A Multiple Case Study of Secondary School Teachers' Understanding of Learning Relationships in Virtual Schools: Implications for Teacher Identity

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A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS’ UNDERSTANDING OF LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS IN VIRTUAL SCHOOLS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER IDENTITY

By

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A DISSERTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education (in Educational Leadership)

The Graduate School
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May 2018

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A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS’ UNDERSTANDING OF LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS IN VIRTUAL SCHOOLS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER IDENTITY

By Linda Fuller

Dissertation Advisor: Richard Ackerman

An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education (in Educational Leadership)

In May 2018

There is now a strong presence of virtual schools in the United States serving K-12 students, along with increased opportunities for brick-and-mortar students to take virtual courses (Ash, 2011; Luo, Hibbard, Franklin, & Moore, 2017). Research into the human impact of virtual education is not keeping pace (Gulosino & Miron, 2017; Rice et al., 2014). This study focused on the experiences and insights of virtual teachers in terms of their relationships with learners as well as on potential changes in their sense of professional identity as they moved from one setting to the other. During a series of three individual, semi-structured interviews, five teachers described their teaching first as brick-and-mortar high school teachers and then as teachers in virtual schools. In the final interview they sought meaning in these changes.

This research indicated that virtual teachers may experience changes in their enjoyment of their work with learners, specifically moving from an immediate to an anticipatory mindset. They will need to adjust to working regularly with one student, or one student’s work or written inquiry, at a time. Indicators of student engagement may change from visual cues to information gleaned through email or synchronous discussions. Reaching out to students can become a
critical component of practice, and trust may shift from something teachers nurture in their
classrooms for students to something they seek from students who may be elusive and not well
known. Other changes were identified in the areas of care, modeling, managing, and assessing
students’ understanding of course materials.

The implications of these findings are significant for the education management
organizations that create the structures, policies, and procedures for virtual schools, for
preservice providers who work to prepare future teachers for a changing educational landscape,
for policy-makers, and for teachers themselves as they explore opportunities to teach in a variety
of settings.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the many teachers in my life, past and present, from within the classroom and from without, who believe in the power of joyous learning experiences to change the world. I cannot begin to name them all, but the list certainly includes Donna, George, Cindy, Jane, Joyce, Bonnie, Cathy, Ed, Steve, Brian, Rhonda, Nora, Becky, Hans, Morgan, Elana, Heather, Maria, Abby, Mari, Maggie, Eloise, Aiden, Kelley, Katherine, Hannah, Phin, Bethany, Talia, Nimisha, Emily, and Shira.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All research depends upon articulate, thoughtful participants, and mine were certainly that. Their careful consideration of my questions and detailed descriptions of their teaching experiences are the life of this work.

No dissertation is completed without a strong committee. Mine proves this is true. Their attention to details and push for my voice is much appreciated, as are the many meetings, the careful readings of various drafts, and the continual encouragement. Thanks especially to Richard, whose confidence in my ability to do what needed to be done never faltered.

A project that requires months, nay, years, to complete implies a level of perseverance that is simply impossible to maintain as an individual. While the work itself was essentially a lonely endeavor, so many people contributed to the quality of my life so I would have the necessities for research, interviewing, thinking, and writing. The bulk of my gratitude, then goes to Jeff, whose talents at home are not even outshone by his remarkable abilities in the work world. Despite the additional pressures on his life, he remained a steady support for sticking with it; when my energy flagged, asking only “how will you feel if you stop?” Other family members picked up the slack with extended family events—huge gratitude to Tricia—and co-workers from two different schools lent their support and encouragement throughout a long process. I was reluctant to give up opportunities for adventure—so much, much gratitude again to Jeff, but also to Val, Missy, and Jane who put up with me working on my laptop for large stretches of the drive to Portland or Kingfield or Freeport. Many thanks also to Maureen for reading multiple drafts, talking deeply about schools in general, and sharing skills from her own teaching years.

Finally, enduring thanks to Morgan for truly understanding this process, for appreciating my status as student throughout the majority of her life, and for gently reminding me during the occasional low points of my efforts of the reasons for beginning the journey.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION......................................................................................................................iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS........................................................................................................iv

LIST OF TABLES................................................................................................................x

LIST OF FIGURES..............................................................................................................xi

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION............................................................................................1

The Problem.......................................................................................................................2

Purpose...............................................................................................................................8

Research Questions.........................................................................................................8

A Conceptual Framework for Teachers’ Relationships with Learners.........................9

Method of Inquiry.............................................................................................................10

Significance.......................................................................................................................11

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE.........................................................14

Virtual Education..............................................................................................................15

An Overview of Virtual Schooling in the United States..............................................15

The Teacher’s Role............................................................................................................17

Teacher Professional Identity..........................................................................................23

Complexity of Teacher Professional Identity...............................................................24

Development and Fluidity of Teacher Professional Identity........................................26

Contextual Influences on Teacher Identity....................................................................28

Importance of Teacher Identity.......................................................................................32
Laura……………………………………………………………………………………………80

Professional Practice Overview…………………………………………………………80
Relationships with Students……………………………………………………………82
Professional Identity……………………………………………………………………87

Ken……………………………………………………………………………………………93

Professional Practice Overview…………………………………………………………93
Relationships with Students……………………………………………………………96
Professional Identity……………………………………………………………………101

Aaron…………………………………………………………………………………………106

Professional Practice Overview…………………………………………………………106
Relationships with Students……………………………………………………………108
Professional Identity……………………………………………………………………112

Carla…………………………………………………………………………………………121

Professional Practice Overview…………………………………………………………121
Relationships with Students……………………………………………………………124
Professional Identity……………………………………………………………………129

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS OF DATA…………………………………………………………133

Part I: Exploration of the Five Domains of Teachers’ Relationships with Students…..133

Student Responses to Teacher-Initiated Interactions…………………………………134
Working with Individuals Versus Working in a Group…………………………………135
New Frustrations in Daily Work with Students………………………………………..136
Student Motivation and Engagement…………………………………………………..138

Reaching out to facilitate engagement with students…………………………………140
Encountering challenges in engaging virtual students……………….141

Acknowledging Differences in student engagement indicators……143

Caring……………………………………………………………………………….145

Virtual forms of caring……………………………………………………………147

Efforts to care……………………………………………………………………150

Modeling of Valued Skills and Dispositions…………………………………153

Lack of clear modeling………………………………………………………….155

Comprehending Students’ Understanding…………………………………….157

Increased control of the learning process…………………………………….160

Loss of confidence in assessing student understanding…………………..161

Trust…………………………………………………………………………………164

Uncertainty in the capacity to build trust in a virtual environment……..165

Challenges in trusting students……………………………………………….167

Summary of Part I…………………………………………………………………170

Part II: Professional Identity……………………………………………………….171

Group I: Virtual Teaching Positively Impacts Existing Professional Identity…172

The participants as virtual teachers…………………………………………..172

Professionally adjusting to virtual teaching………………………………….173

Group II: Virtual Teaching Challenges Existing Professional Identity……177

The participants as virtual teachers…………………………………………..177

Professionally adjusting to virtual teaching………………………………….178

Summary of Part II………………………………………………………………..184

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS…………………………………….186

Relationships and Professional Identity………………………………………187
Enjoyment through Engaging with Students........................................188
Caring and Modeling...........................................................................189
Building Trust and Controlling the Learning Environment..................191
Organizational Affordances and Challenges.........................................194
  Time........................................................................................................195
  Virtual teaching roles...........................................................................198
Changes in Virtual Teacher Professional Identity..................................200
The Appeal of Blended Learning...........................................................206
Summary...............................................................................................208
Contributions of this Research.............................................................209
Limitations............................................................................................211
Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research....................................211
  Blended environment...........................................................................212
  Role integration..................................................................................213
  Teacher empowerment and voice.........................................................213
  Trust......................................................................................................214
  Virtual teacher preparation...............................................................215
  Organizational structures.................................................................216
REFERENCES.......................................................................................217
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR INTERVIEWS 1–3.................226
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANTS’ KEY ATTRIBUTES..................................229
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR..........................................................234
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1. Participant descriptors ..................................................................................56
Table 5.1. Enjoyment of interactions with students in each setting .................................138
Table 5.2. Efforts and challenges in engaging and motivating students .........................145
Table 5.3. Changes in forms of caring and virtual frustrations to these efforts to care ..........152
Table 5.4. A comparison of modeling in brick-and-mortar and virtual settings ...............157
Table 5.5. A comparison of understanding student understanding in each setting ...........163
Table 5.6. A comparison of teacher efforts regarding trust in both settings .................169
Table 5.7. Sources of professional satisfaction and frustration .....................................183
Table B1. Participants’ Key Attributes ...........................................................................229
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The pedagogical triangle of student, teacher, and subject..............................7
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The energy in Block C sophomore world history was palpable as groups of students composed their islands’ constitutions. Among the good-natured general swapping of refined definitions of key words and elaborations on critical concepts, students shared materials and their latest ideas for laws or responsibilities or guaranteed rights. As the final five minutes of class approached, Elana, my student teacher, pulled a chair into the middle of the room, plunked down, and looked around her at the progress groups were making in organizing their thinking and at the results of her concerted efforts over the past twelve weeks in nurturing this group of tenth graders into a well-functioning learning community. As I watched her growing smile and heard her truly satisfied sigh, I wondered whether I was observing the dawn of Elana’s core confidence in her ability to work with students to bring them joyfully to her subject. I felt privileged that as her program supervisor, I was witnessing what was in all probability a significant contributing experience to her developing teacher identity. After this day, she would trust, I believed, just a little more, that her relatively untested beliefs and values regarding student empowerment and peer collaboration could produce observable results, and that her sense of the critical importance of her relationship with each student makes a difference in their learning.

This actual student teaching moment is one of many seemingly disparate observations of teaching and teachers that helped form the questions that shaped the research in this study. Specifically, motivation for this research lies in an awareness of the rapid increase in virtual education, the substantial change in the context of the teaching–learning process within virtual schools, and the potential importance of teacher identity to that process. In addition, no small
part is played by the likely interconnectedness of teachers’ relationships with their students to their sense of themselves as teachers.

In this study I explored individual cases of teachers’ experiences and thinking after moving from a brick-and-mortar setting to a virtual classroom. To understand this research, it is important to have an understanding of the problem of rapidly expanding virtual education as it relates to the two connected issues of teacher identity and teachers’ relationships with learners.

The Problem

Online K-12 learning continues to grow after experiencing a stage of explosive growth at the start of the 21st Century (Abraha, 2010; Ash, 2011; Barbour and Reeves, 2009; Cassidy, 2011; Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008; McFarlane, 2011; Watson, Gemin, & Coffey, 2010). This expansion includes an increasing use of blended school models, combining face-to-face and online instruction, into the traditional classroom (Ash, 2011; Luo, Hibbard, Franklin, & Moore, 2017). In fact, a few states such as Florida and Idaho, as well as individual districts within other states, are now requiring students to take an online course before high school graduation (Davis, 2011; Koebler, 2011). In addition, teachers throughout the United States are experimenting with variations of blended and flipped learning, characterized by students listening to online lectures at home in the evening, either teacher-produced or internet-available, typified by Khan Academy, a non-profit company created in 2006 by ex-hedge fund manager Salman Khan, offering virtual lessons in a wide variety of content areas. Students then use time in class for assignments more traditionally given as homework or to collaborate on group projects and other peer-partnered work (Makice, 2012).

This rate of growth in online courses and learning opportunities shows no sign of slowing, and research into K-12 virtual education is not keeping pace (Gulosino & Miron, 2017; Rice et al., 2014). The rapid development and deployment of a relatively unexplored teaching–
learning virtual environment at the level of primary and secondary schools creates at least four specific issues potentially impacting how teachers experience relationships with learners as well as how they see themselves as teachers. These four issues include: 1) rapid advances in technology that outpace public educators’ ability to design policies and practices in response; 2) lack of teacher preparation options for online teachers; 3) limited research on the ways in which teachers’ beliefs about effective instructional practices is influenced by online teaching; and, 4) the potential impact of teachers’ restricted sensory feedback in a virtual teaching environment rather than in a brick-and-mortar setting on teacher identity.

First, some observers have suggested these rapid advances in technology facilitate frequent new opportunities for learning while the people and organizations responsible for providing public education scramble to adjust their policies and practices to accommodate new, but poorly understood, approaches (Layton, 2011; Rice, et al., 2014). Policy-makers in several states, in fact, have recently debated and constructed policies dealing with blended learning (Ash, 2011; Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011), state virtual schools (Watson, et al., 2011), mandatory online classes (Davis, 2011; Koebler, 2011), and virtual charter schools (Watson, et al., 2011). For the most part, these policies were brought under consideration without a clear understanding of what online teaching actually means for K-12 teachers (Miron, Huerta, Cuban, Horvitz, Gulosino, Rice, et al., 2014), thus increasing the chances that the policies will not facilitate virtual teaching but may actually hinder effective practices.

Second, the field of K-12 virtual education is so new that teacher preparation options for online teaching remain limited (Luo et al., 2017; Miron, et al., 2014; Watson, et al., 2011). As of late 2014, cyber charter schools were still providing considerable professional development to newly hired teachers “because they are not able to hire enough teachers with sufficient previous experience teaching online” (Watson, et al., 2014, p. 18) and observers have cited teacher
preparation for virtual teaching as problematic (Miron, et al., 2014). More recently, the University of California, Irvine, among other institutions (Luo, et al., 2017), has offered online courses designed to prepare educators to teach more effectively in the virtual setting. However, some onlookers express concern for the nature of this type of preparation (Ferdig, Cavanaugh, DiPietro, Black, & Dawson, 2009), with some, for example, wondering whether it falls too far into the technical, ignoring traditional concerns with learning theory and the complexity of the practical. The research of DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, and Preston (2008) typifies this concern: The researchers list potentially effective online teaching practices distilled from interviews with carefully selected virtual teachers chosen by the researchers based on school administrators’ suggestions informed by students’ course success rates. Conversely, more recent research by Luo et al (2017) shows some promise for collaboration between teacher preparation programs and K-12 virtual schools, both to help teacher candidates become aware of the possibilities and challenges in virtual teaching, and also to increase the possibility of student teaching placements at virtual schools.

Third, beyond the lack of research-informed teacher preparation for virtual teaching, there exists a lack of research and also a general uncertainty regarding how teachers adjust their practices, and perhaps beliefs about effective practices, when providing online education at the primary and secondary levels (Barbour, 2013; Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Miron, Huerta, Cuban, Horvitz, Gulosino, Rice, et al., 2014; Ferdig & Cavanaugh, 2011; Glass & Welner, 2011). For example, there is no clear understanding of how teachers re-imagine what it is to engage with learners who are not present in the room with them. We are not certain how virtual teachers establish and display the “self-knowledge, trust, relationship, and compassion” that Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006, p. 266) identified as essential to success in the classroom.
Finally, several sensory-based components were at the heart of the formative teaching experience described above. Elana saw her students, saw how they worked independently or collaboratively and the tone and tenor of their exchanges. She could see and react to their actions within each assigned task. She could hear their questions—of herself and of one another—and could smile at their humor, frown when class behavioral norms were pushed, and touch a shoulder in support when a student struggled. In short, she was absolutely present, as Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) define it, in this lesson. In essence, the study sought insight, from the perspective of virtual teachers, into whether social interactions with the accompanying insights and impact on professional identity, such as those described above, which took place in a brick-and-mortar classroom, can be replicated, albeit in an altered form, in the virtual classroom.

The interaction with students that occurred in Elana’s classroom supported her ability to build the teacher–learner relationships as she watched their responses to the learning activity she had designed and responded in the moment to their sometimes nuanced expressions of confusion, excitement, and curiosity. Watching and being present offered Elana a unique window into students’ learning approaches and interests. Indeed, these interactions within a typical school setting help Elana develop relationships—a critical component in forming teacher identity. Research indicates that relationships with students shape teachers’ sense of themselves as teachers (Beijjard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; He & Cooper, 2011; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012; Zembylas, 2005) and along with emotions, which are often associated with interactions with students, are a cornerstone of professional identity development (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012; Zembylas, 2004). From needed confidence (Zembylas, 2005) to self-understanding (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006), relationships are frequently the source of recurring daily experiences that contribute to aspects of teacher identity. For example, a teacher’s sense of efficacy, of purpose, and of engagement—arguably characteristics of professional identity—are often influenced by
the nature of her regular interactions with students. These interactions may be one of the primary sources of enjoyment, frustration, satisfaction, confusion, and other emotions in the teacher’s practice. Likewise, non-regular but critical moments between a teacher and her students can solidify or transform beliefs and values about her pedagogy and her students.

In contrast to the ebb and flow of these relationships in brick-and-mortar classrooms, the emerging world of virtual or screen teaching, where teachers and students are not in the same physical location, not only requires different means and forms of interaction but also potentially fosters alternative rhythms and textures of relationship building. The centrality of learner–teacher relationships, with the multiple associated affective pieces, to a teacher’s sense of identity as a teacher prompts concerns about the impact upon relationships and professional identity of losing the immediacy of the physical classroom and proximity-based relationships with students on teachers in a virtual setting.

Meanwhile, teachers are being asked to practice their profession and expand their sense of what it means to be a virtual teacher without corresponding changes in supports, policies, and practices, including in teacher education programs, as those available to their counterparts in brick-and-mortar classrooms. This support is unavailable, in part, because we do not yet understand how basic changes in context affects teacher–learner relationships in the virtual environment; nor do we fully understand how teaching virtually impacts a teacher’s professional identity. This is particularly relevant when we consider the fundamental nature of the pedagogical triangle of student, teacher, and subject (Figure 1).

From this familiar and simple representation of the enterprise of teaching, many teachers envision their basic professional role as facilitators of the connection of students with the subject under study—something they often indicate is enhanced by effective relationships with their students. No matter their pedagogical stance, most educators pay some attention to the idea that
Figure 1. The pedagogical triangle of student, teacher, and subject. This figure illustrates the interrelationships between student, teacher, and subject.

all three sections of this triangle are inherent in the teaching–learning enterprise. Literature supports the idea that relationships with students—based on presence, forged over daily contact via physical proximity, and resting quite solidly in the affective domain—are a central feature of brick-and-mortar teacher identity; however, as researchers, policy-makers, and educational practitioners, we know little about the experience of developing and maintaining relationships with learners over a distance—that is, when separated physically (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012)—or about how virtual teaching, then, influences a K-12 teacher’s sense of identity.

In sum, we know teacher identity is impacted by changes in teaching context (Hamman, Gosselin, Romano, and Bunuan, 2010; Lortie, 1975; Zembylas, 2003), but we do not know the impact of the potentially significant contextual change provided by virtual education (Hawkins, et al., 2012); that is, we do not know what changes in the teaching relationship with learners, if anything, when teachers are on one side of a screen and students on the other. Nor do we know how this matters to the teacher’s very sense of who she is as a teacher. Specifically, virtual teaching may indeed have substantial impact on individual teachers’ experiences in their professional role as teachers, with two clear concerns emerging that are not yet fully explored in the literature: their sense of the role of relationships in the virtual teaching–learning process and the potentially related issue of their new understanding of themselves as virtual teachers. The
implications for the world of practice are potentially significant as various entities create policies and procedures with the power to impact the virtual teaching and learning experience.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore virtual high school teachers’ perspectives of their relationships with learners within both brick-and-mortar and virtual teaching practices and to gain insight into how changes in the context of teacher–learner relationships impacts a virtual teacher’s professional identity. The research questions and a brief overview of the conceptual framework guiding the study, the method of inquiry, and the significance of the research follow.

**Research Questions**

In this research I explored what happens to teachers’ sense of their relationships with students and of individual teachers’ perceptions of themselves—of who they were, who they are, who they think they should be, and who, at their envisioned best, they might become—when their interactions with students no longer include sharing the same physical space. The first research question was therefore exploratory in intent and purposefully broad to capture a wide variety of perspectives and experiences across five selected areas of relationships: daily enjoyment in the work of teaching, promoting student motivation and engagement with the subject, caring and nurturing, modeling passion and values, and connecting learners to the subject while gaining clarity of student understanding.

1. How do virtual high school teachers describe their relationships with students, first in the brick-and-mortar classroom and later in the virtual classroom?

The second research question, while also exploratory, additionally asked teachers to share some understanding of their experiences in the virtual classroom:
2. How do teachers describe their sense of professional identity in the brick-and-mortar classroom and in the virtual classroom?

Because these research questions were designed for broad exploration, in the next section I share, briefly, the framework of understanding that supports this exploration.

**A Conceptual Framework for Teachers’ Relationships with Learners**

With focus on relationships as an avenue into teacher professional identity, it seemed sensible to think about the ways teachers typically engage in relationships with learners. Through the literature, my own classroom experiences, and my conversations with a wide variety of teachers at different stages of their teaching careers, I selected five areas of relationship with learners that are frequently experienced by teachers in brick-and-mortar teaching to form the basis for the conceptual framework presented below. To varying degrees, depending on the individual teacher, the physical proximity of students affords teachers the opportunities to engage with learners in the ways listed below. The resulting teacher–learner relationship both is influenced by, and then in turn impacts, professional identity. Of course, the areas overlap and mesh in the reality of the classroom, but for research purposes it proved helpful to think of them as individual conceptual domains. These areas include:

- teachers’ enjoyment of the daily tasks of teaching based on their constant and varied engagement with learners (Brunetti, 2001; O’Connor, 2008; Raphael, 1985; Timoštšuk and Ugaste, 2012)

- teachers’ sense of relationship with learners in terms of student motivation and engagement with the subject under study (Hargreaves, 1998; Kitchinga, Morgan, and O’Leary, 2009),

- teachers’ caring about and for students, seen in nurturing actions and also in curricular, instructional, and classroom management decisions (Hargreaves, 1998; Nias, 1989),
- teachers’ modeling of valued skills and dispositions for life, including passion for subject areas (Hargreaves, 1998, Kitching et al., 2009; O’Connor, 2008); and
- teachers’ connection of students to the subject (Duckworth, 2006; Hammerness, 2006; He and Cooper, 2011; Palmer, 1998) and subsequent clarity of student understanding of the subject under study (one model being McTighe and Wiggins “six facets of understanding”; 1998).

Undergirding each of the above are two pervasive constructs. First is that of teacher presence (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006), a state of being with students (cognitively and affectively, in particular) to the degree that the teacher is aware not only of her impact on students but also of their impact on her. I mention it here because the physicality of presence tends to be assumed, and its lack in the virtual world may be then implicated in changes within each of these five areas. Second, trust is a state of relationship that clearly impacts all five areas and, like presence, virtual teachers may experience the formation and nurturance of teacher–learner trust differently than brick-and-mortar classroom teachers.

**Method of inquiry.** I conducted a qualitative multiple case study exploring teacher perceptions with the intent that each case would best facilitate obtaining detailed, rich data from individuals’ lived experiences. In addition, using a three-interview protocol based on Seidman’s (2006) work provided an opportunity for participants to describe both brick-and-mortar and virtual teaching. I carefully selected five participants whose descriptions, stories, and visions of effective teaching informed a better understanding of the more specific question of how their virtual relationships with learners impacts their understanding and experience of who they are as teachers. Selection was based on demographic diversity, years of experience in both brick-and-mortar and virtual classrooms, and subject expertise. Care was made to ensure that participants were well versed in brick-and-mortar teaching, that it was not too far in their professional past,
and that they also had enough experience with virtual teaching to provide detailed descriptions. With each of these participants comprising a unique, rich case of a teacher who has transitioned from brick-and-mortar to virtual teaching, there was opportunity to explore the phenomenon of virtual teaching from five particular perspectives, observing both similarities and some of the range of possibilities in this evolving educational context.

**Significance.** Clearly, many educators, as well as the general public, view virtual education—defined here as learning that takes place via a screen on a computer or mobile device where the teacher and learner are not present in the same room—as a steadily expanding learning option, and yet it is an option lacking a clear set of implications for teachers. A lack of understanding exists both in the area of teachers’ experiences of their relationship with learners and in their professional identity as teachers.

The pedagogical triangle emphasizes students, subject, and teachers equally. One might contend that when one side is neglected the triangle collapses, becoming less functional. Of all the things still unknown about K-12 virtual education, an understanding of how virtual relationships with learners impact a teacher’s sense of professional identity is probably the least clear. Indeed, amid concerns about K-12 virtual student performance and retention, questions about the impact on teachers are rarely asked and tend to center on the number of students assigned per teacher, frequency and type of student contact, teacher retention, and the nature of teacher participation in curriculum design (Glass & Welner, 2011; Rice et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2011). Meanwhile, without knowing the changes, if any, to a teacher’s sense of and experiences with learner relationships, virtual education in varied forms remains appealing to many policy-makers and educators due to its portability, relatively low cost (particularly in facilities and workforce), and capacity to bring nearly limitless content to a variety of learners.
Thus, gaining insight into the question of teacher identity in a virtual setting is critical for those who would effectively lead schools into the digital age, just as a form of this question, some would suggest, is essential to all organizations worldwide at this point in digital development. As multiple means of digital computing, retrieving, and processing continue to improve, our human roles in work and leisure, particularly in areas of culture and information transmission as well as in knowledge creation, require ongoing definition and understanding.

There are five large groups of constituents who stand to benefit from this study. First, research into this area would help inform the work of policy-makers at the local, state, and federal levels as they grapple with implementing virtual classes. Whether those who design educational policy are wholeheartedly supportive of virtual education or somewhat skeptical, most would agree that if virtual education is to continue as a viable option for students, it should be accomplished in a way that benefits learning. Given that teachers are currently recognized as the most important factor within schools determining student success, knowing more about teachers’ experiences in virtual teaching seems imperative for student learning as well as for teacher retention.

Second, this study may also assist teacher preparation programs as they determine how best to prepare new teachers who will probably encounter virtual teaching options and perhaps even mandates at some point in their 21st-century careers. Poorly prepared teachers do not bode well for student success, and as the national policy focus continues on teacher education programs, having a stronger understanding of the implications of virtual teaching for teachers could prove helpful.

Third, professional development designers, whether part of teacher preparation programs or education-focused resource organizations, might use this information as they work with current teachers who may be interested in transitioning to virtual teaching or are asked by school
leaders to do so. This is increasingly likely with the rise of blended learning models that incorporate both brick-and-mortar and virtual learning. Also, fourth, for those individuals deciding where and whether to teach, any insight into what virtual teachers experience, particularly in relationships with learners, as well as how they describe themselves as teachers, could prove helpful.

Finally, as students and parents encounter increasing options for education, understanding the various roles a teacher might play within each choice could help families make informed decisions as consumers of schooling. The more information families can amass before enrolling their child in a virtual school, the more likely their decision will result in a successful match. While teachers’ experiences and thoughts about professional identity may seem to be a concern that is far removed from concerns about student success, if teachers really are a critical component in student learning, their experiences and perceptions may be of concern to parents. Further, some authors believe –collaboration creates an even more powerful support for student learning (Epstein, 2005).

The next chapter will review the teacher identity and virtual teaching literature that inform the study, with a focus on clarifying what is meant by teacher identity and describing how elements of teacher identity are inextricably entwined in the teacher–learner relationship.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the perceptions and observations of virtual secondary school teachers who moved from a brick-and-mortar classroom to a virtual school, in order to gain insight into their sense of the impact of distance on their relationships with students, as well as to better understand how changes in the context of teacher–learner relationships might impact a virtual teacher’s professional identity.

Three areas of literature inform this study. First, the status of K-12 virtual education in the United States creates the context for the two core research questions and the theoretical understandings underlying them. In particular, because teacher professional identity is believed to be influenced by the larger culture and related societal expectations (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Day et al., 2006; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Roth, Tobin, Elmesky, Carambo, McKnight, & Beers, 2004), it is worth reviewing the policy and related media environment encompassing virtual schooling. Second, the literature on teacher professional identity, while vast, clarifies this study in three ways that will be addressed in turn: first, as an educational model that helps explain teachers’ actions, including those they take in relationship with learners; second, as a construct that develops and changes over time, because identity is not static for individuals or for the profession and so merits ongoing research in a rapidly changing environment and perhaps significantly because of advances in technology; and, third, as a construct that is influenced by context because teaching virtually poses a potentially dramatic change in contextual affordances and restrictions. The literature describing the emotional nature of teaching and the importance of teacher relationships with learners in the classroom constitutes the final section of the identity literature and leads directly into an elaboration of the conceptual framework, which guides the study and was mentioned briefly in the first chapter.
Virtual Education

An Overview of Virtual Schooling in the United States

This first section of the literature review elaborates on the status of K-12 virtual education in the United States begun in chapter one. I begin by sharing some additional data regarding the increase in the number of virtual schools, followed by a listing of the main promises, concerns, and unknowns of virtual education discussed regularly in professional publications. I next describe research related to the role of teachers in education, addressing specifically the lack of research regarding the teacher’s role in virtual schools. Finally, I provide a broad overview of existing studies of virtual education by looking in general terms at their foci.

As described in the problem section, virtual education opportunities for the K-12 learner are now located in nearly every US state. Of particular significance to policy, pedagogy, and professional identity, is the dramatic rise in virtual high schools, often in the form of cyber charter schools (Watson et al., 2011). Fully virtual, multi-district schools were already operating in 30 states and served over 315,000 students by 2014, according to that year’s "Keeping Pace With K-12 Online and Blended Learning" report, published by the Evergreen Education Group. Of the 39 states hosting approximately 5,000 charter schools in 2010, at least 217 operated solely in the virtual world of the Internet (Abraha, 2010). By 2015 the number of states hosting full-time virtual or blended learning schools had reached 35 (Gulosino & Miron, 2017). This represents a rapid and enormous expansion from the start of Internet-based course-delivery in the mid-1990s (Davis & Roblyer, 2005; Davis, N., Roblyer, M. D., Charania, A., Ferdig, R., Harms, C., Compton, L. K. L., et al., 2007). More importantly, in terms of understanding the variety of concerns that potentially impact the political, cultural, social, and professional environment in which a new virtual teacher experiences and understands online teaching, it is increasingly clear these schools pose both challenges and possibilities for individual students and their
communities. Political and professional discussions continue over the following virtual school issues, thus comprising at least some of the peripheral working environment for virtual teachers as they build and maintain relationships with their virtual students and creating the milieu in which the expectations, hopes, and values of their professional identity as a virtual teacher form.

The following issues tend to stimulate debate and cause concern for policy makers, educators – including virtual teachers, and involved citizens: reallocation of funding (Berge & Clark, 2005; Hubbell & Sproul, 2011; Rebora, 2011), privatizing of public schools (Glass & Welner, 2011; Gulosino & Miron, 2017; Lubienski and Weitzel, 2010; Mencimer, 2011; Ravitch, 2013), and inappropriate placement of individual students in virtual classrooms (Berge and Clark, 2005).

The following potential impacts of virtual schools are more generally acclaimed as positive directions: broadening choice with increasing learning opportunities and access (Berge and Clark, 2005; Bowen, 2011; Langley, 2011; Watson et al., 2010) and the promise of decreasing school dropout rates (Ferdig, 2010; Roblyer, 2006) as virtual schools provide an alternative for students unable or unwilling to attend traditional brick-and-mortar classes.

There are also several trends that create confusion for educators and families due to a lack of knowledge about the long-term impact on students and teachers: changing socialization opportunities (Patrick & Powell, 2011), facilitating competency-based pathways through an educational system (Watson et al., 2011) while generating significant data for accountability (Watson et al., 2011) at various levels and promoting the engagement of youth with a virtually connected, globally-oriented world (Richardson, 2011). Each of these is mentioned here as an example of a development exhibiting potential influence on teacher relationships with students, on virtual teacher identity, or on both. That is, just as the expectations and concerns of an interested public helped shape the experiences and understandings of Frank McCourt’s growth
into a teacher of the second half of the twentieth century (McCourt, 2005), for example, so might we imagine that these issues will impact the development and professional identities of teachers moving into the virtual world of the twenty-first century.

**The Teacher’s Role**

Virtual education opportunities may be increasing without sustained concern for the impact on teachers, even while research continues to support the idea that teachers are central to the learning process in schools (Elmore, 2007; Shulman, 2004; Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Yero, 2010). Education writers are beginning to see that this will likely be the case in virtual schools as well (Borup, Graham & Drysdale, 2014; Northcote, 2010). In fact, proponents of virtual K-12 schools insist that teachers will continue to be an important component in connecting students with the subject being studied in online education (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Miller & Ribble, 2010; Muirhead, 2000; Weiner, 2003). However, while for brick-and-mortar classrooms research abounds into multiple aspects of the pedagogical triangle and the teaching–learning dynamic, for the newly burgeoning virtual world of education, research remains relatively limited, particularly with regard to the teacher (Borup et al., 2014; Northcote, 2010). More precisely, whether considering the teacher as a singular factor in the virtual school, or in conjunction with the learner–subject, research is sparse. In contrast, as online programs are developed and implemented, students remain on the research radar (Northcote, 2010), as do the subjects they study, with investigators seeking answers to questions such as: Which content lends itself best to virtual education? Which students, under what conditions, are most likely to persist in an online program? Which learners respond best in an online environment? Do students in brick-and-mortar contexts perform differently on assessments than students in virtual contexts? To reiterate, however, there is limited research focusing on virtual teachers, and so we are just beginning to understand how changes in K-12 teachers’ experiences in relating with learners
when teaching at a distance influence their sense of themselves as teachers when they enter the virtual classroom. While the implications for virtual teachers of even one online course are real, this study focuses on teachers who have transitioned to fully teaching online as part of a virtual high school.

Although the policy and resource issues described above are part of a lively political debate that informs the virtual school environment and impacts those who teach in it, and studies continue to investigate virtual student performance on standardized tests as well as persistence within the virtual school as measures of online schooling and teaching success, equally important are concerns regarding the processes of virtual education. Much of the virtual teaching and learning process research focused originally, and most intently, on post-secondary institutions (Borup, Graham & Drysdale, 2014; Siedlaczek, 2004; Smith, 2005). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (2000) work on Communities of Inquiry (CoI), for example, has been used to look at pedagogical processes at the university level (Akyol et al., 2009; Rourke & Kanuka, 2009) through the constructs of teacher presence, social presence, and cognitive presence, primarily from a student perspective. Studies of university students’ perceptions of the most effective online teachers are also available (Edwards, Perry & Janzen, 2011). Neither of these addresses the question of K-12 teachers’ experiences as they move from brick-and-mortar to virtual classrooms, but they do, however, give some indication that teachers and learners involved in online education perceive the experience as different from brick-and-mortar teaching and learning.

However, more recent studies have used CoI as a lens to study the K-12 virtual education environment. Specifically, Hawkins, Barbour, and Graham (2012) explored teachers’ perceptions of their roles in the virtual classroom using a CoI framework, and Borup, Graham, and Velasquez (2013) examined the ways virtual teachers enact caring through both Nel Nodding’s
ideas around engrossment, motivational displacement, and reciprocity and the CoI concept of social presence. More recently still, Borup et al. (2014) elaborated on their perception of the term presence as “passive” by creating a six-facet framework of teacher engagement in the virtual environment encompassing designing and organizing, facilitating discourse, instructing, nurturing, motivating, and monitoring. Using this framework, they describe the practices of virtual teachers at the Open High School of Utah, a virtual charter school they characterize as successful. In addition, Eisenbach (2015) examined her own initial virtual teaching practice with a particular focus on creating opportunities for Noddings’s (2012) relational caring.

Other authors explore the pedagogy-based question of the potentially changing role of teachers as technology becomes increasingly prevalent in K-12 schools of all types (Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008; Rebora, 2011; Reynard, 2009; and Richardson, 2011). These writers and researchers note the importance of adapting communication practices to physical distance, the potential adaptations teachers might make in both blended and totally virtual environments, and the lack of clarity of the role of teachers as technology that facilitates learning advances. Still, the majority of the virtual education research at the primary and secondary levels has not, for the most part, examined the process of virtual teaching and learning from the teacher’s perspective, focusing far more on the results of teaching as measured via testing and persistence rates as well as through students’ perceptions of effectiveness.

As will be shown in the following sections of this literature review, teachers’ perceptions of who they are as teachers are entwined with the interactions and emotions they experience daily as they engage in the teaching–learning process with their students. We know these regular interactions may build and nurture relationships that enhance learning. We know a teacher’s sense of self as a teacher often influences and emerges from experiences of these relationships. We are only beginning to understand what happens to teacher–learner relationships when
teachers and learners are physically separated by a screen and thereby lose physical proximity. Indeed, in each of the areas of teacher–learner relationships identified in the conceptual framework—from daily satisfaction to a teacher’s sense of success in comprehending students’ understanding of material—changes that might occur in a virtual teaching–learning environment lack sufficient research. Yet, current studies of virtual teaching at the high school level, primarily in Utah and throughout Canada, reveal the start of important avenues for additional investigation.

First, Hawkins et al. (2012) assert that “teacher roles in the online environment have become fragmented, and because of this fragmentation, teachers do not feel the same sense of professional identity as they do in the classroom” (p. 140). While they then propose research that would investigate whether students have similar role confusion, I would advocate the continued exploration of professional identity challenges that virtual teachers may face, as this is a significant virtual education issue in its own right.

Second, we know from these studies that virtual teachers must make a deliberate effort, use different tools, and look for different cues to build relationships and to make assessments of understanding (Borup et al., 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008). It has been suggested that in the “decentralized and distributed” world of virtual learning systems and practices, “decentralised forms of communication” are “controlled more by student than teacher initiative” (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008, p. 1069). If that perception holds true for virtual teachers in the United States and elsewhere, we should consider exploring what it means for teacher identity.

Third, studies expressed some conflicting results around the nature of virtual teacher–student relationships with some researchers reporting that “teachers were able to form caring relationships and provide a moral education by maintaining a high level of dialogue with students, engaging in acts of confirmation that help students to recognize their better self,
modeling to students what it means to care, and providing students with opportunities to care for their peers” (Borup et al., 2013, and as seen in the autoethnographic work of Eisenbach, 2015), while others found teachers experiencing profound isolation and disconnection, including from students (Hawkins et al., 2012). It has been noted that this discrepancy could relate primarily to course enrollment size and specific school policies (Borup et al., 2013), but additional research into virtual teachers’ experiences and perceptions could prove useful.

Fourth, in comparing the conceptual framework proposed for this study with Borup, Graham, and Drysdale’s (2014) list of virtual teachers’ engagement elements (derived from the CoI concept of teacher presence), one finds two of the six fall into this paper’s framework. That is, nurturing and motivating are part of the framework suggested above. The other four elements—designing and organizing, facilitating discourse, instructing, and monitoring—have more to do with tasks than with relationships, although the last element easily fits into the category of understanding students’ comprehension of the subject.

Finally, and overall, studies addressing high school virtual teachers and their teaching strategies and experiences sometimes seemed designed primarily as reports for school improvement aimed at specific virtual schools (Borup et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012) rather than research seeking increased insight into a particular educational phenomenon. In addition, K-12 schools in the online environment, just as with the brick-and-mortar setting, provide structures that impact the way teacher–learner relationships are created as well as how those relationships are experienced by the participants. Social affordances might be of particular concern. In terms of teacher tasks, however, outside observers and researchers describe interesting tendencies. First, the number of students a teacher might work with potentially increases in a virtual classroom. Banchero and Simon (2011), for example, noted that an online teacher might supervise over 250 students due to computerized grading and provider-designed
lesson plans. One online teacher, Darcy Bedortha, stated that for one month in the fall of 2013 with K-12, she had 476 students on her rosters in 30 different classes (Cody, 2014). Virtual teachers’ duties could include communicating with students via phone, text, and email and possibly lecturing online (Banchero & Simon, 2011). As video conferencing becomes more widespread and reliable, that too, might become a teaching expectation. Given that brick-and-mortar teachers rarely see more than half the average of 250 students on any given day, this is a substantial structural change.

Researchers also found the teacher’s role could move more into monitoring students’ progress and acting as a curriculum guide or coach (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). In this same piece of research, the authors indicated that interaction between teacher and students could actually increase in an online classroom. Similarly, other researchers found that students, parents, and teachers valued online relationships in terms of frequency of communication and because those interactions had an actual teaching–learning focus as opposed to a management or disciplinary purpose (Muirhead, 2000; Weiner, 2003). Some researchers also observed that peer communication, both among teachers and among students, could increase in the virtual setting (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Muirhead, 2000) – however counterintuitive this may seem to critics.

Finally, Miller and Ribble (2010) cited earlier research in stating that satisfied online educators will be willing to sit in front of a computer for part of the day, be comfortable with a lot of writing or typing, prefer one to one interaction over one to many, and be experimental and flexible in their teaching strategies. The results from a recent study of teacher satisfaction at an online charter school shared at The Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education’s 2014 conference indicated that student performance made the top five “influences” as did communication and support; however, teacher–learner relationships were not cited (Barbour, 2014).
These potential changes in the structures of “school” and the resulting opportunities for, and constraints on, teaching practice, particularly as they may influence teachers’ perspectives of their relationships with learners, and the subsequent impact on teachers’ perceptions of themselves and their role as teachers, have only begun to be studied. A shift in the learning environment toward the virtual context, potentially changes not only the teacher’s role in the learning process (Borup et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2011) as discussed above. It also changes teachers’ experiences of relationships with students, and potentially their perceptions of themselves as teachers as well. It is to the latter that I turn next.

**Teacher Professional Identity**

In this section I review the theoretical and empirical studies of teacher professional identity by first addressing the importance of teacher identity in general terms, including the role of identity in teacher decision-making. Next, in order to examine the potential differences in “who” between brick-and-mortar and virtual teaching, it would be useful to understand some of the recognized factors that impact teachers’ identity in their early years of becoming a teacher as well as research related to factors that might trigger changes in how teachers view themselves later in their careers. This line of thinking anchors this study in the sense that factors and details in the context of teaching, whether in the brick-and-mortar or the virtual environment, could impact a teacher’s sense of her professional self. To gain these insights, I then review studies focused on the development and fluidity of teacher identity followed by the research found in studies specifically examining the role of context on teacher identity. I end this section with a quick overview of the indicators that teacher identity is a worthy construct for research despite being a concept that is complex, sometimes ambiguous, and probably under-researched.
Complexity of Teacher Professional Identity

In general, then, questions of teacher professional identity as proposed in this study are important not only to the individual but also to the profession and the practice (emphasis on the collective sense of practice is based on Shulman, 2004). Perhaps because teaching has long been recognized as a complex and personal human activity, even those researchers who espouse the value of working to improve the profession as a whole, rather than focusing solely on one’s individual practice, recognize that teaching is an intensely personal endeavor (Borup et al., 2013; Olsen, 2008; Palmer, 1998; Shulman, 2004, Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010), with the constant decision-making that classroom teachers must perform impacting their sense of themselves as well as their relationships with students. Other thinkers and researchers go so far as to state that a teacher’s unique vision “shapes the way that they feel about teaching, their students and their school and helps to explain the changes they make in their classrooms, the choices they make in their teaching, and even the decisions they make about their futures as teachers” (Hammerness, 2006, p. 2). Further, some education-based thinkers believe that school improvement efforts ignoring the inner life of the teacher stand little likelihood of success (Hargreaves, 2001; Palmer, 1998; Yero, 2010).

Specifically, in the practitioner world, features of identity—such as beliefs, values, experiences, and vision—impact teacher decision-making and, inevitably, their relationships with learners. O’Connor’s (2008) research into caring, emotions, and identity revealed that teachers not only use political beliefs but also elements of identity including experiences, beliefs, and values to justify their specific teaching behaviors; she further noted that this matched the results of MacLure’s work in 1993. Her study conceptualized identity as encompassing the reflective and also the active – not just what teachers said and how they rationalized their actions but also what they actually did. Also supporting the connectivity of identity and decision-
making is Zembylas’ assertion (2003) that “reason and emotion are interdependent because our reasoning depends on emotional choices” (p. 223).

