org/10.14257/astl.2014.59.19

Clemons, C. A., Hall, M., & Lindner, J. (2021). What is the real cost of professional

success? A qualitative analysis of work and life balance in agriscience education. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 62*(1), 95–113. https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2021.01095

Criado-Del Rey, J., Portela-Pino, I., Domínguez-Alonso, J., & Pino-Juste, M. (2024). Assessment of teacher motivation, psychometric properties of the work tasks motivation scale for teachers (WTMST) in Spanish teachers. *Education Sciences*, *14*(3), 212. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14030212

Darling-Hammond, L., DiNapoli, Jr., M., & Kini, T. (2023). *The Federal Role in Ending Teacher Shortages*. https://doi.org/10.54300/649.892

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). The general causality orientations scale: Self-determination in personality. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *19*(2), 109–134. https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566(85)90023-6

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Self-determination theory: A macrotheory of human motivation, development, and health. *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne, 49*(3), 182–185. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012801

Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2021). *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351006743

Farmer, D. (2020). Teacher attrition: the impacts of stress. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, *87*(1), 41–50. https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A10%3A13773738/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A146314001&crl=c

Fernet, C., Senécal, C., Guay, F., Marsh, H., & Dowson, M. (2008). The work tasks

motivation scale for teachers (WTMST). *Journal of Career assessment*, *16*(2), 256–279. https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2008_FernetEtAl_WTMST-JCA.pdf

Filgona, J., Sakiyo, J., Gwany, D. M., & Okoronka, A. U. (2020). Motivation in learning. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 16–37. https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2020/v10i430273

Fox, H. B., & Walter, H. L. (2022). More than strength from within: Cultivating teacher resilience during COVID-19. *Current Issues in Education*, *23*(1). https://doi.org/10.14507/cie.vol23iss1.1978

Fradkin-Hayslip, A. (2021). Teacher autonomy, motivation, and job satisfaction: Perceptions of elementary school teachers according to self-determination theory. *İlköğretim Online, 20*(2). https://doi.org/10.17051/ilkonline.2021.02.25

Gagné, M., & Deci, E. L. (2005). Self-determination theory and work motivation. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 26*(4), 331–362. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.322

George, P. S. (2009). Renewing the middle school: The early success of middle school education. *Middle School Journal, 41*(1), 4–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2009.11461698

George, P. S. (2011). The american middle school movement: Taking the long view. *Middle School Journal, 43*(2), 44–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2011.11461802

Gómez-Domínguez, V., Navarro-Mateu, D., Prado-Gascó, V. J., & Gómez-Domínguez, T. (2022). How much do we care about teacher burnout during the pandemic: A bibliometric review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(12), 7134. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19127134

Grooms, A. A., & Childs, J. (2021). "we need to do better by kids": Changing routines in U.S. schools in response to covid-19 school closures. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, *26*(2), 135–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2021.1906251

Hargreaves, A. (2021). What the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us about teachers and teaching. *Facets*, *6*(1), 1835-1863. https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0084

Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2020). *Qualitative research methods*. Sage.

Herman, K. C., Prewett, S. L., Eddy, C. L., Savala, A., & Reinke, W. M. (2020). Profiles of Middle School teacher stress and coping: Concurrent and prospective correlates. *Journal of School Psychology*, *78*, 54–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2019.11.003

Herman, K. C., Sebastian, J., Reinke, W. M., & Huang, F. L. (2021). Individual and school predictors of teacher stress, coping, and wellness during the covid-19 pandemic. *School Psychology*, *36*(6), 483–493. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000456

Ingersoll, R. M., & Tran, H. (2023). Teacher shortages and turnover in rural schools in the US: An organizational analysis. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *59*(2), 396–431. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x231159922

Ingersoll, R., Merrill, E., Stuckey, D., Collins, G., & Harrison, B. (2021). The demographic transformation of the teaching force in the United States. *Education Sciences*, *11*(5), 234. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11050234

Jang, H.-R. (2019). Teachers' intrinsic vs. extrinsic instructional goals predict their classroom motivating styles. *Learning and Instruction*, *60*, 286–300. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2017.11.001

Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D., & Chauvin, S. (2020). A review of the quality indicators of rigor in qualitative research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *84*(1), 7120. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0002945923016066

