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BLOOD AND INK: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY OF TEACHER WELL-BEING IN POST-PANDEMIC OKLAHOMA

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic public schools were at the center of political debate related to educational content and curricula. Some conservative states moved to place tighter controls on schools in these dimensions with anecdotal evidence suggesting a negative effect on teacher well-being by this policy paradigm. Empirical study of this narrative is largely nonexistent in the literature leaving a need for studies on how controlling policies may interact with teacher well-being. To address this gap in the literature, this study performed 30 semi-structured interviews with public school English and Social Studies teachers in Oklahoma to see how they describe their well-being in a controlling post-pandemic state policy environment. Oklahoma is an ideal setting for this study as its different legislative bodies implemented key curricular controls immediately following the pandemic. Oklahoma is also a state that has struggled with teacher retention, studied achievement, and broader social issues in recent years. The study's main findings suggest that teachers, regardless of their political persuasion, view state controls over their work as damaging to their well-being. Teachers also described policies designed by people far removed from the daily work of schools more negatively and expressed that such policies may interact more negatively with their well-being. Findings also suggest that leadership characteristics may shield teachers' well-being from state controlling policies, but that supportive leadership may be insufficient over time in a controlling state policy environment as controls tend to inevitably "trickle down" to the classroom level. These findings may contribute to the literature on the teaching profession by advancing knowledge about how teacher identity and well-being interact with state policies. As such, this work may inform the practice of policymakers and school leaders facing challenges of teacher burnout and shortages.

Chapter I: Introduction

As a middle school principal in Oklahoma, my daily labor is comprised of considerations of how policies I draft and enforce interact with teachers' lived and professional experiences. My career has been shaped by the different eras of policy in which I have worked, and I see it interacting with the teachers I support in 2024. This is personal for me and potentially crucial for the future of public schools in Oklahoma as the state sits precariously in dimensions of teacher retention, student achievement, and other risks to public life broadly. The study outlined and discussed in the following pages hopes to illuminate connections between education policies and teacher well-being in a way that generates implications for practitioners at various stakeholder levels, and policy scholars desiring to generate innovative dimensions of research.

In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, some conservative state governments have implemented laws with a tighter sense of control on content and curricula around socio-cultural issues in secondary classrooms. Oklahoma's House Bill 1775 is similar to legislation in Idaho, Tennessee, Texas, Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Arizona, and North Dakota in its attempt to place tighter controls on teachers' work along lines of political debate around the teaching of historical conversations on race and gender in the United States. These laws come alongside ongoing attempts in dozens of other states to enact similar policies as schools continue to be in the center of embattled partisan dynamics.

This policy shift comes amid an important time in the history of the teacher profession where teacher shortages and burnout seem to be on the rise. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest this phenomenon is due, at least in part, to a sense of reduced well-being in teachers' experiences as a result of controlling policies like HB 1775 and others. These enacted laws, attempts at passing legislation, and broader dialogue about all dimensions of the debate form an

environment in which teachers live and work. The anecdotal evidence that this policy posture may harm teachers' well-being is compelling, but seems insufficient to catalyze systemic change. Coming on the end of a long history of control of teachers' work from national, state, and local policymakers, the pandemic's effect on public schools may exacerbate troubling trends in teacher burnout and turnover due to injured well-being. Empirical study is clearly needed to give scholarly credibility to the anecdotal evidence of this and create new implications for education policies in Oklahoma and other states where similar policies are emerging.

Literature on teacher well-being and policy is superficial in places. To date, research has focused mainly on finite concepts like satisfaction (Admiraal & Kittelsen Røberg, 2023; Monahan et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2021), turnover (Ingersoll, 2001; Sun et al., 2017; Torres, 2016), and efficacy (Chetty et al., 2011; O'Quinn, 2018; Simmons, 2014) related to specific policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Porter-Magee, 2004; Sunderman et al., 2005) and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Au, 2013; Jochim & Lavery, 2015; Porter et al., 2011). Studies on teacher well-being based on state policy actions has focused more on the impact to student experiences and outcomes and some of the discrete dimensions listed above (Acton & Glasgow, 2020; Chan et al., 2021; Day, 2016) without creating an understanding of who teachers are and how their well-being is possibly influenced by policies.

Research on teacher well-being suggests that things like supportive leadership (Boyd et al., 2011; Ford et al., 2019; Torres, 2016); workplace conditions (Audrain et al., 2022; Ma & MacMillan, 1999); stress/burnout (Herman et al., 2018; Lacomba-Trejo et al., 2022; Madigan & Kim, 2021); and the high expectations quality of 21st century school accountability (Au, 2007; Jensen et al., 2014; Torres, 2016; Valli & Buese, 2007) may interact with teacher well-being in

myriad ways. This body of research suggests that supportive principals likely positively influence teacher well-being helping them be more resilient and effective in their work. Conversely, the controlling nature of high-stakes testing accountability and top-down workplace conditions may have a negative effect leading to stress, burnout, and turnover. Teacher well-being is often viewed by the literature as complex, affected by many different characteristics of a school environment, and elevates the importance of human relationship in all aspects of professional dynamics.

Education policy itself has been a well-studied element of public education, but there is less focus on teacher well-being and policy (Craig, 2009; DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Jochim & Lavery, 2015; Mintrom & Vergari, 1998). While research has studied how policies interact with various aspects of teachers' work (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Mintrom & Vergari, 1998; Zimmerman, 2022) and the education sector as a whole (Berliner & Biddle, 1997; Hale, 1988; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Weisburst, 2018), policies are often defined as broad, *de jure* actions at a federal level that outlines specific rewards and sanctions for how it is followed or deviated from. Research on the state level that positions various iterations of policy and how those iterations interact with teachers' working and lived experiences is missing. This study aims to build out the concept of a "policy environment" as a way of broadening the understanding of how policies interacts with teachers and constructing knowledge about who teachers are in the complex environment of a state-level political dynamic.

Existing research on how state policies interact with teacher well-being is in the form of survey data (American Federation of Teachers, 2017) and empirical studies with varied modes of analysis. This modest body of work suggests a negative interaction between controlling state

policies and teacher well-being but is weak in its collective empirical methodology and theoretical foundation

Literature Gap

Research on teacher well-being and policy has been largely quantitative and often excludes teachers' perspectives which may reduce the importance of their phenomenological descriptions of their work. New research on teacher well-being and how a broader policy environment may interact with it may be similarly important as it attempts to add a deeper dimension of understanding to who teachers are. What teachers say about the emotions, lived experiences, and elements of well-being connected to their work in 2024 is a significant contribution to the literature. This work hopes to generate explanations to inform the practice of policymakers and school leaders as teacher shortage, low quality, and burnout rise (Edwards et al., 2023; Farber, 2023; Herman et al., 2018; Park & Shin, 2020).