In fact, some studies showed that when teachers were asked about their “personal practical knowledge” (presumably the very knowledge they use to make professional decisions) participants seemed to provide actual “answers to questions about identity” and conclude “that teachers were more concerned about who they were than about what they knew” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990 cited by Beijaard et al, 2004, p. 121). Researchers further suggested that pre-service teachers begin deciding which methodologies to embrace and which to reject, as well as which to adjust, based on the identity they bring to teaching that creates their sense of what good teaching looks like and whether specific approaches are truly possible for them to use successfully with students (Horn et al., 2008).

Further, there is some evidence the sources of a teacher’s passion for the work may cause her perceptions of students to impact her decisions enough to result in differing classroom environments (Carbonneau et al., 2008). Day et al. (2006) came to the conclusion that teacher identity may have complicated correlations with classroom effectiveness. These researchers suggested healthy identity traits had less to do with imparting skills and content than would be supposed. Rather, teacher identity had more impact on the type of learning community a teacher was able to forge. Other researchers were less concerned with the origin of passion and focused instead on the results of teachers’ identity differences; some, in fact, found that teacher passion is important to such factors as trust, caring, inclusivity, collaboration, and commitment (Day, 2004). Teachers’ decisions arise then, at least in part, out of their sense of themselves and their role in the classroom (a role connected to the relationships that they forge with learners).

In looking more closely at the nature of teacher identity, the literature describes it as a challenging construct around which to create common understanding. Recent efforts to advance
this common understanding include a variety of studies and theoretical works in addition to those mentioned above. Significantly, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop’s 2004 review of recently emerged (1988 through 2000) teacher professional identity research noted that while this set of studies did not agree on a definition, the researchers consistently described professional identity as “fluid” and a “relational phenomenon” (p. 108). Further, they credited Gee (2001) with the idea that identity development is “best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context” (p. 108).

I will now focus on individual professional identity as characterized by change and as influenced by context, in turn.

**Development and Fluidity of Teacher Professional Identity**

Researchers suggested teacher identity is formed via three interconnected routes. First, through the early educational experiences of teachers, when they themselves were learners (Britzman, 2003; Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Weber & Mitchell, 1996); second, through the coursework in preparing to become teachers (Cook, 2009; Horn et al., 2008; Trent, 2011; Weber & Mitchell, 1996), and finally, through experiences within the classroom as a teacher, particularly during pre-service and the early teaching years (Cook, 2009; Hammerness, 2006; Horn et al., 2008; Weber & Mitchell, 1996). At least one researcher suggested times of strong turbulence, such as the beginning of a career, can strongly impact teacher identity, for better or worse (Cook, 2009). However, personal experiences outside of the classroom may impact all of the above throughout a teacher’s career (Day et al., 2006). “Life history, school context, worldview, and personality all play a part, as do mentorship, teacher education, and reflective practice” (Cook, 2009; p. 290). As discussed above, emotions and social interactions are
frequently the building blocks of these experiences, with some researchers singling out power—
given, taken, and used—as a particularly impactful factor (Zembylas, 2003).

It is important to recognize that currently most teachers making the transition from brick-
and-mortar teaching to virtual teaching will have few, if any, K-12 virtual teacher models to
inform their visions, to give an early shape to their emerging virtual teacher identities, or to
create a sense of how teacher–learner relationships develop and grow virtually. Although, most
recently, at least one online provider is now requiring virtual teachers to enroll in a virtual course
prior to tackling teaching online themselves (Carolina Online Teacher Program, 2012; Quinn-
Hutchinson, private communication, 2013).

Vision is also a means of explaining yet another way teacher identity impacts classroom
practice. Specifically, when the gap between vision and practice seemed bridgeable to the
teacher, Hammerness (2006) suggested that deep reflection and new learning leading to an
improved practice were more likely. It might be argued that in the virtual classroom, as well as in
a brick-and-mortar setting, this could also lead to an elaboration and deepening of the vision.
Logistically, comparing a class activity to the standard of one’s vision can help a teacher
determine whether the way class time is spent is worthwhile (Richert, 2003 via Hammerness, p.
84). Similarly, a vision of productive, healthy, learning-focused relationships may facilitate
teacher reflection on the thousands of daily decisions they make that ultimately impact their
perception of those relationships; but again, it is unclear, despite early preliminary investigations
(Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008), what changes, if anything, in the virtual teaching
world with teachers’ perceptions of those relationships over distance and without physical
presence.

Closely related to the concept of teacher vision is that of possible selves. Hamman et al.
(2010), in an extensive study of pre- and in-service teachers in the United States, applied the
theory of possible selves (originally from the work of Markus and Nurius, 1986) to gain insight into identity development in new teachers. Through the written surveys of over 200 student and new in-service teachers, they concluded it is the effort to envision possible selves that best captures the process of change in identity rather than new teachers’ concerns and efforts to gain pedagogical knowledge around content. This research further classified the emerging possible selves in four areas: professionalism, classroom management, interpersonal school relations, and instruction (Hamman et al., 2010, p. 1353). While all of these could be of interest in an examination of virtual teaching, teachers’ perspectives on their relationships with learners seem to match the work on emotions as a key part of identity most closely.

Finally, Trent (2011), in his study of Hong Kong pre-service English teachers, found a tendency among these student-teachers to divide professional teachers into “modern” and “traditional” camps while trying to emulate the former and avoid the teaching patterns and habits of the latter. His research indicated that modern teachers practiced the progressive methods taught in pre-service programs. The degree to which culture impacted this division was not discussed or clarified. Still, it might be reasonable, in a future study, to look for an ideal (modern) and non-ideal (traditional) teacher conceptualization among teachers moving into the new world of virtual teaching.

**Contextual Influences on Teacher Identity**

Many learning theorists and philosophers who contemplate the nature and development of identity postulate that context is essential. As Lortie (1975) observed in his seminal sociological work, “who teachers are” is shaped by the “structure of the occupation” (p. viii.). Context supplies the experiences, the results, and the interactions that contribute to identity (Hamman et al., 2010). From Vygotsky to Giroux, from Freud to Foucault, the impact, in terms of resources and constraints, of context on identity is recognized (Zembylas, 2003, 2005) not as a
settled understanding, but perhaps, rather, in terms of possibilities. Elements of culture, including media, historical pressures, and societal expectations, help to determine the ways teachers are approached and regarded, thus framing their conceptions of themselves as teachers. In fact, Zembylas (2003) writes, “the cultural myths about teacher identity—for example, the teacher is an expert, the teacher is highly professional (i.e. unemotional), and so on—aim at creating a totalizing object of teacher identity that leaves little room for ‘abnormal’ identities” (p. 233). Further, context is so critical that Zembylas (2003) cited Trinh (1992) in suggesting that questions regarding identity might even more accurately become questions of when, where, and how one is (p. 215).

Indeed, recent research also indicates that context matters to teacher identity (Day et al., 2006; Nias, 1996; Roth et al., 2004; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012) both in formation during preservice training (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012) and in the early years of practice (Hargreaves, 1998; Flores & Day, 2006; Nias, 1996). More importantly for this study is the possibility that context might initiate possible identity confusion or even alterations of some sort in self-perception or in perceived expectations of who teachers should be — sparked by changes in the teaching environment, often as part of school reform (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996; Nias, 1996), and certainly based on research into teacher emotions (Hargreaves, 1998). Some researchers discovered that studying teachers’ sense of self in terms of meeting the identity they believe is necessary to fulfill increasingly rigorous (and perhaps unattainable) societal and policy expectations reveal degrees of stress and guilt (Day et al., 2006). Reactions to reform efforts might even differ according to teachers’ career stage or age (Hargreaves, 1995) and the accompanying professional identity.

In addressing the idea of context based on extent of experience, Flores and Day (2006) studied fourteen new teachers in Portugal, primarily elementary teachers (although six taught
secondary as well), over their first two years in the classroom. In this study the context of actually managing a class of students created conflict with some of the taught theories, such as constructivism and individualization, promoted during teacher education. In practice one of the paramount tasks these new teachers encountered was simply learning to create and maintain a learning environment. Eventually, through closer relationships and understanding of their actual students most were able to make “sense of themselves as teachers in terms of their ability to exercise control” (p. 226). This conflicts slightly with the results of a later study in which researchers found a small decrease in teachers’ concern with classroom management after their pre-service experiences (He & Cooper, 2011). We do not know what it may mean to teachers to “exercise control” in a virtual classroom. Nor do we understand how virtual teachers perceive the goals of virtual classroom management in terms of their relationships with students, although the work of Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2008) suggests that virtual teachers may need to move their focus from “a practice of controlling to engaging students’ attention” (p. 1061).

Hargreaves (2000) reminded us that because teaching is emotion-based work, the way organizations structure human interactions within their system impacts how those emotions are expressed and elicited. For example, Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) noticed that the context of teaching impacts the relationship that can develop between students and teachers – particularly in terms of increasing trust. They postulated the trust that is so critical in the learning environment of teacher and students, is also crucial to the context in which the teacher works due to the need to free the mind to be present to teaching and learning rather than worrying about what is happening around them. In addition, how teachers’ moral purposes in teaching play out may be determined by context (Donaldson, 2006; Hargreaves, 1998). Further, the emotional nature of this work may create the passion for teaching, but only when the context allows teachers to do the job well (Hargreaves, 2000). Context to a varying extent dictates the types of emotions
teachers must use to cope with the teaching situation (Hargreaves, 2000)—whether that situation involves disruptions, administrative issues, parent concerns, student excitement, or any number of a myriad of possibilities in a typical teaching day. As those possibilities and realities change in a virtual structure, we are not yet clear how teachers experience their interactions and relationships with students.

Research into mandated curricular programs indicated that such reforms might be experienced as precluding the methods and purposes that teachers’ value, causing feelings of significant loss and grief (Nias, 1996). Even extensive additional responsibilities for non-teaching tasks and duties can create concern in teachers who view themselves as people who work with children first and foremost (Golby, 1996). Thus, context is often the cause of the tension between professional and personal identity (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006) both at the site of teaching (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012) and within the socio-political context (Day et al., 2006; Zembylas, 2003).

In opposition to some of this, Elmore (2007) along with Tyack and Cuban (1995) might suggest that the instructional core of schooling is not as deeply impacted by a variety of changes as reformers have hoped partly because of the stability of teacher identity even as contextual changes occur. One facet of that core, the way teachers think about themselves—about who they are—in relation to the students and the subjects they teach is an amazingly steady feature of American public schools. In the context of virtual teaching, we do not know whether this perception is equally stable. In fact, some studies indicate the change in affordances for teacher–learner interaction (physical proximity with the accompanying social and observational cues) in virtual classrooms can create superficial, information-based relationships (Hawkins et al., 2012) unless virtual teachers purposefully create additional opportunities for communication (Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008).
Importance of Teacher Identity

Knowing that teacher professional identity is imprecise, potentially in constant flux, and most likely quite varied from one individual to the next even in a stable context, it makes sense to explore why researchers consider teacher identity a relevant and useful concept. First, teacher identity can provide a lens into many aspects of the world of schools for those who study education. Researchers have used it not only to understand the teaching environment holistically (Horn et al., 2008) but also to gain insight into individual teachers with focuses on “teachers’ sense of purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and effectiveness” (Day et al., 2006, p. 601). Potentially, then, knowing what impacts teacher identity and in what context and with what results, will provide knowledge of best practices in dealing with each of these aspects of teacher performance. Further, within the world of research, teacher identity as a construct can bring together other means of studying individuals, such as life history, beliefs, attitudes and personal narrative (Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

Second, teacher identity is also, of course, relevant to teachers. Palmer (1998), for instance, moved the examination of teacher thinking from an objectified look at professional identity to a subjective exploration of “the inner landscape of a teacher’s life” in the subtitle of his seminal work, The Courage to Teach. Palmer brought the view of what it means to teach into a quite personal realm in which understanding “who” becomes more important than knowing “what, how and why” (p. 7). Identity is significant to teachers not only in terms of satisfaction and career longevity but also with regard to improvement within the profession. In a very practical way, the length of teachers’ commitment to the profession may depend, at least in part, on their inclination to view their work with students as impactful—even in the face of multiple obstacles in students’ lives (Cook, 2009).
Some research supported Palmer’s theory and suggested teacher identity is an entanglement or at least interplay of personal and professional identities, including those who might say that trying to separate the two is an exercise in futility (Olsen, 2008). For instance, Kitching et al. (2009) cited a 2004 study by Crocker and Park supporting the idea that how a teacher feels about his job determines self-worth. This also supplements studies linking motivation and job-satisfaction with the affective domain (Kitching et al., 2009).

Given the understanding that identity is an unending process of development, teachers’ professional growth may also hinge on their determining not only who they are at the current moment but also who they might become (Beijaard et al, 2004). Researchers found that even for those beginning teachers who envisioned themselves as using the newer methods learned in their college courses, the practicum experience, which often looked more like the type of teacher and teaching that participants themselves experienced in the K-12 setting as students, could easily lead to slipping back into more familiar methods and approaches (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Addressing teacher openness to change and early teacher attrition from the profession, Hammerness (2006) also noted that teacher vision may provide incentive for improving practice and may decrease both teacher turnover and a trend toward senior teachers migrating to suburban or less “challenging” schools, a phenomenon blamed for education inequity in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Even if teacher movement did not generate a loss of knowledge of students and their lives and lessen a sense of community (Hammerness, 2006), such teacher turnover could impede school reform if many schools struggle to keep a core group of teachers committed to a particular change effort (Moffett, 1999 in Hammerness, 2006).

Third, in politics and policy-making, teacher identity may prove most significant by its absence, in the sense that the complexities inherent in its nature and construction are being ignored while an attempt is made instead to regulate teacher actions via a sustained focus on
competencies (O’Connor, 2008). According to certain researchers, if reformers seek widespread and lasting change, looking at individual teacher identities should become part of the process (Day et al., 2006). For those policy makers relying on educational writers and thinkers who view teaching as primarily the transmission of knowledge and skills, teacher identity, beyond competency within the professional role, may not be particularly important (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). However, policy creators might also choose to follow educational thinkers who place great emphasis on the origins of knowledge and the democratic value in understanding the “given” part of “given truths”—in which case, the identity of the teacher is critical (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). Additionally, some writers argued that better understanding teacher identity is a means of providing policy makers with more insight into the practice of teaching than is available from the competencies-based (or technical/rational) perspective (Pajak, 2012).

Policy makers, of course, are concerned with results. So a fourth area of relevance in using teacher identity as a focus or concern in education-based studies would involve the impact on students. To this end, Bandura (1993) states “teachers who believe strongly in their instructional efficacy create mastery experiences for their students” (via more academic time, appropriate praise, reliance on intrinsic motivators, and specific help) while those who have a weaker sense of their instructional efficacy “construct classroom environments that are likely to undermine students’ sense of efficacy and cognitive development” (through more attention to non-academic tasks, criticism, reliance on extrinsic motivators and punishments) (p. 140). Other researchers noted a correlation between successful teaching and growth in self-knowledge (Pajak, 2012), arguably an important aspect of teacher identity.

I next review the literature that discussed the role of emotions and relationships in teacher identity.
Teacher Emotions and Relationships with Learners Related to Professional Identity

Still, it is important to reiterate research supports the belief that teachers are central to the learning process within schools (Elmore, 2007; Raphael, 1985; Shulman, 2004; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010; Tyack and Cuban, 1995). As a result, teacher professional identity, including teacher thinking about teaching and about being a teacher, has been examined using a variety of formats and constructs. Some of these structures include vision (Hammerness, 2006), emotion (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001), pre-professional and practicing teacher autobiography (Britzman, 2003; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008), teacher reflection on practice (Palmer, 1998) and even literary memoir (McCourt, 2005). Within each of these formats, relationships and emotions - particularly as associated with students - emerged as two of the most significant influences on teacher identity, while also being shaped by factors emerging from teacher identity (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; O’Connor, 2008; Sutton, 2005; Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, & Knight, 2009). Thus, in the previous discussion of teacher identity references to both relationships and emotions are frequent. In fact, researchers of teacher identity consistently indicated that two important considerations for questions of identity involved the role of emotions and that of relationships. Specifically, because the context of teaching involves continual interaction with others, teacher professional identity studies typically include a relationship component. For example, a teacher’s sense of control of the learning situation, how much she keeps and how much she trusts her students to lead their own learning, as well as her feelings of success in this aspect of teaching contribute to and reflect identity (Britzman, 2003; Weber and Mitchell, 1996).

More specifically, Zembylas (2004) conducted an ethnographic single person study that pointed toward confirmation of the work of Haviland and Kahlbaugh (1993) regarding the impact of emotions on identity and identity on emotions, with relationships as a central feature. That is, the Zembylas study seemed to indicate that as some teachers navigate the complex,
multi-layered world of teaching, their relationships with students might facilitate a positive professional identity and the necessary confidence to continue in the career of teaching (Zembylas, 2005) even as other studies indicated that while relationships with students are often cited as reasons for staying in the profession, the emotional work of teaching is the “most exhausting part” (O’Connor, 2008, p. 124). It may be true that between these seeming extremes, the relationships teachers experience with learners and the accompanying emotions, contribute to and result from aspects of teacher identity.

Indeed, much of the research on teacher identity at some point cited emotions (Hamman et al., 2010; Haviland & Kahlbaugh, 1993; Zembylas, 2004, 2005). Most directly, Zembylas (2005) stated, “the ways in which teachers understand, experience, perform, and talk about emotions are highly related to their sense of identity” (p. 937). More particularly (and in an earlier study), “emotions connect people’s thoughts, judgments, and beliefs, and it can be said that emotions are the ‘glue of identity’ by providing meaning to experiences” (Zembylas, 2003, p. 222, citing Haviland and Kahlbaugh, 1993, for the “glue of identity” expression). Other researchers affirmed teacher identity as primarily based in the affective domain (Nias, 1996; O’Connor, 2008; Zembylas, 2003). “Thus, not only is emotion central to the construction of identity, but our understanding of its role is complicated by the multiplicity of emotions likely to be experienced in any one event, and by the complex nature of the relationship between emotion and other aspects of one’s identity” (Zembylas, 2003).

Although some research on emotions cited characteristics that can be associated with identity as emotional or dispositional qualities – such as caring and intuition (Hargreaves, 1998), other studies separated this lens for examining emotion from the concept of emotion as a reaction to an event or a situation (Hamman et al, 2010). However, how teachers react emotionally to the events of their teaching lives may be dependent on who they are as both a teacher and a private
person. Sutton (2005), for example, cited Fredrickson (2002) in reminding us that we experience emotions based on how we evaluate situations and that judgment primarily comes from personal experiences and goals—one of the same wells that we look to for insight into identity.

The emotional aspect of a teacher’s life then, appears to be significant. Studies indicated to researchers that emotions are a key part of social learning and therefore have influence on the development of professional identity (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012). Other researchers saw emotions as an actual cornerstone in how identity develops (Haviland & Kahlbaugh, 1993; Zembylas, 2004). One researcher stated that as a means of understanding the demands of their work, teachers utilize emotions; and in fact, conversation about teacher identity “requires the connection of emotion with self-knowledge” (Zembylas, 2003, p. 213). In their research on presence, Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) concluded student responses to teachers’ actions and questions often help teachers understand themselves better. This research reinforced the notion that the qualities of this personal insight, a component of identity, may be impacted when a teacher interacts with learners solely from a distance.

Yet another perspective on the inner lives of teachers is that which examined the interplay between teacher and student emotions, an aspect of relationship that is likely impacted by physical distance. Researchers indicated that teachers are certainly aware of their emotions as a key part of their teaching life and in fact they spend some energy on emotional regulation in order to, as they see it, enhance their teaching, particularly in the area of classroom management (Sutton et al, 2009). For example, in one study middle school teachers purposefully lowered their anger realizing that yelling did not work and that anger could damage relationships that they viewed as critical to their teaching effectiveness (Sutton et al, 2009). Additionally, Sutton and Wheatley (2003) concluded some teachers might believe that refraining from expressing their anger is an investment in a relationship that will pay off later with better student behavior.
Some researchers described a tendency in certain school cultures for teachers to reduce their affect, however, in the interest of matching one version of being “professional” or because they value what they perceive as a less subjective, more neutral approach to interacting with learners (Zembylas, 2004). There was also a documented tendency of high schools to attempt to create an emotionally neutral zone, an environment where emotions cannot distract students (Hargreaves, 2000) and where teachers who embraced an “objective and neutral” approach to their practice might focus less on individuals and more on events (Zembylas, 2004, p. 195). On the other hand, Zembylas in his 2004 study reminded us that this is not a universal practice because some teachers actually placed emphasis on the caring aspects of their practice. Yet still other studies indicated that teachers at the secondary level often find it hard emotional work just at the motivational level: “You have to motivate yourself to motivate them” (O’Connor, 2008, p. 124). It might become part of the teacher’s job to examine their own emotional reactions as they continuously assess whether students are engaged and responsive during class activities (Hargreaves, 2000).

Teachers may also increase their positive affect in order to get and keep student attention and to increase motivation. In at least one study teacher respondents cited humor as a tool for both building relationships and for defusing negatively charged emotional classroom moments (Sutton et al, 2009). Some researchers found evidence that teacher emotion, even arising from or toward certain forms of pedagogy, can essentially set up the dynamic for interaction with students (Zembylas, 2004). It is easy to imagine a teacher who feels excitement about a new instructional strategy bringing that energy to her interactions with her class. However, Hargreaves (2000) warned that relying on emotions to build student passion might also be a strategy certain teachers could use to manipulate their students and to avoid critical thinking.
Again, this body of research informed my study of both relationships and teacher professional identity in that it highlights the pervasive impact of teacher identity as seen in emotions and in the experience of relationship on teacher engagement in the classroom. It became clear, for instance, that physical distance between the teacher and learner could impact teachers’ experiences of these types of emotional interplays. Indeed, Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2008) in a study of Canadian virtual teachers describe a teaching environment where teachers must practice communication with students that is “more formal, planned, conscious, and pre-meditated” (p. 1069). While this study did not directly examine teachers’ felt reactions to this new type of teaching, the teacher adaptations they discussed implicate changes in professional identity.

In a slightly different direction, Hargreaves (1998) observed teachers’ emotions as so much a part of their identity that even instructional planning was experienced as an emotional activity. For example, seventh and eighth grade teachers in this same study actually selected curriculum and instructional activities that they not only felt would excite their students, but would also prove emotionally engaging for themselves as teachers (Hargreaves, 1998). This recognition of the pervasiveness of teachers’ emotions throughout the tasks of teaching, and with teacher–learner relationship implications, could become an indicator of teacher identity changes in the virtual teaching experience.

Teachers may literally connect their practice of teaching and engagement with learners to a variety of emotion-based purposes including believing that students learn because of solid relationships with teachers (Hargreaves, 1998), that trust is at the core of a solid relationship (Hargreaves, 1998; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006), and that the social and emotional outcomes of teaching are as important as the cognitive – including in the areas of social justice and equity (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 845). Many would indeed argue that part of identity encompasses power:
how one gets it, uses it (including relinquishing it—even to students), and deals with it in others (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006).

Other effects of emotion on teacher identity and experience are less positive. For instance, Noddings (1996) finds three areas of concern for teacher emotions: burnout (for those who feel too deeply and get too involved with students); a pervasive association of professionalism with coolness, detachment, and reason devoid of emotion; and fear that good judgment is impaired by emotions.

In sum, teaching is relationship-based, emotional work (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; O’Connor, 2008; Sutton, 2005, Sutton et al, 2009), perhaps considerably more emotional than most work (Nias, 1996); however, unlike cognition and motivation, teachers’ emotions often receive very little attention (Sutton, 2005), even though some would argue that “examining the role of emotions in the development of professional identities leads to a richer and more complete understanding of teachers’ work” (O’Connor, 2008, p. 125) and some might add of teachers as people. Further, if changes in a teacher’s sense of who they are as a teacher may impact student learning, then knowing some of the details of those changes could help policy-makers or the teachers themselves mitigate potential negatives while enhancing possible advantages.

I next continue with an examination of research and thinking regarding the teacher’s view of relationships with learners by delineating five core aspects of relationship brick-and-mortar teachers often experience with learners. These five domains are recognized and described as a primary means of adding structure to my exploration of virtual teachers’ perceptions of their relationships with students and the potential impact on their professional identity, and they formed the basis for my thinking about the study. In addition, whenever possible I’ve added current research findings regarding virtual teaching.
A Conceptual Framework for Teachers’ Perceptions of Relationships with Learners and Implications for Professional Identity

This study was guided by the theoretical understanding that the inner lives of teachers are important. What teachers think (Britzman, 2003; Hammerness, 2006; Yero, 2010), what they feel and believe (Hammerness, 2006; Palmer, 1998), and their sense of who they are (Palmer, 1998) makes a difference in and is in turn influenced by teacher practice. One of the core factors influencing a teacher’s sense of identity is the relationship a teacher experiences with his or her students (Beijaard et al, 2004; Brunetti, 2001; Day et al, 2006; Nias, 1989). By including efficacy in teaching as part of teacher identity, relationships become even more central (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004; He & Cooper, 2011; O’Connor, 2008; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

Using the conceptual understanding that brick-and-mortar teacher identity is embedded in the vision, pre-service experiences, and actual classroom experiences of teachers, and realizing that contextual changes impact professional self-awareness, a change in teachers’ sense of identity as they move into virtual teaching seemed likely. While the actual changes are little explored at this time, research shows relationships play a key role in teacher identity in brick-and-mortar classrooms. That is, teacher-learner relationships both influence and are influenced by teacher identity.

In exploring how virtual teaching might impact teachers’ sense of their relationships with students and the implications for their understanding of their professional identity, a conceptual framework that applies to teachers’ perceptions of these relationships in the brick-and-mortar setting was applied. Specifically, at least five possible areas exist, and all might support the notion that “it is important to benefit from teachers’ perceptions of aspects of their professional identity, such as … their relationship with students …” (Beijaard et al, 2004, p. 115).
The five areas of relationship that were particularly poignant for studying this topic are: teachers’ sense of enjoyment from their constant and varied engagement with learners; teachers’ sense of their impact on student motivation and engagement with the subject; teachers’ caring; teachers’ modeling of skills and passion—both for the subject and in life terms, more generally; and teachers’ understanding of the connections students are making with the subject. These five realms of teacher–learner relationships and their possible impact on teacher professional identity in virtual schools are, with little doubt, intertwined in the professional lives of teachers. Their separation here is merely to examine the variety of subtle, although to some teachers, perhaps obvious, influences.

**Satisfaction from Daily and Constant Engagement with Learners**

This category encompasses the idea that teachers often enjoy their jobs due primarily to regular engagement with learners based on such things as friendly banter, humor, and exchange of stories that are mutually interesting. The very act of working with young people can prove satisfying (Brunetti, 2001) and can enhance the teacher’s sense of teacher-hood and general enjoyment in the craft (McCourt, 2005).

Essentially, there are strong indications that teacher job satisfaction, arguably a measure of a good “match” between job and identity, is heavily related to teacher-student relationships (Brunetti, 2001). Brunetti’s mixed methods study of long-term high school teachers and their sources of job satisfaction indicated that many of those sources are related to relationships with students, including generally working with young people, hearing their positive feedback about the work they’ve done, having students stay in contact after leaving the teacher’s class, and the daily general excitement of the classroom. Indeed, in their study of student teachers’ in Estonia, Timoštšuk and Ugaste (2012) determined that student relationships were cited far more often by
participants as sources of positive emotion than those with administrators, other teachers, or supervisors. Arguably, each of these sources of satisfaction may change in virtual education. Viewed from another lens, satisfaction with teaching might be interpreted as vision realized – if that is the case, then teacher-learner relationships likely comprise an important part of teacher identity.

To complicate the issue, in Hargreaves’ (2000) study of both Canadian elementary and secondary teachers’ emotional responses to daily interactions with students, grade level differences seemed to emerge. These included the possibility that secondary teachers enjoy relationships formed with students during athletics and other extracurricular activities more than those during regular academic hours. Equally significant for this study, Hargreaves posited that contextual elements (curriculum, general structures, professional expectations) create a daily classroom situation where high school teachers do not feel known by their students as emotional beings. In contrast to elementary teachers who mentioned caring and even love, secondary teachers in Hargreaves study referred to “respect and acknowledgment.” Other researchers, however, found that daily satisfaction and enjoyment, even for secondary level teachers, can come from the emotional connections built with students in the classroom (O’Connor, 2008). As Raphael (1985) put it, students can cause teachers to feel “all the way up or all the way down” (p. 35). Additionally, some high school teachers reported that creating an emotionally safe classroom environment, including building positive relationships, was an integral part of their job (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004). Raphael’s (1985) interviews with a wide variety of teachers confirmed the idea that making a connection with students by commiserating, processing, or celebrating is critical (p. 79). It seems quite possible that virtual teachers might experience each of these school relationship dynamics differently than their brick-and-mortar counterparts.
Still, in one European study, pre-service teachers from a variety of programs (single and multi-subject, indicating various grade ranges) talked enthusiastically about the contentment and even joy they felt in daily interactions with their students (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012). In their research many of these positive feelings seemed based on finding ways to deal with challenges and also in believing they’d gained their students’ respect. This is not unlike the work of He and Cooper (2011) who found teacher enjoyment in those moments when students acknowledged their appreciation for the teacher and when they realized their students are sharing similar struggles to those they themselves experienced as students.

Part of a teacher’s daily satisfaction based on engagement with learners may also come from what Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) describe as presence, or the capacity to truly be with students in multiple senses of the word. Presence is one way teachers can both be effective and enjoy their work as they feel a keen awareness of students and subject, with all of it situated in the larger world (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). Presence seems based on physical proximity in current descriptions (current research on presence in the virtual classroom is focused on higher education rather than K-12) and it also seems a characteristic of the most successful teaching–learning encounters (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). What happens to presence in a K-12 virtual classroom lacks research. Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun, and Sutton (2009) supported the notion that teacher and student enjoyment (sometimes based on presence) was worth studying because of potential connections to better teaching and learning. They also suggested that teacher enthusiasm sparks that enjoyment.

**Student Motivation and Engagement with the Subject**

Second, in addition to daily job satisfaction via relationships with learners, if part of identity is a sense that one is doing a good job, and in teaching a “good job” at least in part means having efficacy with regard to student learning (Bandura, 1993), then evidence of
students’ motivation and engagement are often considered “strong positives” or indicators for teachers (Kitching et al., 2009). Teachers will even express the belief they can teach a child anything as long as the child is motivated to learn (Hargreaves, 1998). Further, Hargreaves (1998) suggests teachers believe a strong sense of relationship and the accompanying sense of safety actually enables students to take academic risks. Feelings of efficacy as part of professional teacher identity often determine longevity within the career field—something of concern to policy-makers and teachers themselves.

Researchers also connected teacher willingness to develop and grow, and the resulting pride when their pedagogy does improve, with their emotional connections to students – positing that the desire to fully engage students with the content leads to relationships and emotional connections (Hargreaves, 1998). How teachers created engagement was often based on their understanding of what students needed not just academically, but also emotionally (Hargreaves, 1998). In order to create motivation, teachers sometimes relied on having more control over the teaching environment – from time to design learning activities to control over the time allotted to specific practices (Hargreaves, 1998). Similarly, other researchers indicated that teachers who relied on showing positive emotions with students usually reported stronger feelings of efficacy around management and student engagement (Sutton et al, 2009). As noted above, however, when teachers struggled, efforts to motivate sometimes devolved into efforts to control (Flores & Day, 2006).

Another important study, conducted in Ireland (Kitching et al., 2009), seemed to indicate that, at least for early career teachers, it is not so much the presence of negatives (self-doubt, perceived failure, lack of time) in their daily lives, but the absence of positives, such as interactions with students indicating learning and engagement, that leads to job-dissatisfaction. These categories of positives involving student engagement with the subject were echoed in the
work of Sutton and Wheatley (2003) as well as in Pajak’s (2012) discussion of Waller (1932) and the lives of teachers.

Generally, however, in the very act of identifying their perceived teaching strengths, teachers reveal their values and how they view themselves as teachers (committed, able to build relationships with students, motivating, strict, organized, innovative, for examples). In at least one study, early career-teachers considered relationship building and helping students to find relevance in content as strengths (He & Cooper, 2011), indicating they valued these aspects of their teacher identity. Further, new teachers as well as more experienced veterans, stated that the most exciting aspect of their teaching was seeing success in motivating students around content area learning (He & Cooper, 2011; Kitching et al., 2009) and they were willing to learn from their students to facilitate this motivation (He & Cooper, 2011). Further, in the nexus of identity, emotions, and relationships, researchers indicated that teachers sometimes rely on commonalities between themselves and their students as a means of engaging students with content, including relating content to their own lives (He & Cooper, 2011).

This, then, is a realm of thinking about relationships that can be found in the work of those theorists who discuss the important ways teacher and students engage around the subject under study. Hammerness (2006) wrote about the work-altering realization of one participant that she could be a bridge “between her students and the subject” (p. 43), while Duckworth (2006) described the subject “sitting” in the middle of a community of learners (p.), and Palmer (1998) placed the subject at the center of teaching and learning, stating that connectedness “is the principle behind good teaching” (p. 115). Palmer’s writings capture a holistic means of understanding, or attempting to understand, how the “who” of teaching creates a learning environment, or open space, that potentially connects not only teacher and learner, but both to content, and learners to one another (1998). These teacher-learner relationships can become so
powerful that not only do students learn and grow, but the teacher does as well. Freire (1968) posits, “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (p. 67), thus envisioning a relationship in which teachers and students effectively create a learning community around the subject.

Finally, teacher education programs and authors targeting professional development for teachers often discuss this facet of teaching as essential to best practice (Duckworth, 2006; Dweck, 2006; Lemov, 2010; Singer, 2014; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010; Wessler, 2003). For example, teachers with a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) might experience this aspect of their relationship with students differently than teachers with a belief in fixed capacities for their learners. Teachers who hold efficiency as a strong value might seek and create opportunities for relationship building that follow Lemov’s (2010) suggestions for “championship” teaching over Duckworth’s (2006) observations regarding effective relationships between teachers, students, and subject.

In the virtual classroom, research to date indicates that the lack of visual cues, both those the teacher provides and those she receives from her students (in terms of facial expressions, body language, actions related to learning), can create challenges in the realm of assessing student engagement and facilitating student motivation to engage with the content (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008).

Caring, Nurturing, and Decision-Making

The third area of potential connection between identity and teacher–learner relationships encompasses caring. Several researchers indicated caring is an underlying component of most teacher-student relationships (Hargreaves, 1998, Kitching et al., 2009; Nias, 1989; O’Connor, 2008), placing it as a possible component of professional identity that could be impacted by
changes in teacher-learner relationships within a virtual classroom. Although caring is often considered universally desirable and many researchers and lay people may view teacher caring as an essential component in the teaching–learning relationship (Nias, 1989), some observers recognized the concern that teacher caring can lead to a reduction in expectations and lower student achievement (Hargreaves, 1995). Caring has been linked to the types of instructional and management decisions teachers make on a daily and long-term basis (O’Connor, 2008).

Still, in addition to job satisfaction, at least one researcher found that the caring aspect of the teacher-learner relationship becomes a significant factor in reconciling professional roles with personal identity in some cases (O’Connor, 2008). Researchers also indicated that teaching may attract unusual numbers of individuals who identify themselves as nurturers, for example (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Not surprisingly, however, consistent caring may particularly lead to the trust that educators of many backgrounds recognize as fundamental to student engagement and motivation (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Caring also encompasses the teacher–learner relationship as a contributor of student engagement with the content and with the learning community. For example, in an unusual take on this topic, Nias (1996) reminds us that McWilliam (1994) argues “teachers may use their bodily presence in the classroom to seduce pupils into a loving relationship with knowledge” (p.296).

**Modeling Values, Subject Passion, and Approaches to Life**

The fourth area, which perhaps emerges from teacher caring in a more global sense, beyond daily nurturing, is the desire to model important and even essential life skills for all students, including the teacher’s sense of serving as a model for students through a relationship of trust and mutual interest in growth and developing potential. Much like Erikson’s generative stage of life, many teachers view teaching as a way to pass on some of the essential life lessons they’ve learned, including passion for their respective subject areas.
In addition, teachers often feel they are modeling ways of being in the world. Researchers found that secondary school teachers see value in setting an example for practicing empathy (O’Connor, 2008), for instance. Sometimes this force takes the form of sheer optimism or a “gambling mentality,” where teachers are convinced their efforts will “hit the jackpot” enough times with students to counter all the negative influences in a child’s life (Cook, 2009, p. 287).

While trust undergirds relationship building as a whole, in this fourth category, the teacher-learner relationship serves as a source of mentoring and guiding beyond the subject under study by the learning community. Knowledge of one another and trust become paramount. Teachers express belief in the power of the teacher–learner relationship for general growth. Evidence for this is available in conversations with everyday teachers and is expressed well by Bernstein (2013) in a response to a blog about the significance of craft knowledge to teachers: “But nothing is as important as getting to know the kids, or rather, to have them feel that you are getting to know them. So much of teaching is relationship, without which the intellectual risks that are the necessary underpinning of real learning will be far less likely to be undertaken by the young people for whom we are responsible.”

**Understanding Students’ Comprehension of the Subject**

It is not enough for the teacher to bring her students to the subject (Duckworth, 2006; Hammerness, 2006; He and Cooper, 2011; Palmer, 1998) as discussed above under motivation and engagement. In the final category, which stands out in both the literature and my own experiences, the teacher–learner relationship potentially acts as a powerful avenue for teachers to determine the type (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005) and extent of student understanding during instruction and throughout formative assessment, in particular. In addition to formal tests and evaluations, teachers often rely on informal, formative feedback and assessments during activities and discussions to determine types of understanding, and leading to adjusted
instruction. The teacher’s familiarity with each student often enables the teacher to recognize such student features as facial expressions, intonations, particular word choices, and behaviors as indicators of particular types of understanding. In addition to this level of familiarity impacting teachers’ awareness of student understanding, strong teacher-learner relationships also help teachers motivate students through knowing the students’ interests and current capacities while also knowing potential sources of frustration and excitement as well as possible obstacles to student learning and to participating in class activities and assignments.

Many teachers visualize a key component of the work of the learning community as leading to growth in understanding. To that end, McTighe and Wiggins (2005) described six facets of understanding that enable students to explain, interpret, and apply concepts as well as allow them to take various perspectives, experience empathy for other views, and reflect on their own understanding. Teacher insight into and capacity to build from each student’s type and level of understanding often emerges from the teacher-learner relationship and how well a teacher is able to do this potentially impacts his sense of identity as an effective teacher. This posed the question of what means virtual teachers use to maintain a sense of their students’ understanding without physical proximity.

Summary

In essence, although teachers remain an important part of the online learning process (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Miller & Ribble, 2010; Muirhead, 2000; Weiner, 2003) and both policy-makers and virtual school providers are adamant that virtual learning is not simply about students and content, it is not clear from the literature how moving from traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms to virtual high schools impacts teachers’ experience of relationships with their students; nor is it clear how the virtual environment impacts their sense of who they are as teachers. Palmer (1998) and others (Hammerness, 2006; Hargreaves, 1998; Nias, 1996;
O’Connor, 2008) contend that teacher emotions, relationships, and thinking are critical to their identity as teachers, while researchers such as Northcote (2010) indicate that the shared role of the teacher and emotions in general is critical to both teachers and learners. Changes in the fundamental relationship between teacher and learner may impact teachers’ sense of who they are and perhaps their feelings of being effective within the teaching—learning dynamic. That is, the literature showed a sense of “who” the virtual teacher is remains in its infancy as some teachers move from brick-and-mortar to virtual teaching. The impact on teachers’ sense of their relationships with students of moving into a virtual teaching environment is nearly unexplored. Essentially, how does this transition, in terms of teacher—learner relationships, impact individual teacher visions of their practice along with their emerging virtual teacher identities? What relationship experiences become paramount in their narratives of who they are?

The studies reviewed above suggested interconnectedness of teacher identity with emotion, and of both with learner relationships (Cook, 2009; O’Connor, 2008; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012; Zembylas, 2005). Given the entwined professional and personal aspects of teacher identity, a teacher’s professional identity may begin long before formal teacher training, is impacted by her own educational experiences, grows significantly throughout her preservice years, and continues to develop and change with the accumulated experiences of a career. Changes in the context of teaching have been shown, in several instances, to impact how a teacher sees herself and what she expects from herself or believes others expect from her (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Flores & Day, 2006; Lasky, 2005; Roth et al., 2004; Zembylas, 2003). Given these understandings, this study was both relevant and warranted in examining virtual teachers’ perceptions and experiences of their relationships with learners to gain insight into the nature of those relationships along with the potential change in professional identity that may accompany the move to the virtual classroom.
Many researched ideas and concepts informed this study. That is, I recognized the complexity of influences on teacher professional identity—experiential throughout one’s life, including teacher preparation and actually teaching, and therefore clearly embedded in culture, social changes, and policy—and I trust those researchers and thinkers who view identity as playing an important role in how a teacher engages in professional work. In addition, I stand with Lasky (2005) and the concise statement that teacher professional identity is “how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others” (p. 901); thus, the beliefs, values, and emotions revealed as teachers talk about their relationships with students provided broad, useful data for this study.

Taken as a whole, my review of the literature, including both empirical and theoretical studies and also the questions they inspired, both has led me to and has provided ample justification and support for the study described in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Goals

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how high school teachers who make the change from brick-and-mortar classrooms to virtual classrooms experience and describe changes in their central teacher–learner relationships, and to consider how these changes impact their identity as teachers. The majority of the studies reviewed in chapter two concerning identity, emotion, and relationships were qualitative in method. This contrasted starkly with those studies related to virtual teaching and learning, most of which were quantitative as they examined very specific performance data. In a world increasingly understood both qualitatively and quantitatively, there is need for continued qualitative exploration of virtual teaching as used in this research. Additionally, in this study each individual teacher represents a case or “unique situation” where the individual can provide “different perspectives on the problem” (Creswell, 2007, pp. 74–75). Each participant, then, embodies a case with considerable possibility for providing a rich sense of lived meaning, or of “the way that a person experiences and understands his or her world as real and meaningful” (Van Manen, 1990, p.183).

In essence, this study was conceived as a means of examining and describing how individual virtual teachers experience and understand relationships with learners and how their teaching identity is impacted. While many aspects of professional identity could change, one area that impacts teachers’ emotions and is in fact arguably a gateway to identity (Zembylas, 2005) in a way that seems feasibly explored and described through teachers’ ideas and stories, is that of their relationships with students. This study, then, focused on two questions:

1. How do virtual high school teachers describe their relationships with students, first in the brick-and-mortar classroom and later in the virtual classroom? and
2. How do teachers describe their sense of professional identity in the brick-and-mortar classroom and virtual classroom?