Kaufman, J. H., Diliberti, M. K., & Hamilton, L. S. (2022). How principals' perceived resource needs and job demands are related to their dissatisfaction and intention to leave their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. *AERA Open*, *8*, 233285842210812. https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221081234

Kaul, M., VanGronigen, B. A., & Simon, N. S. (2020). Calm during Crisis: School Principal Approaches to Crisis Management during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Leading in Crisis. Research Brief. *Consortium for Policy Research in Education*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED614234

Kotowski, S. E., Davis, K. G., & Barratt, C. L. (2022). Teachers feeling the burden of covid-19: Impact on well-being, stress, and burnout. *Work*, *71*(2), 407–415. https://doi.org/10.3233/wor-210994

Kraft, M. A., Simon, N. S., & Lyon, M. A. (2021). Sustaining a sense of success: The

protective role of teacher working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, *14*(4), 727–769. https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2021.1938314

Kulikowski, K., Przytuła, S., & Sułkowski, Ł. (2021). E-learning? Never again! On the unintended consequences of COVID-19 forced e-learning on academic teacher motivational job characteristics. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *76*(1), 174–189. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12314

Kwon, K.-A., Ford, T. G., Tsotsoros, J., Randall, K., Malek-Lasater, A., & Kim, S. G. (2022). Challenges in working conditions and well-being of early childhood teachers by teaching modality during the covid-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(8), 4919. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19084919

Lachlan, L., Kimmel, L., Mizrav, E., & Holdheide, L. (2020). (rep.). *Advancing Quality Teaching for All Schools: Examining the Impact of COVID-19 on the Teaching Workforce*. Center on Great Teachers and Leaders. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED610625.

Lang, M. L. (2019). Planning for differentiated instruction: Instructional leadership practices perceived by administrators and teachers in middle schools. *Educational Planning*, *26*(2), 29–45. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1217447

Layek, D., & Koodamara, N. K. (2024). Motivation, work experience, and teacher performance: A comparative study. *Acta Psychologica*, *245*, 104217. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104217

Leech, N. L., Gullett, S., Cummings, M. H., & Haug, C. A. (2022). The challenges of remote k-12 education during the covid-19 pandemic: Differences by grade level. *Online Learning*, *26*(1), 245–267. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v26i1.2609

Lepp, L., Aaviku, T., Leijen, Ä., Pedaste, M., & Saks, K. (2021). Teaching during COVID-19: The decisions made in teaching. *Education Sciences*, *11*(2), 47. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11020047

Liamputtong, P. (2020). *Qualitative research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Liu, W. C., Wang, C. K., Reeve, J., Kee, Y. H., & Chian, L. K. (2019). What determines teachers' use of motivational strategies in the classrooms? A self-determination theory perspective. *Journal of Education, 200*(3), 185–195. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022057419881171

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Wiley & Sons.

Mertler, C. A. (2001). (rep.). *Teacher Motivation and Job Satisfaction in the New Millennium*. Mid-Western Educational Research Association. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED461649

Moorhouse, B. L., & Kohnke, L. (2021). Thriving or surviving emergency remote teaching necessitated by COVID-19: University teachers' perspectives. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, *30*(3), 279–287. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00567-9

Moser, K., & Wei, T. (2021). Covid-19 and the pre-existing language teacher supply crisis. *Language Teaching Research*, 136216882110402.

https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211040297

Mullen, C. A., Shields, L. B., & Tienken, C. H. (2021). Developing teacher resilience and resilient school cultures. *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice*, *18*(1), 8–24. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1295967

Panisoara, I. O., Lazar, I., Panisoara, G., Chirca, R., & Ursu, A. S. (2020). Motivation and continuance intention towards online instruction among teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic: The mediating effect of burnout and Technostress. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*(21), 8002. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17218002

Phillips, S. A. (2020). Middle School Teachers Making Sense of Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Journal of Advancing Education Practice, 1(1). https://openriver.winona.edu/jaep/vol1/iss1/4.

Pintrich, P. R. (1991). A manual for the use of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ).

Pintrich, P. R. (2003). A motivational science perspective on the role of student motivation in learning and teaching contexts. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(4), 667–686.