Study Purpose

This work examined the question, "how do secondary English and Social Studies teachers in Oklahoma describe their well-being in the controlling post-pandemic state policy environment?" It addresses this question by relying on interview data comprised of secondary Social Studies and English teachers' descriptions of their well-being in the controlling, post-COVID state policy environment in Oklahoma. Oklahoma was chosen as the study setting for its particularly controlling post-pandemic educational policy environment (Beaman et al., 2023; Beyer, 2022; Elseman, 2021; Farber, 2023). Oklahoma's governor, state legislature, school board, and state superintendent of instruction have joined forces on various bills and policy conversations aimed to control teachers' work in the years after the pandemic with different degrees of success (Farber, 2023; Hill, 2022; Meyer, 2022; Pain, 2023; Raymond, 2024).

Policies between states are often copied and pasted word-for-word. Oklahoma, at various times, has been the author and copier of education legislation and thus serves as an ideal study setting. One of the first acts of the newest elected State Superintendent in Oklahoma was to remove the photos of past teachers from the State Department Hall of Fame and replace them with photos of parents. While practically insignificant, this act was highly publicized as a paradigm shift at the state level to move policies to be oriented away from the teacher perspective and more harmonious with the views of parents for public education in Oklahoma.

The concept of a controlling policy environment in the post-pandemic, Oklahoma setting will be studied fully in the pages to follow. It is essential for research to emerge that captures teachers' descriptions of their well-being in such an environment as an empirical foundation for education reform. The theories here suggest teachers' well-being will be at odds with this environment as it malnourishes their psychological needs. It seems that is what control does. The innate human desires to be volitional with one's work and to be connected and joyful in that work can energize teaching or, if malnourished, work against the well-being of teachers, potentially leading to broad negative trends in education as a labor sector in Oklahoma and elsewhere. The theory, methodology, and discussion here may deepen the dialogue of this concept and provide implications for practice in Oklahoma and elsewhere.

A qualitative design was chosen to elevate teachers' descriptions as valuable data, thereby probing more deeply into how they are experiencing their work and its bearing on their well-being during the last several years. The sample size (n = 30) is important as it allows for a diverse group of participants in an effort to gather generalizable descriptions. This variety should allow for greater generalizability to other policy environments and eras. Diversity within the sample along school geographical type, work tenure, certification type, personal political

persuasion, and a variety of other demographic characteristics further aids generalizability of findings. To be included, participants needed to have experience in the post-pandemic policy environment and have experience teaching Social Studies and English disciplines. Previous policy environments took aim at STEM fields in debate over the teaching of evolution (Bybee, 2001; Hall & Woika, 2018; Sanders & Ngxola, 2009), and other subject areas have been the center of policy actions on pedagogical concepts for decades (Curry, 1990; Porter et al., 2011; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Swars & Chestnutt, 2016), but the bulk of policy dialogue in the post-pandemic environment seems to focus work in those areas, such as how history is taught and how concepts of race and gender show up in texts and conversations in class (Bissell, 2023; Jamnah & Zimmerman, 2022; Pandey et al., 2023; Ujifusa, 2021; Woo et al., 2023). Snowball sampling was used to leverage existing relationships to source the diverse sample outlined above as cold calling and emailing were ineffective in sourcing participants. The study was designed by drawing on a conceptual framework consisting of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) to understand teacher well-being and how it interacts with teachers' work and sense of self. This interaction is foundational to all aspects of the study design having informed the idea to begin with, the semi-structured interview questionnaire, and the codes used to analyze interview data.

This study focused on the post-pandemic period as it may be unique in the issues intersecting with teacher's well-being. In the years during and since the pandemic, the policies that have emerged to control the work of schools have been considerable (M. A. Brown, 2021; Dhawan, 2020; Monahan et al., 2023). Combined with potential changes to the U.S. labor force (Chaturvedi et al., 2021), the way students learn (Khan, 2022), and the broader political discourse (E. Ng & Stanton, 2023), working in schools in the current era seemed important to

focus on for empirical study. I went into this project wanting to get a sense of how teachers feel about their work right now. What I found were diverse, personal, and empirically significant stories that may help the broader communities of educational scholarship, policy, and leadership gain knowledge of the work happening in schools and how teachers are experiencing these dimensions. It appears that “the way teachers feel about their work right now” is a vital component of their well-being. To say the work teachers do is complex may be an understatement (Farber, 2023; Labaree, 2007; Lawn et al., 2012; Rowan, 1994). I have labored on how to authentically capture the interview data I gathered in a way that is focused and precise to the question of how teachers describe their well-being in the post-pandemic policy environment in Oklahoma. It has been difficult because the complexity creates a veritable Jenga game of thought. It seems to pull out any piece effectively challenges and perhaps weakens the larger work.

Terms Defined

As outlined in the potential contributions, the terms assumed in this study need clear definition as they attempt to move the literature forward in expansive ways. The core terms of the study had working definitions going into the interview process, but the descriptions of the teachers reached were crucial to honing and focusing them within the context of teachers' experience and how controlling policies interacts with their well-being. The empirical spirit of this study is to leverage the descriptions of diverse teacher experiences as empirical data germane to the literature gap.

Often teachers interviewed exhibited some degree of incredulity that I was asking them what they thought about these dimensions of their work. Particularly in rural areas, and even more particularly with teachers of 20 years or more in the field, there was an increased spirit of disbelief that a researcher would be interested in what they had to say with several participants scoffing at the supposition that what they had to say was "data." In the main office of a small rural high school a principal asked what I was studying while examining the recruitment materials and asked "why are you in [*town name*]?" I reiterated the research question and said that a diverse group of participants was essential due to the inclusion of SIT, which was why I was canvassing rural areas. She shrugged her shoulders and quipped "Well, you may interview us, but no one is going to publish it" and walked away with one of the donuts I brought to accompany the flyers. I did not hear back from any teachers at this site who were interested in sitting for an interview. This interaction was important as an element of a potentially resigned posture school personnel have in 2024. The extent to which the stories of teachers are seen as credible data alongside formal metrics of student achievement, chronic absenteeism, and

spreadsheets of figures on teacher certification, tenure, and demographics is perhaps lower than it should be (Mobra & Hamlin, 2020).

While a working definition of each was present during the prospectus process, the terms defined here were shaped by these data. This is simply because I thought I had a clear, albeit generic, picture of what teachers would say and how controlling policies was interacting with their well-being, but their stories focused that into a more poignant collection of terms that are essential to be defined to truly glean clear findings from the data. The concepts of "policies," "policy environment," and "well-being" could be interpreted in myriad ways. The definitions here are pulled from the literature reviewed, the theoretical framework of the study, and the data outlined above. These definitions could be debated as they are positioned amid studies done on their core concepts, but for the purposes of using teachers as empirical data, they are solid in the ways they help explain those data.