Underlying these two broad exploratory questions are six sub-questions designed to align with the categories of relationships in my conceptual framework. Additionally, these sub-questions provided the necessary guidance during data collecting so the work of analysis moved from a wide and general view into particular and specific differences and similarities for teachers in a virtual environment:

a. How do former brick-and-mortar teachers describe their personal satisfaction from daily engagement with learners in a virtual world?

b. How do former brick-and-mortar teachers talk about motivating virtual learners and connecting them with the subject under study?

c. How do former brick-and-mortar teachers describe the ways in which they show care toward virtual learners?

d. How do former brick-and-mortar teachers talk about modeling their values (which may include their passion for the subjects they teach as well as their more general approaches to life and learning) in a virtual classroom?

e. How do former brick-and-mortar teachers describe changes, if any, in their understanding of their students’ connection to and understanding of the subject in a virtual classroom? In other words, how do virtual teachers know what their students understand about the subject?

f. What, if anything, do former brick-and-mortar teachers say about their teaching
presence and the development and maintenance of trust in the virtual classroom?

Again, the sub-questions are designed to provide additional direction for the larger exploration.

Criteria for Sample Selection

Each participant in the study comprises a case, and I used three primary considerations in purposefully selecting the participants. First, participants practiced at the high school level in both the brick-and-mortar and virtual settings. This added consistency in the age level of the students with whom they were interacting, as well as in the emotional ground they might cover working with adolescents.

Second, because each participant constitutes a unique case and there are only five cases, it was imperative that participants were able to articulate, and were interested in articulating, their experiences and ideas in both brick-and-mortar and virtual teaching environments. Their length of experience fosters that capacity. For this reason, I began my search for participants within Maine but then branched into virtual schools from other states with older, more established virtual high schools. This provided me with a larger pool from which to select a varied sample of teachers.

Third, to provide variation among the five cases, I purposefully selected participants with differences in age and gender, and in terms of the subject they teach (Table 3.1). I maintained an awareness of each participant’s years of experience in brick-and-mortar settings. I was also able to include four representatives from a virtual school relying primarily on asynchronous contact and one from a program that also included a segment of synchronous instruction and assessment.

As mentioned above, I began recruitment at Maine’s two virtual schools, Maine Virtual Academy and Maine Connections Academy. I had already established contact with K-12, the education management company running the latter, and they were extremely helpful in connecting me with a large pool of potential participants. I also recruited from a state-run virtual
school in the U.S. South. I was aware of the power issues at play when connecting to potential participants through their employer and very quickly emailed participants directly after hearing from those willing to receive more details about the study.

Table 3.1 Participant descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>participant name</th>
<th>virtual subject area</th>
<th>region of student enrollment</th>
<th>teaching role(s)</th>
<th>years of teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Meg              | life sciences        | primarily south/ some international | instructor/assessor | 15 brick-and-mortar  
12 virtual  
(some of which was part-time) |
| Laura            | English              | south                         | instructor/assessor  
(and content coach for other virtual teachers) | 14 brick-and-mortar  
2 virtual |
| Ken              | English              | central                       | instructor/assessor  
(and content coach/teacher trainer for other virtual teachers) | 13 brick-and-mortar  
2 virtual (plus some additional part-time) |
| Aaron            | physical sciences    | central                       | instructor/assessor  
course designer | 3 brick-and-mortar  
7 virtual (some of which was part-time) |
| Carla            | social studies       | primarily south/ some nationally | instructor/assessor  
mentor/advisor  
(and teacher manager) | 6 brick-and-mortar  
2 virtual instructing / 2 as teacher manager |

Data Collection

Because the intent of this research was to understand what each teacher experienced as a brick-and-mortar classroom teacher as well as what he or she currently experiences teaching virtually, a three-interview process, based on Seidman’s (2006) model, allowed me to focus the interview protocols around these guiding questions as a means to answer the research questions. I modified Seidman’s (2006) use of an initial interview as “focused life history” to be primarily
centered on the participant’s initial reasons for teaching, their path into the classroom, and their brick-and-mortar teaching perceptions and experiences. I drew from his conception of a second interview as providing “details of experience” in order to explore the participant’s virtual teaching perceptions and experiences, and kept his third interviewing focus of reflecting on meaning as a strategy for gathering deeper insights into virtual relationships and virtual teacher identity. The overall focus of each interview may therefore be expressed as follows:

**Interview 1:** What was your road to teaching? What was brick-and-mortar classroom teaching like for you (with a focus on teacher/learner relationships)?

**Interview 2:** What is virtual teaching like for you (with a focus on teacher/learner relationships)?

**Interview 3:** What connections/meaning can you draw when thinking about distinctions between the two settings in terms of who you are as a teacher?

To reiterate, while understanding biographical information is the objective in Seidman’s typical first interview, my initial interview combined basic life history leading to a teaching career with a more intense focus on the participants’ experiences teaching in a brick-and-mortar classroom. The alternative, adding a fourth interview, would have demanded more of the participants’ time than seemed feasible (in terms of scheduling) or fair (teachers tend to be exceptionally busy). Again, because the heart of this study is both relational and identity focused, I paid particular attention to both strands in all three interviews.

Interviews were a data collection method well suited to my problem, as it would have made little sense to investigate virtual teacher identity, and more specifically teacher experiences with relationships in the virtual education world, without extensive conversations with virtual teachers. These conversations provided the space for participants to tell their stories with the details I sought in order to grasp better the experience of virtual teachers. Interviews also allowed
immediate follow-up questions to responses that seemed unclear or potentially rich in terms of my research questions. Therefore, there was opportunity to gain a much closer understanding of what the participant was hoping to convey. As Lortie (1975) observed, teachers are partly shaped by the “meanings” they “attach to their work” (p. viii), and meanings are challenging to clarify outside of the spoken word. However, I do agree with Manen (1990) that meaning is often more richly constructed through the vehicle of writing. Literary memoir, in fact, can provide a close and honest perspective of the impact of relationships on teacher identity (McCourt, 2005). In light of that, I added a written component between the second and third interviews that allowed the participant time to consider his or her answers to questions bridging the brick-and-mortar and virtual worlds. These questions came directly from the transcripts for the first two interviews and prompted deeper meaning and connection-making on the part of the participant and, ultimately, for me as the researcher. Whether the participant responded with written answers or simply shared verbally in the third interview was up to them.

Data collection moved through each of the three protocols at the convenience of the participants, with some participants completing the process within six weeks and others taking a longer approach. Geographic distance between the participants and myself necessitated Skype interviews with the exception of an in-person first interview with Meg. Skype made sense because the participants who best fit my criteria were located beyond a reasonable travel time. The rationale for using distance technology as an interviewing format was as follows: Although Maine conceivably has a new pool of virtual teachers due to the addition of a virtual charter school in 2014 with one to follow in the fall of 2015, the number of virtual teachers was still small (eight faculty) according to the Maine Connections Academy website just prior to the start of my data collecting. Maine Virtual Academy did not open until academic year 2015–2016, so teachers were not available as I sought participants. To avoid a geographic restriction interfering
with the goal of finding virtual teachers with no more than four years of virtual experience but with at least five in a brick-and-mortar classroom, I began with Maine teachers, looked then at Maine virtual school teachers not living in Maine, but investigated other options as needed, branching next into other states’ virtual schools. Conceptually, dealing with virtual education implies compressing distance, rendering it less meaningful to the quality of information gained—in this sense, my participant pool was much larger because geographic location and driving distance were not considerations.

Thus, to expand the area from which I enlisted participants, I used Skype as a means of interviewing. While phone interviews have long been common in qualitative research (Sullivan, 2012), it is important to the interviewing process, especially in issues of identity, to have connections and visual cues beyond voice that might include eye movement, physical signals of emotion, posture, body gestures and tremors, etc., because the body may be one of the “surfaces for signifying identity” (Zembylas, 2003, p. 229). Skype provided this to a significant degree. In addition, Skype conversations were easily recorded with an exterior device.

Each round of interviews was completed as soon as was feasible for each individual. The greatest time lag was between the second and third interview for most participants. This timetable diverged from Seidman’s recommended protocol but worked well in general. My interview work took place in the summer and fall of 2016. The summer interviews were typically within three to four weeks of each other, and the fall interviews within eight weeks; this was partly due to the busy fall term for both myself and my participants. In a prior field study, it was clear that participants may spend time thinking about interview questions between sessions; this proved true for the study’s participants. It seemed helpful for them to have more time and space to do that during the academic year.
Analysis

Analysis included both within-case and across-case analysis as well as the identification of themes and the relationship among themes. It began as Maxwell (2005) and others suggested, during data collection and in a field journal, as well as throughout interview transcription. The first and second set of interviews were transcribed before the third round of interviewing in order to provide context for the final set of questions. I also kept memos throughout this process, developing “tentative ideas about categories and relationships” (p. 96). Additionally, I followed Creswell’s (2007) suggestion of referring back to the study’s research questions on a regular basis.

I followed open coding with an emerging theme protocol in this study as I worked to review information provided by participants while continuing my study of peer-reviewed research as well as blogs, letters, and commentaries by virtual high school teachers that offer additional perspectives on virtual teaching. This is a rapidly evolving area of education with technological developments creating changes in teaching practices and the subsequent teacher experience on a regular basis. While this type of research is clearly an iterative and interpretive process, my literature review and interview protocol suggested that some potential larger themes might include changing relationships with students in these five areas: enjoyment of daily engagement and interaction with students, promoting student motivation, caring for students, modeling passion for content and life values, and connecting students to the subject being studied while gauging their understanding. These potential themes helped guide my interviewing and initial coding. I then collapsed those codes into themes based on both my collected data and research questions. Additionally, as with an earlier field study, I sought contrary evidence and interconnecting themes as Creswell (2008) described.
Glesne’s (2006) ideas regarding analysis of case studies also informed my process. That is, I used a holistic qualitative approach by writing “a context-situated case study” for each participant, followed by a cross-case analysis “to look for patterns across cases” (p. 13). Using folders within folders as well as numerous files, and its strong search tool, Microsoft word provided sufficient organizational strength for my coding and analysis process.

Finally, it is important to note that both data collection and analysis helped to clarify and refine the conceptual framework. These categories of teacher–learner relationships, along with their underlying sense of presence and trust, were indicators contributing to understanding and interpreting data gathered during the study; they acted as starting points for and not as conclusions to findings. As with many categorical systems, these categories are both distinct from one another and fundamentally intertwined in the real world of practice. Significantly, undergirding each of these—to varying extents and in various forms—is a sense of trust. Palmer’s (1998) vision of strong teaching practice originating from a non-fearful, honest sense of oneself, one’s subject, and one’s students informed part of the unstated conceptual framework, or underlying beliefs for this study. Because identity is a complicated concept (O’Connor, 2008) and professional identity seems insufficient in attempting to capture the multiple potential connections and implications for teachers, whether virtually or in brick-and-mortar classrooms, my exploration of teachers’ experiences and perceptions of online teacher–learner relationships also used Palmer’s more encompassing sense of teacher identity. That is, I made every effort to view participant statements less as discreet data facts and more as indicators of complex, extensive, and global windows into full individual lives, as well as teacher-focused perceptions. To that end, Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot’s concept of portraiture also influenced my analysis and understanding of the individual cases (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
Avenues into Understanding Individual Teacher Identity

While part of the analysis looked at patterns across cases, in another level of analysis I sought to represent my participants as five distinct people whose actual identities are better understood when fully embodied as real individuals. In describing the reality, experiences, and thinking of these five virtual teachers so that each case is rich in detail, I used two lenses for collecting and viewing the data throughout the analysis process. To begin, I recognized that researchers may select from multiple frameworks when attempting to understand teacher identity as a construct (Beijaard et al, 2004; Zembylas, 2004, 2005). In particular, it seems researchers studying individual teacher identity must find a way to bracket the cultural, social, economic, and historical factors to move closer to the personal aspects of who teachers are, thereupon finding values, beliefs, goals, experiences, and possibilities for ways of being in the future. Zembylas (2003, 2004) suggested that teacher values are revealed through emotional expression, and the way teachers talk about how they react to and feel about classroom occurrences eventually “yields a richer understanding of the teacher self” (2003, p. 213). Two strategic tools for gaining insight into individual teacher identity that seemed particularly useful for this study included paying close attention to teacher vision and the structure and focus of personal narratives.

Vision

One means of gaining insight into individual teacher identity is to examine how teachers imagine their ideal daily lives as teachers. Karen Hammerness (2006) provided an extensive description of teacher vision that encompassed the ideal classroom, including physical features as well as less tangible qualities such as how teachers interact with their students. These ideal interactions could be based on such components as guiding purposes, and could go so far as to
encompass ideal teaching and learning behaviors, with all of these details emerging from teachers’ imaginations when thinking about their optimal individual professional practices.

In addition to the possible and the ideal, vision in this sense can also come closer to the values teachers live by (Hammerness, 2006), rather than those that are “espoused” or professed but not practiced (Argyris, 1976). These values are supported by teachers’ beliefs, and thus provide a more intimate, personal view into who an individual teacher is.

Vision blurs even further into identity when teachers ask, Who am I as a virtual teacher? Who are my students, and how do I know, understand, motivate, and engage them? How do I know when they understand our work together? What am I doing for and with my students, and why? As teachers move into virtual classrooms and perhaps rethink their teaching identity based partly on altered teaching–learning relationships, some teachers and observers might question their very purpose as teachers. In fact, some writers for education-focused publications have begun suggesting that teachers should not only envision but actively promote a purpose for working with students beyond meeting cut scores on standardized tests—lest the world discovers that computers might actually better “teach” in that narrowly defined way than human teachers (Rebora, 2011; Richardson, 2011).

Another way of thinking about vision is through the idea of “possible selves” (a concept first used by Markus and Nurius in 1986 to link past, present, and potential future self-concepts). For instance, Hamman et al. (2010) posited that trying to determine the components of “who” in the here and now is one avenue into identity but looking at the individuals’ possibilities for whom they hope or fear becoming adds another potentially significant layer of insight into who a person is in the present. Given the unlimited number of potential selves, those a teacher selects as positive and negative options are based on the values, ultimately, of that teacher in the here and now as she has interpreted or assumed them from her social and cultural experiences. Finally, it
is likely those various teaching selves are inextricably linked with the varieties of relationships teachers experience with learners.

**Narrative**

I sought stories from participants to help enrich their answers. I asked for examples and encouraged the recollection of specific incidents through prompts such as: What has that looked like with students or a student? Can you share a time when that occurred? What were some of the details that stand out for you when remembering an incident of this? These narratives added to my re-presenting participants’ ideas within the various themes of the study, and added to my ability to make sense of their situation. In addition, I fully appreciate that what is gained from a narrative focus is not certain nor generalizable but rather “is textured by particularity and incompleteness” and pushes us “more toward wondering about and imagining alternative possibilities” (Clandinin and Huber, in press, p. 14).

In fact, many scholars suggested that our lives are fundamentally “storied” (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; McAdams, 1993). This goes beyond the idea that each person carries a personal story or set of stories and touches the idea that we in fact narratively construct our very selves (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000 from Zembylas, 2003). Specifically, “identity can be understood as a story with narrative constructs typically found in stories such as themes, plots, and characters. These stories are important both as means through which individuals understand themselves as well as tools for taking action” (Zembylas, 2003, p. 215).

Clandinin and Huber (in press) believed that researchers can think narratively about a phenomenon by keeping temporality, sociality, and place in the forefront of their thinking (p. 6) and that this will provide researchers with a personal, practical, and social justification for using a narrative inquiry method (p. 8). They also noted the tendency of a narrative approach to maintain a sense of fluidity about a phenomenon. In thinking about identity then, as the
phenomenon under study, a narrative approach to research might remind us that identity is not static. Given the movement of teachers in this study from brick-and-mortar to virtual classrooms, capturing that change or development in identity seemed paramount.

Further, stories, both those of the participant and those of the researcher, are the lenses through which the reality of identity may be glimpsed. Clandinin and Huber (in press) provide a very hopeful view of social change via this perspective:

Through engaging with participants, narrative inquirers see themselves and participants as each retelling their own stories, and as coming to changed identities and practices through this inquiry process. Change also occurs as phenomena under study are understood in new ways and, in this way, new theoretical understandings emerge. In this midst, much possibility exists for social change, that is, for the creation of shifted social, cultural, institutional and linguistic narratives. (p. 17)

Finally, narratives are not necessarily verbal. Weber and Mitchell (1996) conducted a study of tensions in teacher identity as revealed in drawings from pre-service and in-service teachers in Montreal, thus illustrating another device for eliciting narratives revelatory of identity. While I did not use drawings (or dance, or poetry, or song) in collecting narratives, I do think this experimentation with different ways of telling one’s story reflects the credibility of gaining insight into people’s lives and experiences through narrative.

Ethical Issues and Trustworthiness

This study was designed to provide a safe and perhaps even enjoyable experience for the participants and to minimize any potential harm. The participants’ privacy and confidentiality were of primary concern. I changed the names of participants and avoided identifying the specific states in which they work, although I described the region. Transcripts were number coded with the key to the participants securely guarded. In terms of confidentiality during
interviewing, Skype is comparable to a telephone interview. It is less secure than meeting someone face to face (provided your meeting is not observed or photographed), but it is still relatively private and can enhance participants’ willingness to be candid (Cater, 2013). However, recent information regarding the collection of Internet and phone data by United States governmental organizations does bring up issues of ultimate privacy for any data collected over the Internet or using cellular technology. That aside, the recordings of the interviews, made on QuickTime, will eventually be stored on a flash drive kept in a locked safe in my office and erased from the hard drive of my laptop.

In addition to these steps for ensuring confidentiality, I also endeavored to create a safe and comfortable space for the interviewing process by accommodating the scheduling needs of participants and by reminding them that they were free to stop either the interview or their participation in general at any time. Further, Skype interviewing allowed me to observe some very basic body language, gestures, and facial movements to assess the comfort of participants. The very opportunity to discuss one’s experiences and thoughts for ninety minutes at a time is comfortable, and even gratifying, for many people. With acceptance, appreciation, and deep focus on my part, at least three of the participants experienced the positive emotions Lightfoot (2011) described around portraiture, as reflected in comments regarding their appreciation.

In addition, I was keenly aware that my initial steps in securing participants from virtual schools began with administrators. I was aware of the power issues at play when I connected to potential participants through a supervisor, and I worked to ensure that my final five participants were not only protected from any job-related repercussions but also felt comfortable when discussing their experiences and perceptions to respond honestly and completely.

Finally, in terms of participant safety and comfort, the writing component that I added prior to the third interview was very useful in exploring teachers’ experiences. My three decades
of work with teachers and as a teacher provided me with a good sense of whether specific written questions were reasonable—in terms of length, comfort, and interest—for participants. I was also flexible regarding whether teachers addressed these questions in writing or solely as part of the third interview. In addition, these particular participants were virtual school teachers for whom, at least at the time of the interview, writing constituted much of their job-based communication; this made writing a more practiced means of sharing information and ideas than it might have been for a member of the general public. I also included advanced information about this piece in the informed consent process (both in writing and verbally).

The trustworthiness of this study was supported in numerous ways, although it is important to note that because I collected a relatively small sample of qualitative data, the results are not generalizable. Rather, the value of this study may be found in its capacity to evoke scenarios, ideas, and possibilities though thick description that provide a sense of one aspect of the evolving phenomenon of virtual teaching. Additionally, given significant insight into how teaching happens for these participants, readers may be able “to decide whether similar processes” are “at work in their own settings and communities” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p.78). As Muchmore (2012) observed based on his review of fictional teachers while evoking Brunner (1996) and Cole & Knowles (2000), “Reading stories about other teachers, whether real or fictional, can serve as a powerful tool for self-reflection and identity-formation among preservice and in-service teachers” (p. 14). Specifically, then, to support trustworthiness I added credibility to the data through member checking at the start of the second and third interviews and later on as needed when continuing the analysis and while writing my findings in each case. I also used information from the district and school websites to resolve concerns during analysis of the data that required a level of triangulation. However, this was minimal, as in this data collection I was primarily concerned with teachers’ perceptions of their current relationships
with students as well as their memories of relationships with learners from their brick-and-mortar teaching years. However, a perusal of the virtual school websites also supplied necessary context for understanding at a basic level the participants’ virtual teaching environments.

In terms of reflexivity, because the researcher is the data collection instrument in a qualitative study, awareness of one’s beliefs and approaches with regard to the topic under study is critical. My experiences with distance communication to date include Skyping, emailing and personal messaging with loved ones overseas, enrolling in six MOOCs, hosting guest speakers in the college classes I teach, facilitating an online student teacher seminar each fall since 2013, and experimenting with distance supervision in the fall of 2014. These experiences indicate that the way I interact with others when separated by a screen changes from the face-to-face context, but these changes are subtle, and unpronounced. Setting that aside, as a rural resident for all but two years of my life, I found appealing the promise of bringing specific educational opportunities to geographically remote areas: classes in Russian or higher mathematics to students in schools with enrollments under 200, for instance. I am less intrigued by the idea of students completing all of high school virtually. However, bracketing these vague impressions and imaginings about the topic of virtual education was a priority as I moved into data collection and analysis. I kept a process journal of my thinking and observations as a potential source of information to reveal bias in my interpretations as well as my position within the online education domain. Records of potential bias in the selection of my focus on relationships as well as my protocol questions exist in prior doctoral coursework.

In summary, I used standard and proven strategies to maintain an ethical and trustworthy research environment that respected and protected the people who agreed to participate in my study, thus affording me thick description, direct quotations, and narratives to help establish credible conclusions.
CHAPTER 4
INTRODUCTION TO CASE STUDIES

In the following set of case studies, I present five distinctive educators with the goal of describing their backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences in both brick-and-mortar and virtual teaching. Although each case study follows the same structure of 1) an introduction to their educational practice as a whole 2) a discussion of relationships with students and 3) a discussion of professional identity, the style and approach to each participant’s engagement with the interview protocols is deliberately varied. In some cases, the participants’ words are left more intact than in others, and the three sections vary in length. The decision about how best to present each case reflected two key ideas. First, each of these teaching professionals is a unique individual, presenting a portrait of a single educational story, with the accompanying values, beliefs, and experiences. Second, the variations in presentation styles eventually became a deliberate effort to convey to readers the quite minor but potentially significant differences with which I, the researcher, interacted with and reflected on the virtual teacher embodying each case. For instance, in the many places where Aaron’s ideas were slightly more complex, I tended to use more direct data in the case study; conversely, I experienced Meg’s thinking as relatively easy to synthesize without feeling nuances would be omitted.

Meg

Professional Practice Overview

Not intending to teach, Meg initially pursued a career in scientific research, but explored teaching hoping the hours would provide more time with her small children. She quickly discovered she loved working with young people. She not only likes explaining material so students understand and do well on assessments; she also enjoys being “able to spark a deeper
interest in science.” In addition, she realized she could still have a “positive influence in the field by trying to get kids interested” in science.

After a few years of classroom teaching and tutoring in the South, high school science primarily, Meg moved to the Northeast and continued teaching science as well as some math at the middle school level before returning to secondary school students. Traveling between the North and the South for family reasons, Meg eventually discovered the possibility of teaching from either of her “home” states by joining a state-based virtual school that serves students throughout the world. This move was also precipitated by a disenchantment with increasing paperwork and what she views as unnecessary policies in the brick-and-mortar world. “It seemed to me,” she observed, “that the curriculum kept changing every couple of years”; thus, “a lot of my time was being spent documenting and assessing rather than teaching.” Although the days are longer—she must be available between 8 AM and 8 PM, but will work with students much later in the evening if that’s when they are available—she appreciates the flexibility and autonomy within those hours.

Meg is a student of her students. She was curious about the world as a youngster, and she is curious about her students and how to reach them. She values the information she gets from strong relationships with her learners because it provides clues for engaging them with the material, which both helps her act as a role model and helps them set achievable goals for growth. She has observed students carefully in the brick-and-mortar classroom, and she has paid close attention to them as virtual learners. More than any difficulties encountered due to not sharing a physical space, Meg cited the benefits of working with individual students without an
audience of their peers. This environment allows her focus to be on the student and the subject, with no distractions.

**Relationships with Students**

Meg spoke about her relationships with her students in both environments as opportunities for her to demonstrate care and to motivate students’ engagement with the subject and the work, and also as a strong source of satisfaction and gratification. Taking this last point first, while talking less about in-the-moment enjoyment, Meg laughed when recalling student excitement with particularly challenging hands-on problem-solving tasks in the brick-and-mortar classroom. She smiled when she related specific conversations with virtual students as part of the mandatory welcome call or discussion-based assessments (DBA, mandatory real-time conversations with students individually via phone, Skype, etc., to assess understanding) or during synchronous tutorial sessions. Usually Meg’s smiles occurred when quoting herself engaging in small talk with her virtual students, conversation resembling what one might hear in hallways in brick-and-mortar environments.

A primary way Meg demonstrates care toward her students is to help them on their journeys toward success, whether this is through providing guidance in structuring goals or through helping them master a particular concept or skill. In the brick-and-mortar environment she described feeling “very professionally and personally satisfied” when she saw “somebody that maybe had some self-doubts, or lower self-esteem, or just really didn’t have goals for themselves” learn “how to set … attainable goals.” She added, “I really, really enjoyed seeing them successful afterwards. For me, that’s the biggest reward a student can give me.” Similarly, she believes “teaching the kids, kind of subtly, how to set goals, and how to work towards them, and convincing them how satisfying it will be when they achieve them, and then seeing them do that, is the most rewarding” aspect of online teaching.
Meg also demonstrates care by her continual interest in students’ lives and her openness to their individuality and to their academic and personal challenges. Whether in a brick-and-mortar or virtual classroom, Meg wants to be part of her students’ academic lives. She relates to her students the way she remembers wanting her past teachers to relate to her, reaching out to virtual students when they have not made contact for a while, for instance, or trusting students even though they reveal only a minimal amount from their personal lives so she can understand how those factors might be impacting their academic work. Meg also avoids, to the extent possible, the “teachers’ room” in both the brick-and-mortar building and in the virtual school, partly because she struggles with colleagues whose descriptions of their students, she believes, do not respect those young people. She confided in me that “they talk about all the bad things and struggles that Johnny has had, and ‘Prepare yourself because you are going to wish you are retiring after you’ve had Johnny’ and all this other stuff; I don’t judge my students that way.”

Meg is concerned with student engagement. Much of her teaching experience has been with students who struggle academically. As a tutor she worked with students who “had just graduated high school, were going to be starting college” but “needed math tutoring.” As she moved through middle and high school teaching in brick-and-mortar schools before settling into first one and then a second virtual high school, Meg’s interest in students with academic challenges became a major theme in her career and in her personal experience. Although not prompted, Meg reflected on her own years as a student. “When I was a teenager,” she said, “I was probably one of those challenging people. I questioned everything, and to tell me the sky is blue was not good enough. I had to go see if the sky was blue, and then I would want you to explain to me why IS the sky blue, and a lot of teachers didn’t take kindly to that. It wasn’t at all a thing of being disrespectful. It was just the way I took in information.”
In both settings, Meg described her relationships with students as facilitating her efforts to motivate them to reach a goal or to connect with the subject. In the discussion-based assessments (DBAs), a primary means her organization has created to establish a teacher-student relationship, Meg makes an extra effort to identify areas of each student’s interest in the pre-designed learning modules. She encourages students to talk about those segments that excite them and works to remember what they’ve told her for later conversations. In the brick-and-mortar setting she provided opportunities for students to indicate what they’d like to learn more about. In addition, Meg both built relationships with students and increased their engagement in content through using manipulatives during problem-solving challenges, which she calls “critical thinking activities.”

An additional facet of Meg’s relationships with students that bears mention is the type of feedback students provide both at the end of a course and much later in their lives. Meg depends on her relationships with students to improve her teaching. She is open to and seeks, if not relishes, student feedback. She has them write “a little letter” at the end of the year to share what she “did really well” and what she “could improve on” or even “something that we covered that they never really understood.” She always shares with them her sense that they “are like my clients and I want to make sure they feel they got what they needed to out of my class.” When students know and trust her, it seems more likely that she will get the information she desires.

Meg talked animatedly about students who make it a point to reconnect later in their lives and who offer thanks for helping them get started down a particular road or helping them overcome an academic hurdle, such as a tough math class. She says, “To spark that interest, to really have people achieve their potential, to me is very gratifying.” In this sense, the value Meg places on her students’ achievements eclipses the daily enjoyment of simply being with students. Specifically, she stated, “I enjoy teaching wholeheartedly. I enjoy every moment that I am
teaching, be it virtually, be it brick-and-mortar. I enjoy sharing my knowledge with other people. I enjoy, I really enjoy, when these people who think they couldn’t do what I’m teaching them can do it. It really is irrelevant to me whether I’m doing it face to face or virtually, with respect to the amount that I enjoy it. I love it! I mean, I teach college, I teach virtually, I teach adult ed; wherever there is an opportunity for me to teach, it’s really hard for me to say no because I really, really like it.”

Regarding her move into the virtual environment, Meg observed it “allowed” her to “focus” her “efforts on providing my students the individual attention and guidance they needed to thoroughly learn the subject.” She described her relationships with virtual students as “a lot more meaningful and effective than [those] at the brick-and-mortar,” going on to say that “there's a certain level of safety that our students feel on the Internet. They are very comfortable with talking to you either via text, email, or chat.” She believes they therefore stay in closer contact than brick-and-mortar students and more easily ask “for help using one of those modalities rather than raise their hand in a classroom full of peers.”

Despite several similarities in Meg’s sense of relationships with students across the two environments, her comments revealed four key differences. First, she repeatedly described the richness or depth of the relationships she could develop with students when working with them one-to-one, which she found increasingly difficult in the brick-and-mortar classroom but mandatory in her current virtual position. In her current teaching role, DBAs are required of all of her virtual students. She also engages in individual tutoring as well as group sessions held in her virtual classroom, none of which are specifically required but which she finds effective in helping students master course material. As a brick-and-mortar teacher she shared an increasing sense of time constraints as well as strengthening norms discouraging teachers from connecting with students outside of the classroom and the assigned class times.
Second, she asserted there is more productivity in her virtual relationships with students in terms of motivation as well as in understanding their confusions and misunderstandings. While she attributed part of this productivity to having students’ full attention when she interacts with them, she also noted that students were less likely to resist developing a trusting relationship in the absence of a peer audience. In fact, Meg was adamant in describing her relationships with virtual students as far more productive than those she experienced with brick-and-mortar students.

Third, Meg expressed appreciation for the partnering she could achieve with parents to strengthen her connection with students. While she also made comments about wanting to have a strong connection with brick-and-mortar parents, and, in fact, implemented a “call home with good news” practice during her later years, she also noted, “in the brick-and-mortar [classroom] I can honestly tell you there were some parents that I never even talked to.” Her virtual students, in contrast, have thanked her for communicating with their parents so they “kind of back off ... a little bit” from nagging them about their virtual work, as they become more “responsible.” Meg indicated parents can be effective intermediaries as she builds relationships with her students.

Fourth, the relationships Meg develops with virtual students provide more satisfaction. She talked about removing the stress of facing a crowd, and of removing the peer audience, thus allowing students to be more open with her without fear of ridicule from classmates. She also observed that without an overload of additional responsibilities, she can focus primarily on her work with students, stating, “In a virtual setting when I’m at work my students have access to me all the time, so it’s much more fulfilling because I’m working with my students almost all the time.”

In most relationship areas, Meg stressed the richness of her contacts with virtual students. She did not admit to enjoying her time with them more, but she did repeat how amazed she was
to realize that working with students virtually could be so satisfying. She believes in reaching students “where they are,” and right now she thinks many students are living online because they are comfortable there, and the norms around connecting online feel more open to her. Meg can have conversations with students late at night, send emails first thing in the morning, and easily include parents in the learning relationship. She noted teaching experiences in virtual schools can differ significantly depending on the policies of the school. Context matters in terms of the nature and frequency of contact with students, dramatically impacting relationships. Meg observed without her current virtual teaching experience her “responses [to the interview questions] would have been different.”

Meg clearly prizes relationships with students, and whether in the virtual or brick-and-mortar classroom, she is focused on helping students set and reach goals as well as on fostering self-confidence, and nurturing a love of science. Meg’s personal background enables her to be empathetic toward students who struggle. When the situation merits, she will share a general sense of the rough times in her youth and how easy it would have been to give up rather than to keep trying. Setting goals with students is perhaps her ultimate expression of care. She tells them, “You have the choice also. You can do with your life and you can be whoever it is you want to be ...you are in charge of your own destiny,” adding, “I think they need to know that.” Significantly, she mentioned goals multiple times, 25 in the virtual interview and 7 times in the brick-and-mortar interview.

**Professional Identity**

Meg described who she is as a teacher partly through sharing a series of strong belief statements. First, she believes she can make a difference in students’ lives and feels deep frustration when she does not connect with young people, choosing to ponder what else she could have done rather than blaming their personal lives or social challenges.
Second, she considers herself consistent and dependable, saying, “I think they know I’m genuinely interested in helping them go from point A to point B ... and ... they need that reassurance of somebody that’s always going to be there, that the expectations are going to be pretty similar.” Complementing this is her hope that she’s approachable; no matter the setting, her efforts are so students feel comfortable asking her questions and for help.

Third, Meg believes in accountability, stating students need that role model for ethical behavior. Within this willingness to “hold the line,” she also expressed tremendous empathy for young people, saying, “I really think a lot of teenagers are misread” and that “people forget that they really are very young people in very big bodies.” She also noted it’s a “really pivotal time in their life” and “very sadly in today’s society,” many “don’t really have a positive role model that’s going to help them set goals” and “hold them accountable for what they do and what they don’t do.” She said this is “probably” one of her “strong suits.”

Meg views herself not only as “thoroughly” versed in her content area and “well read on new and cutting edge research” but also as a creative problem solver: “I’ve always, for lack of a better word, prided myself on, the ability to come up with a simple and practical lab or experiment that students can do so they can visualize or experience the concept I’m trying to teach them.” She believes in project-based learning and in hands-on activities, and seeks ways to incorporate these into her teaching, no matter the setting.

Meg values relationships, sharing, “I never want to lose that contact.” In fact, her responses to various questions portrayed her as a professional teacher who has put more of her energy into her work with students and less into some of the other distractions that occur in a typical high school, such as non-student-based paperwork and school politics. Her stories indicate she uses knowledge of individual students to help them stay invested, to show care, and to maintain a working relationship around meeting the expectations of the course.
Meg also shared that she “would like to think that in the brick-and-mortar and in the virtual classroom I am the same person.” She described that teacher as knowledgeable about the content, “well read on new and cutting-edge research,” and approachable. She considers the difference between the two environments thus: “In the virtual setting it’s easier to approach me because you can email me, you can text me, you can Skype me, you can call me, you can send me a tweet, you can Facebook me, there’s so many different modalities, different ways that you can get a hold of me that it makes it a lot easier.” Her sense is that while all of her students would “feel very comfortable asking me questions” her virtual students will find it “easier to approach me and consequently more students will approach me.”

Meg truly puts a premium on providing her full focus on the individual student and pointed out that even if you are the type of person who works until it’s time to “basically go home to shower, eat, and go to bed,” the availability to virtual students is “much more fulfilling because I’m working with my students almost all the time and responsiveness in the virtual world means being available A LOT.” She tells her virtual students, “If you have a question you get that message out to me as quickly as possible before you forget what that question is, and also so I can respond to that question as quickly as possible.” She is not only more available in terms of time, however, but also in her ability to avoid “drama.” For example, although a virtual “teachers’ room” is provided by her organization for informal connecting, Meg chooses not to participate, and her virtual peers do not comment on her absence. Brick-and-mortar teachers’ rooms were not comfortable places for Meg, as she felt both she and students were unsupported.

This approachability contributes to Meg seeing herself as closer to her ideal of a teacher in the virtual classroom – that is, someone who can focus on students and help them succeed, doing whatever it takes really, even if that means losing some sleep, but simultaneously not needing to spend time with administrative or other politics, nor to collegial pettiness.
Specifically, given that Meg identifies as a teacher who is effective with challenging students and whose sense of gratification is dependent on student success, Meg expressed a definite belief that she is more productive in a virtual setting, at least with her current school. Furthermore, all of the relationship-based factors that Meg finds appealing in her virtual teaching position seem closely connected to her professional identity. The beliefs and values she described as most important—such as responsiveness to individual student needs, availability, and strong communication—she feels are currently best met in a virtual environment. Meg may consider herself more successful in the virtual world partly because she sees herself as more autonomous in working with students and better supported, at least in her current organization, in instructional decision-making.

This extensive focus on students means she is able to provide students with the opportunity “to discuss and to process what they are learning, and apply what they’re learning to their lives.” She feels this piece was missing in her brick-and-mortar practice so “that’s why it’s hard... to tell whether or not the kids [were] learning” there. In the virtual world, Meg remains dedicated to her students and the type of learning experiences she believes they need. As in the brick-and-mortar classroom, she tries to provide projects and student-at-home demonstrations that can be done with materials found under the sink or in the garage. She noted, however, that all of this takes time, but she is willing to go the extra steps. “My life would be a lot easier,” she said, chuckling, “and my schedule would be a lot less demanding probably if I just followed the basic protocols of what [is] required.”

It is unclear, however, how Meg is teaching to the whole student in the virtual setting. As a brick-and-mortar teacher she valued modeling life skills for her students. For example, she eagerly related a story of the time she kept her composure as a new teacher when she inadvertently used a permanent marker on a white board; she quickly had a student obtain
isopropyl alcohol from the room next door to clean it off. Students told her later it was a “life lesson” in staying calm and in showing a priority of people over materials and of using science to problem-solve. While still demonstrating qualities of care, curiosity, and humility to her virtual students, one wonders whether her “life lessons” have taken on a smaller role in her current teaching.

Laura

Professional Practice Overview

Laura, an English Language Arts teacher based in the South, enjoyed a literature-rich upbringing in a large family, where her mother, an artist, “read to us all the time from many different cultures and many different types of books.” Despite continuous moving, having and raising children of her own, and changing colleges several times, Laura eventually made her way to a teaching position. This was preceded by preschool and special education work, and was followed by earning teaching licenses in four states. Her greatest influences include her student teaching mentor, who she believes did not actually like teaching but “did a good job and was the one who really taught me about [the importance of] structure in the classroom... having things set, having a routine, knowing what you are going to do before you do it instead of just flying by the seat of your pants.” Importantly, Laura says of this teacher, “She was a planner.” Laura also credits working with challenging students and classes with improving her skills as a teacher “because you have to know how to break everything down and you also have to have very good class management skills.” Virtual influences are so far restricted to the required professional development at the start of her virtual teaching and coaching from another virtual teacher, who resides in a different state, but holds the role of “content coach” for her virtual school’s management organization.
Laura’s memories of brick-and-mortar teaching depict an intensity that was increased by factors outside of her control. In one state, for instance, she remembers that teachers were carefully monitored for a year before earning an “actual teaching certificate.” In addition to working closely with her mentor, she had “a lot of meetings” and was both “recorded … and observed a lot.” She recalled feeling stressed by this process as well as by having her husband at war and her children in college. Asked to relate a particular incident that stands out for her from her brick-and-mortar teaching, she quickly described a very strained stretch of confusion and uncertainty beginning on the morning of 11 September 2001. She was teaching on a military base, “so the whole school, the whole post, was on lockdown... and parents were frantic trying to get their kids. They couldn’t get to the school. The soldiers were all on high alert. That was a really terrifying day.” In the month that followed, her commute increased from twenty minutes to four hours as each car coming onto the base was carefully screened. Also, her students were tense “because almost all the kids had a parent that was deployed.”

Whatever the conditions, Laura values “doing the job well” and described effective teaching as having students experience success. She wants to “make a difference in their lives and to help [students] believe they could reach potential they probably never believed they had within themselves.” Laura spent some time describing an Advanced Placement (AP) Language and Composition course she built from at her last brick-and-mortar placement. She took the assignment because “nobody wanted to teach it” believing “these kids can’t write,” and over five years Laura increased enrollment from a small group of 14 students to three sections of 25. Better still, after two years she “had about half of the students getting [scores of] threes or higher” in a school where “most of the AP kids who took classes got a one” on the final national exam. This sort of success combined with her strong work ethic helped build Laura’s professional reputation, which she values both for her career and for her ability to help students.
She noted, “With the administrators too, they knew if I went to bat for a kid they could trust what I said because I didn’t do it very often.”

Laura moved into virtual teaching in two stages: first as a full-time brick-and-mortar and part-time virtual teacher, and then the next year as a full-time virtual teacher, after taking “a leap of faith that a door would open full-time.” She currently works for one company with several states as clients. The students learn asynchronously, and they have a variety of state-specific rules in terms of deadlines for completing student work and in the structures around full-time, blended, credit recovery, and acceleration for gifted students. Throughout the transition to virtual teaching, Laura made “being real” for kids a priority. She avoids seeming “like a robot” by personalizing her webpage and taking satisfaction in modifying assignments to meet the needs of her online students.

With all of her teaching licenses expiring in about three years, Laura is not prepared to reenter a brick-and-mortar classroom. She sees herself teaching less than full-time at the end of this three-year period, and perhaps doing something different, such as working at the junior college level. Her current job includes a percentage of time coaching other virtual teachers, which she finds rewarding; therefore, another possibility is that her continued virtual work until retirement will consist of “less and less teaching” and more working with peers.

**Relationships with Students**

Laura’s relationships with students in both brick-and-mortar and virtual schools are marked by her strong sense of caring, which can be described as professional, achievement-oriented, and sensitive in terms of her capacity for identifying and addressing student needs. She said, “I think connecting with my students is one of the things that I wanted to do the most... you know, have a personal relationship with them.” She is aware the actual closeness of her relationships with students is based more in “caring about them as a person” than in exchanging
personal information or in sharing enjoyable non-academic moments. Laura did not encourage or experience students talking about “boyfriend” issues or parties; nor did she mention specific fun times in either the brick-and-mortar or virtual environment. Rather, she explained, “They come to me usually for help writing a scholarship essay or academic things.” While she clarified that some students “were on a more personal level,” she also noted she “kept a very fine boundary there that they knew about.” Students, at least in the brick-and-mortar setting, trusted Laura’s professional care. In thinking about comments from former students she stated, “They usually tell me I provided more support and care for them than they had experienced in the past, that they really felt like I cared about what happened to them beyond the classroom ... what kind of skills they were going to take out of the classroom.”

Part of her sense of care may have stemmed from Laura’s sustained and creative focus on academics. She shared several stories of keeping content and skills relevant as well as attainable. She wanted students to realize “they’re making judgments every day all along the way, like what app they like. Why did they like it? Why didn’t they? They’re analyzing all the time,” but not thinking of it as a skill. Similarly, she wanted to help them realize their use of “persuasion” skills in typical experiences such as convincing “your parents to give you their car.” Valuing differentiation, particularly for tasks that were once handled through rote learning, Laura sees herself as more “creative because I had to find a way to [help all students] learn the same skill.” She is always willing to meet students halfway, including offering AP testing prep on each Saturday the month before the national test, and offering various “work reminders” in either environment. In the virtual setting she may keep non-communicative students from moving forward until she hears from them, and she’s willing to use humor to engage them; “They appreciate something stupid,” she said. Her enthusiasm for teaching shone, however, when she talked about student engagement. “It’s exciting when a student is excited about learning,” she
exclaimed. Likewise, Laura cited student success, including “watching their growth in writing” as well as getting good scores on AP exams, as the most satisfying aspects of her relationships with learners in both environments.