Pressley, T., & Ha, C. (2021). Teaching during a pandemic: United States teachers' self-efficacy during COVID-19. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *106*, 103465. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103465

Pressley, Tim, Ha, C., & Learn, E. (2021). Teacher stress and anxiety during COVID-19: An empirical study. *School Psychology*, *36*(5), 367–376.

https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000468

Reyes-Guerra, D., Maslin-Ostrowski, P., Barakat, M. Y., & Stefanovic, M. A. (2021). Confronting a compound crisis: The school principal's role during initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Education*, *6*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.617875

Robinson, L. E., Valido, A., Drescher, A., Woolweaver, A. B., Espelage, D. L., LoMurray, S., Long, A. C. J., Wright, A. A., & Dailey, M. M. (2023). Teachers, stress, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A qualitative analysis. *School Mental Health*, *15*(1), 78–89. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-022-09533-2

Rosenberg, M., Mason-Williams, L., Kimmell, L., & Sindelar, P. (2021). Addressing teacher shortages in the COVID-19 landscape: Viewing teacher candidates as assets. *Excelsior: Leadership in Teaching and Learning*, *13*(2). https://doi.org/10.14305/jn.19440413.2021.13.2.01

Ruslin, R., Mashuri, S., Rasak, M. S. A., Alhabsyi, F., & Syam, H. (2022). Semi-structured Interview: A methodological reflection on the development of a qualitative research instrument in educational studies. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)*, *12*(1), 22-29. https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jrme/papers/Vol-12%20Issue-1/Ser-5/E1201052229.pdf

Russell, M. B., Attoh, P. A., Chase, T., Gong, T., Kim, J., & Liggans, G. L. (2020). Examining Burnout and the relationships between job characteristics, engagement, and turnover intention among U.S. educators. *SAGE Open*, *10*(4),

215824402097236. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020972361

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well- being. *American psychologist*, *55*(1), 68. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and Future Directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *61*, 101860. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860

Santiago, I. S. D., Dos Santos, E. P., da Silva, J. A., de Sousa Cavalcante, Y., Gonçalves Júnior, J., de Souza Costa, A. R., & Cândido, E. L. (2023). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of teachers and its possible risk factors: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *20*(3), 1747. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20031747

Schaefer, M. B., Malu, K. F., & Yoon, B. (2016). An historical overview of the middle school movement, 1963–2015. *RMLE Online, 39*(5), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2016.1165036

Schmitt, J., & deCourcy, K. (2022). The Pandemic Has Exacerbated a Long-Standing National Shortage of Teachers. *Economic Policy Institute*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED626637

See, B. H., Munthe, E., Ross, S. A., Hitt, L., & El Soufi, N. (2022). Who becomes a teacher and why? *Review of Education*, *10*(3). https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3377

Slemp, G. R., Field, J. G., & Cho, A. S. H. (2020). A meta-analysis of autonomous and

controlled forms of teacher motivation. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *121*, 103459. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103459

Smith, T. W., & McEwin, C. K. (2011). The legacy of middle school leaders: In their own words. Information Age Pub. https://www.infoagepub.com/products/The-Legacy-of-Middle-School-Leaders

Smith, J. A., & Fieldsend, M. (2021). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In P. M. Camic (Ed.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (pp. 147–166). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000252-008

Smith, J. A., & Nizza, I. E. (2022). *Essentials of interpretative phenomenological analysis.* American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000259-000

Souto-Manning, M., & Melvin, S. A. (2022). Early childhood teachers of color in New York City: Heightened stress, lower quality of life, declining health, and compromised sleep amidst COVID-19. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *60*, 34–48. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.11.005

Stratton, S. J. (2021). Population research: convenience sampling strategies. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, *36*(4), 373–374. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X21000649

Styck, K. M., Malecki, C. K., Ogg, J., & Demaray, M. K. (2021). Measuring covid-19-related stress among 4th through 12th grade students. *School Psychology Review*, *50*(4), 530–545. https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966x.2020.1857658

Toropova, A., Myrberg, E., & Johansson, S. (2020). Teacher job satisfaction: The importance of school working conditions and teacher characteristics. *Educational Review, 73*(1), 71–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1705247

Trinidad, J. E. (2021). Teacher satisfaction and burnout during COVID-19: What organizational factors help? *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.2006795

Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., & Koestner, R. (2008). Reflections on self-determination theory. *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne, 49*(3), 257–262. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012804

VanLone, J., Pansé-Barone, C., & Long, K. (2022). Teacher preparation and the COVID-19 disruption: Understanding the impact and implications for novice teachers. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, *3*, 100120. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2021.100120

von der Embse, N., & Mankin, A. (2020). Changes in teacher stress and wellbeing throughout the academic year. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, *37*(2), 165–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/15377903.2020.1804031