Policy

For studying how teachers are experiencing their work now, "policy" is conceptualized as any of a broad range of *de jure* and *de facto* constructs that attempts to reach an outcome via prescriptive means. As such, policies may cascade from over-arching enacted laws to district-level guidelines to daily, building-level constructs that interact with teachers' work and well-being in any way. The definition of a policy need not be narrowly defined as enacted law only, but expanded to look at the whole breadth of how a human experiences policies in their work and how it interacts with that work (Hale, 1988; Rogers, 2015; Sun et al., 2017).

An expanded definition of what a policy is may lead toward a better explanation of elements of the research question, and more inclusive criteria for practice implications in the discussion of it. Indeed, while a mandate from a state agency on improving chronic absenteeism

is our comfortable view of a policy, a building-level email suggesting teachers gather during weekly shared planning periods to have meetings where they individual student attendance concerns is also a policy. The latter type is what the data suggest may have more of a daily interaction with how teachers experience the environment in which they work. A directive from a national or state figure about what teachers should or must do with respect to student gender pronouns is a policy in the formal sense, but a family rule for the Thanksgiving dinner table conversation between a teacher who is home for the holidays and their parents, grandparents, and other family that states "we shouldn't talk about those things", while not a formal state policy, is a *de facto* construct inserted into the life of a teacher that, once again, may interact with their well-being more deeply than the *de jure* policy (Feinauer, 2006; Hale, 1988; Handel, 1979).

This definition will be used in other related ones such as that of "policy actions" and "policy agents." An "action" is anything executed around a policy up to and including its ratification into law, but anything less formal. A proposal, a news story, a district initiative, a building-level mandate, or a communication of potential consequences could each be a "policy action" in this study. Similarly, a "policy agent" need not be a formal leader like a governor, state superintendent, or legislator, but could also be a principal, local district leader, department chair, school board member, or parent. These definitions are intentionally broad as the scope this study desires to cover is broader than previous definitions as articulated in the next definition.

Policy Environments

The mention of getting "fired" in responses from participants was important as a looming fear for many participants. In August of 2022 a high school English teacher in Norman, Oklahoma made news for resigning amid controversy over a parent complaint about books in their classroom (Polansky & Korth, 2022). After being placed on administrative leave, the

teacher voluntarily resigned creating a stir nationwide about Oklahoma legislation as a landmark element of the policy environment. In the fall of 2023, a series of bomb threats against different sites in Union Public Schools in Tulsa reignited the debate as the threats were linked to political activists who saw social media posts by teachers at Union Public Schools as methods of indoctrination (Ramirez, 2023). The activists are believed to have been signaled to these posts in their own social media groups formed solely for the process of identifying and impeding efforts of indoctrination in schools as they define it. That same fall, Tulsa Public Schools saw its accreditation lowered by the state superintendent due to non-compliance with the same legislation in the Norman and Union incidents based on a singular parent complaint (Brinkman, 2023).

In late February of 2024, a transgender student at Owasso High School died suddenly the evening after being in a physical altercation at school earlier that day (Villafranca, 2024). This made international news and narratives, apologetics, debate, and dialogue from all sides exploded for weeks. Different stakeholders accused the student, the others in the altercation, parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, and society at large for somehow causing this student's sudden death. The conservative side said their death was due to drugs in their system in the toxicology report. The liberal side said it was suicide due to bullying. The medical examiner confirmed the death was not a direct result of trauma from the altercation, but was indeed suicide. Nevertheless, operations at the school ground to a halt as threats from around the nation came in, police presence escalated, vigils were held, news vans crawled through and around the campus, and the world centered the school in the cable news crosshairs (Sharfman, 2024). At the very least, these news narratives underscore the complexity outlined here and further define the nature of a policy environment and how it can impose itself in formal and informal ways.

Many different concepts of policy levels and dynamics are apparent in these different issues. One deals with formal, *de jure* policies (HB 1775) while the others are not connected in any direct way to policies by name. Nevertheless, the dialogue on "indoctrination" from teachers at Union or transgender rights and policies in smaller iterations in Owasso informed the experience and well-being of teachers in those schools as well as every other stakeholder.

With a broader view of what a policy may be, the "policy environment" needs additional clarification for its importance to the research question and design. For the purposes of scaling up all dimensions of policy in that definition, I incorporate the addition of "environment." This concept should be viewed as the conditional state in which teachers live and work as shaped by policies as defined above. As such, the policy environment may be conditional to direct, prescriptive rules stemming from enacted legislation or other polices, but also extend to include dialogue, self-imposed management, pressure from colleagues, or feelings of responsibility to concrete and abstract communities.

This definition challenges a narrow understanding of policies as being confined to any specific laws passed. Dimensions of the policy environment certainly include formal legislative bills passed into law, but must be expanded, in the spirit of empirical flexibility to the broad range of human emotion in their work, to include recommendations for facilitation of school leadership, rules or emergency rules for new laws meant to be quickly implemented, suggestions for policy implementation, district-level dimensions of the iterations of legislative moves by school boards and executives, and building-level policies that hold implications for the daily work of school leaders, teachers, and students. As such, the policy environment could be looked at simply as the place and time in which teachers work as influenced by all dimensions of policy decisions and the dialogue on them. For qualitative inquiry, the inclusion of cursory political

dialogue about public schools is important to include. Simply, the policy environment should be defined to include policy actions and effects at all levels.

As shown in the issues that began this definition, while news media and public consciousness are most captured in headlines made by grand, partisan legislations nested amid larger political machinations at state and federal levels, the working lives of teachers are influenced, perhaps with as much effectiveness, by district and building-level policy changes (Boehm et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2019; Tiilikainen et al., 2019). This may occur at various levels such as collective bargaining agreements, teacher evaluation, certification requirements, curriculum selection, special education, student behavior management, pedagogical decision making, educational equity, standardized testing, teacher preparation programs at the university level, and others. Even in contexts where things are not formally inked as policies at any level, the collective conversation concerning the profession associated with any such politicized issues may tinge the environment differently. These often-elusive ideological ripples may catalyze interactions with teacher well-being, parent and guardian involvement, and students' daily experiences in schools. Plainly, it may not take a bill becoming law at the highest level to affect the experience of different stakeholders in a variety of ways, so expanding the definition of the "policy environment" to include formal and informal dimensions can provide a more realistic foundation for qualitative inquiry.

Close to a dozen teachers interviewed used some form of the word "indoctrinate" as extant in their consciousness in 2024. This term was always used negatively and always quoting an outside entity who was accusing specific teachers, or the profession itself, of being predisposed to indoctrinate, rather than educate, students. The descriptions of this term were stressed, sad, and angry because of the assumption that teachers overstep the work for which

they were hired to elevate personal agendas and unfairly subjugate students to their will. This is an example of how a policy environment operates. Interviews in this study suggest formal legislation, while important, is still hollow, distanced, and toothless in most teachers' minds, similarly to how veteran teachers described experienced elements of A Nation at Risk, NCLB, and Common Core policies in those eras. The personally damning assumption about, say, a social media post intimating teachers operate as agents of "indoctrination" seems to interact with teachers' well-being much more. This is why I have attempted to solidify the concept of a "policy environment" as one that incorporates the *de facto* as well as the *de jure*. The hope is that this term becomes important for understanding the core of the research question and contributes a new dimension to the currently well-researched concept of education policies.