Laura’s caring is also evident in the ways she has worked to remove obstacles from student achievement. In the brick-and-mortar setting she arrived at school two hours early and opened her room, with its five computers obtained from the library, to students whose computer access was limited. In addition, her brick-and-mortar students demonstrated a willingness to share information with her about missing assignments such as “I was at the emergency room with my mom all night.” While they would not discuss “the fight they had with their parent or their boyfriend,” they shared enough details to allow her “to be flexible… in terms of getting an assignment in.” This mutual trust was also seen in her advocacy for a pregnant student who confided in her, asking for support in finishing the course so she could graduate. Through technology, doing “two or three weeks of work at home via the computer,” the student succeeded. In the virtual setting, Laura noted, “If a student has circumstances that might impact their success, I can modify the requirements to ensure the student is able to learn the material, but maybe show… their mastery in another way.” She gave an example of expanding the required work product of a PowerPoint slide show to using “a Prezi, an online video program, or their phone” instead. By allowing or making these adjustments, Laura sees herself becoming “the buffer or lifeline to the student in ensuring their success.”

Laura was one of the participants to discuss the challenges of locating appropriate and reliable technology for virtual students. While easily describing multiple advantages to virtual coursework, when asked about questions I might have omitted, she immediately noted the problem of virtual students relying on technology at libraries and other public places to complete
their assignments. She not only seemed to understand this dilemma with much empathy, she also sought solutions through free online software, among other things.

Laura’s continued demonstration of care typically resulted in the trust that she also fosters by supporting her students with administrators. She described one incident where she agreed to stay after school with a tardy student rather than having him get detention points. She lamented, however, the “tough kids, who are just resigned to going through the motions until they can legally quit school,” noting this occurs “in both environments,” making it “hard to establish trust, or really any kind of relationship with ... them.”

Finally, although students’ perceptions of her were included in her evaluations as a brick-and-mortar teacher in one state, thus putting an external, career-based value on her relationships with learners, she persisted in believing less in catering to students’ desires and more in meeting their needs, saying, “If students truly believed you cared about them and their education, they would pretty much do anything for you.”

While Laura continues to value a caring relationship in the virtual environment and finds ways to demonstrate care such as creating a welcoming home page and incorporating humor and a sense of her own personality into her messages to students, she described several differences in elements of her relationships with her virtual learners. To start, establishing that caring, trust-based relationship, or at a minimum impressing on virtual students her sense of care for them, seems more challenging to Laura, at least in the virtual environment in which she currently works. She described a sense that it takes longer for students to feel trust in the relationship, perhaps in part because they do not see you daily, they do not “see you looking at them and [know] that you care,” they do not “see empathy on your face or concern. That’s a little harder to convey ... in an email.” Also, in the brick-and-mortar classroom Laura built on knowledge of her students’ activities to informally check-in with them, periodically asking, “Well, how did it
go, did you do well, are you happy with your performance?” She understood the value of “that
day-to-day interaction as they’re coming into the classroom,” believing this routine makes it
“much easier to build an intimate relationship without really forcing yourself into a student’s
life.”

That said, she works to know her virtual students through their personal writing “either
on their discussion boards” or through “a narrative” or a persuasive essay they have to write
“about a topic they’re interested in.” Using information gathered from these writing tasks, Laura
says she is able to have a sense of her students as individuals and to respond personally to their
inquiries around learning particular skills by using relevant examples and making connections to
their future goals. Still, she noted, much of the relationship building in the virtual classroom is in
the hands of the students. Laura illustrated the potential for close relationships in describing two
specific virtual students who made the most of the opportunity to connect with her: the creative
writer who wanted to strengthen her academic writing skills and the competitive dancer who
“would email all the time what she was doing. ‘I performed here, here’s a picture of me in my
costume, I know I didn’t read Hamlet, I’m sorry, I’m traveling today’.” In each case the student
reached out and defined the level of personal engagement. The writer’s more personal comments
came well after she completed courses with Laura, had enrolled in college, and realized how
useful academic writing was to her success. “Whereas,” Laura stated, “the dancer wanted to
bring me into her world. But it was totally her choice because I would never say ‘Where did you
perform, what are you doing?’”

Laura did, however, describe more “pushing into” students’ lives in terms of maintaining
the basic tools for connecting. That is, she has encountered issues of deceit, not just in the realm
of plagiarizing work but also in the seemingly minor detail of providing a false phone number
when registering for school. Laura mentioned getting accurate phone numbers could be a
challenge in the brick-and-mortar classroom as well, but regular face-to-face contact may lessen the necessity for those specific contact details.

Finally, Laura noted two structural areas that impact her ability to know and to respond effectively to students. First, she expressed a preference for using a synchronous platform. “I would just like to have four or five of them see me at a time and say, ‘Hey, I need to talk to you for a minute. You three people need to come in to me,’ and that’s almost impossible because they’re taking online schooling for a reason, because they have a weird schedule.” Second, she talked about having “more videos embedded in my courses where I would be talking to them about the unit” prior to starting it. Laura sees potential in being “more involved in their learning experience online instead of just having it be the modules.” Because she cannot control which stories and content are used in the curriculum, her videos require updating each year, creating a time problem. She “can frontload some of it in the summer,” but much of the supplementary materials are a reaction to students’ errors and misunderstandings. Laura described her desired level of responsiveness to her actual virtual students as more likely to impact the teaching and learning relationship.

**Professional Identity**

In five distinct areas, Laura’s beliefs about her teaching and herself as a teacher hold true in both teaching environments. First, Laura maintains empathy for the student experience, beginning with making her space warm and welcoming and varied. She values her students’ perceptions, realizing such things as it’s tedious for them “seeing everything the same all the time.” She added that “in a virtual classroom it is especially important for them to see that you care what they’re looking at is not boring.” In thinking about how students experience her routines, Laura relies on consistency and follow through; that is, doing what she says she’s going to do and meeting deadlines, as well as offering support outside of class, including intervening
on behalf of students with administrators to build trust and student confidence in her professionalism. Similarly, in creating a positive learning experience for students, Laura states, “You do have to have showmanship ... if you want your students to be engaged in what you’re doing.” In her brick-and-mortar classrooms as well as in virtual videos she “would be very animated and do silly things” or “use humor to keep them engaged” or “act something out,” despite such antics going “against the grain” because she describes herself as “an introvert at heart.” She wishes to avoid becoming one of those “critical teachers that never told you anything positive ... and never smiled” while seeming to hate their job and ignoring students, so Laura is willing to push herself to create a positive learning experience for students. This held true in her virtual classroom, where in lieu of greeting students “when they come in,” she strives to create an “interactive and exciting” classroom by perhaps making “a funny announcement” or asking students to “go online and find five things you wish I would be as a teacher.” Through these means, Laura expressed hope that “her compassion and concern for their success still carried over.”

Second, at the same time that Laura values students’ perceptions of her classes, partly because of her belief students often can do more than they think they can, she described herself as tough but caring. She is committed to recognizing and developing students’ learning processes. She consistently sets high expectations for learners. She said students might say about her “You were a really difficult teacher in terms of what you expected. I worked harder in your class than I’ve ever worked in any class ... I didn’t believe I could do it, but I did it.” Laura prioritizes assisting her students in “building confidence” in the face of difficulty and struggle. Again, she is dedicated to differentiating, and for both environments she stated, “My goal is for them to learn the skill, not necessarily to demonstrate it in the way the curriculum dictates they do.” She credits experiences with her own teachers and “the military influence” for her
realization that “kids do better if you scaffold skills” rather than pulling ideas from the internet, as she’s seen student teachers do, without consideration for “How does it fit into the skill we’re trying to teach? How does it build [toward] where we’re trying to take our kids?” She explained she “spent a lot of time really thinking about the process and the order in which I delivered my material” in the brick-and-mortar classroom, and while she works with a predetermined curriculum in her virtual teaching, she spoke of paying attention to ways she can increase accessibility for students.

Third, Laura expressed strong satisfaction in creating new programming for successful learning. One means of adding access to materials and skills for a wide variety of students is through specific programming with high standards, such as her highly successful AP Language and Composition classes in the brick-and-mortar setting. Laura described this as “probably one of the most rewarding things” she’d ever done because she was “given carte blanche” by administration for the program. She also spoke extensively and with satisfaction about a system she designed for teaching vocabulary that helped rote learning become more engaging and meaningful. This push toward relevance may be assisted in either setting by Laura’s belief that her content is critical. She stated, “Writing is in everything. It’s one of those things you have to know how to do.” She helps students see connections to their lives by pointing out the “need to know how to write a complete sentence so when you fill out a job application you spell things right, and you know how to use subject–verb agreement.” Wherever she’s teaching, Laura spoke of language content and skills as essential, and her interest in creating engaging, relevant programming and tasks for student growth in this area is significant.

Fourth, Laura expressed self-confidence in her teaching expertise despite fallible evaluation systems. She spoke with confidence about her abilities to work productively with students, but was critical of brick-and-mortar teaching evaluation systems. She sometimes felt as
though she was going through a mental checklist of what administrators wanted to see, and “their idea and my usual delivery didn’t always agree, so I felt like I had to program myself to their delivery style in order to get a good evaluation.” She also disliked “selling” the value of a series of state tests to her students, despite not believing they effectively measured learning. In both environments, Laura seemed to see herself as someone whose work is assessed based on factors that are not at the core of what she does, stating, it’s comparable “because what they’re looking at is the physicality and the technicality of what’s in your room ... they have no idea how you interact with the students on a day to day [basis].” She appreciated the flexibility with which the checklist for her virtual classroom was applied and received a commendation for creating a unique site, followed by being asked to conduct a professional development opportunity for other virtual teachers. However, she clearly disagreed with her current virtual organization’s assessment protocol, asserting that “whether or not you are engaged with the students” is more important than, for example, fretting about avoiding “copyright infringement” when using unapproved content rather than the company-provided course materials.

Fifth and finally, Laura talked about her enjoyment in fulfilling various roles while teaching. Although she spent more time addressing how students learn and demonstrate their learning than on any other aspect of her relationship with learners, she readily described taking on several teaching roles regardless of environment. She observed, “You wear so many hats as a teacher. I mean you’re a mother. You’re a cheerleader. You’re a disciplinarian.” While not discussing these roles separately in the virtual environment, Laura described her actions within some of the roles in the brick-and-mortar classroom. As taskmaster she was careful to keep “an agenda always on the board” for the whole week, and students would enter the room saying, “Oh … you’re killing us. You’re killing us.” To which she would reply, “I know, but I’m doing it because I love you.” Later, wearing her “mom” hat, she would be sure to check in with students
who might look as though they’re faltering; her knowledge of students helped because she “knew most of my students pretty well” in terms of classroom behavior from paying “attention to what they were doing.” As a cheerleader Laura helped students slow down when they seemed “overwhelmed,” and she also helped them create study plans and offered optimistic encouragement. Laura was particularly enthusiastic around AP exams, making “a little bag of candy for each of them” that included “peppermints ... or little happy things.” Finally, as disciplinarian, Laura used her presence in their physical space to help keep students focused and engaged. She also relied on humor, believing “if you get in a conflict with a kid you’re going to lose every time. You have to find a way around it, that doesn’t put them on the spot.”

It was unclear how these roles look in Laura’s virtual classroom; although she uses humor as an engagement tool, and a collaborative approach to issues of plagiarism, her largest discipline “problem.” She added that she feels she “may be more a mentor because ... if high school students cannot be successful in an online course they’re going to struggle in college because so many courses are online.” However, metaphorically, she imagined moving from being “a watering pot for a little seed” to being “the keyboard ... or the voice in the sky, in the ... virtual cloud.” No matter the role, Laura spoke of feeling satisfied when students are successful in completing courses, doing well on AP tests and in classes, and in experiencing growth in writing skills. She shared a consistent hope that she “could make a difference” in students’ futures and “could give them a skill they could take with them that would help them somehow in their life.”

While Laura’s experiences of the enactment of her professional goals and beliefs may have changed as a virtual teacher, she would likely insist that her teaching core remains intact. She still wishes to approach her students with care and compassion while not being seen as a “robot.” She still works proactively and diligently to help students succeed in her courses. With
the exception of a few learners who have reached out to her, however, her definition of success for most students may now center more on students passing courses because “a high failure rate ... will pretty much end your career online.” She also asserted the asynchronous nature of her interactions with students makes virtual teaching “very different than being in a classroom.” For example, assignment feedback, and suggestions and links she sends students “to get extra help” when she is not online, comprise the majority of their communications. Despite the availability of digitally connecting “face-to-face,” Laura observed that most of her students “would rather instant message or text you.”

Similarly, Laura’s sense of her competency as a teacher remains solid, although she acknowledged experiencing stress when using technology to make the most of her virtual teaching capacities. She noted she’s added more “practice” when “trying something new,” and she also mentioned missing brick-and-mortar students, who could help her master specific digital programs. Her tendency toward introversion is taxed because “it’s a very big stretch for me to do all this videoconferencing and record myself.” She added, “I’ve never been into appearances very much. I’ve been more into relationships and intellect.” She also shared a sense that virtual teacher evaluation is less onerous and not “as much of an infringement on me as a professional.” She particularly appreciates “not having to cite standards” and other “fluff that really interferes with teaching.”

Although not designing full curricula for her virtual classes, Laura described opportunities for creating supplementary videos and of devising her own process for moving students through the final stages of course completion. This often involves flexibility with deadlines, negotiating with both students and other educators in their lives, and closely partnering with parents—something she feels “probably was what helped more than anything.” She felt positive about these initiatives where she was also able to “go to bat for kids” by looking
for evidence of skills versus routinely scoring the completion of each little assignment without thought of relative value.

**Ken**

**Professional Practice Overview**

Despite his strong early interest in teaching, Ken did not go to college directly after high school, although he eventually completed his certification program in less than four years as a commuting student. His achievement in English courses combined with his pragmatic reasoning that high schools typically employ more English teachers than other subjects clinched his decision regarding which subject to teach. As a first-generation college graduate, Ken felt comfortable and satisfied working with career tech students for most of his brick-and-mortar years, as well as with credit recovery in the virtual world.

Ken clearly values experience, noting that 70% of what makes him an effective teacher comes from “learning from my mistakes, trying things and realizing when things weren’t working and being able to formulate better adjusted approaches.” His anecdotes indicated he learns deeply from doing. For example, as a first-year teacher he found himself in mid-March with eight or nine weeks of school left after he had “literally raced students through the textbook,” thus prompting his “first taste of developing my own curriculum.” He created “really excellent project ideas and units that became a part of my teaching until this very day,” while becoming “better at pacing my lessons.”

As he closely observed his emerging teaching efforts, Ken worked to improve on some of his past teachers’ models of practice. For example, he upgraded vocabulary work from a “memorization” activity to work dependent on meaning, primarily determined from images, scenarios, and conversation. Similarly, he began his teaching career using the lesson flow from his student teaching mentor’s pattern of quiz for accountability, small group work on text
questions, whole group discussion, and “move on to next story.” By the time he left brick-and-mortar teaching, he’d evolved to a more unit-driven, workshop-based model, where students pursued individual goals within the curriculum and practiced personal skills, which appealed to most students’ need for variety.

Ken’s self-awareness led him to enthusiastically seek help after realizing “these kids were just sort of running me over” in terms of paying attention to instruction. In his efforts to improve, he “read all the classroom management books and got mentors” finding “some of the best disciplinarians in my building.” He thus improved his classroom stance from being a bit “intimidated” to having “a strong leadership presence.” Ken engaged and managed students even more effectively after integrating principles of salesmanship into his teaching. Specifically, his approach in the brick-and-mortar classroom eventually took a strong turn toward “customer service.” In his ninth year of teaching, prompted by techniques he was learning in network marketing (direct customer sales), he made changes in his classroom. “I was thinking about all these sales techniques,” including asking prospects “questions to get them to realize they want your product instead of telling them.” So he empathized with student reluctance around particular tasks while simultaneously helping them make personal connections to the work. He framed reading Shakespeare as a means of getting a diploma leading to a career, and connected school habits with traits of employability, writing recommendations that might include the assessment that, for example, “even when Billy didn’t like Shakespeare, he always got his book out and approached his assignments and followed directions.” With these strategies, Ken was able to effectively encourage and motivate the most disinclined learners.

Ken eventually left brick-and-mortar teaching for parenting. While home with his small children, as a contracted virtual teacher (part-time; timecard-dependent; pay based on student enrollment, no benefits), he was offered a fulltime position. He preferred working from home, as
it effectively supported his parenting; still, he lamented “it was hard to leave” brick-and-mortar. “My heart was not in leaving at all.” Ken evolved into a virtual teacher from “very much a face-to-face, being-in-a-classroom person,” who also admitted to being “kind of curious” about virtual teaching. He concedes he was largely unprepared for the transition, having experienced just a couple of trainings online, so “envisioning myself as a virtual teacher” was “a gradual process” over two years as he “discovered the usefulness” of his job. From feeling at first that he was “just a paid grader,” Ken has gained appreciation for creating resources and has learned he can have impact through feedback to students and by sharing screencasts. He is currently both teaching students and training other virtual teachers, which he enjoys. However, 95% of his enrollments are in a “credit recovery class, which means they come and go, work at their own pace; all the content is preloaded, but it’s not loaded in a way that the students can always succeed.” Ken said his efforts to help students understand, using asynchronous teaching methods, can be vital to their success. This success may be a low bar, with “a lot of students grading out with a D,” but he realizes “first and foremost they’re trying to ... graduate.” Through coaching and substituting for other teachers, Ken has also seen virtual AP classes and homeschooled students who want the A, students who “aren’t just focused on getting enough to pass and get out.”

Ken shared his confidence and enjoyment as a brick-and-mortar teacher. He expressed a strong belief in working with kids and in being “part of that mission we had in our community to groom the future workers.” Specifically, he explained, “I left brick-and-mortar not feeling like I had gone as far as I could go.” He reflected further and said that “those last couple years I was really starting to hit my stride” and “was excited” and still “making mistakes” and still wanting “to improve some more.” He compared himself to “athletes that ... come out of retirement ... because they didn’t get their championship.” Ken concluded his growth in brick-and-mortar was incomplete, saying, “I just don’t feel I’m done yet. It was real hard for me to leave.”
Despite the sense his brick-and-mortar work is unfinished, Ken wholeheartedly accepts his online roles. He talked about enjoying coaching and said he is realistic in his expectations of credit recovery students. Ken actually values their effort to simply graduate because he has a family member who, although very successful, has missed opportunities due to no high school diploma. Especially in these instances, he’d like to see blended learning opportunities; “credit recovery students could really benefit” from a model “where they go in and work at their own pace” and also “have a teacher in a learning or computer lab, even twice a month, and do office hours in person,” rather than the current unattended virtual office hours. Ken commented, “I really believe students are programmed to respond to a real human differently than a computer.” He added, “they’re on computers all day ... but a living, breathing, smiling, pointing, gesturing human being in your close physical proximity is something people are getting more and more removed from.”

**Relationships with Students**

Ken’s comments and stories characterized his relationships with students in five deeply connected areas. First, and partly from his salesmanship work described above, Ken began relying on devices of acknowledging and validating students’ thoughts and feelings, asking genuine questions, agreeing with the responses, and building on those answers to help each student see the value of his “product.” He spoke of “finding out their needs” and then connecting “what you have” to those needs. “Through asking the right questions,” he continued, “they see it for themselves.” He described his reliance on incorporating the student perspective as “a paradigm shift” that also kept him thinking positively about kids while using the “sales” point of view to bring them to the content and skills he believes are most critical for their future success. Ken was keenly reflective on the ease with which a teacher can become biased toward brick-and-mortar students who, for whatever reason, become “a pain in the neck,” asserting that teachers
lose effectiveness when worrying about “seventh period” or briefly thinking, “Oh, I’m so glad he’s absent today.” Because he feels those emotions are both “not right” and also part of “human nature,” he expressed optimism in each interview for the power of thinking about students as clients for whom you have a very important product.

Second, Ken feels relevance is essential to his connection with students and their connection to the subject. He described being fingerprinted for school and having a local police captain complain about the spelling and punctuation in his officers’ reports. He shares this anecdote with his students because just hearing it from him is insufficient. “They need to hear it from someone in their occupation,” Ken said. “And that really does motivate them” and help them relate to the learning goals.

Third, Ken considers modeling “professionalism” a key part of his interactions with students. He keeps the focus of class on course and individual career objectives, avoiding letting students move the conversation to personal topics. In the interest of efficiency, he does not let students distract him. Ken also avoids becoming “the students’ friend,” paying careful attention to “those professional boundaries.” Although Ken reserved his lunch minutes for grading in the brick-and-mortar setting, and he kept class discussions focused, he said he was certainly sympathetic to student problems and was “happy to talk” to them. Still he was consistent in redirecting students, saying, “It’s like it’s your job. If you’re a waitress and you’ve got a customer waiting, that comes first.” Similarly, he honed his interjecting skills; for example, he became well able to “redirect ... in a way that everybody walks away happy and no one feels picked on or embarrassed or frustrated with each other.” Ken was transparent about many of his brick-and-mortar teaching practices, including cold-calling on students rather than waiting for a show of hands, and he regularly shared his hopes for their futures. Despite his dogged attention to the curriculum, he felt students knew he “always worked hard to see their potential” and to see
“the good in them.” He described helping students develop a “vision of themselves ... moving into their life, into these roles” where “work ethic, employability and all those things” are important. Seeing the “potential in people” to excel in their profession and to even become employers was Ken’s stated “biggest hope” for those relationships.

In terms of personal connections with virtual students and modeling a consistent work focus, Ken explained, “I feel very professional and conscientious [in] that I’m very much there to serve their needs,” and despite his assertion that “you see their personality to a certain extent,” primarily in their writing, he is adamant he does not “go overboard to make sure they think a lot about me because I don’t think they do.” As he poignantly argued, “Some kid in Cleveland that just wants to get his credit ... doesn’t care if I have two guinea pigs. He really doesn’t.” Essentially, he says sharing personal information “just doesn’t seem like it meets my clients’ needs,” but he is “personable” and is “big on being polite and friendly and professional.” Still, he reiterated, “There are not 800 pictures of me and my pets ... I just don’t spend our valuable time on that.”

Fourth, Ken knows his students are unique in background and aspiration, and this impacts what they need from him. For instance, he explained the most critical method of engagement is “whatever would be most effective for accomplishing the goal because I’m assuming that some students are going to get engaged a little differently than others.” For this reason, in the brick-and-mortar setting he would not rely “on what mattered most to me” but rather on “what was most effective for them.” After listing several formats for engaging with readings, such as highlighting, audio books, and discussion, he said, “I’m open to all of those things” because students will “determine” their needs. Ken also spoke about using a variety of entry points into learning tasks to accommodate various student goals and past experiences. In the virtual setting,
he creates supplemental tasks and videos to ensure understanding and remembers comments in personal papers he can use to add relevance to challenging concepts.

Ken described feeling frustrated when the structure of an online course inhibits his ability to meet students’ personal and academic needs. After declaring “bad assignments” could make students better people and “it’s important students understand life is like that and you overcome” discomfort, he lamented that “students, because they’re not in a room with me will tend to give up easily, and I’m not there to reach them in that moment they want to give up. I’m not physically present.” He imagines students seeing a challenging or inappropriate assignment and quitting. By the time he realizes the work has stopped, he can email or call, if he has an accurate number; however, he has no control over ensuring a student response.

In the virtual classroom Ken readily distinguished among students who simply need the credit to graduate and those whose aims go further. In either case, he supplements the prepared curriculum with video tutorials but seems aware his students may need more, stating that “they obviously aren’t successful in school or they wouldn’t be in credit recovery.” When he realizes “they don’t want to read Shakespeare and they don’t want to write this essay,” he simply acknowledges their reluctance and reminds them they “owe it” to themselves “to earn that diploma.” He’ll offer “10 extra credit points just to write a paragraph” about their future goals. Despite the ability to offer generic feedback, Ken is committed to providing “the most tailored, most individual feedback” he can.

Fifth, and finally, Ken places value on knowing his students so he can truly be of service. Ken shared he “looked forward” to working in the brick-and-mortar computer lab, helping students “identify their strengths” for senior year resumes. Ken’s familiarity with students’ abilities “amaze[d]” them, and their appreciation of his attention to details was “satisfying” and “really paid off.” In the virtual setting Ken relies extensively on “hearing” the students’ voices in
their writing and getting to know them enough to help them improve their skills or to engage them enough to pass the class. He intimated that by “the sixteenth paper I’ve graded from Susanna I really am starting to perceive her. It’s very intangible, but it’s there.” This might include “just the things that are important to her, maybe she’s always talking about dance or music, or just the way she writes.” He asserts English teachers grade “so much student writing” that “you can just hear” a voice “even if you’ve never heard [them] speak.” He believes the reverse is also true: “Using canned feedback ... could be picked up by them.”

Two additional critical areas to Ken’s relationships with students involve trust and the reduction of bias. Ken described developing trust based on his Mennonite upbringing, which emphasized honesty and “meaning what you say while saying what you mean.” He honors deadlines, consequences, and promises and “never tries to manipulate” students. He said keeping relationships businesslike meant students might be closer with other teachers, but he was trusted enough to recognize “and redirect” conflicts in the hall effectively.

For Ken, plagiarism, rather than primarily impeding his sense of trust in virtual students, has become a support challenge. He described great satisfaction in creating assignment samples that encourage students to do their own work using his as a model. He declared the “goal of the student–teacher relationship isn’t to be a best friend, it’s to be a learning coach,” and from that he observed a reduction of bias working with virtual students because you are no longer impacted by “how you hear them talk in the hallway, how they dress, how they smell, how they look, [or] how they treat you.” He sees this as a distinct “advantage” because “their work [is] the focus and the only thing you see,” and his feedback is consistent “regardless of what kid’s name is on the paper.”
Professional Identity

Ken values being effective and relevant. He spoke numerous times of the value of sales techniques to his success. Because he’s “selling something they need, which is to read and write at a proficient level,” it is helpful to “anticipate objections” and “make sure you can help your customer understand why they still need to buy your product” or “meet that learning goal.” He added, he knows it’s necessary and the “transference of belief is huge.” Ken also sees himself as compassionate and reflective, realizing his role in students’ classroom experiences. For example, in noting how easy it is “to let your inner dialogue become negative about ... that rotten kid that wants to be disruptive,” he said, “you can’t do that and be effective. So you have to discipline yourself that you won’t do that no matter how much a pain in the neck Billy is.” He pragmatically offered that it’s helpful to focus on a student’s strengths instead, “or have compassion and think, ‘Boy, this kid really struggles and he’s going to need a lot of help.’” Similarly, when claiming the “interpersonal part of working with teenagers is frustrating,” he said that “of course they will want to talk about prom with a friend sitting near them!” However, he continued, “You know you can’t wish it was easier. You just have to wish you were better.” Despite “uncomfortable or frustrating times,” Ken claimed he liked “the fact it was challenging” and “you constantly had that opportunity to do it better next time,” whether in a later period that day or later in the year. He concluded the first interview by stating brick-and-mortar teaching was “something worthwhile.”

Eventually Ken grew into a teacher who wholeheartedly supported the school’s community-focused mission “of taking junior[s] and senior[s] and molding them” into “good workers” with the belief that some would become employers. He encouraged “habit[s] of excellence” and was dedicated to student growth and development. Ken values personal responsibility, saying of his brick-and-mortar students, “I wanted them to see they had
responsibility for that outcome, and no set of circumstances was insurmountable.” He also stressed sharing with students that “who they were as a person mattered, and they had to work hard.” Ken talked about experiencing his class as a “small practice session for the life you’re going to live as an adult where you’re going to have do things you don’t want to do” including working “even when you don’t feel good.” He claimed practicing and internalizing these values for success “in the work environment” is “just beneficial.”

Because Ken cares about standards and sees himself as focused and conscientious in doing what’s best for kids, he will follow the “research” and adapt and adjust with changing times. For example, he has not viewed himself as a particularly collaborative brick-and-mortar teacher, citing a “tunnel vision focus” on his goals with little “mental energy” for collaboration and a need for “time and space” to process what was happening in his “own classroom.” He also believed, despite a pervasive interest in multiple intelligences, for example, that when studying Shakespeare there’s no need “to let kids spend six weeks drawing a model of the Globe Theater.” With all teachers feeling the pressure of having part of their evaluation based on students’ test scores, he said there’s a desired “common outcome,” so “planning mutual projects or helping each other with curriculum or having our students doing the same types of things” might be more feasible. “There’s just no more time to draw the Globe Theater.”

In thinking about how his students might describe him, Ken said, “energetic, committed, sincere. I was kind of hyper-organized because I had this little folder system,” and kids might roll “their eyes,” but “I was very structured.” This included assigned seating as well as specific processes for maintaining student engagement such as cold calling, using a clipboard to track participation, and continually moving throughout the room.

In the virtual classroom, Ken discussed four primary changes in how he experiences and approaches teaching. At the most basic level his energy expenditure decreased, and he’s “gained
forty pounds in two years.” Still, the first major change he discussed at length is feeling less stress over grading than in brick-and-mortar, where he might have 180 students and seven periods a day with a 40-minute lunch and 40-minute conference block. He now gives papers his “full attention.” He is not rushing to grade during breaks, but rather “actually focusing” and providing “really good feedback.” Grading also feels less biased because he no longer has “a kid that subconsciously gets on your nerves because he’s a class clown or he’s rude and disrespectful”; nor are there “positive biases.” Instead, Ken explained, “You don’t have any personal thing about that kid in your head. All you have is their product, so as you open each assignment your feelings don’t change.”

Second, despite feeling more flexibility and calm around grading, Ken described a sense of a lack of time and some anxiety around technology. For example, he calls making video tutorials “the best things I can do and some of my favorite things to do”; however, “they aren’t required,” so they are a low priority in his day. Still, he credits some of his success to these tutorials, which as a content coach he believes should be part of a weekly routine. In actuality tutorial creation might happen “a couple times a month,” especially during grading as teachers notice a pattern of poor work and realize they “could grade twelve more of these” with students failing, or stop and “make this recording” to bolster student understanding of the material. Just as Ken voiced some dissatisfaction with district-designed daily grammar work as a brick-and-mortar teacher, saying it was not “a great use of that much of my class time,” he expressed concern that after creating videos for one class, a change in schedule might necessitate all new classes, meaning he’d “need to grade for a while” to see which projects would benefit from extra video support. Further, in thinking about the rest of his career, he noted that if he stays “strictly virtual, I need to step up my game in the utilization of screencast, video graphics, music, etc., to engage students,” including “visually engaging newsletters and announcements with graphics.”
Third, Ken discussed new challenges as a virtual teacher in terms of professional responsibilities. Maintaining contact with his students is work; he noted the frustration of students not responding to emails. As in the brick-and-mortar setting, Ken empathizes with the reality of students’ lives, including drugs, “juvie,” or home tragedies “outside of your best effort” causing “your course” to lose relevancy when a diploma is “no longer their main goal.” He said in his virtual work some of these obstacles might be school based, such as inaccuracy in emails or poor classroom management at the credit recovery site. He described a data tracker for his student contact efforts as “what an English teacher would not want to be doing with his time” in terms of it getting “real mundane and boring and dry and frustrating and unhappy,” but, he added, “you want to be a professional so you do it.” Ken also observed English teachers cannot let students get by with simply “understanding the main ideas”; rather his charge for virtual students is to require “polished writing: proofread, edited, spellchecked, [and] grammatically correct.” Conversely, he lamented losing curriculum design freedom. He said, “I’m coming to this preloaded content, and I have varying degrees of being real oppressed with it,” but his sense is he’s “got to be that bridge” so students can succeed. Yet he recognizes important and significant content when he sees it, such as the “super-duper important” lessons on “credible sources” and bias. However, he described a movie and book compare-and-contrast assignment as “so perfunctory” with nothing “built in” allowing them to “do any kind of analytical thinking.”

Finally, Ken enumerated several ways in which he feels effective as a virtual teacher. In addition to the reduction of bias in grading, Ken appreciates not thinking about minimizing student distractions. He also noted his “customer-service oriented” mindset works well in terms of promoting course resources and remaining focused on the material, knowledge, and skills he “was trying to bring” to students. He explained the need to “push your agenda of learning very strongly,” as students “come and go so fast.” He specifically described feeling success when
students “actually revise a paper based on my feedback” or when they use his model paper as a guide rather than plagiarize. “That thrills me,” he said, “it’s so much better because it’s their authentic work.” He added, “I felt like I actually did some kind of teaching and they did some kind of learning, and I wasn’t just a paid grader.” He also feels hope when students understand lessons on bias or credibility in sources, calling that “really satisfying” because of the importance of the topics. Additionally, Ken commented “a great deal of satisfaction” comes from content coaching because of the potential reach to many students. He added, “Those things have kept me in this”; without them he would “be back in a classroom.”

Ken seems determined to remain conscientious and responsive in the virtual setting, seeing himself as putting students first and taking the time that’s needed to personalize their experiences. Ken mused that “what it means to be a teacher would be the same regardless of” setting. He said “core standards” are going to remain steady. After more thought he clarified that while your objectives with students are the same, “the skills you need to have could be different.” He described one colleague who would “be so good at it because she likes sitting at a computer.” For himself, Ken equated “those moments” of effectiveness with a sense that “there’s real teaching I can do.” He sees that as “encouraging” and adds that “it makes me hopeful that for as long as I need to be in this role I’ll make the most of it, and I will have some impact.”

Despite communication limitations in virtual teaching, Ken remains true to his core teaching beliefs. He explained that “modeling is everything in teaching,” and so he still models a strong work ethic. He tells students “not to copy and paste,” and he takes the same approach with their feedback. He refuses to use “general comments” because he knows although not all students read his responses, the “ones that [do] are going to know,” and “they deserve rich feedback. They deserve a teacher grading their paper that actually read the story too.”
Finally, he remains committed to his content. While recognizing the benefits of images and video in a digital world, he noted that “the bottom line is they’re going to have to be able to write; they’re going to have to be able to read.” He uses a variety of tools “as a hook” but ultimately embraces the idea that if “reading and writing are the skills, then we’re going to have to do that through pens and paper [and] books.”

Aaron

Professional Practice Overview

Aaron moved late into education with a master’s degree in astronomy and original aspirations to work in academia. Returning to a northern state for personal reasons, he explained his decision to work with high school students in part by saying he comes from a family of “preachers and teachers,” and he eventually recognized teaching might be more “fun” than research. Indeed, his experiences as a young science teacher of upperclassmen in a private school for two years, followed by less than a year teaching math to ethnically and economically diverse ninth graders in an urban charter school, reflect his pedagogical goals as well as a recurring theme about what it means to be a good teacher. Despite questioning the “academic rigor” of his courses at both schools, Aaron’s class received “a shout-out from the valedictorian” at graduation in the first school, illustrating “the value that it played in their education,” and he was also recognized as the key faculty support person after a student suicide. He saw these recognitions as indicators of his status with students as well as a “confirmation” to him “of what really matters and what I was trying to do as a teacher.”

Aaron’s early influences include an appreciation for the “proverbial TED Talk, Sir Ken Robinson on creativity in school,” that asserts “the way we approach school tends to not actually match the skills or values in the workplace or in real life.” He also acknowledges the importance of the approach of his student teaching mentor, a teacher with a “very nontraditional view of the
purpose of science education” who “would be the first to admit the most important things happening in his classroom probably had nothing to do with the content he was teaching.” Aaron readily acknowledged how much this man’s beliefs “very much resonated” with him and “shaped [his] approach to teaching.” He shared examples of teaching practices showing his capacity for innovation. He and his students did media and NASA recognized research at the private school, including student involvement in designing a zero-gravity flight experiment. He said this was important and exciting work. A similar dynamic was evident when he shared, “I had discovered an asteroid in college so I opened that opportunity up to some of my students in astronomy ... as sort of an extra-curricular and not even giving them credit for it ... we’d meet for lunch.”

Aaron found his own passion for astronomy as early as middle school and once making the decision to teach, wholeheartedly committed to helping students see the amazing aspects of science. He compared teaching to “giving someone a tour of your favorite collection” because “you are so excited about showing them each thing in your collection, and you want to tell the story of where it came from and why it’s so cool. And you want them to think your collection is really cool too.”

Aaron explained his transition into virtual teaching as a way of having “an additional source of income” and he eventually taught fulltime simultaneously, both virtually and brick-and-mortar, before leaving the latter part-way through the year when it became clear to him that his teaching goals and the charter school’s mission were in conflict. He currently teaches science classes online, but the majority of his time is spent designing virtual courses. Aaron explained that “a teacher’s job can roughly be thought of in three different capacities. We build relationships, we create content, and we grade student work.” He added, “Increasingly those three roles are being separated, especially in online learning.” He drew on his experiences with
creating content and grading student work for his responses to questions of relationship and identity.

He described virtual teaching as “playing catch with somebody by mailing the ball back and forth via UPS. The point is less about moving the ball and really more about the relationship you’re developing.” To illustrate, he described playing catch with his son, saying, “One of the fun things ... is it’s not about throwing the ball back and forth, it’s about talking and the conversation you have while you’re playing.” Despite this frustration with the virtual environment, he spoke about the exciting possibility in virtual education “of expanding people’s access” to an incredible amount of content. He argued, “If it’s about discovering your passion then in my mind it’s about breadth instead of depth, which I know is an unpopular attitude; but I’d rather have people encounter the diversity of amazing things that they can study and be exposed to a little bit than just be hyper-focused in one area from a young age.”

**Relationships with Students**

One of the touchstones of Aaron’s brick-and-mortar teaching experiences is his recognition “that kids are going from class period to class period without a break and being asked to just jump right in.” Aaron advocated the importance “of acknowledging that these are human beings” and went on to state “if I had to choose one word to describe school it would be boring; I think school in general is very boring for students.” Partly to counteract both of these issues, and partly because of his own admitted low tolerance for something he finds “monotonous,” Aaron continued his student teaching mentor’s pattern of opening every class with a “kind of open-ended, community-building discussion time.” While he said it wasn’t his sole highlight from the brick-and-mortar years, he shared “that was, without question, what defined the classroom and certainly is the thing I miss most about being in a brick-and-mortar setting.” He also stated it was very important in terms of building trust and as “one part of
making it clear” that he valued students “as people.” He also described helping students appreciate a subject as more important than memorizing information for a test. He explained throughout life kids are “going to encounter illustrations of this cool science. I want them to see and be amazed by all of these connections in the real world.” Aaron also noted he “really enjoyed just talking with kids and getting to know them and sharing things I thought were really exciting ... and seeing them getting excited about it as well.” He believes one of the main purposes of school is “to help people discover the thing they’re passionate about because [then] the learning becomes pretty easy and it’s enjoyable.”

He did, however, contrast his experience of relationship between the two brick-and-mortar schools, admitting he was not as close in the second placement, perhaps due to the younger age of the students or the lack of “informal interactions.” In contrast to the first school, which was open, bell-free, and let “students go where they needed to go during the day,” the second school was regimented with “15 minutes” for lunch, during which Aaron felt supervising teachers were like “prison guards ... making sure no one was too loud or got up to go to the bathroom, heaven forbid.” Aaron said, “The structure of the school day and the time and space” led to an “almost adversarial” relationship between teacher and student. He described quickly feeling “burned out” and cited several additional possibilities for his struggles to teach and build relationships as he had at his prior school. These included the disconnect between student skills and expectations: “Holding [students] accountable to high school-level math” felt like a “terrible situation” and the high stakes tests left him feeling he’d lost “flexibility” and the “freedom to do what I wanted to do.” In addition, he described being unaccustomed to “kids just being openly rude and hostile”; later in the interviewing process, however, he observed, “I didn’t know or understand or wasn’t prepared for students who came from such different cultures.” Aaron questioned his capacity to not only “manage this classroom” but also to “provide meaningful,
engaging experiences for these students whose experience is so different from my own.” He felt the school’s attitude of college prep at any cost, “wasn’t working very well.” He concluded, “I clearly abandoned ship before I figured out” how to surmount these challenges.

During the two years of his prior practice, however, Aaron felt he was able to establish productive, trusting relationships with students, which is seen in the fact that “it wasn’t always the same students who shared at the start of class,” as well as in the variety of “students electing to spend [free] time in my room.” He also shared an incident where he inadvertently broke trust by digitally displaying students’ assignment progress and was confronted by a young person who felt comfortable enough with him to share her dismay. Further, he felt many of these students would probably call him “awesome,” and a handful of them send a message or “an email maybe once a year just checking in” or asking a question.

Finding “grades in general” just “a difficult part” of the teacher–student relationship, Aaron observed that grading “always felt like it was pushing against” his enjoyment of “building community and getting to know students.” He described grading as “pressure in a different direction.” He doesn’t believe students would call him “the hardest teacher I ever had”; nor does he think anyone would say “he was the easiest.” Although not enthusiastic about grading strategies, Aaron spoke animatedly about choosing “the demonstration or the lab activity that I felt would be the most engaging” with a “cool factor” for virtual students. He sought extreme videos of things not possible to do during class to “try to engage” brick-and-mortar students. He admitted right after “building relationships with students ... exposing them to a wide variety of exciting content” was a top goal. He “wanted them to think physics was a fun class” and confessed, “It’s almost embarrassing when I think how little I cared about them actually learning lots of physics,” calling it “just way down on my list of priorities.” Strong relationships also “drove” student engagement: “They’d be interested in learning about science because of the
atmosphere of science class.” Aaron said “the fun part of the day was connecting with kids” because then “the more enjoyable my day was, and the more enjoyable the students’ day was.”

Because “interactions with students became the priority,” Aaron found it challenging. Moreover, he realized that he did not enjoy many students at the second brick-and-mortar school. He said, “There were a few I enjoyed being around, but there were a number who were just a pain. They were younger, more immature.” Noting the differences in background and experiences between himself and these young people, he stated, “It wasn’t fun and it didn’t feed me in any way.”

While Aaron was careful to explain the differences in relationships with students he’d experienced between the two brick-and-mortar schools, he essentially described relationships with virtual students as non-existent. Although the company Aaron works for calls the role of facilitator, “teaching,” he called it “grading” and said student contact mainly consisted of “responding to student emails,” most of which were logistically “really simple requests” with occasional content questions to which he would “send kind of like a typed-up solution to the problem ... maybe a few times a week.” In fact, Aaron could only recall one incident of an extended discussion, “a semester-long dialogue over email in astronomy class” that encompassed a “far-reaching conversation ... all about the universe” through “an email every other day.” He went on to say he felt like he was really “making a connection with a kid” yet still did not “know what the student even looked like.” Perhaps even more telling, he noted that despite accolades as a virtual teacher, he knew “how little I was really communicating with students and how little they were reaching out to me. I had one or two students who really engaged with me and that was really awesome, but I knew how rare that was.”

As a course designer, Aaron experimented with “putting himself” into the course, by inserting some of the “cool things” he’s done “to try to build that connection.” After getting no
student feedback, he “stopped because it feels showy and dumb”—unlike in a brick-and-mortar class, where taking “ten minutes” to talk about something he finds “interesting and has nothing to do with class” seems “appropriate.” He said through inserting his own experiences or pictures into a virtual course, as “a way to connect the content,” students do receive him “as their instructor.” He also said “when someone else” then “teaches the course, it just creates confusion in the students.” Still, Aaron felt as the creator of the course “my voice” is present.

Finally, in the instructor role, Aaron questioned the nature of a relationship based solely on written feedback, saying, “It depends on the nature of your feedback.” He added, “I would contrast it to the face-to-face experience.” He noted, “seeing someone’s face” includes checking on their lives, asking “How was your basketball game last night?” and such. There is likely some level of an interpersonal relationship established in a physical classroom before a teacher says, “It looks like you don’t quite understand this concept.” He compared this to receiving critical feedback from a virtual teacher whose picture or “intro video” may have been available. Then he asked, “What kind of relationship is that?”