Walters, G. D., Runell, L., & Kremser, J. (2021). Social and psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on middle-school students: Attendance options and changes over time. *School Psychology*, *36*(5), 277–284. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000438

Weilbacher, G. (2019). Rediscovering the middle school mission. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *100*(6), 34–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721719834026

Wright, D. S., Weinberg, A. E., Sample McMeeking, L. B., Lin Hunter, D. E., & Balgopal, M. M. (2023). I will survive: Teachers reflect on motivations to remain in education amidst a global pandemic. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, *60*(6), 1266-1291. https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21831

Yang, C. (2021). Online teaching self-efficacy, social–emotional learning (SEL) competencies, and compassion fatigue among educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. *School Psychology Review*, *50*(4), 505–518. https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966x.2021.1903815

Yang, C., Manchanda, S., & Greenstein, J. (2021). Educators' online teaching self-efficacy and compassion fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic: The dual roles of "Connect". *School Psychology*, *36*(6), 504–515. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000475

Yildiz, V. A., & Kiliç, D. (2021). Investigation of the relationship between class teachers' motivation and job satisfaction. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching*, *8*(1), 119–131. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1286451

Zviedrite, N., Hodis, J. D., Jahan, F., Gao, H., & Uzicanin, A. (2021). Covid-19-associated school closures and related efforts to sustain education and subsidized meal programs, United States, February 18–June 30, 2020. *PLOS ONE*, *16*(9). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0248925

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Research Question: What are the lived experiences of intrinsic motivation in teaching among middle school educators 4 years after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Introduction

- Introduce self and the purpose of the research.

- Ensure confidentiality and obtain the necessary permissions.

- Confirm that the interviewee is ready to begin.

Warm-Up Questions

- Could you please tell me a little about your teaching experience prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What subjects and grades do you teach?

1. Autonomy

- How did you experience decision-making in your teaching practices during the pandemic?

- Could you share any experiences regarding your sense of control over your work during the pandemic?

-How would you describe your autonomy experience now?

2. Competence

- Can you share a specific example from the pandemic ~~r~~egarding your competence in teaching?

- What practices did you use during the pandemic to enhance your sense of competence as a teacher?

- How would you describe your effectiveness as an educator now?

3. Relatedness

- How would you describe your connections with your students during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Can you share a specific experience representing how your relationships with your students changed due to the pandemic?

- Were there particular strategies you employed to maintain or strengthen your sense of relatedness with your students during the pandemic?

-How would you describe your connections with your students now?

Intrinsic Motivation

- Can you please tell me if your motivation to educate your students changed during the pandemic? Can you describe those changes?

- Can you describe a specific moment during the pandemic when you felt particularly intrinsically motivated to teach? Why?

- Looking back, how do you think your experiences during the pandemic have shaped your intrinsic motivation to teach now and in the future?

Closing Questions

- Is there anything else about your experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic that you think is important and we haven't covered yet?

- Do you have any questions for me?

Closure

- Thank the participant for their time and contributions.

- Explain the following steps and how their input will be used.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

PARTICIPATE IN A STUDY EXPLORING THE INTRINSIC MOTIVATION OF MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATORS AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Middle school educators are invited to contribute to an important study exploring the unique experiences of intrinsic motivation in teaching long after the COVID-19 pandemic. This research seeks to gain valuable insights into how educators have sustained their motivation, resilience, and passion for teaching during a time of immense global change. I am conducting this study for my Walden University dissertation.

Why Your Participation Matters

Your participation will help shape a deeper understanding of how educators, like yourself, have navigated the challenges of teaching during and after the pandemic. By sharing your experiences, you will contribute to important research that may influence future policies, support systems, and professional development programs designed to help educators stay motivated and effective in the classroom.

Through this study:

I hope to identify the key factors that influence teacher intrinsic motivation in postpandemic educational environments, providing schools and administrators with insights into how best to support their teaching staff in these evolving times. Your story could be instrumental in helping to improve conditions for fellow educators in the future.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?

As a participant, you will be invited to take part in a one-on-one Zoom interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes, during which you will be asked a series of open-ended questions designed to explore your intrinsic motivation teaching experiences following the pandemic. This interview will be conducted in a supportive and conversational format, allowing you to freely express your thoughts and reflections.