Well-Being

To connect the data in this study to the explanations it desires, "well-being" needs clear definition. A synthesized popular definition of well-being centers on some degree of health, comfort, and happiness.

This study used a hybridized approach to well-being defined as a psychological state of positive feeling stemming from the satisfaction of needs incorporating both objective and subjective dimensions of environmental considerations, social relationships, personal self-fulfillment, and health. This definition was derived from a multidisciplinary review of literature attempting to define the construct over several decades. (Allardt, 1976; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; Simons & Baldwin, 2021). Allardt's work focused on well-being as reliant on the satisfaction of needs as opposed to the availability of resources. This dimension is important as it applies to the conceptual framework of the study outlined in chapter II, and pulls the conversation back from traditional dialogue that can be often one-dimensionally connected to compensation (Admiraal &

Kittelsen Røberg, 2023; Maiden & Evans, 2009; Nalipay et al., 2023). The Konu and Rimpelä component created a necessarily broad scope of factors that may interact with well-being incorporating environmental, relational, and goal-oriented indicators into the model. Simons' and Baldwin's work contributed the inclusion of objective and subjective phenomena to the definition as needing equal emphasis. This was important to the study as the interpretivist design outlined in chapter IV incorporated and yielded data in both dimensions.

With this definition of well-being in focus, the antithesis to the concept needs additional clarification. If the concept of nurturing psychological needs toward volition is central to the definition of well-being, the broad control of one's work in a way that challenges that quality of nurturing may come close to an antonym. There is no measuring tool to articulate an empirical continuum of policies that interact with teachers' work between controlling and nurturing. This study does not seek to formally establish such a tool but will use that dichotomy to translate the conceptual framework to usable explanation of the qualitative data. Neither "control" nor "nurturing" are traditional components of the aforementioned conceptual understandings of well-being (Allardt, 1976; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; Simons & Baldwin, 2021). Chapter II will unpack the theories used to form the study and will position those concepts as importantly interactive with well-being.

Scholars have established ways to measure this concept well in looking at how people view volition and control in their lives, but this study advances that dialogue by focusing on teachers and how the conditional state of their world interacts with their work and, in turn, their well-being (Carver & Scheier, 2012; Kuhl, 1987; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Skinner, 1996). In the study, this is fleshed out in the way transcripts were coded to look for trends in positive and negative references to their policy environment and its bearing on their work.

The controlling-nurturing dichotomy is present in this process as elements of teachers' descriptions of their well-being are based on their place between those extremes. The codes that emerged from this study are included in the appendices referenced in Chapter IV but are also necessary in the process of defining this study's understanding of well-being (Allardt, 1976; Deci et al., 1994; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Simons & Baldwin, 2021). In this process, a posture of controlling is defined as a negative quality of policies that slows the development of well-being as described by conceptual mentions like: burnout, fatigue, fear, sadness, difficulty, depression, anxiety, dread, worry, anger, avoidance, low perception of ability, descriptions of "cannot" or "will not," job insecurity, knowledge that other teachers are struggling, lack of time, unfair demands, paperwork, busy work, misalignment from "real" teaching, financial hardship, feelings that administrators do not listen, those in charge as being disconnected from reality of daily teaching, pressure, misalignment from purpose, futility, time dragging, derealization, disassociation, thoughts about leaving, work feeling harder than before, aimlessness, disorientation, confusion, unsustainability, fear for profession, or a desire to block out or ignore parts of the environment (Allardt, 1976; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; Roth et al., 2007; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Simons & Baldwin, 2021). Conversely, nurturing is defined as a positive quality of policies that support and accelerate the development of well-being and is described by terms like: protection, fun, insulation, joy, happiness, personal worth, connection, relationship, support, extra-economic fulfillment, alignment to purpose, belief in making a difference, humor, friendship, personal preference for the work, camaraderie, listening, passion, content affinity, purpose, direction, clarity, vision, mission, kindness, sustainability, feeling special or unique, privilege, pride, competence, skill, efficacy, duty, responsibility, professional worth, or civic

pride (Allardt, 1976; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; Roth et al., 2007; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Simons & Baldwin, 2021).

To define the concept hypothetically germane to the research, if a teacher in an interview said "these state laws about books scare me when I read the news stories but they don't affect me much because my admin takes care of all of that stuff," this would be evidence of the negative descriptor of fear of a state-level policies being interrupted by building-level ones that bears the positive descriptor of supportive administration. In this example warring elements within a policy environment are seen as more complex than the ideologically comfortable good-bad dichotomy. At its most basic level, this study's definition of well-being is a sliding scale of experience between controlling and nurturing, but it is too easy to say that those dichotomous qualities are operationalized simply by the variation in positive and negative codes listed. As such, the qualitative inquiry methodology allows for a nuanced look at a concept like well-being (Aurini et al., 2016; Fossey et al., 2002).

If data on teachers were collected via responses to a static survey or as data points within reports in sprawling databases, the concept of well-being must also remain static and less sliding. The interpretivist paradigm, however, suggests the quality of how teachers respond to questions, their pauses and body language, the tenor of the things they are saying alongside or sometimes apart from the actual words, and the contextual factors surrounding their responses are all data to inform the definition of what well-being is (Aurini et al., 2016; Blakely, 2013; Habermas, 1983). In fact, the diverse stories collected for this study show an interpretive view of the concept. While "do you feel like you have well-being?" was not part of the questioning process in the research design, it became clear early in each interview whether a teacher was well or not in the policy environment. It was also clear that, if asked to define "well-being" in a formal way,