**Professional Identity**

In his first brick-and-mortar teaching position Aaron identified as a “popular teacher” who would be called on as the face of the faculty in high-stress situations and whose classes students requested. He admitted he wanted students “to like him,” which he tentatively said “was more about the human connection than it was some grand teaching strategy.” He appreciated students saying his classes had “meaningful impact” and shared “whether that ended up being true or not, it doesn’t matter. I’m okay not knowing.” Aaron’s primary goal was “to make school less boring” for students mandated to attend for large portions of their lives. He reasoned the experience should extend beyond learning into active engagement. Because “high school students don’t necessarily show their cards in terms of enthusiasm,” he relied on “visual clues to
assess true engagement, such as his “perception of the looks on their faces, whether they were looking at me, whether they were interacting with one another.”

From displaying the quote “imagination is more important than knowledge” at the front of the room to putting out “the coolest” and “most impressive looking equipment” usually stored away in cabinets, and from these to choosing videos that would engage students’ curiosity, Aaron sought a variety of ways to bring excitement to his classes. Yet, he confessed he did not enjoy “teaching the same lesson” for the “fourth time” or “getting through difficult content” or the “assessment part of the relationship.” He “had an issue with ranking students’ performances,” feeling a student’s poor assessment “was more my fault than the student’s.” Still, Aaron was clear he found the excitement “in the classroom was really culture and community and giving that space for kids.” His dedication to teaching physics ranked behind his passion for wowing them “with a physics-related concept.”

This approach was not necessarily shared by colleagues at either school. He said the successful achievement-oriented climate at the first school afforded him the opportunity to “flourish in that environment” because he contributed “to the diversity of the students’ experience.” He noted if other teachers had used his relaxed style he might have moved “towards being a more rigorous teacher.” This willingness, and even desire, to determine his own professional path was also seen when he said, “In the classroom I had tremendous freedom to determine how closely I was going to align to the standards.” For instance, other teachers might stop a discussion after three minutes, saying, “We have a lesson we have to get through today,” but Aaron wanted to take “the pressure off of time” and allow “those conversations to really flourish.” He said, “If what we’re doing is high quality and is relevant and interesting, then we can do our lesson tomorrow.” Similarly, he reserved the right to change gears if a lab was not going as planned. He aimed for “flexibility” and a “relaxed atmosphere” and created space for
students’ entusiasms, even if it meant showing a student’s video of a band comprised of “instruments [made] out of vegetables.” He said, if it’s “physics related and it’s interesting, then let’s look at it and try to see what we can learn.”

As readily as he spoke of his successes and recognition, Aaron also displayed humility around his work with young people and, perhaps, an uncertainty. When he shared the story of inadvertently “embarrassing” a “quiet young lady” who “always gets her work done ahead of time” but “wasn’t finished yet” when he displayed the digital progress tracker, he called it a “situation where I broke a student’s trust by playing a little too fast and loose.” Later, as he reflected on the challenges of his relationships in the second brick-and-mortar school he suggested that without “the content to be excited about” and fall “back on ... I didn’t have the charisma to overcome it.” He continued, “Some teachers in the school with the same population could build that kind of rapport with the students.” He confessed to being both “pushed and pulled” out of this urban charter, saying, “I didn’t finish the year because I was almost literally getting physically sick.” Despite those feelings of discomfort, Aaron wanted to note his student interactions were not among the “top three of things I hated about going to work every day.” These seemed to fall in the realm of a disconnect between his understanding of education and the school’s mission of “trying to build a reputation as having rigorous academic standards” with a student population not experienced with those standards. This, along with “a culture of ... we will fail the students we have until we start getting the students we want” really “bristled [him] the wrong way.” Yet, he acknowledged that in the diversity of the school “a big part of what I struggled with was dealing with [an] urban, African-American population.” Although he cited the context of “a predominantly white staff” creating “racial tension,” he also owned the issue saying, “I don’t think I’m particularly well suited probably to teach students who are high needs. I think my approach and my attitude probably worked a lot better in a wealthy, [private] school
as much as I hate to say that.” He then defended himself by saying, “While I was at that [private] school I was discovering asteroids with students.”

Aaron also struggled with the meaning of teaching well at both schools. At the first school he “didn’t realize until later” that he “had a reputation among the other teachers of being [easy] because my first year the students were really high performing.” This caused him to wonder about basic teaching tasks such as “How do I set up my grade scale so I don’t give all A’s?” He described feeling that he was “inherently rewarding or penalizing students for their prior knowledge.” In addition, he said having the “local evening news” showcasing the “amazing things these students are doing ... was way more meaningful than every kid in my class mastering physics content to the point where college physics is a breeze.” In the second brick-and-mortar school, when an administrator called him aside to compare his students’ math scores with those of other teachers, he said, “The implication was I had to teach more like those other teachers were teaching.” Instead, he quit, which led him “to wrestle with [the question]: Does that mean I’m not a good teacher?” and to conclude that “the way they defined being a good teacher, I wasn’t [one], because I wasn’t moving the needle as much as others. But if that’s what it means to be a good teacher then I don’t want to be a teacher.” He described the conflict as one of focusing on performance and growth “in a traditional academic” manner “as opposed to personal growth, as opposed to discovering passions, as opposed to enjoying [the process].” He then said in further explanation, “We think about students as future college students or ... like we’re preparing them for a next phase of life. But at some level we have to acknowledge they’re currently living a phase of life and that phase of life should also be rich and fulfilling.”

Aaron reflected honestly on other potential issues of his professional identity, saying he “was not very cognizant of evaluating or measuring whether students were learning,” and he “did a lot of pop quizzes” acknowledging, “assessment was not a strong suit, so I really did not have a
robust way of determining whether students were really learning.” Interestingly, he provided “online homework” students could try repeatedly “until they solved their physics problems,” believing “a student should be graded based on their effort as opposed to their sum total of knowledge or ability.” He concluded, “I was more interested in effort and attention than in learning” and did not do “a very good job of evaluating their understanding of core concepts.” He conceded, “not that I’m proud of that, but that’s probably my honest answer.”

Aaron’s expectations for students’ engagement were high, however. He wanted them to go above and beyond class assignments, taking initiative to meet after school, to extend their learning and to do it for the joy of the learning experience. He described “keeping everybody connected and discussing and engaged on a given topic” as very enjoyable. This might include “a question going off here and a reaction going off over there and then me sharing something at the front, and then that sparks another question” leading him to “grab this thing and give a quick demo to address that question.” He added, “To the extent possible what’s happening among twenty people is evolving, and it’s so engaging that all twenty people are a part of it, even if they aren’t necessarily speaking all at the same time.” He called this a “collective energy and enthusiasm that comes from having that many people all part of something.”

One of the most critical issues in Aaron’s sense of professional identity in his online teaching is questioning whether he’s actually still a teacher. He said, “I don’t often consider myself a teacher,” although he added that at this point if he does “identify as a teacher” it’s primarily when he’s “making the videos that go along with the course.” He compared this to brick-and-mortar teachers who feel that “if I’m not lecturing then I’m not teaching, all I’m doing is choosing which activities the kids are going to do and answering their questions.” Aaron discussed at length his organization’s division of the teaching role into thirds, saying, “It’s hard for me to separate creating courses from facilitating them. Our teachers are the ones who
facilitate the course, but the bulk of my work has actually been in creating courses,” which is essentially “creating videos ... selecting resources and building assessments.” When asked about engagement and excitement, Aaron conceded his required course creation process with its “standards and objectives” and aligned readings and assessments, results in lessons that “are probably really boring in general [because] there’s a lot of reading, a lot of watching videos.”

A second issue involves refocusing his sense of success from relationships and achievement indicators to material compensation. He explained, “There’s an efficiency you can get when you teach online; you can scale yourself to teach for multiple organizations, and you can make good money.” Aaron cited the narrowing of his role to “almost being paid as a grader” as an initial reason why “it was about the money primarily.” For the “teacher” position, he concluded, “I’m being paid to grade student work, to provide any feedback and to answer their questions, and as a content expert.” Aaron also spoke of always feeling “like I was trying not to get caught, like I can’t possibly be doing everything that’s expected of me.” When he compared his enrollment numbers and the amount of work virtually to brick-and-mortar, he concluded that virtual teaching “felt like I was somehow gaming a system.” Similarly, while he talked about enjoying media attention during his brick-and-mortar years, he described his virtual teaching recognition as “meaningless.” He conceded, “Obviously it was meaningful; it’s nice to be recognized and all of that, but I didn’t feel like I deserved it ... in fact, I know I didn’t deserve it because of the quality of the work I was doing.” He suggested his selection “was more to do with the leadership role” he sometimes took at “meetings where I would bring forward ideas and share openly.” Later, he elaborated:

I have a great deal of respect for teachers who are highly organized, do things by the book, are focused on student learning and able to use a variety of strategies to reach all of their students. I’ve come to recognize that’s not my gifts or interest ... but that is what
truly makes an excellent teacher. It’s not about the teacher, it’s about the students, and so it was inappropriate to consider me excellent in some way because a lot of what I was doing was me doing it, and it’s questionable how much students learned in the process.

A third change in Aaron’s professional identity is in his sources of enjoyment and daily satisfaction. While he described hypothetically sharing a student’s emailed idea “with the rest of the class” as a valuable “kind of connection,” he said the connection does not “happen in the feedback loop of an assessment” partly because “it’s a one-way communication. It’s me giving feedback once on a student’s performance.” In fact, in his course creator role he tries “to build feedback into the course” so students “get instant feedback and multiple attempts at their work, especially when they’re solving mathematical problems” and do not have to wait for a teacher to provide feedback. In thinking about the three roles in his company, he said his impact was probably stronger when creating content that “might reach 200, 300, 500 kids.” Despite not interacting “with those kids directly,” they are “consuming something I created.” He added that as an assessor, he’s “interacting with fewer students” but doesn’t feel he’s “giving them anything really meaningful.” When asked about how his teaching mission in the brick-and-mortar environment translated into a virtual practice, Aaron said, “When I think about what I hope to achieve, it robs the fun out of it, and it’s easy for me to take off the afterburners, put it in cruise control, and just do my grading.”

As part of a fourth issue in virtual teaching Aaron spoke of his inherent ability to “give things what they’re worth.” He explained, “If a job is good enough then I can walk away from it ... I’m not the kind of guy who’s going to go 10 times over and above to get something no one’s asking for.” For example, as a course designer, he found free assessments online that aligned to objectives and would do “the work for you.” Although he talked excitedly about the effort he put into engaging brick-and-mortar students in far ranging discussions, he explained a bit
apologetically with regard to his virtual teaching, “I’m paid the same regardless of the quality of the feedback I give,” and “it’s questionable to me how valuable that feedback is to students on some of the work we do.”

Aaron’s fifth virtual teaching issue emerged as he described his sense of efficacy in engaging students from the role of course creator or teacher. He said he has “more control” as a creator because he’s “choosing what videos they watch ... what articles they read, what activities they are engaged in,” but as an instructor with an unengaged student his “only options are basically to harass them by email or potentially contact their mentor or parent. I have a lot of sticks. I don’t have a lot of carrots as an online teacher.” However, “As a creator I really don’t have any sticks. All I have is carrots, so it’s all about trying to get kids excited about what they get to learn.” Admitting he tends to “think a lot about enthusiasm,” believing it will “drive” students through the difficult parts, Aaron shared examples of lab activities and an “activation” story of a woman surviving an elevator crash in the Empire State Building. He tries to make this “real world connection” in each lesson “just as absolutely cool as possible.”

Additionally, Aaron’s sense of effectiveness, like his sense of success and satisfaction, manifests differently as a virtual teacher. In the brick-and-mortar classroom he equated “a great day” with an effective day. For example, “If we did nothing content related but we had a lot of fun” he might rue a bit not being more content focused, but “making progress in our learning was a part of that positivity, that goodness we were doing.” He contrasted this scenario with the second school where “we were focused on the content the whole period but it was not positive or enjoyable for anybody,” either “because it was boring for me and the students or because I was dealing with discipline issues,” so “at the end of the day it was not effective. Even if they learned content, I was not happy.” Aaron did not discuss daily enjoyment in virtual teaching but rather described his work as “a huge shift” where he struggles with the open-endedness. He observed
that in a brick-and-mortar semester, “there is a beginning, a middle, and an end, and you reset every term; there is a sense of accomplishment with each term.”

Aaron also spoke of a new effectiveness in his virtual work that eluded him in his second brick-and-mortar position. He said after designing the first couple of courses, he “started trying to picture minority students more as I was developing content because I realized the examples at the start of every lesson” were often inappropriate for “students who may have grown up in poverty.” He began avoiding “examples like ‘The last time you flew on an airplane do you remember ...?’” He also realized many of his students were incarcerated and some had severe physical handicaps, so he acquired a new goal of making the lessons “accessible and meaningful to everyone, hopefully” but acknowledged that “it’s challenging.”

As an assessor, Aaron said his “behavior has changed, which suggests my beliefs have changed in some way.” Specifically, he’s increasingly worried “about the security of our tests and the degree to which students are cheating on them,” and he’s begun designing his tests “to be completely open book, open Internet, so it’s less about assessing what’s in their brain and more about assessing their ability to find the right information when they need it.” A writing task could probably reveal more about student understanding than simple “problem-solving, [where] they either get it right or wrong.” He also pointed out, “If they can solve the problems I’m asking them to solve, they must understand the things I’m asking them to understand.” Still, he said, “There are levels to that too; it doesn’t necessarily mean they have a conceptual understanding of the larger framework for understanding the concepts behind the course.”

Finally, Aaron spoke of a sense of having less impact on the virtual student. He described impact as “twenty years from now when a kid looks back” on the learning experience and realizes it shaped interest in a topic or they recognize the cause of “some phenomenon” they see “when they’re walking down the street” or they share knowledge gained in his courses with their
own kids. He said, “I’m much less likely to have that kind of impact in my online teaching.” He also noted even in terms of his best videos, “as much as I would like to think ideas change people’s lives, a lot of evidence points to the fact it’s relationships that change people’s lives.” He concluded, “So, if it’s about making a positive impact on somebody’s life, then it’s more about that relationship than it is about communicating these ideas.”

Aaron summarized his thoughts about where he’s been as a teacher and where he’s headed as moving from a sense of himself as a teacher “who is in the presence of students, knows their students and who the students know,” where “knowledge and relationship” are key, to virtual teacher identity where he’s more of a “content expert, because ultimately what I’m doing is assessing student knowledge.” He said the incentive systems in each setting drove these impressions. In brick-and-mortar classrooms, Aaron said, “The incentive was to build meaningful relationships with kids; that’s what made me more of a teacher.” In virtual teaching “the personal shift was driven by dollars. The more students I can take [and] the more quickly I can assess, the more money I make, so then I’m just going to get really good at assessing students as quickly as possible.” He added, “I didn’t feel much like a teacher.” Because he has little sense of how students receive his feedback, he said it feels like “going through the motions.” In thinking about his future plans, Aaron was sensitive about using the word teacher, saying he knows “what it means to some people in terms of their identity” and to call himself a teacher “as someone who’s just making videos and putting them on the web, [is] sort of disrespectful to people who are building back-and-forth relationships.”

Carla

Professional Practice Overview

Carla came to teaching as a second career. She began working in youth ministry but soon noticed her aptitude for teaching, eventually obtaining a job in a school where her former
guidance counselor was the principal. The ensuing mentor relationship helped form Carla’s teaching approach and her interest in leadership. As a public high school social studies teacher, Carla was appreciative of professional development courses focusing on teaching specific content, finding the College Board’s Advanced Placement training particularly helpful. In the brick-and-mortar setting Carla valued participation, speaking enthusiastically of students taking “part in the conversation ... engaged and actually responding.”

Carla shared stories of her early years, indicating she carefully observed the learning environment and adjusted her expectations and visions for her teaching practice accordingly. For example, she described really enjoying courses that “were straight-up, old school lecture from beginning to end and your head was down [furiously] taking notes.” Calling herself a “history buff,” Carla expressed admiration for her professors’ storytelling abilities and their “incredible” knowledge. She soon realized at the high school level that strategy was “not going to reach every student.” Carla learned instead to “mix it up and try different things and be more interactive.” Likewise, she adjusted to what she described as the standards-based expectation of teaching “the history of the entire world in one year.” This forced her to prioritize standards based on their importance and students’ previous exposure. She now will frequently “structure the lessons to open up more discussion” for new ideas or “things that I like to talk about.”

Carla said learning on the job was critical, believing working “in the trenches” is essential, and it can still take two or three years to develop some comfort with the work “if you’re lucky enough to teach the same content and not get bounced around.” Thinking back to her brick-and-mortar years, she found it easier to think of the negative and humorous stories, such as the student “puffing on the e-cigarette whenever I turn my back,” while the positives felt fuzzier. She talked about holding “on to the notes and letters ... of appreciation,” saying that “as a whole it can be a very rewarding profession.” Specifically, she shared the insight that “it’s nice
we can step beyond the classroom and get that full sense of a community and where you fit in with those students’ lives.”

After six years of brick-and-mortar teaching, Carla moved to the virtual setting “for flexibility, to be with family, [and to] support family needs.” She taught social studies courses nationwide and even a bit internationally before company policy changed, restricting her enrollment to one southern state. She then moved to “a role that we called advisor” with the task “of keeping students engaged” and getting them online, “helping them understand the virtual setting” and “to keep them on pace.” Now she manages virtual teachers. In discussing her decision to move into virtual education, Carla was adamant that she not be “classified” as escaping the traditional brick-and-mortar to avoid “behavioral problems ... and the additional duties you have in a brick-and-mortar setting.” She does not see herself as “a stereotypical, disgruntled teacher just trying to avoid students.” In fact, she shared that her own two children are in virtual education “for the middle school years” and stated her belief that “you can live without some of those interpersonal experiences in middle school, and it’s a good time to get ahead a little bit.” She described her transition as adjusting to “a body of curriculum” and with tests and prompts, understanding “exactly what [the course designers and the virtual school management organization] were looking for.” Working from a desire to “keep the day pretty structured,” Carla consistently tries for a “very quick response time” so students maintain their “momentum,” because it can take a while to “get back on track” once it is lost.

In her current managerial position, Carla can contribute opinions and sometimes see the bigger picture of her organization. For instance, she helps organize course fieldtrips and has come to realize from the “data” that “an extremely small percentage of students” are “showing up,” and their participation does not seem to enhance their academic performance. She’s planning to “bring this up in discussion for next year” and will present it as an issue of teacher
time spent in organizing with “disheartening” results. Overall, however, Carla sees virtual education as what she’s “chosen to do,” and she appreciates “the opportunity to do it ... to be able to teach in this way and work in education and in this capacity.”

**Relationships with Students**

Carla spoke of four core aspects of her relationships with brick-and-mortar students. First, she described her approach as leaning more towards a “real mentoring-type relationship” which may stem “from my background in working with students through the church.” She said that such mentoring was even more likely “with struggling students.” Carla noted these students did not want to be there, and that “you start to get the picture that maybe they’re not getting a lot of attention at home, and ... might be from separated families or just in difficult situations.” She said the connections with those students were critical so they might “open up” and see “the importance of education.” Realistically, these students will need to do “more work than any typical student” to get themselves on track, but when students realize that and still commit, Carla feels it’s particularly rewarding. She shared a favorite example of a young person who, with extended family help and school support, reengaged academically and used his artistic gift to become “a pretty successful tattoo artist” who “has a job and is successful at it and can do for himself.” While Carla described her sense of loss when these stories do not end happily, she found her real frustrations center on the “student that’s in your regular class that never speaks up ... never engages.” She said, “They’re not bad [but] they just don’t put forth that little bit extra” to be “top students” and are “just happy with being middle of the road.”

Second, Carla placed importance on enjoying the process of working with students, on wanting to be at school. She shared her brick-and-mortar routine of greeting students at the door by name and asking them questions about their lives outside of school. She also noted many students wanted to come in after class to talk. Carla credits some of her brick-and-mortar success
to entering “teaching at a later age” and thus avoiding the challenge of poorly negotiating the “friend-and-teacher line” she observed with teachers “that were just starting out of college.” She said this helped her keep the “leader type of respect a student should have towards a teacher.” She described students trusting she’d “be honest” no matter the topic. In turn, students expressed an interest in her, and she considered “that kind of back and forth conversation” an effective means of “rapport-building.” Significantly, she noted it prepared students for the important “discussions” they needed for “world history and government.”

Third, after citing the fact her students were sophomores, and, at 16, essentially adults and old enough to “drive a car,” Carla explained she “liked to treat the students fair and to respect them as an adult.” She credits this approach with receiving only one or two parent calls, non-serious ones, in five years. She also shared that “trust” in her brick-and-mortar classroom was built on “honesty” in a variety of situations. This included fair warning about mandatory reporting for issues of danger as well as an honest approach in group discussions. Plus, she said she often started the first day “letting them know I know a lot about a lot of things, but I don’t know everything.” She believes students might “respect” that and that “it might be something they’ve never heard from a teacher before.” She knows trust is established when students are open and sharing personal experiences, but it’s “easier to recognize when you don’t have that with students than when you do.” Specifically, “They’re probably really transparent on the negative side ... you can really read it, sense it, if they don’t want anything to do with you.”

Fourth and finally, Carla shared her reliance on classroom strategies that build on relationships to engage students and assess their understanding. She spoke of discussions as allowing students to ask “questions to get deeper into whatever we were talking about” and when those questions were serious, and “they’re genuinely interested and wanting to know more, that’s when I felt I had them and they’re learning.” She also valued small group work where she could
sit down “with four to six students at one time” and “maybe work on what they’re doing with
them” something she considered “more relatable.” In addition, this was a way for her to “pull
their understanding out.” Carla expressed a willingness to be creative and flexible in order to
help students engage with the course material. She appealed to students’ curiosity and sense of
fun by adding competition and gaming via Friday Trivia and lessons structured like CSI, the
television show based on crime investigation. She said, “When you hit upon lessons like that [it
demonstrates] big-time engagement.” In addition to being fun, Carla noted the novelty. She also
described engagement as times “when the student that never had an interest in government
whatsoever” gets involved in “asking questions,” when “you start talking about their individual
or human rights” and “body language is ... a big indicator. They may not ask questions but you
can certainly tell when they’ve suddenly perked up a little bit and they’re paying attention more
than they might typically.”

As Carla talked about her relationships with virtual students, she described less
interaction overall. She noted that a few do reach out and connect, which she described as
satisfying, versus the frustration felt when students “don’t return emails, you can never get them
on the phone, maybe they’re passing, maybe they’re not, but you can’t really make the contact to
help them.” For those virtual students who made regular contact Carla expressed concern for
over-sharing, something she felt was easier for virtual students because of the physical distance.
As a brick-and-mortar teacher who was well aware of boundaries around hugging and social
media, Carla expressed sensitivity in both environments to maintaining “a professional type of
relationship.” Still, Carla felt her virtual interactions with students were “a lot more constrained
to really just the academic,” which, she adds, “isn’t a bad thing.”

The physical distance also impacted Carla’s sense of student engagement. She noted, “in
the brick-and-mortar classroom they sit in your class but you can at least see them and see their
body language.” She said even if “a student doesn’t ... engage in a lot of the discussion,” you can still “gauge” to what extent they’re working. However, a virtual student who does not answer emails and whose calls go to voicemail can feel absent. She explained that client school districts can “enforce some type of attendance policy,” but virtual teachers have no voice in this, so “crafting emails” and “making phone calls” without response can feel like “time spent” futilely, when “maybe you could be doing something with students that are engaged.”

In terms of evaluating student engagement, unlike real time observation of student behavior as in the brick-and-mortar classroom, Carla spoke of having “those tools we need to depend on,” which digitally means that “you figure they are logging in, they are doing their work, they’re doing fairly well on their work, then they must be engaged.” She identified effort as the unknown, and also insisted students do not “fall off the radar” even if they are “not emailing, calling or reaching out.” After talking about the available data, she spent several moments describing categories of idleness and the customized messages teachers can send to students.

Carla spoke extensively about assessment and trust issues. She noted when testing is “the clear tool,” as it can be in the virtual setting with high student to teacher ratios, there is a need “to trust they aren’t exploring the World Wide Web for their answers.” This reliance on written testing to determine understanding contrasts with brick-and-mortar’s capacity for “a lot of formal and informal assessment” and with the affordance of seeing students do the work in front of you, thus increasing the teacher’s sense they are “actually doing it themselves.”

Carla also talked about other types of trust, explaining for many online students trust in the brick-and-mortar setting has been broken. “Maybe they’ve been bullied. Maybe they felt wronged by the school, by their teachers, by their school district.” She noted these students come to virtual schooling “already very guarded ... they don’t trust education. So it can be a lot of
work to try to build that up again.” Still, she feels it can happen, saying that “the first step is, again, doing the little things for the student to understand that you are a person and there’s a live teacher on the other side.” She added, “There’s essentially a whole team of teachers online to support them ... all working with them and helping them to succeed.” This support works multiple ways, because that “actual teacher” is also “going to hold them accountable ... then they know that maybe they’re just not trying to put something past a computer program.”

Carla also shared her sense of the key role parents play in virtual education. After speaking with a student she would “speak to the parent because it truly takes a village.” While the structure of “public brick-and-mortar schools” may inhibit parent involvement, “online, if you don’t have parent support and also parent communication with the student, it becomes more difficult for the student to be successful.” For Carla, however, much of this necessary parent support revolves around plagiarism concerns. She also talked about the way trust factors into providing support for disengaged and poorly performing students. Sometimes that trust is disrupted when parents discover their children, who may be home alone all day, are not actually working on the course. Yet, multiple times Carla shared the inseparability she experienced between her student and parent relationships. Often she communicated more with a parent than with their child, or even only “through the parent.” This sometimes left her with the sense her relationship with the student was totally mediated by another person.

Finally, asked about the importance of relationships with students in terms of motivation, Carla spoke of brick-and-mortar’s design as affording “more of a connection with student[s] as a whole” along with the capacity to “push them more” when they wanted to stop at a passing grade. In comparison, the way her virtual school is structured, individual teacher’s perspectives are limited in terms of knowing students’ schedules and their performance “in their other courses.” Mentors “in dire situations” can share information “to bring the team together,” but she
described teachers as having “blinders” and “not knowing the big picture.” Carla also said for students truly only enrolled to pass, “it’s hard to get them past that.”

**Professional Identity**

Carla described herself as “pretty laid back” while valuing conversation, innovation, and humor. She also described following “a very good principal” who really stressed, in every interaction, teacher professionalism in communication and appearance. She talked about not needing recognition or a pat “on the back” or a “reward for being at work.” Carla said she feels successful when her students are successful, whether that means arguing their case, engaging in group discussions, or just graduating. Carla also expressed satisfaction in her professional growth during her brick-and-mortar years, specifically for improving her capacity to set and achieve lesson objectives through helping students ask “the right questions to drive the discussion” further and “get all the points made.” However, she also “fully” recognized how little of what she taught would be remembered “down the road.” She added, “as a lifelong student I know I’ve forgotten more than I ever learned.” Carla also noted she’s been more likely to retain “things that I’ve sought to learn ... and invested my personal time into learning.” She acknowledged no one enjoys everything and that “world history and government may not be the most interesting” or what students “really care about,” but “those were vehicles” through which “they could learn bigger skills.” She said the things she really hoped she “could instill” might be “a better way to do research, a better way to write, a better way to just develop skills that you need beyond high school,” and she concluded that “whether they remember everything about Genghis Kahn or not” is less important than whether “they know how to respect one another and have a conversation with an adult and whatever it might be.” She then continued, saying, “Those are good things.”

Carla identified six areas where her sense of how she teaches or who she is as a teacher has changed in the virtual setting. First, within her content area of social studies, she values
discussion skills and effective thinking. She said students should “have an understanding of history, of the world, of how everything functions” so they “can talk about religion and sexuality and government and economics.” She added it’s valuable “to take this background knowledge into other subjects, into your relationships with other people and ... have conversations” as part “of our society.” She asserted that “in a virtual classroom I never really have [the] same opportunity to lay it out like that,” although she feels “it just as strongly.” She senses when virtual students are “isolating themselves because of some incident,” and then “they’re not around people where they can develop those skills they need to really interact.”

Second, Carla said one of her “biggest challenges in transitioning” to virtual teaching was improving “written feedback,” something she did not worry about in the brick-and-mortar classroom because she could review assessments with all students at once, and they had access to her full presentation, including body language, “so you have to get really good at verbalizing what you said.” Asked about gauging student understanding, Carla said, “It comes down to the dirty word that I don’t like using a lot, which is assessment.” She knows “when students are getting it” through formal testing and also seeks opportunities through feedback to engage in dialogue. She asked questions in her virtual feedback, hoping students will “either give me a response” explaining their answer or say “something that might further discussion.”

Third, Carla noted tasks where more effort is required in virtual teaching than in brick-and-mortar although she also said virtual teaching is a place where your energy can go down without detection, and noted the possibility of being “a little jaded, but ... still professional,” so the job gets done. Maintaining contact with virtual students can be a big effort, and she explained the importance of reaching out immediately, because “if personal contact’s not made with a student, typically they never get restarted or they get started extremely slowly and they’re behind.” At the same time, she acknowledged, “You might have 250 students [overall]. To make
that kind of commitment of calling that number of students in two weeks or so, it’s a pretty good feat.” Keeping students engaged “just like we do in the brick-and-mortar classroom,” through trying “to be innovative” and “using humor” and moving from just emailing to trying “to incorporate some video,” are all “a little bit more of a struggle ... in the virtual setting,” even though these strategies can be effective.

Fourth, although Carla talked about being structured in the brick-and-mortar classroom, she wrestled a bit with the idea of whether she was more structured as a virtual teacher. She said, “You can almost set up your day completely on your calendar right in front of you: 10 o’clock phone calls, 11 o’clock office hours, 12 o’clock teaching time, 1 o’clock grading, and then maybe make contacts some afternoons and cycle through.” She added that “every day could be like that,” whereas in brick-and-mortar even with a bell schedule “it feels like you can be more fluid in your classroom with what you’re doing.” She stressed creating a strict virtual daily structure was the “successful way to approach it, because things can pile up on you,” including grading, “if you don’t have that allotted time [to] carry things out.”

Fifth, Carla also compared her sense of her professional encounters with parents in each environment. After noting the difficulty of “get[ting] parents in” to brick-and-mortar “even for open houses,” while online they might not “be familiar with the technology yet” in knowing how to effectively communicate, she explained that “in the brick-and-mortar, I don’t recall ever having [a] confrontational relationship with a parent, whereas online it was a fairly frequent thing to have some parent upset about something.” In pondering the reason, she talked about two key differences: her strong relationship with brick-and-mortar students that “probably headed off issues” and an increased virtual parent willingness to step in for their children.

Finally, in thinking about her enjoyment and satisfaction with her various virtual roles, Carla mentioned her love of history content and her “techie” side, although she’s not worked in
course design. When asked which role comes closest to his understanding of what it means to be a teacher, she noted, “As the traditional holistic teacher ... then it’s all of them.” Her least comfortable role virtually is live teaching, because often she “was teaching to no one.” With sessions recorded and scripted, she experienced the lack of students as “not fun” and limiting, despite enjoying and valuing academic discussions. Carla also shared that plagiarism “has become shocking to me,” and dealing with it can take a large amount of her focus as a virtual instructor.
CHAPTER 5
ANALYSIS OF DATA

In keeping with the descriptive purpose of the study, in this chapter I address both of my research questions by first discussing the emerging themes in the five facets of the conceptual framework for teacher–learner relationships guiding the study. I also look at implications for trust, which provides the foundation to these relationships. In part two of this chapter I address my second research question directly by exploring participants’ statements for themes and the accompanying complexity of patterns regarding their sense of professional identity in each setting. For each relationship facet I first summarize participants’ brick-and-mortar practices and then identify salient themes emerging in their comments of virtual practice, supported by a discussion of the patterns observed in the cases.

Part I: Exploration of the Five Domains of Teachers’ Relationships with Students

Enjoyment of Relationships with Students

As the literature suggested (Brunetti, 2001; O’Connor, 2008; Raphael, 1985; Timoštšuk and Ugaste, 2012), all of this study’s participants mentioned some aspect of relationships with students as a primary source of job satisfaction and daily enjoyment during their brick-and-mortar teaching years. Enjoyment encompasses a continuum from simple pleasure in a moment to a pervading sense of joy. For example, Aaron was specific in relating his passion about the general excitement of the classroom, much of which centered on full class discussions and introducing projects and activities with a certain “coolness” factor. He admitted he placed a premium on running an enjoyable class. This statement, along with his comments about the joys of a full class discussion perhaps come closest to Brunetti’s research findings about teachers’ daily enjoyment in working with students (2001). Meg spoke of her enjoyment working with young people in general, and both she and Laura described feeling pleasure when former
students shared that they felt well prepared for college after taking their high school courses. Ken elaborated on his enjoyment of getting to know his students well enough to truly assist them with their resumes for post-secondary planning, and Carla, while noting she’s always enjoyed “working with that age group,” said she enjoyed her teaching most when students “were engaged and actually responding and taking part.” She also shared her ongoing pleasure in seeing students succeed by graduating or simply by realizing the importance of school.

These former brick-and-mortar teachers described three primary areas where the enjoyment of their interactions with students was experienced differently in the virtual classroom. Themes emerged from the following areas: student responses to teacher-initiated interactions, the participants’ experiences of working with individuals versus working with a group, and the emergence of new frustrations in their daily work with students that impede enjoyment and that they had not experienced in the brick-and-mortar setting.

**Student Responses to Teacher-Initiated Interactions**

The first theme emerged as participants described their interactions with virtual students changing from the instant or immediate responses they had experienced in the brick-and-mortar setting to an environment of anticipating student responses. For example, they talked about brick-and-mortar students responding to their use of humor and to their smiles and to their feedback as part of presence. In the virtual classroom, however, either there was a delay in student reactions due to the asynchronous nature of the work or the teachers never fully knew how students reacted. This seemed to lead to situations such as Laura describing her use of humor on her virtual teacher page as anticipating students’ reactions to a new banner: “Oh, that was funny; my teacher’s got a sense of humor.” This compares to actually hearing, seeing, or even reading their reactions. Similarly, Ken, despite being an advocate of informal personal sharing during the downtime between brick-and-mortar classes, chose to share very little about
his personal life on his virtual teacher’s page, anticipating students’ reactions when he said that “some kid in Cleveland that just wants to get his credit ... doesn’t care if I have two guinea pigs.” Any enjoyment Ken gets from this non-interaction comes from anticipating that he’s building some sort of relationship with his students by meeting their need for less personal details from him. Aaron spoke extensively about the ways he anticipates potential student responses to the courses he designs, recognizing his only knowledge of those responses will come from pass/fail data, and perhaps from other virtual teachers’ comments.

It should be noted that one of Meg’s primary sources of satisfaction in virtual teaching is the percentage of time that she is available to students. She expressed great pleasure in knowing that when she is “at work ... students have access to me all the time.” So rather than finding gratification in the instant responses of her students to her teaching efforts, she enjoys providing them with “instant” responses to their learning efforts.

**Working with Individuals Versus a Group**

The second area of change in enjoyment discussed by participants was in terms of working with individuals virtually versus a group of students in the brick-and-mortar classroom. This unfolded into two themes: increased pleasure with the ability to focus on a single student and a loss of joy in regular conversations with student groups. For the first, Meg, Laura, and Ken stressed the pleasure they gain in having a one-to-one student focus in the virtual classroom. Meg stated it is “a lot more relaxing” and that she finds enjoyment in conveying the messages of “Wow, this is a real person” and “She’s really trying to help me.” Laura also enjoys being real to students and prizes any direct contact, both through student work and, more rarely, student emails. She expressed satisfaction in getting to know students through their writing. Ken spoke little about actually conversing with students, recalling the majority of his student interactions occur via email and stating your “attention is not on that student as much as that student’s work.”
He spoke, however, about the pleasure he gets from providing rich feedback without feeling rushed and of finding patterns in students’ work that he can immediately use to “adjust” his presentation of the course to “meet their needs better.”

The second theme of feeling a loss of enjoyment from interactions with groups of students, especially discussion, was seen in Aaron’s comments throughout the interviews. He also indicated minimal contact with virtual students, but the incidents he was able to recall, in particular, the semester long email dialogue with one student “all about the universe” did not elicit as much passion and sense of joy as his comments about engaging a full brick-and-mortar class “at the exact same time, keeping everybody connected and discussing and engaged on a given topic.” That said, Aaron also liked the hypothetical scenario of a student emailing him a description of a real-life connection to the subject that he could then share with the rest of a virtual class, but said, it does not happen when “giving feedback once on a student’s performance.”

Only Carla made no distinction between working with an individual and a group of students. She did, however, express feeling pleased “when [virtual students] show up … when they’re engaged in the present with you.” While she was commenting on student presence at office hours and help sessions in this instance, it may be significant that her greatest frustrations included the extent to which her virtual students sometimes ignore emails and other messages, or do not respond to feedback.

New Frustrations in Daily Work with Students

Ken shared a related sense that the pleasures in each environment are similar but the frustrations are different. Specifically, the daily frustrations that impede pleasure in teaching, which the participants highlighted, ranged from keeping students on task and managing peer interactions in the brick-and-mortar classroom to untangling technology problems, maintaining
productive communication with students, and negotiating plagiarism issues in the virtual setting. A strong theme for the virtual experience emerged as each of the five participants expressed frustration with receiving no responses from their virtual students to emails or to assignment feedback. Carla noted all brick-and-mortar students, on the other hand, are truly a “captive audience” with their responses to teachers’ efforts quite visible versus those specific virtual students who “just never show up” in terms of synchronous meetings, phone calls, emails, and work product.

Aaron was an outlier in enjoyment and frustrations, completely devaluing the pleasure in his contact with virtual students when he said that “as a virtual teacher it’s never student interaction that makes it a great day because it always feels quite superficial and brief.” Rather than looking to his relationships with virtual students as a source of daily professional satisfaction, he said his paycheck provided a stronger sense of fulfillment when in the “grading” role, and his successful design of labs and videos, as well as the money, when he was “creating content.” Aaron’s very clear negative reaction to the idea of enjoying interactions with virtual students may be contextual in that he has not pursued much contact with his virtual students, admitting that he did not feel rewarded for the additional work of opening an email exchange with non-communicative students. This lack of satisfaction with his student connections may also be inherent in his professional identity because he has perhaps minimized student work progress while instead focusing on their interest in, and excitement with, the topic of study.

Aaron is also a part-time designer of courses, a role that does not afford any student contact, so a lack of student interaction may not be as troublesome to him as it might be to others.

Each participant’s comments on key aspects of enjoyment in both brick-and-mortar and virtual environments are recorded in Table 5.1, as well as frustrations impeding enjoyment of the teacher–learner relationship in the virtual setting.
Table 5.1 *Enjoyment of interactions with students in each setting*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Enjoyment</th>
<th>Meg</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Ken</th>
<th>Aaron</th>
<th>Carla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brick-and-mortar sources of enjoyment</td>
<td>- positive feedback re: academic preparedness</td>
<td>- positive feedback re: academic preparedness; - nurturing actions (treat bags, etc.)</td>
<td>- knowing students strengths well</td>
<td>- full class discussions; - incorporating the “cool” factor / seeing students’ excitement</td>
<td>- student participation and success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual sources of enjoyment</td>
<td>- more relaxing working with individual students</td>
<td>- prepping homepage/emails for student enjoyment</td>
<td>- finding patterns in students’ work to adjust course support</td>
<td>- thinking of student reactions to course elements</td>
<td>- students “showing up”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual frustrations impeding enjoyment</td>
<td>- unresponsive students</td>
<td>- unresponsive students; - issues with technology</td>
<td>- unresponsive students; - issues with technology</td>
<td>- unresponsive students; - not knowing how students are interacting with feedback</td>
<td>- unresponsive students; - superficial and brief student interactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum, with the notable exception of Meg, the participants’ sources of enjoyment shifted from a “give-and-take” *with students* to providing something *for students*, such as tutorials and other academic support or welcoming home pages, with the hope that students would gain from the teacher’s efforts. Teachers adjusted their expectations of finding enjoyment in direct contact with students to feeling pleasure when students respond to outreach efforts in any way or when they simply “show up” at the required instances. Frustrations tended to cluster around experiences of disconnection, whether manifesting as complete non-responsiveness by students or as a superficiality or ambiguity in those interactions.

**Student Motivation and Engagement**

The second facet of teachers’ experiences with student relationships directly explored in this study involved how participants sense and describe their impact on students’ motivation and engagement. Again, as the literature suggested (Bandura, 1993; Hargreaves, 1998; Kitching et al., 2009), all of these teachers indicated a desire during their brick-and-mortar teaching years to help students engage with the subject matter and to motivate them to do good academic work.
Some of these teachers also expressed a desire to help students find motivation to strive for future success as well as to engage with school as a whole. From Meg’s focus on goal setting to Ken’s and Carla’s aspirations to help students take an active and productive economic role in their communities, the participants talked about various ways they could facilitate student motivation to achieve as well as to increase their engagement with assigned materials. Laura mentioned “showmanship” as one means of engaging students, along with setting very structured goals for class activities and enforcing deadlines within a caring relationship. While admittedly much looser in classroom protocols, Aaron stressed the importance of his daily opening discussion and his dedication to sharing the “coolest” examples of physics concepts with keeping students motivated to work and learn in science. He depended on an awareness of his students’ interests and personalities, built from their relationship, to know what would best create the “cool factor.” Carla talked about games and group activities as highly engaging for students. Ken strove to “develop a sense of who [students] are and what they want,” which he could “then use” for motivation via his sales techniques for meeting needs. He described using persuasion to help students “focus on their education despite their circumstances.” Similarly, Laura mentioned knowing students well enough to determine when they “were off” and then stepping in to provide caring inquiry as well as assistance with reengaging in coursework. Repeatedly, as brick-and-mortar teachers, the participants talked about their work with students as constituting a series of opportunities to help learners engage with work on a continuum, from compliance in completing academic tasks to actively seeking more knowledge and understanding both in their classes and beyond, and sometimes with the motivation to continue setting goals and striving for academic and career success into the foreseeable future.

As these teachers talked about their experiences as virtual teachers, three core themes emerged: the necessity of reaching out to students through more elaborate means than they may
have used in the brick-and-mortar environment, the consistent challenges encountered in doing so digitally, and the need to become aware of the differences in student engagement indicators from those they were accustomed to in the brick-and-mortar setting.

**Reaching out to facilitate engagement with virtual students.** The first theme to emerge encompasses the participants’ sense of the necessity of consistent and intensive reaching out to virtual students in order to keep them engaged at least at the most basic level of connection with the course material. This theme was repeated many times and by nearly all of the participants. Laura described putting students on an email “rotation” every one to three weeks based partly on the student’s course completion percentage. She also used phone calls for those students most behind and attempted to motivate all students enrolled in her courses through encouraging announcements in which she used humor, animation (such as cartoon students pulling their hair out during stressful weeks) and empathy. Ken stated that “a big part of our job description is time spent in what we call engagement, which is reaching out to kids that are not logging in and working or they’re logging in and working but not succeeding.” Carla spoke of the necessity of reaching out to students within the first week or two of course enrollment so they would not “fall behind.” In addition to the basic technology of phones and email, participants relied on other digital tools to help students engage with the subject material. Carla noted she could use body language when on camera, but otherwise she relied on speaking with an individual or group or using emojis. She expressed appreciation for her virtual organization’s platform’s capacity for teachers to divide a large group into breakout rooms, which the teacher could then rotate through as needed. Ken shared a goal of attaining a higher level use of screencasts, video, graphics, and music to improve student engagement.