Eligibility Criteria

You must be a middle school educator who actively taught during the COVID-19 pandemic.
You must have started teaching before 2020 and continue to teach in a middle school environment today.
You must have taught in the United States

Appendix C: Cross-Case Table of Experiential Statements and Group Experiential Themes

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Group Experiential Theme 1: Sustaining motivation through student-centered purpose	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
addressing individual needs	X	X			X				X	X
adjusting curriculum students	X									
allowing students to talk	X							X		
being patient with students	X			X				X		
being present for students	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X
dealt with students lack social	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		
differentiated instructions			X							X
engaged students creative sol	X		X			X	X		X	X
ensuring learning continuity	X		X							
firm with students when needed	X						X		X	
giving students incentives	X		X							
helping underprivileged stud.	X									X
involving parents help	X				X			X		X
listening to students needs	X		X							
meeting students at their level	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X
modifying instructions needed							X			X
reached out to students			X				X	X		X
relationship built on trust				X						
showed grace and leniency			X			X			X	X
students different competence									X	
students mental health issues									X	
understanding student diff.	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	
used alternative platforms			X		X			X		
used digital tools to engage		X				X	X			X
used group work participation	X					X				
watched students change					X					
Group Experiential Theme 2: Maintaining motivation through competence building	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
autonomous decision-making	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
confidence in one's competence	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
description of teaching experience	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
lacking confidence		X					X		X	
motivated by student response		X		X						
lacking confidence									X	
practice produced good results	X				X	X				
received digital skills training		X				X				
received professional development		X	X				X	X	X	
reflected on practices						X				
returned to calmness aft covid						X				
validation method motivating			X							
Group Experiential Theme 3: Ability to adapt to change	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

built resilience		X	X		X	X			X		
COVID era was chaotic time	X	X			X					X	
COVID era was challenging	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		
COVID isolated people	X	X									
COVID was uncertain	X				X			X		X	
COVID challenges took time		X									
developed positive outlook		X	X						X		
doing what was needed	X	X		X	X			X			
gradual return to school						X				X	
had health concerns					X						
implementation hybrid learn.	X			X				X	X		
learning as they go	X					X		X	X		
problems in person vs online		X				X			X	X	
preference for in person				X	X			X	X	X	
requiring more effort teach						X					
students not showing up class		X	X		X		X		X	X	
students preference digital		X									
students were academically behind	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	
technical problems		X	X		X		X				
tried to make experiences fun					X				X		
Group Experiential Theme 4: <u>Anchoring motivation in professional identity and purpose</u>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
conscious about teacher ratings	X								X		
dedicated to fulfill role							X	X	X	X	
extrincic motivation							X		X		
sense of responsibility to teach	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
suggestion that administrators played a smaller role than teachers during the transition to remote learning	X			X			X				
Group Experiential Theme 5: <u>Sustaining motivation by compartmentalizing external pressures</u>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
administrators did not listen								X			
blamed for COVID related issues				X							
cannot achieve desired outcomes	X						X				
cannot deviate from standards	X	X			X				X		
discouraged by changes				X							
drifted away from colleagues					X						
felt complacent low expect									X		
have to follow district mandates	X	X			X						
led to teacher shortage		X							X		
limited resources		X							X		
no communication from admin				X			X				
no communication with parents									X		
no connection with colleagues										X	
no support for parents				X							
no support from government				X							
parents cannot commit school										X	
parents lack of cooperation	X	X	X	X			X	X			
pressured meet test scores			X								

school shootings				X							
suggestion that administrators listened but made the final decisions	X		X	X	X		X				
teacher shortage affect role		X									
Group Experiential Theme 6: Reinforcing motivation through community and relationship-building	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
administrators facilitate conn								X			
built relationship co-workers				X				X			
colleagues worked together	X		X		X		X		X		
communicated issues					X			X			
connected with close colleagues										X	
cooperation of parents	X			X	X		X	X			
co-teachers willingness help		X			X			X			
easier connect in person					X						
gap in relationship students					X		X			X	
hard to built relationships online							X		X		
in touch with community				X							
mutual respect with students	X	X							X		
no communication with parents									X		
rapport with students	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
received resources teaching		X						X			
school can afford materials	X										
working with parents					X			X	X	X	