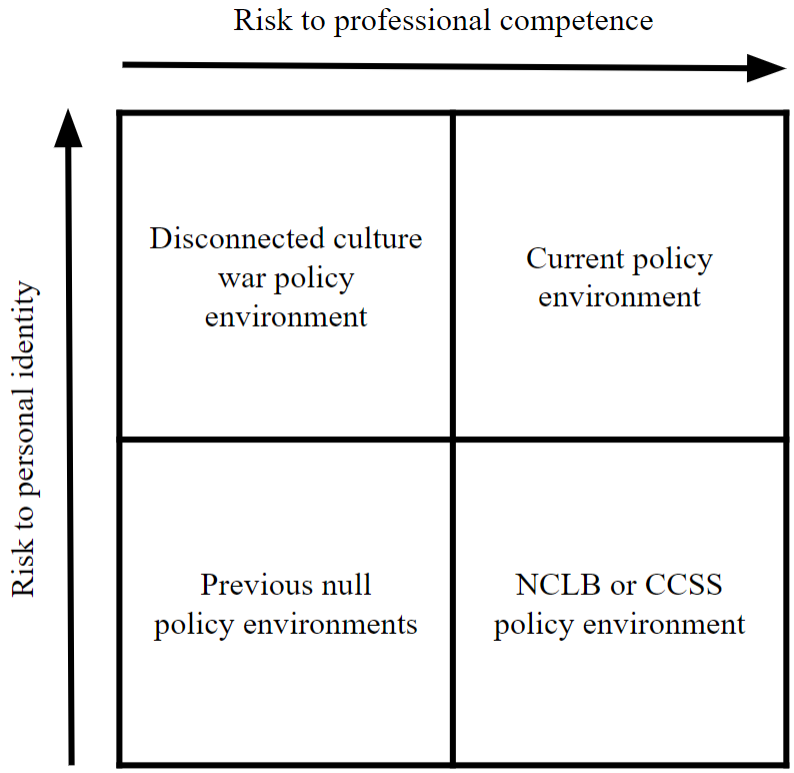
teachers would be varied in their conceptualization of it and how it is operationalized and experienced in their work. As such, it seemed important for this study to adopt a more inclusive, broadly interpreted definition of the concept to help explain participants' responses in a way that constructs knowledge of the phenomena investigated by the research question.

Term Interaction

These definitions seem to interact based on risk. Figure 1 shows the conceptual risk interaction in various kinds of policy environments as a way of showing these terms interact with one another. The interwoven nature of the theories determines the potential for risk a teacher may experience to their well-being based on how controlling policies may interact with teacher well-being. This risk to well-being could be experienced by risk to their professional competence, via a policy environment's imposition on their ability to do their job, and their personal identity as the nature of the policy may intersect their personal beliefs and foundational ideals for getting into the work.

Figure 1

Risk Interaction in a Policy Environment



In an environment that is minimal risk to both (bottom left) would be one where the policies are neither professionally controlling nor culturally or politically charged in relationship to one's beliefs. Here, the risk is low in both dimensions as it does not interact with their work or sense of self. There have been periods of lower policy frequency and energy in history and one of these would be a "null" example. Periods just before sweeping policy actions like A Nation at Risk or NCLB qualify. An environment that is still low in terms of personal identity impact but is high in control on work would be reminiscent of the NCLB or Common Core eras. Here, in an environment that is still more politically neutral (though political elements do exist, just in less pronounced ways) but highly prescriptive on teachers' work, the risk is mostly toward their professional competence. This will erode well-being, but a teacher would have their sense of self

still intact to fall back on. Similarly, in an environment where it is culturally loaded, like around elections, wars, or religious phenomena, the risk is high toward teachers' sense of self, but their professional competence remains intact for them to fall back on. This would be during a time like the 9/11 attacks or the Columbine school shooting where it is highly personal but imposes itself less on teaching. The riskiest kind of environment for a teacher's well-being is the top right where the environment is controlling toward the actual work of teaching and the content of the policies is likely to intersect elements of teachers' personal beliefs.

This is how the post-COVID policy environment could be described and may be explanatory of how teachers are experiencing in the findings to come. The upside of such an interaction could be positive when elements of the environment agree with the support of teachers' well-being. However, when the interaction grows malignant toward the work and a teachers' identity, the friction not only causes professional negative effects, but risks deeply affecting their well-being. It is possible this is where ill-being elements of burnout, demoralization, low self-efficacy, and turnover result (Bandura, 1993; Deci et al., 1994; Farber, 2023; Torres, 2016; Zhao et al., 2021).

Chapter II: Conceptual Framework

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) was used as a theoretical lens through which to view psychological needs concepts as important to how teachers view their work through in different policy environment in this study. Additionally, Social Identity Theory (SIT) was used to enrich the conceptual model by assuming the identity one holds as a marker of belonging with a group in some ways informs their behaviors and other psychological factors. The involvement of SIT is germane to the research question here (Hatch & Schultz, 2004; Tajfel, 1974) as the sampling, setting, and interview questionnaire contain elements of the interplay

between who someone is and how that identity interacts with a given policy environment. The potential for a connection between well-being and social identity in the theory is an important dimension of inquiry in the study.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT was popularized in the 1980s as a framework for understanding what helps people be intrinsically motivated in their work (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The theory outlines basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence that must be nurtured for intrinsic motivation to occur. Since its inception, SDT has gained prominence as a theory with implications for school leaders in developing teacher satisfaction, improving teacher retention, bolstering teacher efficacy, and driving student achievement (Deci et al., 1994; Deci & Ryan, 2014; Ford & Forsyth, 2021; Power & Goodnough, 2019).

As a foundational way of understanding how people are, or are not, intrinsically motivated in their work, SDT aids the conversation of how teachers are or are not able to do their work longitudinally and with efficacy toward the demands of a diverse 21st-century society. It does not appear that workers of any sector in 2024, particularly those who were born after 1980, have the stomach for work that is repetitiously dehumanizing and disconnected from their personhood (Audrain et al., 2022; Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Zaharee et al., 2018). In short, it seems modern generations would rather not have a job than have one that is corrosive to their well-being. This is seen across job sectors, but the dearth of quality public school teachers (Castro, 2023; Edwards et al., 2023; Wiggan et al., 2021) suggests scholars, policy makers, and society as a whole may need to pay attention to how that phenomenon is playing out in schools. Detractors of distance learning during the pandemic voiced how important it is to have teachers in schools doing the work they do for society to function. With that imperative, it seems a direct

function of the public good to focus on how to ensure teachers can do just that and SDT provides a conceptual framework ideal for studying that phenomenon.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