Meg was the only participant who talked about synchronous contact with students as a means of helping students engage both with the course content and with her. While these
conversations are institutionally mandated in the form of DBAs, thus students participate by
necessity, Meg reaches out to students informally at the start of each DBA to help them relax, so
they can better share what they know. This informal relationship-building to help students
engage, even though by phone or video-conference, allows a more sustained individual focus,
Meg feels, than a simple greeting and check-in as students enter a brick-and-mortar classroom.
Meg also noted that virtual students were more receptive to her “getting on” them, in
conversation or through digital messages, to “step it up,” which she felt was due to the lack of
“peer audience.” Finally, Meg shared an appreciation for the diversity of her virtual classes,
which she views as highly motivating for students, noting she can put together groups from
various states and even internationally. Each of these engagement strategies, however, involves
her reaching out to students.

**Encountering challenges in engaging virtual students.** Another theme emerged
regarding the challenges the participants encountered in reaching out to engage students
digitally. They were concerned with their efforts to assist students with the most basic level of
engagement, essentially compliance in completing the work, and also with assisting students
toward a deeper engagement with content that could lead to greater understanding or a change in
appreciation for the subject. With regard to the former, for example, Ken noted that the teacher’s
responsibility to reach out to students can be hindered by not having “the right email” or when
“the kids aren’t even opening their emails.” Carla, too, described challenges with personal
outreach, despite its importance. For example, she said a phone call “trumps a lot of the other
stuff when you *can actually get them* on the phone and speak to them.” Ken lamented missing
phone numbers, while Carla suggested some teachers’ large enrollment numbers create a time
challenge in terms of connecting with each individual student.
Virtual teachers may also face problems actually following through with intended efforts to engage students more deeply. Similar to Ken’s observation that the pleasures in working with students in each setting are similar while the frustrations differ, Carla commented that the means of facilitating student engagement with content are the same in both environments (fun activities such as games, interesting or relevant topics, videos, humor), but in the virtual world they can easily be “overlooked or ignored.” Laura, while not using that phrasing, talked about the entertainment piece of engagement and noted that throughout her teaching career she would be “very animated, do silly things, or would use humor to keep [students] engaged,” but added this requires “more creativity” in the virtual classroom. Meg, too, talked about thinking creatively to continue providing opportunities for students to do hands-on, project-based activities, which she believes are optimal for real student engagement with the content.

The participants described other obstacles to increasing the engagement level of their virtual course materials to the point where students move beyond doing just what is required to pass the class. Laura, Aaron, and Carla all mentioned copyright challenges when seeking engaging videos and other visuals they could use with students. They pointed out privately that managed organizations follow a different set of rules than publicly based educational institutions. When appropriate materials without copyright issues were located, Aaron, as both a course designer and instructor, actually wondered whether students were ever really engaged with the provided content or were “simply skipping to the assessments” while just “using the content as a reference.”

Finally, the simple fact of distance may create challenges to virtual teachers’ efforts to engage students. Ken observed that his virtual students,” because they’re not in a room with him, will tend to give up easily, and I’m not there to reach them in that moment they want to give up. I’m not physically present.” This was of particular urgency, he explained, when the assignment
designs were of poor quality. Carla described a missing “level of engagement” in general when students do not “physically leave their house, get dressed, go to a school building.” She worried that when it’s “just on the computer [and] fed to them … they can choose to respond or not respond.”

**Acknowledging differences in student engagement indicators.** All of this said, each of the participants was able to recall moments of clear engagement on the part of virtual students. The third theme for this relationship facet comprises the need for virtual teachers to learn alternative indicators of student engagement. For example, rather than seeing students extend their learning as in a brick-and-mortar classroom, when students went beyond what was asked by the curriculum, virtual teachers would typically learn about it when the student reached out. For instance, Laura’s budding writer combined elements of two virtual courses to improve her poetry, and Meg’s marine biology student created an extensive project on sea turtles. In both of these cases, the virtual teachers had no awareness of the scope of the students’ efforts until the students contacted them to share their work, sometimes months after completing the course.

Other indicators of virtual student engagement participants cited were inherent in the learning systems. That is, Laura declared engagement was “evident by how [students] changed the way they wrote.” Ken, too, found clues to students’ growth, a sign of engagement, in students’ writings. Because this was often the sole place to “see” engagement, these English teachers read students’ assignments very carefully. Carla pointed out one indicator of at least some level of engagement is assignment completion data. Students who do not log in or do not exhibit progress are identified through course data, including, for Carla, a “donut graph” showing time spent on courses and work completed. She noted this does not account for effort, but provides some potentially helpful information about the most basic level of student engagement, with “a glance.”
Despite these indicators, the level of student engagement and the reasons it flourished or not were often unclear to the participants. Ken shared a metaphor that the “seeds of teaching” often do not land in the “proper soil” due to the life circumstances of many young people, but he added in brick-and-mortar schools it can be “less of a mystery what’s going on with them.” Uncertain reasons for student engagement, and especially disengagement, could enhance feelings of frustration at times for some participants. In addition, there was a notable lessening of emphasis on motivating students toward general academic success or toward setting and striving to reach life and career goals compared to participant comments when describing brick-and-mortar teaching. The exception to this was Meg, who indicated her capacity to engage and motivate students through a range of levels was enhanced in the virtual setting.

Table 5.2 shows a synopsis of participants’ comments about their brick-and-mortar and virtual engagement efforts as well as their perceived virtual challenges to engage students. In total, the modifications in engagement efforts by these teachers in the virtual setting reflect a shift in emphasis from trying to engage students with the subject by making it cool or exciting through games and humor, for instance, to trying to engage them in the work itself. Most participants admitted to focusing on course completion rates at times. Without individual daily contact with students and the accompanying awareness of those students’ needs, their ongoing desire for student engagement coalesced around successful assignment submission, such as by somehow being there as close to the moment students “want to give up” as possible through tutorials or timely emails. Only Meg experienced her efforts to engage students as more successful virtually than in the brick-and-mortar setting.
Table 5.2 Efforts and challenges in engaging and motivating students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Meg</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Ken</th>
<th>Aaron</th>
<th>Carla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brick-and-mortar Efforts</strong></td>
<td>- goal setting for the course and life</td>
<td>- showmanship</td>
<td>- sales techniques to meet students’ needs</td>
<td>- discussion</td>
<td>- games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- enforcing deadlines</td>
<td>- cool physics concepts</td>
<td></td>
<td>- group work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- goals w/in activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- knowing students well</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virtual Efforts</strong></td>
<td>- individual conversations (DBA frequent)</td>
<td>- email rotation</td>
<td>- minimal effort by own admission to &quot;reach out&quot;</td>
<td>- body language (rare – only w/ video)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- diverse grouping</td>
<td>- phone calls</td>
<td>- imagining diverse student in designing a course</td>
<td>- breakout sessions (rare)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- “getting on” students</td>
<td>- encouraging announcements</td>
<td></td>
<td>- emojis (fall back strategy)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- humor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virtual Challenges</strong></td>
<td>- replicating projects / hands-on activities</td>
<td>- copyright challenges</td>
<td>- incorrect emails</td>
<td>- inability to get students on the phone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- more creativity required to engage students</td>
<td>- students ignoring email</td>
<td>- copyright challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- missing phone numbers</td>
<td>- easy to ignore “best practices”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- can’t react in the moment when students give up</td>
<td>- enrollment #s limit reaching out as needed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- too easy for students to do nothing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Caring**

Teachers’ relationships with students also encompass feelings of care and nurturing actions as seen in their curricular, instructional, and classroom management decisions. All of the participants described experiencing emotions and taking actions based in care for their students, as suggested in the literature (Hargreaves, 1998, Kitching et al., 2009; Nias, 1989; O’Connor, 2008). Beginning in their brick-and-mortar years, these teachers attempted taking a student perspective, at least in part, to create a more welcoming, generative learning environment. They also sometimes took on additional work to ensure student success. For example, Aaron, after shadowing students during his preservice years, made a commitment to reducing boredom in his classes and to igniting student passion for sciences whenever possible. He sought the most
exciting examples of scientific concepts and regularly shared videos, artifacts, and stories with his students.

Laura paid close attention to student behaviors and was ready to ask friendly, caring questions to assist those who struggled. She also observed that “students perform in your class based on how well they like you. If you are warm and friendly, and you convey your concern about them, they will work for you.” She talked about experiential forms of caring; that is, having students see your “smiling face” and greeting them as they enter the classroom as well as of providing “treat bags” and strong words of encouragement before AP exams. Laura focused on adding relevance to the heart of the curriculum; for example, she created enjoyable writing assignments to help students with specific skill development rather than getting “bogged down” with work that might seem less relevant or interesting to students. In return, she believed students would say that although they worked harder in her class than in others, she “provided more support and care for them than they had experienced in the past,” including care “beyond the classroom” as well as concern for “what kind of skills” they would take into their futures.

Ken, too, changed his curriculum to add variety for students, and he based his engagement efforts on caring as evidenced in his knowing students’ needs and desires. He added they “knew” he “always really worked hard to see their potential and see the good in them.” He also paid attention to his own efforts and emotions and did not “allow” himself to “indulge” in “negative thoughts” about students, instead relying on “compassion” to understand that a particular student “really struggles” and will “need a lot of help.”

Meg talked about her empathy for “kids in big bodies” and described providing goal-setting assistance. She also had students work with her during lunch, which afforded her the opportunity to realize the effort they put into the course. Additionally, she showed care for students by making “good calls” to their homes, which meant parents would hear from the school
when their child did something well rather than only receiving calls related to problems and misbehaviors.

Finally, Carla observed that within world history and government, an exciting and relevant topic eventually surfaced for nearly every student. She also added games to her curriculum and incorporated partner and group work so students would enjoy the learning process. She believed her demeanor encouraged students to share aspects of their personal interests with her during non-class times.

Each of the participant’s efforts to show care in the brick-and-mortar classroom reflect an attempt to connect with students and to meet either their stated or teacher-perceived needs, encompassing Noddings’s (2010) relational and virtuous caring. As with other facets of relationship, teachers made comparisons between their brick-and-mortar and virtual teaching experiences of caring. While as virtual teachers these participants continued to try to see the learning environment from a student’s perspective and while they were still willing to devote extra effort to caring actions, two key themes emerged from their comments. First, some participants expressed the sense that while the intent for caring remains steady, the forms that caring takes diverge from their brick-and-mortar experiences by necessity of the distance and the digital tools available. Second, the effort required to demonstrate care in the virtual setting increased for some participants in comparison to their experiences in the brick-and-mortar environment.

**Virtual forms of caring.** Again, the first theme encompasses the participants’ need to change the ways they expressed caring in the virtual setting. Laura extolled the importance of first impressions in saying that “the format is different, but the message is the same. Do your first interactions come across as welcoming and supportive, or are you just fulfilling a job? Students have a teacher radar that can sense this immediately!” Thus, Laura envisioned her
virtual “landing page” as the entrance to her classroom and tried to see it from the students’ perspective, making “the announcements and everything eye-catching and interesting from a teenager’s viewpoint” through the use of sports, colors, and brief videos. All of this would let her students know they were not dealing with “a robot” that lacked emotion and the capacity for personal connection. She also worked to portray care to students through humor, which was a strategy she employed during her brick-and-mortar practice, as well as with emails, phone calls, announcements, and short digital tutorials, which were new strategies for her. She shared a strong sense that when she reached out virtually to a struggling student who then succeeded, it mattered to them that she cared “about whether they failed or not.” Additionally, Laura adjusted assignments, allowed students to use various media to meet the expectations of courses, and called herself the “buffer between failure and compliance.”

Ken described caring in the virtual world as consistently making good use of students’ time: “They’re going to come and go so fast that you need to just really push your agenda of learning very strongly, really be mindful of those limited opportunities and not waste time.” His energies are not directed toward creating an appealing visual presence but rather toward strong feedback. Because feedback is his primary means of expressing care virtually, he seems determined to make it very specific to the individual, rather than “canned” or universally applicable. This level of attention to feedback in the brick-and-mortar setting was not possible due to time constraints and extensive additional teaching responsibilities such as curricular design and delivery.

Laura and Meg also talked about providing useful, specific, and rich feedback as an important means of conveying care to their virtual students. Meg described the feedback process as much easier in the virtual classroom. Multiple choice assessments are computer scored, and she has “more time to focus on the short-answer questions.” She, too, described feeling that she
has “a lot more opportunity and time” than in the brick-and-mortar environment, where providing quality feedback was actually a source of frustration. Laura described her virtual feedback as “very specific,” often including “an example sentence.”

In thinking about care for the virtual student, Aaron shared his awareness that he controls the level of difficulty of questions. This was also true in the brick-and-mortar setting, but in virtual course design he has no capacity to follow-up those questions with a caring response after gauging the reactions of students. Thus, he described trying to honor what a typical course of study would look like “while also not making it unnecessarily difficult.” He also tried to imagine a truly typical virtual student after designing the first few courses. This perspective-taking has led him to use more relevant examples.

For Meg, caring for the virtual student takes the form of both providing more personal contact time and of helping students feel more comfortable with the requirements of the virtual course, especially the DBA. She described a process of “calming” students down at the start of a DBA through more personal conversation and sharing, whether that’s about the weather or weekend plans. She talked about deliberately learning about students’ lives through any opportunity for informal conversation in order to help them succeed. She also said students are quite honest with her and share specific academic struggles readily once “rapport is established.” While this form of caring was also true in her brick-and-mortar classroom, the virtual setting affords her the opportunity to engage in more of those informal one-to-one conversations.

For Ken, the elimination of bias is a huge factor in the care he can show students because “there’s nothing to really influence [me] like there is with brick-and-mortar. It’s really grown me, as a teacher in giving student feedback and focusing on the student’s work as opposed to the student’s personality or whatever relationship you’ve developed with them.” This neutrality allows him to provide the type of care he feels students really need in terms of nurturing growth
in their language skills and content knowledge, and moves his relational care into virtuous caring, which may be common (Eisenbach, 2015) virtually.

However, Aaron questioned the quality of any relationship based on feedback, let alone a caring relationship, saying that although it is a “push” in his organization for teachers to use both the student’s and their own names in feedback as well as “something specific” about the work, he wondered how students feel receiving these comments from someone they do not really know as a person. Carla eventually discovered that asking for a response from the student in her feedback could open avenues for an email exchange style conversation and perhaps a deepening of their communicative relationship, one means, for her, of expressing care.

**Efforts to care.** The second theme that emerged around virtual teacher caring asserts the effort required to demonstrate caring in the virtual setting increases for some people compared to the brick-and-mortar environment, in large part because of the size of the student enrollments combined with limited time. Carla called it “a pretty good feat” to make the required initial contact with students, despite its importance. Ken noted the rapidity with which students come into and out of courses, adding the relationship becomes more “with their work” rather than with other aspects of their lives, so his attention and care becomes focused on their work. However, he said, “identifying individualized student needs is often more difficult” than when students are in the room with you, and there are more limitations on adapting “course content to meet [those] needs.” Still, Laura pointed out not all “300 students” need the same amount of care and attention.

Carla noted differences in the ease of connecting with students in order to provide additional support. She experienced brick-and-mortar students as a “captive audience” and virtual students as sometimes elusive. She pointed out that her organization contracts “with school districts” and not individual students, so despite caring about the student, teachers do not
have any sense of their “schedule” or “how a student is performing in their other courses.” With such limited information, Carla wondered what levers of help virtual teachers might have with individual student issues beyond the basics of academic content.

Because feedback became a primary means of expressing virtual caring as noted in the first theme, in cases where students are missing phone numbers, not answering emails, and not responding to feedback, a void may emerge in a teacher’s feelings of connection to the student. Demonstrating care by reaching out and providing that rich feedback can become a source of frustration. Carla said providing written, rather than verbal, feedback was “one of the biggest challenges in transitioning” to virtual teaching. She spoke of being acutely aware her comments were for individuals, as opposed to reviewing a “test with everyone all at once” with the accompanying spoken presentation and body language. She put in extra effort to provide effective comments and questions for student work, while again, Aaron questioned the notion of basing a caring relationship on written feedback.

Meg was the only participant to describe her efforts at caring as having more impact in the virtual setting. She poignantly explained through an analogy involving puppies that she felt the same amount of care in each setting, but because her virtual work allows her to get closer to each student through additional time in individual conversations, she’s more compelled to think, “Oh no, I’ve put so much time and effort into building this relationship,” and the student was “doing so awesome” we’ve got to get her “back on track.” She added that her desire to help is equal in both settings, but “because I get to know my students more at the virtual setting, I feel a deeper desire ... to work the very long hours ... to help them.” It’s important to realize that she described virtual teaching as not so much a job as “a way of life.” Table 5.3 below summarizes each participants’ brick-and-mortar forms of caring as well as their virtual forms and the frustrations they encountered in enacting care virtually.
Table 5.3 Changes in forms of caring and virtual frustrations to these efforts to care

|                          | Meg                     | Laura                  | Ken                     | Aaron                  | Carla                  |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|                        |                        |                        |
| Brick-and-mortar forms of caring | - took students’ perspectives  
- little kids in big bodies  
- lunch work  
- goal setting  
- “good” calls home | - took students’ perspectives  
- warm, friendly  
- relevance / concern for future  
- smile, greeting  
- treat bags | - took students’ perspectives  
- knew students well (needs)  
- knew self well (biases)  
- look for positives | - took students’ perspectives  
- did extra work to find cool examples of processes and concepts  
- less boredom | - took students’ perspectives  
- partner/group work  
- games, etc.  
- demeanor encourages sharing |
| Virtual forms of caring   | - more personal contact time  
- increase student comfort w/requirements  
- know students for relevance  
- seek honesty  
- better fdbk | - engaging landing page  
- humor  
- lots of contact  
- tutorials  
- adjusted assignments  
- better fdbk | - respect students’ time  
- strong fdbk w/less bias  
- relational care into virtuous care | - relevant examples for diverse enrollment  
- attention to difficulty level in design | - ask questions in feedback to get a ‘give & take’ going |
| Virtual effort/frustrations in caring | - time and # of students hinder contact efforts  
- individual conversations allow stronger connections  
- will put the time into having these talks (“a way of life”) | - time and # of students hinder contact efforts  
- w/out contact less feelings of connection | - time and # of students hinder contact efforts  
- identifying needs  
- limitations on course adaptations  
- relationship with work not rest of life | - How well can you establish a relationship via feedback?  
- w/out contact less feelings of connection | - time and # of students hinder contact efforts  
- elusive students  
- limited view of students’ academic lives  
- limited levers of help |

Taken together, these five virtual teachers depict their intent to care about their students as a stable feature in their relationships with learners across contexts. However, without the affordance of demonstrating their caring approach daily and through non-verbal means, they described, with the exception of Meg, feeling less connection to many students than might be the case in the brick-and-mortar setting. Meg described a sense of better knowing her virtual students and “investing” in them as individuals so that her feelings of commitment to their success are heightened. The other participants depicted substantial efforts to enact care for virtual students, particularly with regard to written feedback, but a missing “human” connection, the foundation for caring, limited their perceptions of having the type of caring relationships they experienced with brick-and-mortar students.
Modeling of Valued Skills and Dispositions

A fourth important facet of teachers’ relationships with students embraces the idea of helping students to make their way in the world through acquiring critical attitudes and values. While this includes helping students find some level of passion for subject areas taught, which participants mentioned in their responses to a variety of questions, it also envelops the start of at least a basic mentoring relationship in which teachers model both particular values and skills, including what it means to care (Borup et al., 2013; Eisenbach, 2015). Participants’ comments were again diverse as they described teaching experiences and beliefs that indicated a sense of modeling for students.

The idea of modeling emerged, often unprompted, as participants talked about their brick-and-mortar practices. Ken had clearly given much thought to this concept and spoke of it more directly and with more details than the other participants. He noted, “Modeling is so much more than just the skills.” That is, “You’re modeling so many other things all the time because there are so many variables that you need to respond to or react to.” He went so far as to say “modeling is everything in teaching.” Specifically, he described modeling as “the essence of teaching,” which could entail that a teacher should “model content skills ... model professionalism, work ethic, winning attitude, whatever it is.”

Meg lamented the lack of “a positive role model” in teenagers’ lives who might “help them set goals” and “hold them accountable for what they do and what they don’t do,” a role she described as “probably one of [her] strong suits.” She specifically talked about her “rapport” with both students and parents as a strength in helping students grow and develop as learners and people. She described an instance of naturally modeling positive coping skills early in her brick-and-mortar practice. In her “first day” story of solving a problem of writing on a whiteboard in permanent marker, she shared her students’ appreciation for the “life lesson.” Meg also noted the
importance of respect, something she models with pride. Students have told her one of the things they “love” about her is that “it doesn’t matter what I’ve done in the past, you respect me for who I am in your class.” She said she responds to them, “Absolutely, because that’s the relationship you and I have. I will give you utmost respect, I will trust you wholeheartedly, until you give me reason not to do so.” She added that “the kids like that’ and “tactually value it.”

Carla also modeled respect. Although she was not as explicit about this aspect of her teaching, she described at length her belief that sophomores were old enough to “drive a car” and to accept other responsibilities, and so she tried to not only treat them fairly but also “respect them as an adult.” She described building this respect on informal “back-and-forth conversation” about a range of subjects, some personal, that led to a healthy rapport. This mindful work toward shared respect, combined with her expectations for engagement in social studies discussions, reflects Bernstein’s (2013) belief in the importance of young people feeling they are known as a precursor for taking necessary “intellectual risks.”

Laura spoke of modeling care and commitment to learning the subject, although she did not use the term “modeling.” She aspired to do “the job well,” and she held particularly high expectations for students when teaching Advanced Placement Composition; however, even in remedial courses she talked about creating writing assignments that would enable the most reluctant students to work on skill improvement. Placing a premium on acquiring the essential communication skills, Laura modeled flexibility in her practice, especially with students with diverse learning preferences. Unlike Cook (2011), Laura was unsure her efforts would counter any of the negative influences in a young person’s life; rather, she shared a metaphor of teachers being the “watering pot for a little seed.” She sees a teacher not as a single influential person who influences students’ lives but rather someone able to “provide them something they needed along the way.”
Aaron never used the framework of modeling described here; however, he did talk about incidents and practices that were likely modeling particular values and dispositions. For instance, his daily opening discussion in the first brick-and-mortar classroom, often student-led, modeled a type of verbal and emotional engagement around issues of importance to students and helped him create a certain classroom culture and community, something he said he valued. He described creating opportunities to model excitement and passion for the content, and by welcoming newspaper publicity, Aaron also modeled the possible benefits of public recognition for academic work.

The primary theme emerging in the virtual environment was a lack of clarity in the participants’ sense of how they were modeling for virtual students. While an interest in inspiring and motivating students to adopt particular values and practices remained for these teachers as they began virtual teaching, their specific strategies for doing so were less evident and certain than in the brick-and-mortar setting.

**Lack of clear modeling.** Each participant expressed some vagueness about modeling for virtual students. For example, while Meg’s rapport with students and parents seemed to hold true in her sense of both virtual and brick-and-mortar teaching, she told no stories of modeling “life lessons” as a virtual teacher. She did, however, talk about sharing her enthusiasm for learning science, primarily during “science nights” when she designed and led experiments using materials easily found in most homes. As Aaron moved into the second brick-and-mortar environment and then into virtual education, he continued to talk about wanting his students to develop qualities such as subject-interest, passion, and a desire to learn more, but he was less clear about his role in demonstrating those qualities beyond incorporating engaging videos into his lessons. Carla sought individual “discussions” by asking questions of students as part of their
assignment feedback, which seemed the only way she was continuing the modeling of skills that she mentioned in the brick-and-mortar setting.

Laura, too, was vague about her opportunities to model for virtual students. She has spent time creating a welcoming home page for students, and she described other ways she ensures a safe space in her courses, such as removing students’ posts that might border on disrespect, but it was unclear whether she considered these significant methods of modeling certain personal behaviors. Laura also characterized her “showmanship” as a way to engage students rather than to show them the value of the course content. Despite her admitted discomfort in creating videos to explain challenging concepts better, she has been willing to do so in order to increase course completion rates. She said nothing about sharing her enthusiasm or value for the particular details of the subject. Perhaps tellingly, her metaphor for virtual teaching seemed less directly impactful on student growth than that for brick-and-mortar teaching: She moved from feeling like a watering pot to feeling like “a keyboard” or “the voice in the sky.”

Only Ken, mindfully, and in both learning environments, declared his intent to model particular behaviors. He modeled being positive in the face of challenges, saying, “The best, appropriate response is to do what you’re required to do, make the best and take from it what you can and then move to other things.” He also spoke of modeling in subtle ways, through conscientiously grading and avoiding “canned feedback” as well as by completing the virtual course readings. He said of virtual students, “They deserve rich feedback. They deserve a teacher grading their paper that actually read the story too.” While it is possible some students may realize the extent of his efforts around feedback and preparation to engage with their work, Ken’s perseverance and conscientious approach may also be known solely by him. He alluded to this when observing, “It’s a huge advantage to be in person modeling something” because of the immediate contact and the visual engagement enabling students to “pick up on the skills a little
faster because you can model right in their presence.” Ken contrasted this to the virtual setting in which modeling is “definitely mostly limited to reading and writing, to written communication.”

Table 5.4 below summarizes participants’ descriptions of their experiences with modeling in each setting.

Table 5.4 A comparison of modeling in brick-and-mortar and virtual settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Meg</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Ken</th>
<th>Aaron</th>
<th>Carla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brick-and-mortar</strong></td>
<td>-holding students accountable as a strong suit -rapport with students/families - “life lesson” in problem solving -modeling trust and respect</td>
<td>-modeling care for others and for the subject -modeling high expectations</td>
<td>- “essence of teaching” - “content skills, professionalism, work ethic, and winning attitude” as useful to model -visual demos</td>
<td>-modeling passion for the subject -modeling outside attention as valuable</td>
<td>-modeling respect -importance of discussion to modeling, including by peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virtual</strong></td>
<td>- modeling excitement for science via family “science nights”</td>
<td>- care put into home page</td>
<td>- “essence of teaching” still -positivity when challenged -conscientious approach to her own work</td>
<td>- engaging videos</td>
<td>- questions in feedback to initiate “discussions” w/individuals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though all teachers were asked about their roles in each educational setting, only Ken and Meg spoke of modeling directly. All five teachers provided multiple details in responses during the brick-and-mortar-focused questioning that reflect modeling. However, Laura, Aaron, and Carla were particularly vague about ways they might be modeling for virtual students. Ken’s clear interest in the value of modeling as the core of his professional practice makes his experience particularly valuable for this facet of relationships. He described an unrelenting effort to model his values as a virtual teacher despite very little sense of whether his key messages regarding a conscientious, consistent approach to high-quality work are received.

**Comprehending Students’ Understanding**

After teachers help students engage with the subject, gaining insight into the type (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005) and extent of students’ understanding of critical concepts is an
important part of their professional practice. There is a general sense among educators that effectiveness here can be enhanced by strong relationships with, and awareness of, students as individuals. The participants talked about student understanding both as a simple transmission of facts and information that could be assessed through multiple methods, including computer scoring, and as a multifaceted process involving an accurate and perhaps layered understanding of complex concepts teachers would observe over time.

Laura, for example, talked about student writing in the brick-and-mortar classroom as an effective and reliable way to gain a sense of student understanding and skill development, saying, “Because they had to do it in class in front of me,” she said, “I knew they didn’t cheat. I could see the progress of working on sentence structure and parallelism and how to write effectively and how to organize your thoughts.” She added, “Just about everything I did during a week, the small, mini activities, always led up to some type of a writing or discussion assessment.” Small group presentation was her third means of determining student understanding. Ken summarized his brick-and-mortar strategies of assessing students’ growth in understanding as “verbal responses, testing” and demonstration. He called these “pretty much the three best ways.”

Meg expressed hope that students would replicate activities from the classroom at home, because showing “family and friends [is] when the real learning takes place.” If students can “explain why they’re seeing what they’re seeing to other people, now they have not only learned the material, but they’ve mastered it. They can replicate it without you being there and then use that information.” Her knowledge of when this happens comes directly from her relationship with students and their informal conversations.

In the brick-and-mortar classroom, Carla preferred partner and group work to written tests and quizzes for gaining insight into her students’ understanding of course material. She
described circulating “through the room” and talking to students “about what they were doing.” She explained their responses quickly revealed whether “they know what they’re doing ... or they’re just totally clueless.” Carla also suggested her accuracy in assessing student understanding was better via observation than through paper-and-pencil testing.

Teaching a group of students simultaneously complicated yet also enriched how teachers were able to provide and process details indicative of understanding. For example, Ken appreciated the capacity for a single student to deepen the conversation for others within brick-and-mortar group work. Carla, too, said it “helps the student ... when they hear their peers sharing and talking.” Both teachers acknowledged the benefit of observing these peer interactions as a means of gaining insight into each student’s understanding. Meg expressed a differing perspective of the brick-and-mortar situation, pointing out that “unfortunately with all the demands they put on teachers, you don’t really have time to delve in one-on-one with these kids. You’re looking for a correct response.” She added, “You can do periodic checks for misconceptions and so forth, but as long as they’re pretty much on the right track, you’re moving forward.”

As the participants discussed their virtual teaching practices, they did not seem to change the value they place on determining students’ understanding of the course material. Two themes emerged that were not emphasized, and often not mentioned, when they discussed their brick-and-mortar years. The first theme involves teachers’ feelings of increased control over the learning process as seen in their pacing to ensure understanding and in a decrease of their own emotions during assessing, thus allowing a strong focus on students’ cognitive growth. The second theme, in contrast, indicates a loss of teacher confidence that student work reflects their actual understanding of the course content, either because it may not be their own work or because it is a single measure.
**Increased control of the learning process.** First, Meg talked about taking advantage of the opportunity to slow her self-paced virtual students’ progress through the predesigned modules, telling them, “It’s great you want to move forward, but I need to make sure you really understand this.” She was comfortable then requesting further discussion or additional research from the student. Her virtual school allows her the flexibility of adding “enrichment assignments” for credit, which helps her to “hone in on these weaknesses, these misconceptions, and ... address them completely one-on-one.”

Meg also touted her capacity as a virtual teacher to carefully read student writing and then follow up with a discussion through which she can really determine whether each student understood what they wrote. She explained that with so many resources at their disposal, students can often provide correct information without understanding “why it’s the right answer.” She uses verbal check-ins and DBAs to find misconceptions and assess whether students are making important “connections.” Meg placed enormous value on “allowing students plenty of opportunity to talk” and described conversation as good for their relationship and for her sense of whether “they are learning.”

Second, Laura talked extensively about the ways she could use technology to provide struggling virtual students with additional material, individual tutorials, and extensive feedback to further their understanding. She controls the pacing of these supplements based on her sense of student growth in understanding, and she appreciated the fact that she could do all of this without “having to worry about thirty other kids in the room sitting there waiting for me to finish explaining to this student.” In this sense, perhaps time seems more abundant and under the teacher’s control than in the brick-and-mortar classroom.

Ken expressed an appreciation for his capacity in the virtual classroom to focus on students’ work products without bias in assessing, or evaluating, their understanding. He spoke
of the brick-and-mortar classroom challenge of ignoring personal emotions toward students, especially toward those who clown around, are rude, or show no respect. While not discussing his potential emotions toward habitually non-responsive virtual students, he stressed that emotions can influence how a teacher interprets student work. He also asserted that because of the number and type of writing assignments in his virtual course, if he reads closely, he can eventually “hear” the “voice” in students’ writing and therefore come to “know them,” enabling him “to determine whether they are learning” or even whether the work is theirs.

Again, Aaron was an exception. Rather than increased teacher control of the learning process, he pointed out that virtual students are often “more responsible for their own learning.” Expressing ambiguity about the value of this autonomy, he explained that virtual students would tell him “they struggled with something, they talked to their teacher at school, and eventually they just figured it out on their own.” He added, “They’re telling me this without ever seeming to recognize they could have come to me as an online teacher to help them,” and so his sense was his virtual students feel “whether it’s through the resources I provide or whether it’s through just searching and finding videos on their own, it’s their job to learn the material.” His assessment of student understanding was mainly determined by whether they had solved problems correctly.

**Loss of confidence in assessing student understanding.** Authenticity of student work emerged as a pervasive concern. Laura said that despite many tools for increasing student understanding, it is hard to know when they’re learning because “they plagiarize so bad.” After additional discussion around determining whether students were doing their own work, Laura said, “I know that they’re learning when I see it in their written response or their writing.” She talked about depth and analysis in writing, concluding “in English it’s pretty easy to tell.” Somewhat contradicting herself, she also extolled the usefulness of plagiarism-detecting software.
Both Carla and Aaron expressed alarm at the level of plagiarism in virtual courses, with Aaron stating he’s increasingly worried “about the security of our tests and the degree to which students are cheating on them.” He has begun designing tests that are “completely open book, open Internet, so it’s less about assessing what’s in their brain and more about assessing their ability to find the right information when they need it.”

In addition to issues of whether students are doing their own work, participants also talked about a narrowing of tools to gain insight into student understanding. Carla, for instance, cited the “higher student–teacher ratio” in some virtual courses as necessitating reliance on formal written assessment, which, unlike Laura, she found less reliable in providing details about actual student understanding. Ken suggested that while it is beneficial in the virtual classroom not having students distracting one another, “the drawback is when you do have those 30 teenagers, and one of them actually gets their hand up and asks a question, you realize maybe 26 other kids … didn’t catch that [until then].”

Only Meg expressed the sense that she better understands the level of her virtual students’ understanding than she did her brick-and-mortar students. Her organization not only affords her multiple opportunities to engage with individual students synchronously but also supports her “science nights” where students and their families learn together. Again, Meg believes student talk about why an experiment results in certain data or effects, is a strong indicator of understanding.

Aaron, however, also talked about the complexity of student understanding, including the general lack of emphasis on empathy and other important ways of knowing in virtual coursework, remarking that even if students correctly solve problems—in either environment—they may not “have a conceptual understanding of the larger framework [or of] the concepts behind the course.” He said most of the virtual assessments he designs “can only tell us about
certain aspects of their understanding.” He added “more writing assignments” would be helpful, which instructors could add; however, on further reflection he explained that while instructors “are responding to students’ needs,” they often are “not really aware of all of the instructional content.” He concluded designers might “develop an appropriate writing assessment more easily than an instructor because they have the whole picture of the objectives, the instructional content, everything in the course.”

Table 5.5 synthesizes the participants’ comments of both their brick-and-mortar and virtual experiences with regard to assessing student understanding.

Table 5.5 A comparison of understanding student understanding in each setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Meg</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Ken</th>
<th>Aaron</th>
<th>Carla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brick-and-mortar</strong></td>
<td>- teaching others</td>
<td>- student writing</td>
<td>- oral responses</td>
<td>- amazed at his own lack of attention to understanding</td>
<td>- accuracy better through observing and discussing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- felt less connected to individual’s understanding</td>
<td>- in class work was their own discussion</td>
<td>- testing</td>
<td>- small group/ partner visits</td>
<td>- small group/ partner visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- small group presentations</td>
<td>- demonstration</td>
<td>- reactions to peers ideas</td>
<td>- reactions to peers ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virtual strategies</strong></td>
<td>- controls pace/ thoroughness of understanding</td>
<td>- can provide additional materials and attention as needed w/out worrying about other students</td>
<td>- unbiased, unemotional attention to work products</td>
<td>- verifies problems are solved correctly</td>
<td>- evaluates written assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- lots of student talk to verify grasp of concepts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virtual concerns</strong></td>
<td>- minor concerns with plagiarism</td>
<td>- plagiarism</td>
<td>- lack of peer interaction to increase ideas</td>
<td>- plagiarism</td>
<td>- plagiarism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- assessments are too narrow to get a full sense of understanding</td>
<td>- reliance on formal written assessment not as revealing as discussions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taken together, the participants’ remarks described gains in their ability to assess and understand virtual students’ understanding of the course material through a new capacity for pacing and reducing their own biases toward individual students. Yet they also indicated a sense of loss in their ability to hear students’ comments in relation to their peers’ ideas. Their usual knowledge of individual students may be diminished, with only those who read a large amount of student
writing (Ken and Laura) or regularly converse with students (Meg) feeling some confidence in
the authenticity of most of their virtual students’ assignments, although all of the participants
indicated plagiarism can be a significant issue in their practice.

**Trust**

Trust can be considered foundational for the facets of relationship discussed above. Trust
may be experienced as the sense of safety allowing students to take appropriate academic risks
and as the foundation of learning relationships. Trust is typically present as teachers work to
facilitate student engagement with the subject and interest in their modeling of values. Trust
allows teachers and students to relax enough to enjoy each other’s company during the learning
process, and trust provides the connection enabling teachers to show care. For these five
teachers, trust may very well be, if not essential to their sense of professional success (Rodgers
and Raider-Roth, 2006) and solid relationships with students (Hargreaves, 1998; Rodgers &
Raider-Roth, 2006), at least very important to them. Further, these teachers’ comments indicated,
as is common in brick-and-mortar schools, that the responsibility for creating trusting classroom
climates lies with teachers because of their positional power. Indeed, the participants described
developing and maintaining students’ trust in their various roles as teacher and in the learning
process for their work together. Using the Bryk and Schneider (2002) framework for relational
trust, the participants’ efforts to nurture trust are evident. These include “going to bat” for
students (personal regard for others), maintaining consistency in classroom routines and
management (integrity), showing flexibility in work expectations for extenuating circumstances
(respect), and creating truly engaging learning activities (competence).

However, two significant themes emerged as the participants discussed trust
in the virtual setting. First, some teachers expressed uncertainty about whether they can
effectively build a trusting learning environment for students virtually. It was not clear whether
they do not believe trust is truly possible in a virtual learning environment, particularly in a predominantly asynchronous learning environment, or whether they simply believe they are missing those skills. Second, they described feeling distinctly challenged in their efforts to trust their students. While trust in one’s students was never mentioned in participants’ descriptions of the brick-and-mortar setting, it was a prominent theme as they described their relationships with virtual students.

**Uncertainty in the capacity to build trust in a virtual environment.** For some virtual teachers, the virtual setting does not offer the same affordances for building trust as the brick-and-mortar environment. Aside from a few basic strategies that included using humor and creating a welcoming environment, such as the virtual home page, the participants intimated a lack of clarity regarding how to surmount the distance created by physical separation. For example, while Ken stressed the importance of consistency in building trust in either environment—of meaning what you say and saying what you mean, as well as of follow through—he noted that perceiving students’ trust in you, or any of their feelings toward you, is one of the most critical challenges in the virtual classroom. While expressing an interest in determining whether virtual students trust him, Ken said, “It’s really hard to get a read on what’s going on in their head about you as a teacher.” He compared this to brick-and-mortar classrooms, where “they give you all kinds of cues: put their head down, roll their eyes, smile, try to help you out ... there’s a million little things students do.” While his comments blended liking and trusting, he also noted it was easy to tell when trust was missing in the brick-and-mortar classroom, as students might try “to avoid being in your classroom, coming in late every day, putting their head down, rolling their eyes.” Laura talked about the lengthy time it takes, “especially in a virtual school, for students to feel they can [share] personal things and trust you.” The process is faster in brick-and-mortar classrooms, she said, because they see “you looking at
them” and they see “empathy on your face or concern.” She added, “That’s a little harder to convey in an email.” In these instances, the asynchronous nature of the virtual school’s structure seemed to create a barrier to the participants’ usual pattern of trust development.

Other virtual teachers recognized the need for trust within virtual schools but remained unclear of how to nurture it. Carla, for instance, talked about the frequency with which it is necessary to rebuild the trust of both virtual students and their families if students have left brick-and-mortar schooling due to damaging circumstances. The majority of virtual students she has worked with have had their trust “broken in the brick-and-mortar setting,” citing bullying and other types of violations by schools, teachers, and districts. She said the entire family can come to the virtual environment “guarded” and lacking “trust [in] education, so it can be a lot of work to build that up again.” Her subsequent comments about calls from angry parents and non-responsive students indicated that the success rate for rebuilding trust may not be optimal. Aaron acknowledged that he lacked “great insight” into how you nurture trust “in a virtual environment, saying he does not think he’s “been very successful” in that area and that it would come “down to really intentional reaching out and communicating with kids.” Meg does just that, and her sense of students trusting her as a teacher and mentor seems to form an anchor in her virtual practice. In these instances, participants tended to cite organizational or structural challenges to trust-building less than their own knowledge of how to create a trusting virtual environment, with Meg thriving in a predominantly individualized environment in which building trust can be part of each day’s routine.

On the other hand, Laura pointed out students accustomed to social media might actually reveal more of themselves to virtual teachers because “having the machine [in] between might create a sense of distance and security for the student.” This is similar to the theory that quiet or introverted students might contribute more to an online threaded discussion than to an in-class
live conversation. Laura, indeed, described a few instances of virtual students sharing personally with her, although she acknowledged this was rare.

Only Aaron suggested that trust might play “a pretty small role in an online class” if one measures it according to how much a student shares, which he described as a willingness “to be vulnerable in that classroom space.” He said he gets “very few requests for help from [virtual] students.” On the other hand, he also mentioned the possibility of “face-to-face teachers” violating students’ trust “for some reason,” causing “an online teacher [to] be that person a kid reaches out to.” He then added, however, that it seems less likely to him that a student would feel “the online learning space is a safer space.”

**Challenges in trusting students.** Trusting one’s students is another component of a trusting learning environment. Plagiarism undermined that trust, to some level, for all participants. Meg called it her “biggest drama issue,” and her tolerance for it is low. She works first with the student but is willing “to push it up to my principal.” Laura said she had less plagiarism in her brick-and-mortar classroom because students mainly wrote in her presence. Like Meg, when the “plagiarism-detecting software” indicates a problem with a virtual student’s work, she handles it directly with the student while also alerting mentors and parents.

Working with parents over plagiarism was a big topic for Carla. She described it as the aspect of virtual teaching that most causes her to ask “How effective is this? What is it that we’re really doing here?” Her level of trust in students not “exploring the worldwide web for their answers” became low enough that she was moved to “doing the plagiarism check first” before grading. She asserted that virtual work is similar to relying only on a brick-and-mortar student’s homework; she noted that issues of trust would be more prevalent in the brick-and-mortar setting if that were the case.
Returning to the students’ experience, Ken wondered whether having plagiarism-detecting software programs in place sends an immediate message of distrust, although he argued that the programs are only triggered when a student plagiarizes “so [students] aren’t really trustworthy at that moment in time.” Laura discussed the lesser levels of stress a virtual student might feel when caught plagiarizing simply because of a lack of physical presence of the teacher. She surmises that “they’re probably less intimidated in their relationship with me as a teacher online than they would be in a classroom.” Aaron shared his interest in designing courses where plagiarism would be impossible, where reliance on searching the internet with critical thought and creative problem-solving would be encouraged. Thus, that particular impediment to trusting one’s virtual students would be eliminated, although knowing whether it is the student actually doing the work would remain a concern.

In contrast to the issue of plagiarism, there were two observations that belied the pattern of teachers experiencing challenges in their efforts to trust students. First, Meg said she could be trusting in both settings, but it’s more effective “one-on-one” because you can see “more of who the person really is.” Again, Meg is a solo voice, and it seems likely that her sense of trust is enhanced by the DBA requirement of her educational organization. Second, Laura pointed out that students in both environments will make an effort to have you trust them when pleading a case around missing or late work. Surprisingly, no one else talked about this scenario, although it seems likely that most have experienced it.

Finally, there may be a shift in power occurring with issues of trust in the virtual setting. While the positional power of the teacher, combined with her physical presence, indicates considerable power for creating a positive environment for relationships to flourish in the brick-and-mortar setting, in a virtual classroom, teachers can only reach out and hope that the student will engage with them. Laura, in particular, described the power a virtual student has in creating
a trusting relationship. She said in a brick-and-mortar classroom if she says to a student, “I’m really concerned that you are struggling,” they “have to look at me and answer.” Whereas, if she emails “a student with that same message, they can delete the email.” Again, this supports the work of Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2008), who also saw the likelihood of increased student power in virtual communications.

Table 5.6 summarizes participants’ essential comments about building a trusting environment and feeling trust in their students.

| Table 5.6 A comparison of teacher efforts regarding trust in both settings |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                  | Meg             | Laura           | Ken             | Aaron           | Carla           |
| Brick-and-mortar: building trust | -honest, reliable | -going to bat w/admin -nonverbal indicators -humor | - consistency -follow-through -responsiveness to students’ reactions | - creating student friendly classroom | - conversations in class and out of class |
| Virtual: building trust for students | -individual conversations | -going to bat by modifying assignments -emails -humor -power w/student | - consistency -following through | - few requests for help -questions role trust plays here -would need to reach out more | -helping families to realize virtual school is a safe place -awareness of student’s school history/concerns |
| Virtual: teachers trust in students | -can gain familiarity through one-to-one conversations -plagiarism is “biggest drama issue” | -including parents and mentors in incidents of plagiarism -low student stress due to distance | -questioned message plagiarism-detecting software sends | -designing plagiarism resistant assignments | -using software to reveal plagiarism before scoring work |

On the whole, missing visual cues that are essential for trust between people—e.g., facial expressions, gestures, physical placement in a common space, and timeliness in arriving or starting a class—created uncertainty for most of the participants about whether trust exists in their relationships with virtual students. Much of this ambiguity could be due to structures where asynchronous connections between students and their teachers predominate, a hypothesis strengthened when examining Meg’s case. Her increased sense of knowing her virtual students,
of being a key element in their journey of learning, was provided through her institution’s required DBAs along with her inherent drive to learn all she could about her students and to incorporate their families into much of her outreach efforts, including important communication and virtual science nights. Without such opportunities for interaction, virtual teachers may struggle, like Aaron, to create a learning environment based in trust. In addition, widespread plagiarism among virtual students combined with an inability to ascertain who actually completes assigned work inhibited teacher trust in students.

**Summary of Part I**

Within the conceptual framework for relationships designed to help guide data collection, these five former brick-and-mortar teachers’ descriptions of their virtual teaching experiences provided specific details of changing relationship dynamics with students. In the facet of daily enjoyment of those interactions, they described changing from an immediate to an anticipatory mindset and of adjusting to regularly working with one student, or one student’s work or written inquiry, at a time. Engagement indicators moved from visual cues to information gleaned through email or synchronous discussions. Reaching out to students became a critical component of practice. Teachers did not cite a sense of decreased or increased caring about their virtual students but rather identified changes in the means by which they demonstrated care. Similarly, modeling passion for learning and positive work skills remained objectives for some teachers, but how they model these traits took different forms in the virtual world. The lack of a peer audience emerged as both a positive and a negative with regard to these teachers’ awareness of students’ understanding, and they described issues of plagiarism as complicating efforts to assess what virtual students know.

It is possible that the instructional changes required by distance, especially when synchronous interactions are highly limited, such as working with students individually and
knowing them through their work rather than through conversation, contribute to the fundamental changes in how participants spoke of trust. Specifically, with the exception of Meg, these virtual teachers shifted their focus from creating a trusting environment for students to worrying about whether they could trust students to do their own work, to reply to messages, to “show up” in the virtual classroom. Still, they struggled to enact elements of a trusting environment, especially Laura, Carla, and Ken; although whether this was due to the asynchronous structure of their virtual schools or to their lack of professional development as virtual teachers is unclear. The fact that all three have spent some time training new virtual teachers points to the former. Only Aaron no longer considered relational trust with students as part of his teaching practice. This alteration in how teachers deal with something so fundamental as trust with their students has an impact on how teachers think of themselves as teachers, and it is central to the second research question of this study, which concerns how teachers describe their sense of professional identity in both the brick-and-mortar classroom and the virtual classroom, that is the focus of the next part of this chapter.

**Part II: Professional Identity**

Teachers’ professional identities appear no less complex than the ways they see themselves as humans with complicated beliefs, values, traits, and experiences impacting their classroom decision-making and interactions with their students (Beijjard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; He & Cooper, 2011; Timoššuk & Ugaste, 2012; Zembylas, 2005). Changes in how these five teachers viewed themselves through their practices in the virtual setting may be discussed through several lenses. While these teachers might accurately state they are fundamentally “the same” in each teaching environment, they also spoke of changes in how they participate in the craft of teaching and in how they view the ways they engage with virtual students. This was seen
clearly in the case of trust, for instance, where most of the participants described their capacity in creating a trusting environment and their sense of trust in students as challenged by the change of context.

In this section of the chapter, I divide the participants into two groups. The first group is one whose professional teaching identity might be considered positively impacted by teaching in a virtual setting, either because they are able to better enact components of their identity or because they are able to add to their skill set in ways that support aspects of identity they already value. The second group shared comments about brick-and-mortar and virtual teaching that indicate that they experienced conflicts in maintaining their professional identity or even relinquished prized parts of their brick-and-mortar identity as virtual teachers.

**Group I: Virtual Teaching Positively Impacts Existing Professional Identity**

For two participants the move from brick-and-mortar teaching into the virtual setting seemed to essentially support their professional identity as evidenced in the descriptions of their teaching careers. This is not to say their sense of themselves as a teacher remained static when teaching virtually; rather, they seemed optimistic about their capacity to achieve the most salient of their pedagogical goals within the institutional parameters of their virtual school. Furthermore, the satisfactions and frustrations they experience teaching virtually are a workable match for their values and beliefs.

**The participants as virtual teachers.** Meg was the most specific in observing that she’s the same person no matter where she teaches. She said she values “thoroughly” knowing “the information” and being “well read on new and cutting edge research.” She stressed the importance of being approachable. Meg explained her intent of approachability was the same in both settings, but “in the virtual setting it’s easier to approach me because you can email me, you can text me, you can Skype me, you can call me, you can send me a tweet, you can Facebook
me. There’s so many different modalities ... it makes it a lot easier.” While she stressed the willingness with which students approached her face-to-face, she concluded that in the virtual school “it’s easier to approach me, and consequently more students will approach me.” Hence, Meg’s sense of success as a virtual teacher seemed very strong.

Ken talked about virtual teaching as broadening his “sense of who I am as a teacher.” For example, he shared that he didn’t think of himself as collaborative until he became a virtual teacher and content coach. Rather, he said he was “very isolationist” as a beginning brick-and-mortar teacher, limiting contact with colleagues to socializing, partly because of a self-described “tunnel vision focus” on what he was doing and a lack of “mental energy” to work and plan with others. He said he “just needed that time and space to process” within his “own classroom.” He added that his time in virtual education has shown him the value of being a “teammate” versus a “lone ranger,” and he credits other virtual teachers with much of his virtual teaching professional development. It’s important to note Ken also spoke of being collaborative in the brick-and-mortar with administrators, parents, and support personnel in the interest of student achievement; however, his new found collaborative abilities seem more centered on curriculum support and implementation. Much of Ken’s sense of success as a virtual teacher seems to come from his personal growth as a teacher leader in the position of content coach.

**Professionally adjusting to virtual teaching.** Both participants reported changes in their sources of professional satisfaction and sense of success as a teacher. These included a new sense of effectiveness in their use of well-honed teaching skills as well as feelings of growth in learning new skills. In addition, both described a reduction in aspects of brick-and-mortar teaching that frustrated them.

While noting the lack of “instant gratification” in the virtual environment, whether in student responses or in a sense of “camaraderie” with colleagues, Ken described strong
satisfaction in feeling that his grading is “caught up” and in being afforded more time for student feedback. He also mentioned appreciating a sense of control in perfecting a lesson that would then be consistently delivered to all students, with “perpetual” access minus “the distractions.”

As a content coach, Ken also finds satisfaction in helping other teachers.

Meg noted how much less stress she feels working with a single student knowing there are not thirty others waiting for her to continue class. She spoke of feeling pleased that the student she’s working with in the moment gets to experience being “the focal point” of caring communication. She did not, however, mention concern with the many students not receiving her time or attention while she spends precious moments with one individual, a significant issue for Eisenbach (2015). Again, one of Meg’s primary sources of satisfaction in virtual teaching is her extensive availability to students.

Perhaps significantly, both Ken and Meg experienced enhancement of at least one aspect of their core teaching beliefs and values in the virtual setting. For example, Ken talked extensively about his “service-minded approach” and noted that teaching virtually allowed that practice to blossom in terms of establishing clear goals and fostering a “businesslike” stance in his relationships with students. He described striving for a “warm and caring” demeanor, but also maintaining a “serious” focus on “what students need to walk out of your classroom being able to do,” basically pushing “your agenda of learning very strongly” while remaining “mindful of ... limited opportunities [and] time.” Ken also expressed his appreciation for this razor sharp focus in the time available for reviewing written work and providing strong feedback. He said virtual learning forces “reading and writing skills” that “they’re being assessed on” rather than the “artsy and craftsy” pieces some brick-and-mortar teachers have brought into their English classes.
Meg shared her teaching philosophy of emphasizing hands-on, project-based learning for students no matter the teaching environment. She explained that she may have to be more creative in the virtual world, however, such as thinking of ways students can use household items for meaningful science activities. She also expressed strong and deep appreciation for learner differences. She said this dedication to working with students as unique individuals in a supportive relationship is enhanced in the virtual classroom, where she is better able to accommodate individual preferences and capacities through the individual conversations that comprise a significant part of her day. She described these relationships as “a lot more meaningful and effective than at the brick-and-mortar [school].”

Meg also recognized a sense of comfort with the political aspects of her virtual school, including easily avoiding the “teachers’ room” and feeling her principal “has her back.” While Meg said she’s experienced a reduction in her sense of unreasonable professional responsibilities, Ken described a new layer of bureaucracy, particularly excessive data tracking, while losing some of his professional autonomy to scripting and prepared curriculum that varies in quality and in student accessibility. Ken’s role discomfort did not reach the level of role confusion that Hawkins et al. (2012) talked about in their research, however.

A second discrepancy between these two virtual teachers was in their experience of trust. Ken aligned far more closely with the second group in this area and struggled to maintain his professional sense of creating a trusting environment for students and of trusting students as he had in the brick-and-mortar setting. While both he and Meg seemed to understand the key role of trust to teacher–learner relationships and both seemed successful at building that trust as brick-and-mortar teachers, this fundamental aspect of professional identity around relationships did not translate well into the virtual world for Ken. The extent to which this might owe to the differences in their respective organizational structures, in which Meg is afforded synchronous
contact time with students while Ken’s contacts are almost exclusively asynchronous, are beyond the scope of this study.

Additionally, of all the participants, only Meg described feeling part of a strong community of learners within the structure of her organization. She highlighted the excitement of working with students from all over the world and eagerly shared descriptions of her science nights, designed for students and their families. She shared, however, a longing for at least one regular opportunity per course, or annually, to interact in person with both students and colleagues. This aligns with Meg continuing to view herself as a person who helps students set and reach goals and whose reach extends well beyond the course and into other academic endeavors as well as into many students’ futures. While Ken described a similar professional identity component as a brick-and-mortar teacher, the part he plays in his virtual students’ lives seems very much focused on mastering subject skills well enough to meet course objectives.

Lastly, one of the most striking discrepancies in how individual teachers reacted to the contextual changes in virtual teaching, is in the area of their willingness to do more than the stated expectations. Ken creates additional resources for his virtual students although it’s not expected, and he’s rebuilt his sense of teaching as “useful” in this new setting through discovering the various virtual tools he can use “to help students.” Meg, however, recognized she is highly dedicated and devoted to the learning of any student she encounters. She brought that work ethic to the virtual classroom, which has perhaps led to an increase in her sense of success. Specifically, from implementing projects to keeping consistent individual contact and providing rich, detailed feedback, Meg admitted “life would be a lot easier and my schedule would be a lot less demanding if I just followed the basic protocols of what is required.” However, her awareness of her students and their progress enabled her to excitedly claim that her teaching “effectiveness” is better virtually.
Group II: Virtual Teaching Challenges Existing Professional Identity

For this second group of participants, virtual teaching is distinctly different from brick-and-mortar teaching, as it is for Ken and Meg; however, Carla, Aaron, and Laura relate additional challenges to the beliefs and goals and even enjoyment they experienced as brick-and-mortar teachers. To varying degrees, they are either adjusting their sense of what it means to teach or they are moving into educational roles such as administration or course design that require much less interaction, synchronously or asynchronously, with students.

The participants as virtual teachers. Carla was adamant that she not be perceived as leaving brick-and-mortar teaching because she was “sick of dealing with students,” and she has retained her sense of being responsive by trying to return emails to students’ inquiries quickly, because even “waiting an hour” for a response can sometimes cause young people to “lose whatever momentum they had.” She also talked about continuing to be “innovative” in the virtual setting and has explored creating course resource videos that incorporate humor, hoping to increase student engagement. Carla noted a change in her fundamental connection to course design, and shared that her biggest adjustment to virtual teaching was “getting used to having a body of curriculum in front of you” and losing, a bit, the sense of “knowing where you’re trying to take your students.” She mentioned the need to answer essay questions herself first to ensure she’s “answering the way the curriculum writer had in mind.” Her most optimistic statements of professional identity, including empowerment for making a difference in the lives of others, concerned her administrative position.

Laura described working hard in the virtual setting to maintain a professional sense of caring and empathy for her students. Whereas she described embracing several teaching roles in the brick-and-mortar environment including cheerleader, mom, and taskmaster, her virtual roles seemed centered on establishing positive contact through creating an engaging virtual classroom.
site and then following up with repeated outreach through email, video tutorials, and thoughtfully written feedback on assignments. When speaking of her professional future, she focused on working with other virtual teachers rather than with virtual students.

Aaron was least connected to his prior sense of teacher identity. He lost his status as a popular and innovative brick-and-mortar teacher even as he gained recognition within the virtual education world. He described feeling most like a teacher in the virtual setting when creating videos, and lamented the loss of connection with learners, calling himself a “paid grader” when he was in the instructor role and questioning whether students even read his feedback. His reliance on interactions for strong relationships and to share his enthusiasm around science content that flourished in the brick-and-mortar setting conflicts with his roles in the virtual environment.

Professionally adjusting to virtual teaching. These three participants were able to describe finding satisfaction in virtual teaching, but the sources of those positive aspects of their professional lives were either dependent on students reaching out to them or involved no student interactions at all. In comparison to Meg and Ken, their lists of frustrations were longer and their ambiguity regarding the efficacy of their teaching efforts was apparent. Beginning with the former, Carla mentioned a new satisfaction in using data effectively, which she feels advances in technology facilitates. Working with other teachers regularly as an administrator provides, perhaps, a stronger source of satisfaction for Carla—conceivably because this work with colleagues is personal, often synchronous, and sometimes collaborative.

Laura explained that student success remained a source of satisfaction in both settings, but she noted that the lack of proximity is challenging in the virtual classroom and described relying on students’ notes of appreciation for her help with assignments as evidence that she had made a difference. She, like Meg, noted how much less stress she feels working with a single
student knowing there are not others waiting to continue class. Laura also said she appreciates not repeating the same lesson to four sections of a brick-and-mortar course or perusing a mental checklist during administrator observations.

Aaron admitted enjoying accolades as a brick-and-mortar teacher, including his popularity with students, who always filled his classes. He sees nothing similar happening in the virtual world and said his source of professional satisfaction is now based in monetary compensation. He was also the only participant to talk about his discomfort with the level of “ease” in the work, noting that while he was fulfilling all of his organization’s requirements and even received a virtual teaching award, he believed he was somehow not working hard enough and would be “caught.”

Frustrations likely impact these participants’ sense of professionalism. Carla noted her universal frustration with students who work only to pass the course. In the brick-and-mortar classroom she would observe the daily signs of disengagement, whereas virtually she has noticed work completion numbers coming to an abrupt halt when the student reaches 70%. In the brick-and-mortar setting she continued to have regular contact with struggling students encompassing multiple opportunities to help them re-engage, but in the virtual world she experiences both the comfort and frustration of such students being out of sight and out of mind. Laura commented on a new sense of anxiety as she learns the technology well enough to use it effectively. She described missing her brick-and-mortar students who would often provide her with “hands-on tutorials” with new digital programs and tools.

Changes in their sense of leading a learning community struck some participants as a professional loss and contributed to a decrease in teaching satisfaction. As predicted in the Community of Inquiry research (CoI) for distance learning (Hawkins et al., 2012), a perceived sense of imbalance or decrease in teacher presence, in cognitive presence, or in social presence
created concerns for participants. Carla actually described isolation at times in both brick-and-mortar and virtual teaching, which she compared to “sailing alone.” In the former, she said, “the crew is a little more evident because of proximity and visibility in the building,” while in the latter “guiding the class yourself [can] feel like you’re steering the ship, you’re hoisting the sail, you’re making announcements, you’re sending out emails, you’re making phone calls. Sometimes you get a wind that pushes you along, and sometimes you just sit dead in the water.”

Laura spoke repeatedly of distance creating the likelihood that virtual students will think you are a robot. This prompted her to create a “visually appealing and welcoming” online classroom with personal information and pictures so students will know she’s “real.” Notably, Aaron, remarked that the excitement of classroom teaching was embedded in “culture and community and giving space for kids,” something he doesn’t experience when working alone in his organization’s primarily asynchronous format. Aaron also talked about a lack of community with “kids scattered all over the state” who may never be “interacting with one another outside of your class” or “talking to any other adult who knows you personally” as an inhibitor of sharing “amazing” learning experiences. In addition, while Ken’s role discomfort did not reach the level of role confusion that Hawkins, Barbour, and Graham (2012) talked about in their research, Aaron’s discussion of his two roles as instructor and course designer, specifically his questioning in what ways he is still a teacher, supported, at least in part, this earlier study.

For these participants the move to virtual teaching may have altered their goals and objectives as an educator. Aaron, for instance, seemed to move from a focus on process to a focus on product as he talked about his sense of efficacy as a teacher in each environment. He spoke of task completion as a measure of his effectiveness in the online setting, with “the quality with which it’s completed ... only partially related.” In the brick-and-mortar classroom he described working with students who had to be there to make “this as good as we can together.”
His stated brick-and-mortar mission was to “make this as positive a day as possible for everybody.” His virtual educator mission, on the other hand, seems tied to increasing the value of his product and thus his paycheck. He did, however, talk about the possibility of a far-reaching influence through course design and video creation, a concept with which he struggles, noting that “there’s a part of me that thinks the farther the reach I have, the less impact I’m making.”

Carla, too, seemed to change the way her core beliefs for teaching relationships are enacted in the virtual setting. For instance, she saw herself as “fair and understanding” in the brick-and-mortar setting. She said this probably paid off in her relationships with students, which were so solid that “the openness of the conversations” they enjoyed daily meant they “probably headed off issues” and “they didn’t get to the point of complaining to their parents.” Similar to the experience Eisenbach (2015) described teaching virtually, parent displeasure may challenge, at least momentarily, her sense of efficacy as an online teacher. While Carla’s core belief in the power of fairness and understanding remains, it has narrowed to practicing empathy for virtual students and parents, including their reasons for selecting online education, along with accompanying challenges in successfully completing courses.

Despite these various negative impacts on their teaching experience and sense of professionalism, two of the three participants still described themselves as making above average effort in the virtual setting. Laura, who valued her Advanced Placement success in her brick-and-mortar practice, goes above the expectation for classroom visuals in her virtual classroom so she will be a more real presence to students; she also provides self-recorded mini-lessons and YouTube links as supplementary materials to increase students’ chances of successfully completing her virtual courses. She, however, also described more than once the importance of high student pass rates to positive formal teaching evaluations. Carla, too, provides tutorials and carefully considered feedback to written work, going beyond the organization’s expectations to
read all materials and be thoroughly versed in the prepared curriculum. Significantly, their efforts to engage and motivate students have narrowed to a laser focus on course completion.

On the other hand, Aaron doesn’t believe the incentives for going beyond the minimum are sufficient in the virtual environment. Although he has enjoyed accolades in both settings, he described a stronger pleasure in having his brick-and-mortar teaching practice highlighted and his popularity with certain brick-and-mortar students affirmed. He also talked excitedly about his efforts to engage brick-and-mortar students in far ranging discussions; but, now describes himself, with little hesitation but perhaps some chagrin, as someone working for a paycheck.

The key sources of teacher satisfaction in both settings are summarized in Table 5.7 along with the frustrations likely to impact professional identity. Note that the participants are now on the vertical axis and ordered according to the professional identity impact from generally supportive to the new identity opposing the one forged in brick-and-mortar. Brick-and-mortar frustrations in some cases have been incorporated as a satisfaction in the virtual world (i.e. “avoiding non-teaching parts of the job” for Meg’s or Laura’s ability to focus on one student without others waiting). Furthermore, within the virtual setting, salient elements of professional identity can be supported, as in Meg’s case, although it is unclear whether this support is more a function of her personality or of the structures used by her virtual school, such as the requirement to connect regularly and synchronously with students. Professional identity can be supported and even expanded as seen in Ken’s comments describing aspects of his identity as intact. Ken has also added a sense of competency in leadership and collaboration. On the other hand, virtual teachers’ professional identity might be challenged from a weaker relationship with students leading to more parent intervention, as in Carla’s case, or from a consistent concern about being “real” to students as Laura experienced. Finally, Aaron’s identity as a cool and engaging teacher with the ability to lead exciting and full class discussions and to bring innovative opportunities to
Table 5.7 *Sources of professional satisfaction and frustration*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity impact</th>
<th>Brick-and-mortar Satisfactions</th>
<th>Frustrations</th>
<th>Virtual Satisfactions</th>
<th>Frustrations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supporting* (Meg)</td>
<td>- graduates’ positive feedback on preparedness</td>
<td>- “political” issues around contact with students (social media, meeting when convenient for students)</td>
<td>- working with a wide variety of students</td>
<td>- described as minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>key elements of brick-and-mortar identity are facilitated “as is” in virtual setting</em></td>
<td>- calling home with good news</td>
<td>- negativity in the teachers’ room</td>
<td>- having one-to-one conversations where the student is the focus of caring</td>
<td>- plagiarism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- informal conversations with students and families outside of school</td>
<td></td>
<td>- being constantly available to students</td>
<td>- not seeing students and colleagues face to face at least once during the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadening+ (Ken)</td>
<td>- knowing students well</td>
<td>- some of the aspects of engagement in the moment given all of the distractions</td>
<td>- caught up grading</td>
<td>- excessive data tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>key elements of brick-and-mortar identity are persevered via additional skills and/or roles</em></td>
<td>- persuading students to care about academic success via recognizing and meeting their needs (salesmanship)</td>
<td>- teens experience</td>
<td>- more time for feedback</td>
<td>- loss of professional autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging* (Carla)</td>
<td>- being professional in supporting students</td>
<td>- walking the fine line between support as a teacher vs friend – disengaged students</td>
<td>- effective use of data</td>
<td>- loss of participation in curricular design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>key elements of brick-and-mortar identity cannot be fully realized</em></td>
<td>- strong relationships with students based on respect so no parent complaints</td>
<td></td>
<td>- potential impact on policy as administrator</td>
<td>- challenges with supplementing or modifying poor assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging” (Laura)</td>
<td>- growth in AP enrollment</td>
<td>- when outside supports for students are missing or weak and her influence can’t</td>
<td>- coaching other teachers</td>
<td>- isolation (“sailing alone”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>see cell above</em></td>
<td>- student success on AP exams</td>
<td>surmount these personal challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td>- unresponsive students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- graduates’ positive feedback on preparedness</td>
<td></td>
<td>- student success as found in notes of appreciation</td>
<td>- students working only to pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposing* (Aaron)</td>
<td>- recognition as a popular and innovative teacher</td>
<td>- in second brick-and-mortar felt a lack of connection with the students (culture and interests)</td>
<td>- money</td>
<td>- lack of community among peers, to support the work of teachers/learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>key elements of brick-and-mortar identity are no longer applicable</em></td>
<td>- lively and engaging full class discussions</td>
<td>- was secure in first brick-and-mortar, but later discovered he may have been too “easy” academically</td>
<td>- gaining design skills</td>
<td>- lack of energizing conversations with students as a group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

his brick-and-mortar students has been thoroughly reduced in the virtual environment to the extent that he questions whether he can legitimately consider himself a teacher.
Summary of Part II

The potential changes in professional identity described above manifest differently for each participant. With the exception of Meg, increases in confidence in fulfilling some of their professional responsibilities are often balanced with a lessening of assurance in other areas. For example, Aaron described increasing proficiency in his ability to design courses according to organizational expectations while considering potential students but also expressed concern for the ways students would interact with the course and for the loss of contact with students. Ken touted a new affordance of objectivity toward student work, thus increasing his confidence in his fairness and consistency in assessment, but he also lamented the loss of designing his own curricula, especially when some of the assignments have not been optimal for the students completing these courses. Carla’s ability to maintain a professional stance in interactions with students is enhanced in the virtual environment; however, she described both frustration and ineffectiveness around disengaged students who seemingly “disappear” from courses. The rapport and trust she worked so hard to achieve with brick-and-mortar students simply is not there to the same degree, if at all, in the virtual classroom. Finally, Laura described herself as effective in holding students to high standards within a caring brick-and-mortar environment. She shared multiple ways she continues to try to show virtual students both care and strong expectations for their work. But she was unable to relate more than two incidents in which she knew she achieved this teaching objective in terms of students’ experiences in her course.

These differences may be due to a variety of factors from personality to the nature and circumstances of prior teaching experiences, including subjects taught. However, contextually, it is important to recall that Meg’s virtual organization requires synchronous contact, and while the other four participants are afforded the capacity to initiate or receive requests for synchronous conversations from their students, all four indicated this is a rare occurrence. In addition, the
virtual teaching roles each participant holds, be that designer, instructor, mentor, content coach, or virtual school administrator, influence their sense of and experiences in, the virtual education environment and differ markedly from their teaching roles in the brick-and-mortar setting.

In chapter six, I link teachers’ experiences of relationships with their virtual students with the potential impacts of these experiences on professional identity. I identify key contributors to changes in both relationships and identity as teachers engage in virtual teaching, and I suggest ways specific stakeholders might move forward to ensure an effective match for individuals wishing to teach virtually.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Classroom teaching is a complex endeavor based both in emotions (Hamman et al., 2010; Hargreaves, 1998) and intellect. Virtual teaching, as viewed through the perspectives of five practitioners, both affords new opportunities and creates specific challenges in the ways teachers engage with learners as well as in how they see themselves as teachers. The ways in which a brick-and-mortar teacher adjusts to the demands and possibilities of virtual education may depend upon the individual teacher’s values and pedagogical goals as well as on the structure of the virtual school and the systems of its management organization. In addition, virtual teachers may experience a longing for some of the positive attributes of brick-and-mortar teaching as they adapt to the virtual environment, even as they celebrate a reduction in other teaching challenges or frustrations. The experiences and ideas of these virtual teachers in regard to their relationships with students opens a window into a rapidly changing teaching environment and its possible impact on professional identity.

While the differences vary, it is clear changes in participants’ relationships with students may impact the extent to which they feel effective and in what ways they find satisfaction in virtual teaching, leading to alterations—sometimes slight, sometimes more profound—in their sense of professional identity. Each of these virtual teachers identified goals and gratifications in the brick-and-mortar classroom that the virtual setting either facilitated or impeded. When the goals seemed easier to reach, virtual teacher satisfaction was high; when the goals seemed unreachable or no longer made sense, teachers either changed their focus to other sources of teaching fulfillment or experienced some unease or uncertainty in their virtual teaching practice. All of these adjustments impacted their sense of the necessary personal effort required to be successful as a virtual teacher, how they experienced perceived changes in autonomy toward
realizing their teachings goals, and their overall sense of satisfaction with what it means to be a virtual teacher.

Three areas that foster these changes stand out: changes to virtual teachers’ experiences of engagement with and enjoyment of interactions with students, changes in the avenues for showing care to students and of modeling values and positive dispositional qualities, and changes in the nature of trust and of power from the teachers’ perspectives. For this concluding chapter, I start by examining links within these three specific areas between relationships and professional identity. I then reflect on the affordances and challenges of organizational structures such as enrollment, expected student contact, and teacher responsibilities on both relationships and identity. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of these changes taken together on overall professional identity through the lens of individual cases. I finish with brief comments regarding the appeal of blended learning to all five participants before summarizing the study’s contributions and describing the limitations and implications for various stakeholders, including researchers.

**Relationships and Professional Identity**

Many researchers have recognized a strong interpersonal impact on the teaching and learning experience within the virtual classroom (Borup et al., 2013; Eisenbach, 2015; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008), and participants, at least in part, affirmed some of those impacts on teachers, including changes in the experience of being part of a learning community, challenges in enacting relational caring, and a sense of disconnection from students. Related impacts can be seen in an examination of participants’ enjoyment of student interactions, the
adjustments they describe in caring for students and modeling desired attitudes and values, and in their emerging perspectives on trust and power as virtual teachers. I turn to these first.

**Enjoyment Through Engaging with Students**

The experience of daily work with students is a key component of brick-and-mortar teachers’ professional lives. Changes in this aspect of daily work within the virtual setting may impact not only core teaching-learning relationships, but also teacher identity. For instance, a loss of engagement and enjoyment in interactions with students, particularly as part of a learning community, may create concern as to whether one is still a teacher, as Aaron’s experience exemplifies. In the brick-and-mortar classroom he worked to create exciting shared experiences for students, and their responses, as well as outside recognition for these efforts, bolstered his feelings of success. In the virtual world, his sense of success centers on monetary rewards and a feeling of improvement in course-design skills. Similarly, virtual teachers may find their most enjoyable and effective teaching strategies are challenging to implement in the virtual setting.

For example, Carla enjoyed discussions, facilitating small group work, and adding game-based learning activities as a brick-and-mortar teacher. Her comments regarding enjoyment of her virtual students narrowed from a focus on building and maintaining a learning community to appreciating when students respond to email and feedback and show up at virtual office hours and online events.

In contrast to the challenges of actively connecting with virtual students, some teachers may experience an increase in their opportunity to know students as individuals and this may in turn create an alternative sense of community and provide general satisfaction with student relationships. Meg described one-to-one discussion-based assessment conversations as leading to a stronger sense of teaching effectiveness as well as to a joy in teaching tasks that supports her longer working hours. While some researchers observed the key position held by emotional
connections built during daily interactions of commiserating, processing, and celebrating in teachers’ experience of their professional work (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004; O’Connor, 2008; Raphael, 1985), relationships might also be experienced as full emotional connections through less regular, but more focused, interactions with virtual students, as in Meg’s case.

For virtual teachers who interact with students primarily through writing and even for those who are afforded the opportunity to engage in routine individual conversations with students, the sense of enjoyment from daily interactions with learners is distinctly different than in the brick-and-mortar setting. The impact on professional identity will likely vary depending on teaching priorities and the communication structure of the virtual school. In addition, those teachers who truly enjoy large group discussions or informally chatting with students during transitions into and out of class will likely experience some degree of loss when those opportunities for engaging with students no longer exist as part of their daily teaching practice.

Caring and Modeling

As the participants described changes in the nature of their means for showing care and for modeling values and positive dispositional qualities in their relationships with virtual students, some experienced related frustrations impacting their sense of effectively connecting with students. In addition to the problem of non-responsive students, which all participants recognized as a problem in the virtual setting, frustrations fell into two categories: doubts about their capacity for being real and authentically connected to virtual students, and persistent struggles to maintain a direct line of communication with students. Laura provides a strong exemplar for the first category in her consistent focus on caring across settings, with notably less success in the virtual environment. Depending on rare notes of appreciation from virtual students to verify academic and emotional impact versus the immediate cues in the brick-and-mortar setting, and with enrollment numbers hindering the level of reaching out to individual students
that’s feasible, virtual teachers such as Laura who highly value a relational caring relationship may experience challenges to their core professional identity.

Another issue contributing to a sense of loss of impact in the key roles of caring and modeling is that of an increased presence of other adults in the academic lives of virtual students acting as intermediaries with the teacher. While most participants cited the importance of positive parent involvement in virtual schooling, research into the impact of parents on virtual learning was spare, although many online school communication materials emphasize parent support often leads to higher rates of student success in virtual courses. Particular issues occurred for participants in confrontations with virtual parents over the validity and authenticity of student coursework and in the extent of their assignment completion. It is also possible at times for teachers to communicate more with virtual parents and brick-and-mortar support personnel such as mentors, than with students. For teachers whose relationships with brick-and-mortar students were strong and may have precluded parent attention to their courses, such as Carla and Aaron, the sudden extensive involvement of virtual parents could exacerbate potential trust concerns around plagiarism and impede a direct sense of relationship with the student.

At least two other possibilities for teacher interpretations of interactions with other adults in students’ lives are worth mentioning. First, virtual teachers may experience a strengthening of feelings of collaboration with other adults for student success. Meg’s comments exemplify an avenue of connecting with 100% of her virtual students’ parents in some form, and of crediting that transparent communication with an ‘intimacy’ that supports student learning. Second, virtual parents may be experienced as less available to contribute to a strong learning community, one that recognizes both student and teacher achievement and provides incentives for additional excellence. This was seen in Aaron’s understanding of, and comments about, the role of families and the larger community in his first brick-and-mortar students’ growth and development.
The variety of reactions to this perceived change in the role of supporting adults, from Meg’s positive statements of increased parent involvement in the virtual setting to Carla’s sense that parent involvement could limit her own contact with virtual students, suggests the need for additional research into ways virtual teachers and schools might optimize the advantages and minimize the constraints of a potential increased parent and mentor presence when teaching virtually. In essence, some virtual teachers may find their most effective means of caring and modeling for their students comes through their work with parents and other supportive adults. Adjusting to this collaborative approach is likely to impact professional identity in a variety of ways depending on the teachers’ prior experiences and teaching beliefs.

**Building Trust and Controlling the Learning Environment**

As participants talked about the nature of trust in their relationships with students in each environment, it appeared virtual teaching could change the dynamic from a focus on nurturing trust in students, through visible caring, to a focus on whether teachers could trust students. Essentially, these virtual teachers shifted their attention from creating a trusting environment for students, partly to encourage full engagement and appropriate academic risk-taking (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010), to seeking trust in their students. From talking about the available technology for detecting plagiarism to pondering what type of understanding (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005) virtual teachers might feasibly seek and evaluate, participants spoke far more about ways they could increase their trust in virtual students than about ways they could foster students’ trust. While concerns about being “real” to students were shared, these were more often followed by anxieties around plagiarism rather than strategies for instilling and maintaining a trusting relationship.

Specifically, changes in the nature of trust as the core of teacher–learner relationships, from something participants sought to create for their students to something they felt they were
losing in their students as direct contact via email or phone calls lessened and incidents of plagiarism increased, may cause some teachers to feel not only anxiety and less certain about the nature of the relationship with the learner, but also less effective as a teacher. Carla’s experiences typify this as she described losing the kind of contact with students that built strong trust and which also facilitated family comfort (or in some cases, perhaps complacency) in the brick-and-mortar setting and gaining, instead, distance from students that interferes with her ability to motivate and engage students in academic tasks.

Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) indicated that a trusting student-teacher relationship may facilitate stronger teacher presence in the brick-and-mortar classroom partly because teachers who aren’t worried about off-task behaviors can be more focused on the many other details related to teaching and learning. Virtual teachers spending inordinate amounts of time worried about dishonesty in student work, to the point of running the plagiarism checker before reading assignments as Carla mentioned, may have implications for teaching practices and for teachers’ relationships with learners meriting additional study. That shift in trust from nurturing it in students to seeking it from students may also contribute to teachers’ feelings of diminished success as practitioners in the social and emotional realms of education (Hargreaves, 1998).

Conversely, teachers who work in a virtual school that requires synchronous contact may experience increasing trust through communicating closely with mentors and families regarding student progress, and through events such as Meg’s “science nights” where students and families can participate together. Meg described knowing her virtual community and feeling known by them to a much greater degree than any other participant in the study, and to a greater degree than she had experienced in the brick-and-mortar setting.

How these virtual teachers experienced trust and thought about trust seemed to change their sense of control of the learning situation, another area where a sense of effectiveness
impacts identity (Britzman, 2003). In particular, Carla’s conflicts with parents over virtual student honesty impacted her prior sense of strong relationships with students and support from parents that she formed in the brick-and-mortar environment. Similarly, Meg’s increased trust in what she described as solid relationships with virtual students due to continuous individual conversations may add to her overall sense that she is doing much better work in the virtual classroom than she did in brick-and-mortar.

Based on the importance of control—or power—to identity (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006), when a power shift is part of the structure of the educational setting rather than part of the teacher’s learning design, there will likely be implications for the ways virtual teachers experience their professional role. Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2008) discussed “decentralised forms of communication” being “controlled more by student than teacher initiative” (p. 1069), and most of the participants shared experiences that seemed to support this observation as they talked about students either having control over when they enter into a relationship with the instructor, or about their own sense of relative powerlessness in interactions with students. That is, when they have experienced unanswered emails or unreturned phone calls after extensive efforts to connect with non-performing students, they described feeling frustration and oftentimes sadness, as well as a measure of futility. It is perhaps this sudden reduction in their power to work with a “captive audience” that contributed to metaphors such as being “the captain of a crewless ship” or being part of “the cloud.” This contrasted sharply, however, with participants’ sense of increased control in scheduling their own time and in some cases their students’ focus on particular concepts or topics. Meg’s reported experiences strongly support Hargreaves’ (1998) conclusion connecting teachers’ control of time on certain tasks with efforts to increase student motivation.
Reactions to the change in professional responsibility from engaging with living, breathing, in the moment, young people whose reactions to one’s initiatives are obvious to multiple senses to communicating, primarily in writing, with formless students who may or may not respond, can take different configurations. Virtual teachers seem likely to focus intensely on feedback, providing it quickly, perhaps personalizing it, or using it to initiate a bit of dialog with individual students by asking questions, even while wondering whether students actually look at it. Two participants suggested, however, that students in virtual courses must become more independent as learners, so perhaps that implies a form of student empowerment – at least for those students who are successful.

I turn now to an examination of the ways virtual educational organizations impact the experience of teachers’ relationships with students through practices involving time and teaching roles.

Organizational Affordances and Challenges

As active educators in some aspect of virtual high school education, the participants held diverse roles and worked in organizations that varied in their expectations of students and requirements of teachers. These variations included: the number of students enrolled in teachers’ courses; the form of contact with students available, required, and regularly utilized; the rate and times in which students enrolled in and completed courses; the pace of change in and variety of courses teachers were assigned to teach; the responsibility for supplementing basic curricular materials; and the type and level of teacher discretion for assignments and grading. Two areas of virtual teaching, dependent on organizational structure, emerged as creating both tension and advantages for teachers’ experiences of relationships with students as well as their sense of professional identity: time and virtual teaching roles. It is important to remember participants were not working at the same school, nor for the same organization. Meg’s organization was,
however, an outlier from the other four in terms of requiring a discussion-based assessment and in hosting additional times for synchronous contact such as the Family Science Nights. While Meg was excited about these chances to connect with students, her organization supported them.

**Time.** While brick-and-mortar teachers frequently note the constraints placed on their practice because of a lack of time, and research typically mentions time as a limitation when discussing initiatives and the implementation of new policy (Fowler, 2009), moving into virtual teaching may create a different set of time-based affordances and tensions. However, a sense of not having enough time can certainly persist. From feeling a dearth of time to create video tutorials and find supplemental resources and student-friendly software, to noting the amount of time it takes to provide effective feedback and remain in regular contact with students, the participants also recognized the challenges of having too many course sections and students for the time available in their working day. This said, four other observations of time in virtual relationships and teaching practice merit mention.

First, for some virtual teachers there is a sense of time slowing. This was not described as having more time, but rather as time moving at a slower pace. This slowed pace can be an affordance when it means allowing time between students’ discussion board comments for teacher intervention, or for providing well-considered feedback or finding resources, or for making mid-course adjustments that will benefit those students who work more slowly. The slowed time can instead become a frustration when it means waiting for students to respond to messages or when feeling a need to provide fast feedback to build on a student’s work completion momentum. In addition, although teachers may sense time slowing in a virtual classroom, they also may sense a shortening of students’ attention spans, as illustrated by Ken’s observation of students’ preferences for quicker solutions, such as shorter videos watched only “when they need it.”
Second, increased flexibility around time is another perception virtual teachers may experience as impacting both relationships and identity. This flexibility may be perceived as useful. For example, virtual teachers who are parents may appreciate the ability to go to appointments with their children and “see them off” in the morning. Other virtual teachers may find it rewarding to meet with students when they are most available and likely to be engaged. This same flexibility might also create challenges. Negotiating the lack of a solid routine, avoiding a grading pile-up, and scheduling meetings in consideration of time zones when students are located around the nation or in other countries are all potential problems for virtual teachers. There may also be adjustments to the speed with which students enter and leave courses. It is even possible that with this inherent flexibility in time and scheduling, especially when organizations allow students to start and finish courses as needed, virtual teachers may miss the beginnings and endings of terms and school years, times often marked by shared emotion, a sense of closure or of new beginnings filled with potential, and of celebration.

Third, part of a teacher’s sense of their practice resides in how they spend their time, and in who controls those decisions. The participants provided a view of many possibilities for virtual teachers. Onerous requirements for their time exist in each setting, such as call logs for virtual students or monitoring the halls between classes in brick-and-mortar schools; however, virtual teachers may sense even less control over basic parameters of their practice, including the courses they teach, the quality of the content in the prepared curriculum, and the persistent constraints on supplementary materials associated with copyright laws in virtual schools. On the other hand, the elimination of typical brick-and-mortar routines such as delivering information, citing standards, or engaging in “all this fluff that really interferes with teaching” as one participant described it, may strengthen a teacher’s sense of effectiveness as a virtual teacher. Similarly, focusing one’s time primarily on students, as Meg depicted her day, can be rewarding.
If it is the part of teaching most valued, time can feel very well spent, indeed. It becomes time afforded for getting to know students individually, again, as in Meg’s case, allowing her to enact her sense of herself as “a caring and respectful teacher.” It is not clear in this study whether those participants unable to regularly connect synchronously with students felt less successful in showing care or in motivating students or increasing their understanding, but there was enough evidence to indicate the importance of future research to focus on those questions.

Equally important, the number of minutes, or hours, spent trying to reengage students with their work, and in tracking those efforts, might be experienced not only as frustrating but as time poorly spent. Given that four of the five participants stated the majority of their time was spent assessing student work and communicating via email, it is likely non-responsive students and poorly attended live tutorials will be experienced as significantly negative by virtual teachers. It is unclear whether this negativity increases problems with trust, but given Meg’s ongoing synchronous connections with students combined with her positive reports of effective relationships for learning, it is worth further research. Additionally, without regular interaction with students, virtual teachers often simply don’t know whether their time is well spent or not. When Aaron questions whether students read grading comments or use the “teaching materials” he designs solely as a reference for assessments, or when Carla feels a huge waste of time when lecturing to an empty room and repeatedly reaching out to the same students with no response, there arise questions for teachers of their effectiveness.