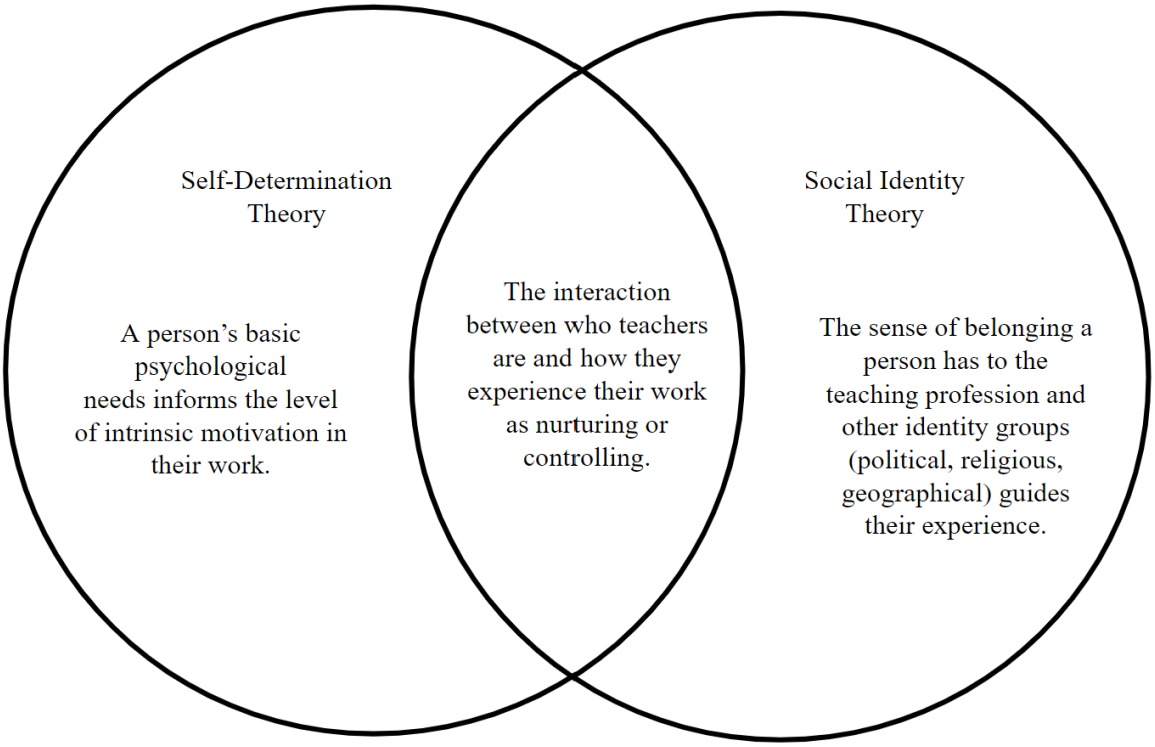
SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) was incorporated to describe how teachers' well-being within a particular policy environment interacts with who teachers are. This phenomenon theoretically hinges on how they view themselves in relationship to the group with which their identity communicates belonging, and their behavior based on identification with that group. The "relatedness" component of the psychological needs outlined in SDT potentially holds great explanatory power for how teachers experience their work in different policy environments, and SIT provides an important framework for constructing knowledge here.

Theoretical Interaction

The intersection of SDT and SIT (Figure 2) is one way this study is uniquely important. Whereas an environment's interaction with teachers' work may present challenges to SDT, and elements of the social and cultural stressors of living in 2024 may present another kind of stress on them as U.S. citizens, the combined effect is important to study as it shows an enthusiasm for viewing teaching as a complex, deeply personal phenomenon.

Figure 2

Conceptual Interaction Between SDT and SIT



The tenets of SDT and SIT form a useful lens through which questions were developed and teachers' perceptions of their work in the policy environment were described and analyzed. The descriptions of participants on the interaction between their psychological needs and the current policy environment in Oklahoma is an important contribution to the literature. SDT proposes that human motivation is galvanized by the nurturing of humans' basic psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their work environment (Deci et al., 1994). The findings of this study propose how a policy environment may interact with teachers' well-being via controlling and nurturing qualities toward their work has implications for the importance of psychological prerequisites to intrinsic motivation. It could be postulated further that, as a prerequisite to positive student outcomes associated with teacher self-determination,

developing a deeper knowledge of the way these different phenomena inform one another is a worthwhile undertaking (Ford et al., 2019; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Roth et al., 2007).

Though it emphasizes the nurturing of the basic human psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence, self-determination theory is not well-being in and of itself—it centers on intrinsic motivation. The conceptual connection of nurturing inherent in SDT to a person's self-concept within SIT gets closer (Allardt, 1976; Deci et al., 1994; Habermas, 1983; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; Kuhl, 1987; Roth et al., 2007; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Simons & Baldwin, 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). Theoretically speaking, when a person achieves volition in their work with a closely aligned, holistic sense of self, the popular components of health, comfort, and happiness as they relate to a teacher's daily, working psychological wellness is more easily achievable (Acton & Glasgow, 2020; Chan et al., 2021; Dieudé & Prøitz, 2022; Olsen, 2008; Rivera Maulucci, 2013). In addition to the popular definition of the construct, clinical additions abound that position well-being as a complex and multifaceted array of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Assor et al., 2002; Kuhl, 1987; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). This understanding works alongside SDT to build out more of an understanding of how an environment interacts with the well-being of people within it.

Chapter III: Literature Review

This study hopes to contribute by adding creating interpretive knowledge to existing thought on how state controls may interact with teachers' well-being. The way government systems have attempted and succeeded or failed to control or nurture what teachers and school systems do is an important phenomenon to unpack. While this phenomenon is hardly specific to the U.S. educational system, the United States may present a landscape potentially more complex

and frenetic than other world powers (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Education as an explicit state's right in the United States makes any nationally cohesive curricular paradigm difficult. With each state operating its public schools autonomously, the policymaking process is one some say is fraught with variation, complexity, incoherence, and confusion (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The NCLB era provided a comprehensive demand and set of recommendations for state governments' oversight of public schools, perhaps to a higher degree than any before it. The Cold War's tentacle into American schools, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983) provided a foundation of concern and fear about public schools as a primary engine for national success and dominance on the global scale, but NCLB propelled the United States into an era of enthusiasm for control on schools beyond that of the 1980s (Rury, 2013). Concepts such as achievement gaps, educational equity, funding for struggling schools, merit-based pay for teachers, government takeover of perpetually low-performing schools, and the concept of "teaching to the test" were not solely invented in the NCLB era but rose to become household names at a higher rate than ever before (Menken, 2006). As such, the interaction between a policy environment and teachers' well-being became even more important to study as scholars searched for theory and empiricism to support a labor sector growing in divided, embattled work (Castro, 2023; Farber, 2023). The complexity of this literature is borne out by the lack of empirical studies connected to the research question on how teachers in Oklahoma describe their well-being in the controlling post-pandemic state policy environment. Even when broadened to include adjacent, less specifically related parameters, the research is often the work of essayists, narrative historians, conversational sociologists, or political pontificators. Finding literature germane to the research question: the Common Core movement, the NCLB era, fad-based pedagogical controls, and heated sociopolitical policies has been difficult.

Teachers' Work and Government Oversight: Contested Space

An individual U.S. state's control on curriculum in schools helps create a picture of the American public school classroom as a "contested space" (Craig, 2009, p. 1034). This contest is, according to Craig's work, deepening and becoming more polarized. Her longitudinal study in Houston Public Schools (HPS) discussed how control by external factors such as legislation and administrative paradigm shifts can constrain, stress, and otherwise complicate the work teachers do in their classrooms. Craig's work gathered narratives from HPS teachers from 1997-2007 which importantly predates and portends the NCLB era, a time particularly controlling on teachers' work. Craig's study used meta-analysis of narrative accounts to characterize the nature of teachers' work as informed by policy changes from the state legislature.