Fourth, it is possible for virtual teachers to experience “school time” and “home time” as very blurred, hence Meg’s emphasis that virtual teaching is “a way of life” and certainly not a means of having less work. Her tendency, echoed by others, to work late into the evening, may provide better service to students, but the sustainability of such an approach is not yet clear. However, it is also conceivable that virtual teaching may, indeed, enable some teachers to make
more money with fewer hours invested than in the brick-and-mortar setting, as is Aaron’s experience. Because at least one brick-and-mortar study indicated negatives such as lack of time impact teacher’s job satisfaction less than a scarcity of positives such as time for helpful interactions with students (Kitching et al., 2009), these changes in how virtual teachers experience time merit continued research.

**Virtual teaching roles.** Hawkins et al (2012) identified role confusion due to “fragmentation” as one of the primary issues for virtual teachers, but my research indicated that may be a simplification of the situation for virtual teachers four years later. Specifically, these participants’ virtual teaching environments included more opportunities for synchronous connections with students in the forms of live tutorials, virtual classrooms linked in real time by video, and discussion-based assessments. The most extensive of these by a considerable measure, in Meg’s organization, appears associated with a very positive and seemingly healthy sense of professional self; that is, Meg repeatedly indicated enactment of her values, vision, and joy when teaching within her virtual instructor role. However, it is also possible to feel the profound isolation and even disconnection from students described by Hawkins et al (2012). To what degree this isolation is associated with role division is not yet clear. For example, in Aaron’s case of working first as an online instructor and later as a course designer, he did not describe these roles as enhancing qualities he already possessed, but instead questioned whether he could even be considered a teacher. Specifically, as Borup et al (2013) noted, policies matter. Aaron’s organization’s policy of enforcing three sharply differing educator roles has created a situation where he feels most like a teacher when videotaping himself sharing information. He recognizes this as lecturing, and by questioning lecturing’s effectiveness in any setting, he reinforces his doubts about not only his professional identity, but also his impact within the learning process for students’ growth.
In addition to role separation, teachers may struggle with changing from a qualitative role with students to a quantitative one as they adjust to using numerical data regarding standards’ attainment, assignment completion, and time on task rather than responding to students’ faces, voices, and movements, as one participant observed in her work with other virtual teachers. Another participant commented that the required paperwork centered on data collecting in the virtual setting is particularly unappealing for English teachers. However, this may not be a strictly virtual issue as many brick-and-mortar teachers complain of “canned curricula,” and Meg asserted the role of “documenter” was actually more onerous for her in brick-and-mortar. Aaron directly commented on a fracturing of teachers’ roles throughout education, although he said it’s particularly prevalent in the virtual setting, and Carla observed the teaching triangle may not be a useful model at this stage because the angle represented by the teacher is now “a team” of educators.

While Hawkins et al (2012), considered roles in the same way as they were described by the participants in this study, particularly Carla and Aaron, another way to examine teachers’ roles is seen in the conceptual framework – that is, the relationship roles of caregiver, motivator, role model, etc. For example, role modeling seemed a rich part of brick-and-mortar classroom life for all, including Aaron’s description of modeling excitement and passion, but was not mentioned in participants’ comments about their virtual experiences except by Ken, who spoke of modeling written communication and “sucking it up” when tasks are tedious or burdensome. However, his sense of whether this modeling was even noticed by virtual students is left to hope. In the realm of gaining insight into student understanding of concepts, an interesting divide appears between the benefits of observation, including of peer work, as both Carla and Ken mentioned, in the brick-and-mortar, and the benefits of individual conversations with extensive opportunities for student talk, as Meg described. Ken also extolled the benefits of unbiased
reflection on virtual work products. A third example is found in the area of student engagement and motivation where participants discussed devices for classroom management in brick-and-mortar, but mainly described contact efforts and ensuring honest student work as virtual teachers. A favorite tool, humor, which studies indicated could be used both for building relationships and dealing with challenging emotions in the brick-and-mortar classroom (Sutton et al, 2009), was cited by participants as useful in both settings, but the success of this tool was often left to the imagination of the virtual teachers depending on student feedback to their classroom messages, emails, and written comments on assignments.

Finally, it’s important to note all but Meg, who stayed solely within an instructor role, mentioned finding a large source of professional satisfaction when asked to take on new roles within their organization such as content coach, teacher trainer, or teacher manager. Noting this allowed them to “expand” their influence on students by reaching other teachers, it might be worth additional study to determine whether teachers who do not find strong satisfaction in the instructor role typified by Meg, are likely to take more pleasure in virtual education when offered one or more of these additional roles.

**Changes in Virtual Teacher Professional Identity**

This study affirmed the theoretical understanding and research that links relationships with learners to teachers’ sense of themselves as teachers (Beijaard et al, 2004; Brunetti, 2001; Day et al, 2006; Nias, 1989). Using a theoretical framework that focused on five facets of relationship from enjoying time spent interacting with students to using knowledge of one’s students, gained through relationship, to better assess students’ conceptual understanding of the subject, this study indicated that the context of virtual teaching alters a brick-and-mortar-teacher’s sense of professional identity. Organizational practices of the virtual school impact those alterations. The size of course enrollments and the probability for synchronous interaction
are clearly two of the factors that afford or restrict actual contact with learners and therefore
determine the nature of those relationships, including the form and degree to which trust remains
at the core of their connection.

Equally critical to teachers’ professional identity is the sense they have of being effective
in their efforts to help students learn—a sense that it also tied closely to relationship with the
learner (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004; He & Cooper, 2011; O’Connor, 2008; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Timošťuk & Ugaste, 2012; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Because teaching roles
vary in the virtual setting, including the roles of designer, instructor, mentor, content coach, and
virtual school administrator, the impact on student learning may feel significant when the teacher
regularly experiences direct contact with students either verbally or through written exchanges,
or it may feel distant at best when the teaching role precludes regular interaction with students.

In sum, for these virtual teachers, changes occurred in how they experienced their
professional practice, especially in their core relationship with learners, a strong factor in
professional identity. However, the changes were not the same from one participant to the next.
The study described cases ranging from a strong sense of losing satisfaction in relationships with
students, as Aaron shared, to the keen sense of fulfillment Meg described in working solely with
students on their learning. Each of the participant’s experiences with virtual teaching described
below provides insight into a particular impact on professional identity. Essentially, if a teacher
was able to continue to enact their pedagogical beliefs and to experience satisfaction in their
interactions with students in terms of engagement, motivation, and success in completing
learning objectives, their professional identity remained solid, and they were able to embrace
their role as a virtual teacher. Similarly, those participants who could refocus their attention on a
particular aspect of their practice with relation to learners that they valued, providing unbiased
feedback, for example, described a sense still enacting their profession. For participants who
struggled to remain connected to students because of a lack of interaction or awareness of students’ status as learners, professional identity as a teacher was challenged. For some this meant immersing themselves in another role such as teacher coach or administrator, and for others it resulted in a deep questioning of whether they could be considered a teacher at all.

First, Aaron’s case illustrates significant adjustment challenges in terms of teacher identity and relationships with learners. Neither the instructor nor the designer role provide Aaron with the moment to moment enjoyment he described in the brick-and-mortar classroom. Whether through discussions, sharing “cool” science videos and information, or engaging in innovative projects, Aaron did not describe anything comparable in his virtual experiences. Because his pedagogical goals were centered on student relationships and particularly in student reactions, including the development of interest in science – or at least in his class – he no longer can regularly sense whether these goals are being met in the virtual setting. He was also precise in questioning to what extent students even review teacher comments on their work. Aaron was articulate in wrestling with the idea that his power to impact learners might be dramatically increased through technology’s reach or it might simply be completely diluted by distance and lack of personal connection. His comments, in part, support the work of Miller and Ribble (2010) in that his dissatisfaction lies mainly in missing work with groups. He was clear his current sources of professional satisfaction are material. Professionally, this may be enough for him and for other virtual teachers as well.

In stark contrast, Meg’s virtual teaching experiences have allowed her to bring forward key components of her prior teaching identity and to find great satisfaction in relationships with virtual learners. Her shared perspective fully supports the conclusions of Miller and Ribble (2010) regarding satisfied online teachers dealing well with extensive computer use, including typing, and preferring one-to-one interaction over one-to-many. She also indicated an
experimental and flexible approach to teaching strategies, something these researchers believed would help teachers find satisfaction in the virtual environment. She and Laura continued to receive and appreciate positive feedback from students regarding their courses, thus supporting Brunetti’s brick-and-mortar job satisfaction study (2001). Meg’s enormous gratification with her student relationships, actually described as far better than in brick-and-mortar, dispute the work of Lai and Pratt (2009), whose participants, even with the capacity for video-conferencing, were challenged in connecting with students. On the other hand, Meg’s responses were the only ones that fully supported the research of Muirhead (2000) and Weiner (2003) regarding an increased sense of value for virtual relationships due to the frequency of communication and the teaching-learning focus of those interactions as opposed to having a management or disciplinary purpose.

Laura’s case is an example of adaptation, of finding ways to enact, however loosely, the teaching ideals from her brick-and-mortar experiences. For example, her sense that she can be the “buffer or lifeline” for virtual students by removing obstacles and finding accommodations for their challenges, particularly in terms of technology, provides a new way to enact her brick-and-mortar capacity to show care—a stated pedagogical goal. Laura also pushes herself to create a positive learning experience for students partly to avoid becoming a certain type of teacher, one who doesn’t smile and is overly critical, and seems to hate their job. Her descriptions of virtual teaching most closely support those studies indicating virtual teachers must make a deliberate effort, use different tools, and look for different cues to build relationships (Borup et al., 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008). Laura more than once cited the multiple attributes of virtual education, and embraced not only the one-to-one aspect but also the “asynchronous interplay” as helpful for many learners. She continues to rely on humor as a teaching tool, even without awareness of the actual impact on students. Her purpose for using humor, however, is now solely targeted at relationship-building, with classroom management applications no longer
relevant although both objectives were identified by Sutton et al. (2009) as reasons for teachers’ humor. Laura also described valuing the extra time she can provide for strong feedback. Indeed, feedback was rated as an important pedagogical goal by nearly all of the participants, along with a perception of more time available for virtual feedback and an acknowledgment that it takes a lot of time to do well. Regardless, it is an area those seeking to teach virtually might embrace because doing it well could become a major source of job satisfaction. Finally, Laura’s efforts to engage students from the moment they enroll in her course, and her appreciation of not needing to deal with classroom management issues, clearly supports the work of Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2008) who suggested virtual teachers may need to move their focus from “a practice of controlling to engaging students’ attention” (p. 1061).

An example of even more smoothly adapting to the changes inherent in virtual teaching is found in Ken, who described an easy adjustment to what he experienced as the more businesslike atmosphere of virtual education. For instance, he moved into a narrative of being “professional” as valuing what he perceives as a less subjective, more neutral approach to interacting with learners where his focus is less on the individuals and more on events (Zembylas, 2004), such as work completion. During his discussion of brick-and-mortar teaching he indicated a concern around the impact of his feelings toward particular students, something Noddings (1996) might identify as fear that good judgment is impaired by emotions. As a virtual teacher he was perhaps better able to focus on his future-oriented career preparedness mission for working with students, without diversion into other aspects of his students’ lives. His comments and beliefs aligned well with the research indicating relationships based on deadlines, encouragement, and continual teacher communication can keep students motivated (DiPietro et al., 2008). This belief, as well as his willingness to hold to and enact specific values despite a lack of feedback from students,
such as the core importance of modeling to teaching, may comprise a large part of the reason he is most similar to Meg in terms of the impact of virtual teaching on professional identity.

In contrast, Carla presents a challenged professional identity in her efforts to adapt to the changes in relationships and teaching in the virtual setting. She conceded that in the virtual world a large part of her sense of success is dependent on students showing up, and that she is frequently disappointed. This seemed to diminish her commitment to her brick-and-mortar pedagogical goals around life skill building, and perhaps prompted her to refocus on new goals in virtual school administration.

An examination of each case in the study illustrates strategies for dealing with the relationship changes inherent in virtual versus brick-and-mortar teaching. These changes impact professional identity, but not necessarily in predictable ways. For instance, part of professional identity might arise from having some aspect of personal needs met and these can vary widely as seen in the examples of Meg and Aaron. At least the possibility of the realization of pedagogical goals matters, as seen in the example of Laura. Flexibility, such as hours of work, being home with family while working, and possibly earning decent pay as in Aaron’s experience, may become primary sources of satisfaction and key components of professional identity for virtual teachers. Deeply knowing one’s students, as Meg described, may be less likely. Relying on knowledge of students through the questions they ask and the work they do may keep the student-teacher relationship on primarily an academic and intellectual level as Eisenbach (2015) experienced and as Ken extolled for its positive impact on bias reduction. While participants in this study were able to identify exceptions, most of their interactions with students could not be described as rich, and were not cited as sources of satisfaction or enjoyment, except in terms of students eventually passing the course or showing growth in skills or in work completion. Meg provides a strong exception, and future research into the factors that create a setting where virtual
teachers can find that level of professional satisfaction directly from their work with virtual students could be useful in recruiting and retaining highly satisfied teachers for virtual schools.

**The Appeal of Blended Learning**

I have included this section because each virtual teacher described an ideal *virtual* future as including elements of brick-and-mortar classroom life, and in one case that an ideal *brick-and-mortar* future should include elements of online work. They indicated to varying degrees that certain challenges they regularly negotiate as virtual teachers would diminish within a teaching scenario encompassing components of both brick-and-mortar and virtual classrooms.

After considering their experiences in both worlds as well as their developing virtual pedagogy, participants talked about combining virtual and brick-and-mortar learning to enhance their sense of effective teaching and their students’ likelihood of substantial learning. Even Meg, who asserted a high level of satisfaction with her current virtual position in terms of contact with students and her work as a teacher, described an ideal future scenario where she would meet her students, not just for a field trip, but for a family reunion-style, informal gathering at least once during the duration of a course. Students could meet her and one another and parents would be included. She also talked of subject “departments” gathering in person, which would enable her to spend time with some of her favorite virtual colleagues face to face. Aaron’s ideal future job involves a streamlined digital learning program that would require no human grading combined with video help for common misunderstandings, thus leaving him available for the kind of far-ranging and stimulating discussions he enjoyed most in the brick-and-mortar classroom. Carla spoke of increased family commitment from investing in actually getting to “a facility,” and a potential reduction in plagiarism with in-person writing in a blended environment. Ken, on the other hand, envisions bringing a digital self-paced writing program back to the brick-and-mortar classroom one day. He’s realized writing could be an individualized ongoing course component
done independently with his feedback, as it is in his virtual teaching, while other aspects of the
class are conducted as a full group. Laura sees blended learning as part of everyone’s future as a
means of offering “courses in subject areas previously untapped within the brick-and-mortar
setting.” She also talked about optimizing her use of videos to become increasingly “real” to her
virtual students, and she described an ideal case of being able to video chat at will with her
students in addition to putting them in live video group chats where she could pop in to do real-
time tutorials. Although her emphasis is on moving from asynchronous to more synchronous
learning opportunities, her interest in face-to-face time is evident.

Many of these ideas highlight the physical separateness of virtual teaching. That is,
despite the varied points of virtual contact and the use of emojis and emoticons to build
relationships, actually being apart from one another seems to be a salient component for these
virtual teachers, causing face to face meetings to take on importance when they envision ideal
teaching and learning scenarios. For Meg and Laura, there is an element of being “real” to
students they believe could be enhanced in a blended environment. In addition to simply
knowing one’s students better, this may stem from a desire, spoken or not, and similar to
Eisenbach’s (2015), to increase relational care in the virtual classroom through establishing “a
sense of immediacy and presence” (p. 40).

Finding professional satisfaction in daily informal and formal communication with
students can happen, as seen in Meg’s case. However, it is more likely, perhaps, as related by the
other participants, that virtual interactions with students will fall into the categories of
‘procedural’ around the use of technology or ‘instructional’ around content and class processes.
Clearly described by both Hawkins et al (2012) and Eisenbach (2015), this potential lessening of
social and emotional connections with students may merit additional research. Carla and Ken
indicated a blended environment might ultimately help eliminate negatives in one or both of the
current settings, such as plagiarism or the periodic overwhelming amounts of writing requiring feedback. Aaron seeks to do more of what he enjoys as a teacher and less of the “boring” tasks, while creating more efficiency in an online learning system. If a form of blended learning is the ideal for each of these virtual teachers, the reality is they have made various adjustments and accommodations in their teaching practices and in their professional thinking to better address the needs of virtual students while meeting the expectations of their virtual school employers. I turn now the contributions, and then the limitations, of this study.

Summary

From these five case studies it emerged that virtual teaching, as it is with virtual learning, may not be for everyone. Relationships with students are impacted in various ways. A virtual teacher’s sense of professional identity may differ dramatically from what she would experience in the brick-and-mortar environment. Frustrations and rewards in the work are likely to transform. In considering these five individuals, with their diverse personalities, interests, backgrounds, and content expertise, it is unclear what qualities in a brick-and-mortar teacher’s practice will translate into a successful transition when moving into virtual teaching. Even qualities as basic as subject passion and an interest in students’ future lives do not guarantee any level of satisfaction in the virtual setting, nor a common experience with virtual teaching. Issues of how a particular educational organization’s structure and practices impact the way time, power, professional roles, and the daily enjoyment of working with students effect a teacher’s experience will likely cause adjustments to relationships with learners and ultimately to professional identity. Trust, as an aspect of how teachers interact with students, may take on new features, and may assume a different role in those relationships. While an understanding that daily contact and engagement with students will be much different than in the brick-and-mortar classroom had been evident for some time, an alteration in opportunities to express care for
students and their learning may surprise some virtual teachers. The adjustments required by teachers will vary depending on the structures in place by the educational organization managing the virtual school, the new virtual teacher’s goals and past experiences, and the type of virtual teaching position.

Preparing to teach virtually may not encompass a simple formula of adjustments in routine and in pedagogy. Potential virtual teachers may need to carefully examine their personal educational beliefs, work-style preferences, and the structures and expectations of prospective virtual teaching organizations to seek a positive fit. Sometimes that match may involve teachers growing into entirely new ways of being teachers, including as peer coaches, managers, and course designers. Other times there may be a continual questioning of the value of this work and its true impact on learners. A sense of reaching more students may leave an ambiguity about the significance of that reach: Can amazing bits of knowledge presented in an engaging manner match the life-changing possibilities of a memorable teacher–learner relationship?

Contributions of This Research

This study has begun to address some gaps in research regarding potential impacts of virtual education on teacher’s identity through a lens of the fundamental relationship teachers experience with learners. As a holistic investigation, the study explored the experiences of individual teachers at some depth, and in so doing added to our knowledge of teachers as professionals in the relatively new world of virtual schooling. The focused exploration of each individual teacher’s experiences in both contexts affirmed the complexity of the teaching process and indeed, of the profession, while specifically targeting teachers’ experiences of the teacher–learner relationship and subsequent sense of what it means to be a teacher.

Additionally, this qualitative study made visible multifaceted aspects of structural features over which educational organizations have control, such as flexibility with time, course
enrollments and assignments, the percentage of time likely to be spent in synchronous versus asynchronous contact, and the separation of teaching roles, thus helping to elaborate on the notion that organizational policy matters to a teacher’s sense of relationships as Borup et al. (2013) suggested. For instance, this research illustrated both advantages and frustrations for teachers in assuming just one role in the teaching process and in adapting to pressures and autonomy with aspects of time. Chiefly, it is not always clear how an individual teacher will experience those benefits and challenges, nor is it clear whether specific structures might work against virtual teachers doing their best work to enhance learners’ opportunities for growth. Participants referred to their class sizes, the amount of synchronous contact required or available, the stability of their schedule in terms of the courses they are assigned to teach, and their degree of curricular, instruction, and assessment autonomy when discussing their student interactions, both positive and those marked by issues that interfered with their performance. More specifically, the study’s description of a virtual teacher who is working incredible hours, making her teaching “a way of life” and yet finding great rewards in the work, is an indicator that virtual education may indeed hold promise, not just for fiscal and flexibility reasons, but also through social-emotional strengthening of the teaching and learning process. While this case was an organizational outlier, and a single case does not make an argument, it does illustrate a potential scenario for virtual teachers. This is especially true because this research simultaneously illuminates several specific challenges to virtual teachers’ experiences of relationships with their students and suggests possible implications that challenge professional identity in organizational structures that are primarily asynchronous with strong separation of teaching roles.

Finally, while both caring for (Eisenbach, 2015) and motivating (Borup, et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2012) students have been explored within the virtual setting, the areas of teachers modeling dispositions and values for students, as well as a teachers’ capacities for acquiring
various lenses into virtual students’ conceptual understanding, are rarely addressed. These facets of teachers’ relationships with students, along with the significant and pervasive issue of trust, emerge in this study as worthy of additional research.

**Limitations**

This study’s most visible limitation is the small sample size. Specifically, while the five participants represent diversity in subjects taught, years of experience, roles in virtual education, and gender, four of the five virtual teachers work in organizations which rely primarily on asynchronous contact with students, while only one teacher regularly connects with students in real time, either through phone calls or video conversations. A second teacher in a similar setting would perhaps have added a stronger point of comparison around virtual school structures. As an outlier, the single case leaves ambiguity around whether the strong enhancement of professional identity and feelings of positive, effective practice are specific to this individual or reflective of her organization’s structure and policies.

That said, while this data is not generalizable, it is useful as an exploratory, descriptive study pointing to areas of virtual teaching that would benefit from continuing research. It is to those possibilities for additional study, as well as to the implications for policy and practice, that I now turn.

**Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research**

This research leads directly to a handful of recommendations for stakeholders, including teacher preparation educators, policy-makers, researchers, managers of virtual schools, public school administrators, and pre-service teachers or in-service brick-and-mortar teachers deciding whether to move to the virtual classroom. These suggestions are intended to stimulate discussion and to help provide direction as all stakeholders continue to negotiate the growth of virtual courses and virtual schools for secondary students. This study’s participants represent at least
two ways of structuring virtual schools: One method requires regular synchronous contact between teachers and their students, primarily through discussion based assessments, and the other structure, while permitting synchronous contact, actually relies on asynchronous connections between the instructor and student and no connections at all between the course designers and the students. Neither of these means of organizing virtual education represents the gold standard in virtual teaching and learning, and in fact, this study indicates further research into what structure(s) might provide optimal contact between teacher and learner is needed.

**Blended environment.** Researchers and policy-makers should continue exploring ways to bring face-to-face contact into the virtual school setting. Even Meg, who loves virtual teaching and described ongoing opportunities for synchronous connecting in her virtual classroom by phone or by Skype, emphasized her sense that the experience of teaching and learning in this environment would be greatly enhanced by planning regular gatherings of virtual classes. These included not only field trips, but also events that she described as comparable to “family reunions.” Enjoyment in being together matters to teachers, and often to their students. More face-to-face opportunities might impact some of the issues virtual teachers shared around time, including time spent futilely trying to connect with non-responsive students, as well as around the role of trust in the virtual teacher–learner relationship. In addition, a teacher’s sense of the ways and the degree to which students understand course material might be enhanced by face-to-face interaction time.

This is also a decision that educational-management organizations should examine more closely. The degree to which teachers have synchronous contact with students is largely determined by an organization’s policies and practices, whether that means implementing
discussion-based assessments or reducing class enrollments so virtual teachers have time to connect in real time with students on a regular basis.

**Role integration.** Researchers should evaluate with rigorous studies the division of the teaching role into mentoring and advising, instructing and assessing, and designing. Prior authors described virtual teachers’ potential for role confusion (Hawkins et al., 2012), and this study’s five participants expressed varying reactions to the constraints and affordances within their roles as instructors, advisors and mentors, and course designers. If this division of roles is deemed desirable, it may prove effective to understand better which professional traits truly match best with each role during and after the hiring process. If it is not established as an effective practice, education management organizations should reconsider this practice, even if it runs counter to their sense of efficiency.

Teaching via discreet roles is a substantial change to a profession built on relationships and typically practiced as integrative and holistic. Thus, it may be worth determining, with some accuracy and for a variety of teachers and students, whether a holistic and integrated approach to teaching and learning, where the teacher addresses a variety of roles in the student’s learning process, is simply holding onto a relic from the past or is an important means of preserving and enhancing valuable knowledge and skills, including the intangibles such as human “goodness” and empathy through less predetermined and structured growth efforts.

**Teacher empowerment and voice.** A combination of academic research and action research could provide a better understanding of the impact on the education community of the changes in control that virtual teachers are likely to experience in virtual schools, especially those with little to no synchronous connections between teachers and students. This extends from issues of mediating adults impeding learning relationships with students to students disappearing “into the ether” without a means for teachers to reconnect. Additional examination is needed to
determine the prevalence of teachers’ feeling of control within the virtual learning setting versus feeling at the mercy of poorly created curricula or policies that impede their ability to understand students’ learning situations and status. The role of the organizational management organization in this area may be of particular interest.

Policy-makers and virtual school managers should consider finding ways to include more teacher voice in the design of the virtual environment. This study was not broad enough to explore the various ways in which teachers’ voices are already incorporated into virtual school decision-making; however, several comments indicated that even when an individual experienced satisfaction with their virtual teaching experience, there were many more instances of experiencing a sense of little control. In fact, Carla made it a point to mention her increasing ability to “bring things up” to those with the power to effect change as she moved into more of a management position with her virtual education organization. Having more control over the curricular core as well as supplementary materials could be useful to teachers in supporting learners. In addition, exploring more deeply the paradox that teachers reported of a perceived sense of a lessening of impact on students while simultaneously gaining control over the structure of their day could be particularly helpful in terms of increasing virtual teacher satisfaction and retention.

Trust. Similarly, the issue of trust in the virtual environment requires more investigation. Researchers such as Hargreaves (1998) and Rodgers & Raider-Roth (2006) have determined the importance of emotions to teaching and the primacy of trust as an emotional state facilitating learning. Changes to this fundamental means of being in contact with one another deserve more exploration to enable both teachers and learners to do their best work. Issues of wondering how to trust that students were doing their own assignments supplanted the focus of creating a trusting environment for virtual students. Teachers also experienced decreased trust in their
students to participate in learning by attending live sessions and completing assignments beyond the minimum required to pass the course.

If, as some predict, trust has become and will remain the most important commodity of the next few decades, some level of modeling and sharing trust in a learning environment seems an essential part of an effective K-12 public education. Additional research into how teachers and their students currently experience trust in a virtual environment will be a critical component in creating and sustaining a learning environment in which students will grow socially and emotionally as well as academically.

**Virtual teacher preparation.** Teacher educators and school managers and administrators should create opportunities for pre-practicum and in-service teachers to explore virtual teaching, perhaps through literature, virtual teacher guest interviews, or even job-shadowing. Rather than simply providing instructions for moving brick-and-mortar content into a virtual environment, preparatory activities could also promote insights into the daily professional lives of virtual teachers. A potential model program was studied and described by Luo et al. (2017) and participants overwhelmingly rated the guest virtual teachers as helpful to their understanding of the virtual school setting. Having a sense of the potential changes they might experience in the virtual setting could aid teachers in making better decisions about whether virtual teaching is a good match for their values and skill set.

Likewise, in-service and pre-service teachers considering virtual teaching should carefully explore potential virtual schools to ensure a sustainable match with their teaching mission and relationship priorities. Specifically, all potential virtual teachers should thoroughly investigate organizations for which they might teach. The nature of virtual teaching entails that teachers might enjoy choices that are non-geographically dependent. Taking the time to vet possible employers to determine whether each institution is an appropriate match in terms of the
availability of synchronous contact as well as expectations around that contact and enrollment load might facilitate higher levels of satisfaction and retention and personal growth.

**Organizational structures.** Finally, it may prove worthwhile for researchers to continue to explore larger issues of virtual teacher relationships and identity, such as the extent to which healthy teacher identities rely on attributes of community and which qualities between teacher and learner are essential for students’ social and emotional development around the very notion of academic growth. The answers to these will also add clarity to the question of how effective virtual schools are organized. Many of the implications above are impacted by the types of processes and procedures an organization uses to structure the work of teachers and learners. For instance, continued research into the differences between teachers’ experiences when forms of synchronous connections are common compared to those of teachers at virtual schools that primarily operate asynchronously could help to clarify issues of trust and time. Similarly, problems of pedagogy involving teachers’ awareness of students’ understanding of complex concepts may link to the structures used to enable teacher and student interaction.

Indeed, this study only begins to raise additional questions about the relational nature of teaching as a profession when practiced over geographical distances. As a fundamental human activity, how might teaching, and therefore learning, be better served when practiced in a virtual environment that erases physical distance, but perhaps increases emotional separation?
REFERENCES


Hawkins, A., Barbour, M. K., & Graham, C. (2012). Everybody is their own island: Teacher disconnection in a virtual school. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance (or distributed) Learning, 13(2), 123–144.


Reynard, R. (2009). Bridging the gap between online and on-ground teaching. THE journal.


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR INTERVIEWS 1–3

Research Question I:
How do virtual high school teachers describe their relationships with students, first in the brick-and-mortar classroom and later in the virtual classroom?

Sub-questions:
- how do former brick-and-mortar teachers describe their personal satisfaction from daily engagement with learners in a virtual world?
- how do former brick-and-mortar teachers talk about motivating virtual learners and connecting them with the subject under study?
- how do former brick-and-mortar teachers describe the ways in which they show care toward virtual learners?
- how do former brick-and-mortar teachers talk about modeling their values, passion for the subject(s) and approaches to life (“theory translated into practice”) in a virtual classroom?
- how do former brick-and-mortar teachers describe changes, if any, in their understanding of their students’ connection to and understanding of the subject in a virtual classroom? How do virtual teachers know what their students understand about the subject?
- What, if anything, do former brick-and-mortar teachers say about their teaching presence and the development and maintenance of trust in the virtual classroom?

Research Question II:
How do teachers describe their sense of professional identity in both the brick-and-mortar classroom and the virtual classroom?

Semi-structured Interview Protocols

Interview 1
Describe the logistical start to your teaching career.
Where? When? How did you prepare?
What were some of your reasons for becoming a teacher?
How did you decide to teach at the high school level?
How did you choose a subject area?
What were the most important influences on your development as a teacher?
Which particular people, programs, authors, courses?
What were your first years of teaching like?
Describe a typical day.
Tell me about an incident that stands out for you during that time.
When did you feel most successful? What sort of teacher were you?
Examples?
What sort of teacher did you aspire to be?
What sort of teacher did you work to avoid becoming?
How would you characterize your relationships with your students?
What were the most satisfying aspects of your relationships?
What were the most frustrating aspects of these relationships?
What metaphors might begin to describe these relationships?

How did you know when your students were learning?
  How did you know they were engaged with the subject?
  How did you gain a sense of their understanding of the subject?
    Examples?
  How did you encourage and facilitate student engagement and motivation?
    Examples?
    What sorts of engagement were important to you?
How did you build trust in your relationships with students?
  How did you know when this trust was established?
    Examples?
What were your hopes for your relationships/interactions with your students?
How else might you describe your role with students?

**Interview 2**
Why did you move into virtual teaching?
What is teaching virtually like for you?
  Describe a typical day.
What are your biggest influences to date in how you teach virtually?
  Which particular people, programs, authors, courses?
When do you feel most successful?
  Examples?
  What do you hope to avoid in your virtual practice?
How would you describe yourself as a virtual teacher?
How would you characterize your relationships with your students?
  What are the most satisfying aspects of your relationships?
  What are the most frustrating aspects of these relationships?
  What metaphors might begin to describe these relationships?
How do you know when your students are learning?
  How do you know they are engaged with the subject?
  How do you gain a sense of their understanding of the subject?
    Examples?
  How do you encourage and facilitate student engagement and motivation?
    Examples?
    What sorts of engagement are important to you?
How do you establish trust in your relationships with student(s)?
  How do you know when this trust is established?
    Examples?
How do you encourage and facilitate student engagement and motivation?
  Examples?
What would be your ideal virtual practice in 5 years?
  What would interaction/relationships with your students look like?
How else might you describe your role with students?
  (Increased honesty/dishonesty?)
Interview 3 (these are highly dependent on the responses in rounds 1 and 2)
Why did you make the switch? (immediate and long-range motivations)
How did you prepare for the change?
How has your thinking about your day changed (if it has)?
   How has your thinking about your students collectively changed or remained?
   the same?
   How has your thinking about your students individually changed?
   In terms of their learning successes and struggles?
   How have your goals and desires for your students changed?
How has your thinking about your students collectively changed?
What have these changes meant to you?
What have you noticed about your thinking about your job? About the profession of teaching?
Who are your students and how do you know, understand, motivate and engage them?
How do you know when they understand your work together?
What are you doing for and with your students and why?

General prompts for each question:
   What has that looked like with students or a student?
   Can you share a time when that occurred?
   What were some of the details that stand out for you when remembering an incident of this?
## APPENDIX B

### PARTICIPANTS’ KEY ATTRIBUTES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Professional qualities and values in B &amp; M</th>
<th>Qualities described in virtual</th>
<th>Constraints in virtual setting</th>
<th>Affordances in virtual setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>Knowledgeable well-read on new research</td>
<td>Same person in virtual as B &amp; M</td>
<td>Time is never really enough (“always something else to do”)</td>
<td>Flexibility (w/time especially)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd career after research science</td>
<td>Approachable (nurturing /caring)</td>
<td>Ability to help students set and reach goals through vigorous 1 to 1 contact</td>
<td>Missing that ‘human connection’</td>
<td>Autonomy (instructional decisions / contact w/students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dedicated to student growth tries to interest students in science (inspiring)</td>
<td>Accessible – platform and timewise</td>
<td></td>
<td>Freedom from continual new initiatives, drama, and politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solicits student and parent feedback to improve practice</td>
<td>Closer to her ideal teacher in virtual</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supportive principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student of own practice – growth-oriented</td>
<td>Responsive Strong communicator (more time for student talk)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Welcome call DBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appreciates later students’ thanks</td>
<td>Better able to apply concepts to students’ lives</td>
<td></td>
<td>Synchronous tutoring sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent and dependable</td>
<td>Exceeds organization’s expectations in multiple areas</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students feel safe in sharing (no peers, comfort w/ digital communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holds students accountable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Strong parent communication</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provides a role model for ethical behavior and “life lessons”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>% of time w/students higher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship-oriented</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curious</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relational (out of virtuous caring)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Professional qualities and values in B &amp; M</td>
<td>Qualities described in virtual</td>
<td>Constraints in virtual setting</td>
<td>Affordances in virtual setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Organized</td>
<td>Collaborative Flexible (modifying assignments – esp. deadlines and presentation options)</td>
<td>Could seem like a robot</td>
<td>Humor can still be impactful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong class management skills (consistent)</td>
<td>Pushes to get basic contact info / keep communication open</td>
<td>Lack of daily informal contact to build trust and knowledge of one another</td>
<td>Teacher eval less onerous “not as much infringement on me as a professional”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raise aspirations &amp; confidence and see student success in improved writing, skills to help future</td>
<td>Avoid boredom by showmanship / “room” design</td>
<td>Lack of synchronous communication</td>
<td>Don’t have to “cite standards” and other “fluff that interferes with teaching”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong work ethic (Saturday exam prep, videos)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of time to create videos that would personalize the learning experience</td>
<td>Effective partnering with parents / mentors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caring as professional, achievement-oriented, and sensitive to student needs</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of students “in the room” to provide tech help</td>
<td>Avoiding initiative churn and “selling” tests she didn’t believe in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part relational care and part virtuous</td>
<td></td>
<td>Limitations on ways to connect with students (no personal contact info policy, etc.)</td>
<td>Prep for future expectations (tech)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hesitant to “push in” to students’ lives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Scaffolds and differentiates</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strives for relevance /values ELA skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sees relationships as more important than “physicality and technicality”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Good reputation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Virtuous caring – 1 Relational caring - 2</td>
<td>Determined to use time well to prep for future/ aware of student challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table B1 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>participant</th>
<th>professional qualities and values in B &amp; M</th>
<th>qualities described in virtual</th>
<th>constraints in virtual setting</th>
<th>affordances in virtual setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Aware of students’ strengths</td>
<td>Pleased with less bias in grading – removal of emotions</td>
<td>Paid grader to ...</td>
<td>Resource creator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“born teacher”</td>
<td>“born teacher”</td>
<td>No need to share lots of personal stuff on her site</td>
<td>Curriculum not accessible to students AND she is not there to help them reengage when the going gets tough</td>
<td>Reduction in bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>highly reflective</td>
<td>Feels she can know students through their writing</td>
<td>Autonomy to offer extra credit, tutorial videos</td>
<td>Can give papers full attention and stay “caught up” with grading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(saw her own bias, sought help for management, etc. – “can’t wish it’s easier have to wish you’re better” growth mind-set)</td>
<td>Values individualized feedback and gives “really good” fdbk</td>
<td>Missing the human touch</td>
<td>Some important topics done really well (credibility, bias)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>consistent</td>
<td>Physically expends less energy</td>
<td>Lack of time for making videos (“the best thing she can do”)</td>
<td>Coaching opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>trust-based /sincere</td>
<td>Still modeling – won’t take the easy shortcuts (fdbk)</td>
<td>Frequent changes in course assignment</td>
<td>Believes in mission of credit recovery – it’s an important chance to not drop out of high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>strong presence (clipboard, cold-calling); energetic</td>
<td>Believes in importance of content (less talk of mission of school)</td>
<td>Obstacles out of your control – bad email addresses, school-based stuff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>customer-service oriented; mission driven</td>
<td>“Transference of belief is huge”</td>
<td>Core skills can’t be overlooked in assignments</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>strong manager and “hyper-organized”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Paperwork: student contact tracker</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>career motivator – build soft skills too</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students don’t come to “office hours”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>fosters sense of responsibility and habits of excellence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“modeling is everything”</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>virtuous into relational via salesmanship</td>
<td></td>
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<td>participant</td>
<td>professional qualities and values in B &amp; M</td>
<td>qualities described in virtual</td>
<td>constraints in virtual setting</td>
<td>affordances in virtual setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Creates enjoyable &amp; memorable classes</td>
<td>lacks sense of being in relationship w/ students</td>
<td>Student confusion from designers and instructors being two people</td>
<td>Planning based on standards (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Default in lieu of academia</td>
<td>Cool / Exciting (not boring) / relevant</td>
<td>doesn’t identify as a teacher – except perhaps when making videos</td>
<td>Lack of visual cues around students’ engagement</td>
<td>Can make good money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wants to connect well with students on multiple levels</td>
<td>courses he creates now may be “really boring in general”</td>
<td>Instructors have sticks not carrots</td>
<td>More control of student engagement as a designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wanted students to appreciate science &amp; be amazed &amp; to find their passions</td>
<td>monetary satisfaction</td>
<td>Questions whether students were learning when he was an instructor (sees issue with focusing on his teaching vs. students’ learning)</td>
<td>Designers have carrots not sticks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Also understood “most important parts of class” are not content</td>
<td>doesn’t feel compelled to go “above &amp; beyond”</td>
<td>Concerned w/ test security</td>
<td>Can imagine a variety of students to “teach” toward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philosophical / reflective</td>
<td>vision for testing that is completely open</td>
<td>Open-endedness doesn’t allow for regular sense of accomplishment</td>
<td>Exposes students to lots of content (breadth over depth which can be good)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Believes in the enjoyment of the moment / flexible &amp; relaxed with time</td>
<td>more in tune with cultural (and SES) backgrounds of his students (seeking access &amp; meaning)</td>
<td>Relationships rather than ideas change people’s lives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High value on informal discussion, less regimentation, community-building</td>
<td>still values “explorative conversations” which he could have virtually as an instructor w/tech graded assignments</td>
<td>Do students read feedback? And then what?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncomfortable with grading/assessing</td>
<td>content expert</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preferred the novel and the fun to the repetitive/mundane</td>
<td>new model: at least I’m projecting myself out there</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two very different experiences with students in two schools</td>
<td>Virtuous caring now</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fine w/being outside the box</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OK w/good enough</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relational – 1st Virtuous – 2nd</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Professional Qualities and Values in B &amp; M</td>
<td>Qualities Described in Virtual Setting</td>
<td>Constraints in Virtual Setting</td>
<td>Affordances in Virtual Setting</td>
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<tr>
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<td>----------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>High standards, content-focused (AP PD)</td>
<td>Responsive (important to be very quick)</td>
<td>Less interaction w/students &amp; no captive audience</td>
<td>Strong students can “get ahead” (ex. his own kids in middle school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valued student participation</td>
<td>Keeps day structured</td>
<td>Students can ignore efforts to contact &amp; connect w/ them</td>
<td>Provides “starting over” opportunity for kids hurt by b &amp; m schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective – learned to add interactive components; on the job learning as critical</td>
<td>Important to understand what designers of course are doing / hoping for</td>
<td>Easier for students to share “more than they should”</td>
<td>A “whole team of teachers” are available online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appreciated community and being part of student’s lives / mentoring is natural</td>
<td>Works to provide good written fdbk</td>
<td>Hard to gage engagement w/out body language and other visuals</td>
<td>Tech/charts provide helpful info</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fairness &amp; respect (0 parent concerns)</td>
<td>Dreads parent questioning / values parent buy-in</td>
<td>Plagiarism is an issue</td>
<td>Plagiarism checker is available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humble, sincere, ‘laidback’ &amp; thinks about professional boundaries</td>
<td>Appreciative of students reaching out w/questions</td>
<td>Families come to virtual w/trust in education already “broken”</td>
<td>Offers students options (avoid the babysitter mentality though)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goal, esp. for tough kids, is self-supporting status</td>
<td>Works within tech means to be relatable (including humor)</td>
<td>Hard to encourage excellence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values process; informal conversation key; his content is crucial</td>
<td>Might do the work with “not quite as much passion” but that’s not as obvious or critical in virtual</td>
<td>Enrollment numbers make contacts challenging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>group work and informal assess. work best</td>
<td>Still adaptable</td>
<td>To be successful less fluidity in day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relational – 1st Virtuous – 2nd</td>
<td>More important to think and engage then to regurgitate</td>
<td>Less teacher control of the relationship (so parents get a student-only view)</td>
<td>“live” tutorials are videotaped and not well attended</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Linda Fuller was born in Blue Hill, Maine, and graduated from Ellsworth High School, also in Maine, in 1976. She attended Brown University for two years, studying liberal arts and independently pursuing research into area schools and theories of learning. Returning to Maine for teacher certification, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Education in 1983 and promptly began teaching English at Ellsworth High. When the opportunity arose, she moved into a multi-grade middle school position at the three-room school of Beech Hill in Otis, Maine. Eventually she returned to Ellsworth High School and Hancock County Technical Center to teach government and technical English, respectively. After earning her Master of Education degree in Counselor Education from the University of Maine in 1999, Linda worked as a school counselor at Ellsworth High School for twelve years before moving to College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor as Associate Director of Educational Studies in 2011. In addition to teaching, she works closely with certification candidates, including supervising their student teaching internships.

Linda’s professional activities include serving as a panelist for the Maine Commissioner’s Superintendents Conference in 2017 and on the Educator Preparation and Employment PK-16 Leadership Council from 2016 to 2018. Her work on a variety of committees for improving education services in Hancock County, Maine, includes the MDI Education Enhancement Fund, the Downeast Educational Partnership (DEEP), and the MDI Science Partnership.

Linda’s publications include “Creating Keys to Multiple Doors” in the Journal of Maine Education and “A Counselor Perspective” in Maine College Advisor. She is a candidate for a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Maine in May 2018.