Particularly important to this research is the narrative data Craig incorporated that make sense of how people outside the profession viewed teachers' work and the imperative to control it. What her study showed was a prodigious mistrust that teachers had in one's professional ability to make strong curricular and pedagogical decisions, thereby necessitating policies to control it. Some would argue this uncovers a germ in the soul of teachers' relationship to the greater public that has existed for more than a century, that teachers' work (and potentially their well-being) is under a constant quality of scrutiny and control (Goldstein, 2015; Rury, 2006; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Craig's work also exposed a dimension of why education exists. It is not presumptuous to agree that, at some level, schools should be places where students grow in academic achievement. Craig's work demonstrated, narratively, that there is an added stress on students in the classroom in an environment that is confined, prescribed, and motivated by policies. Craig discussed how this level of stress can be detrimental to academic achievement as

it creates a learning environment where teachers are confined to the role of "curriculum implementer" (p. 1045) rather than as agents of "liberation" (p. 1055).

This work was completed over a 10-year period incorporating 10 schools of various age levels in three different HPS school districts. The time commitment and sample size of the study are clear strengths in its ability to generate explanations of how the NCLB era interacted with teachers' well-being. The study lacked a strong conceptual framework and, given its long chronological scope and large sample size, meandered with respect to its theoretical foundation. This leaves the reader at a loss in terms of being able to assume any causal implications for the feelings teachers undergo or connect it to other research.

An important scholar in this literature is Jonathan Zimmerman whose 2022 book *Whose America?* rests on a foundation of previous research that aims to describe some of the sometimes panicked, complex environmental characteristics of how politics influences work in public schools during periods of "culture war." In this work, Zimmerman tracked different eras of political oversight and provided implications for grappling with our current moment. Zimmerman ethnographically mapped how the culture wars over industry, race, religion, crime, guns, sexuality, and free speech have entered American schools and discussed the parallel societal needs, desires, motifs, and trends of those time periods (Zimmerman, 2022). Exhausting the narrative behind a sprawling chronology of issues in schools such as textbook selection, prayer at sporting events, war protesting, and where students who identify as transgender may use the restroom, Zimmerman's work is extensive and provocative. These issues have all, though wildly different in their components and implications for running a school, tasked school systems and those who lead them to adapt, often on the fly, to the whims of political fashion.

Zimmerman's book is important in understanding a policy environment's interaction with teachers.

Zimmerman's book is not an empirical look at the phenomena he discusses, rather a historical account. While important for the work of scholars here, valuable, peer-reviewed empirical study of his work's components could help solidify it as an authoritative presence. While it does not provide a discrete list of steps to follow for practitioners to operate safely or predictably in this environment, his work used American history as the substance of will a society uses to focus its energy on what it demands of its largest social support system.

A 2011 Spanish study, while outside the American context, is also important in understanding how policy environments interact with teachers' work with potentially grim and troubling undertones for their well-being. The 20th century fascist Franco regime in Spain was famous for enacting a purge of high school teachers between the late 1930s and mid-1970s. The study here looked at the breadth of sanctions and that regime's long-term ideological effects on teachers in Spain, many of whom have never lived or taught under Franco's regime. The findings, based on 2,445 cases of governmental sanctions, revealed that the direct and violent control on teachers under the fascist regime potentially perpetuated a "cultural disease" (p. 245) wherein teachers felt, almost molecularly, that they are in danger if they choose to allow their personal identity to interact with their work (Zúñiga et al., 2011).

The study discussed the cultural wound in Spain from the purge as it asserted teachers are "the ones who put us in touch with reality" (p. 237). The researchers combined their meta-analysis of the sanctioned teachers' ages, genders, and degrees of social capital within the institutions all as identity-based characteristics that interacted with how and why they experienced sanctions by the regime. As weaknesses, the difference in cultural context, the

situation of Spanish "high school" teachers as much more like American university professors, translation complication, and the historical separation of 40-80 years from the present, all pose obstacles for studying policy environments in the United States. The strength of the study, in its analytical precision, comprehensive sample size, and theoretical similarity to the tenets of SDT and SIT that drive this inquiry, create a necessity for its inclusion in this discussion. Rather than use this study to pave the way for a histrionic omen, it should be used to empirically support the contention that teachers' work is deeply personal and to control it, in the broad, violent ways in the Spanish example, or in the more diplomatic, modern mode seen in the U.S. policy environment, is to potentially interact at a deep level with their well-being and identity.

The conservative orientation toward maintaining and pruning the fiscal habits of social programs is a fixture in the American sociopolitical landscape. A 2012 meta-analysis in Ohio, Florida, and Wisconsin examined how policy environments may interact with the work and psychology of teachers (Shober, 2012). Shober's work looked primarily at the gubernatorial role and its growth in interaction with specific elements of what schools do since the 1970s, particularly in the name of fiscal responsibility. Shober's work used strengths of narrative analysis to comprehensively survey the political eras and sub-eras of the last four decades and discuss their interactions with schools. Shober's work reads like a political essay, cobbling together dialogue and implications in all three states to create synthesis of ideas and observations.

The primary weakness of this study is its lack of empiricism via quantitative data or qualitative sensemaking, replaced by a reliance on synthesized discussion of the modes and mindsets of different political eras, how they may have shaped what happened in schools during those times, and how those policy environments have shaped life in schools within them since.

Taken alone, as a piece that reads more as a magazine or newspaper article, it is insufficient in understanding how policy environments inform the work germane to this study. The strength of this work is its considerable synthesis of political eras to provide implications for policymakers in how important it is to approach a state's collective teacher corps as "a powerful political force with which no other state policy area can compete" (p. 559). The depth to which this study supports the idea that, at the very least, education as a public program is unique in its collective phenomena, foundational in its social importance, and informative of how a state and its other sectors and institutions function, is valuable for an understanding of policy environments and what is at stake in how they interact with teachers and their well-being at work.

The concept of state controls on curriculum is a valuable component of an understanding of how a policy environment interacts with teachers' well-being. Though focused primarily on the effect of government control on "student consciousness." Christine E. Sleeter's *State curriculum standards and the shaping of student consciousness* is a policy critique of significant importance to this inquiry for what it says about what teachers may experience in a policy environment. Sleeter's critique came out in 2002 and therefore sits at the birth of NCLB, looking at the *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools* which was first adopted by the California State Board of Education in 1987, then readopted in 1994, 1998, and 2001 with only minor updates (Sleeter, 2002). With much discussion on the effects of such controls on students and their well-being, Sleeter also critiqued the policy on the grounds of the "bending" (p. 8) teachers must do to work within the policy for the human and academic good of their students.

The critique drew on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the systemic injustices inherent in state-mandated curricula particularly when those curricula are created by, benefit, and

uphold favorable historical narratives of historically dominant groups. The effect this phenomenon has on teachers is what seems to be an existential crisis that undermines their well-being. Though Sleeter did not use these terms, the critique of the *Framework* bears those assumptions. This policy critique is weak in that it lacks empirical study of in any paradigm, but strong in its reach across the sprawling educational landscape of one of our largest state systems. It also provides knowledge for the implications for policymakers now, at the end of the NCLB era, with the damage predicted by Sleeter's critique of California policy having come to some fruition in states across the country.

Lastly, Smith's and Rowley's seminal 2005 correlational work on teacher perceptions of professional development and rates of turnover is a key place to spend some time when discussing government-initiated controls of teachers' work (T. M. Smith & Rowley, 2005). This quantitative inquiry unfortunately focused more on the building-level control of professional development (PD), decision-making, and school culture than on more direct government-teacher directives, but since many controls by policy environments may trickle down to teachers' work (and interact with their well-being) via principals over time, it is important to include. The correlational data drawn from close to 40,000 teachers across the US via the 1999-2000 SASS public school survey is a clear strength of the study with strong implications for generalizability. The analytical model is similarly strong utilizing two phases of analysis: the first being a three-level (teacher, school, and state) hierarchical linear model (HLM) to predict teachers' level of participation in four different PD activities, followed by a three-level hierarchical generalized linear mode (HGLM) to predict turnover of those teachers later.

The study's findings support Ingersoll's earlier research on the relationship between organizational context and turnover (Ingersoll, 2001) and provide new insight on how PD

influences teacher retention. At the individual level, teachers who report less control over classroom practices and less influence over policies in their school are more likely to quit the profession or move to a different school at the end of the year. At the school level, teacher influence over policies, administrative support, a collaborative atmosphere, and a positive social climate are all associated with reduced teacher turnover. Increased participation in professional development was also positively associated with reduced teacher turnover, with this relationship even stronger in schools where teachers report having more influence over school-level decisions (T. M. Smith & Rowley, 2005). This study may stray too far toward the organizational capacity research, but its discussion about how policymakers' increased demand for accountability may interact negatively with teachers. Heavier controls on professional development in schools and favoring a more hierarchical, traditionalist management habitude may impact the work of teachers. This study shows how a shift in the policy environment may interact with teachers' feelings about their work and their ability to keep doing it.

A weakness of the study is a foggy grasp of the conceptual lens through which the research was being viewed. It started with connections to Rowan's (1990) theories on two distinct types of "control structures in schools" and Ingersoll's (2003) "school disorganization versus teacher disempowerment" perspectives. Encouragingly for my work, there is a tacit critique of Herzbergian "carrots-and-sticks" methods in favor of an unnamed SDT posture toward the psychological needs of teachers. This speaks of an early movement ahead of NCLB to fend off controlling policy interacting with teachers' well-being at work.

While considerable research has been done in the argument against government control of teachers' work (Au, 2013; Filson, 1988; Hursh, 2001, 2007; Imig & Imig, 2006; Shelton, 1978) and for modest extant benefits to increases in control (Admiraal & Kittelsen Røberg, 2023;

Kraft, Matthew A. & Lyon, Melissa Arnold; Rowan, 1994), the lion's share of this work takes the form of essay, philosophical apologetics, partisan rhetorical acrobatics, and theoretical dialogue. It also fails to flesh out implications connecting teachers' work to their well-being. The studies discussed in this section (Craig, 2009; Shober, 2012; Sleeter, 2002; Zúñiga et al., 2011) are important, but more is needed. A policymaker should not have to comb and translate a Spanish manuscript on fascist regimes of history for evidence of what government control can do to teaching as a profession. The work of the researchers reviewed here is strong, yet they may lack a theoretically-sound, qualitative inquiry of how teachers experience policy environments as part of who they are. New research is needed in the broad study of how governments' control on teachers' work shapes our world and our students' world. It is also important to continue to fuse findings on control of teachers' work with how it may interact with their well-being. Particularly on the grounds of teaching in places rife with a quality of "profound human difference" (Griffin-Smith, 2021).

Curricular Control for Student Achievement

A policy environment's appetite for uniform, standards-based control over teachers' work in the name of student achievement is clear in school reform efforts throughout U.S. history (Ma & MacMillan, 1999; T. M. Smith & Rowley, 2005; Sun et al., 2017). In the name of increased learning and opportunity outcomes for students in the United States, these reforms have been occurring for the last 100 years (Berliner & Biddle, 1997; Rury, 2013; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Initiatives and programs are often overlapping and concurrent (O'Quinn, 2018). These simultaneous attempts can occur within conflicting, intersecting initiatives and thrusts that all bear out the complex, embattled position of schools within different policy environments (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Labaree, 2007; Rury, 2013). The early debate between those aiming to

figure out the function of public education remains today. The perennialists, progressivists, essentialists, and social reconstructionists of the post-Industrial Revolution each warred to cement their place in the annals of social importance (Berliner & Biddle, 1997; Rury, 2006; Tyack, 2007). In 2024 we are still broadly divided on whether schools are for moral formation, democratic efficiency, professional utilitarianism, or simple academic discipline (Jamnah & Zimmerman, 2022; Taylor et al., 2023; Zimmerman, 2022). The Cold War era, where the desire for an increase in student achievement seemed to hold implications for the preservation of American safety and perpetuity. This phenomenon was operationalized by *A Nation at Risk* where we see a new emphasis on STEM disciplines and the NCLB era where urgency for students from marginalized contexts became the focus of sprawling attempts to ensure, in theory, that all students can succeed. These periods of emphasis have interacted, to some extent, with teacher well-being as it is defined in this study with the different policy environments outlined.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

NCLB, as a federal act, was simultaneously important to school policy at a level never seen in the United States but particularly impotent in the face of individual states' constitutional sovereignty over local education policy (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Dee & Jacob, 2010; Sunderman et al., 2005). Despite significant power to mandate implemented reform efforts in school via federal funding formulae, NCLB still could not mandate a universal set of standards nationwide or specifically prescribe the frontline implementation of its components such as teacher evaluation, high-stakes testing, school report card indicators, or professional development curricula (Hursh, 2007; Ladd, 2017; Porter-Magee, 2004). In the face of these practical inadequacies, NCLB, while transformational in its effectiveness to generate a new era

of education policy, did little to codify or unify the ramshackle assemblage of state-specific education systems (Hursh, 2007; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Ydesen & Dorn, 2022).

This failure aside, NCLB's importance in kicking up much-needed dust in the educational dialogue cannot be discounted. It created the necessity for earnest, sprawling policy aimed to close the gap between affluent and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Hursh, 2007; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). It increased urgency for schools failing to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) and earmarked considerable funds to support the improvement work needed (Hursh, 2007; Linn et al., 2002) and laid the groundwork for important discussions on achievement gaps between racial groups, ability levels, and genders across different subject areas (Borkowski & Sneed, 2006; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Ladd, 2017). With these various positive moves forward, NCLB is now seen as potentially detrimental in several areas. It increased the phenomenon now known as "teaching to the test" (Borkowski & Sneed, 2006; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Smyth, 2008), narrowed programs in the fine arts (Beveridge, 2009; Grey, 2009). and increased homework for students (Burroughs et al., 2005; McCaslin, 2006; Wronowski & Urick, 2019) thereby potentially damaging the lives of students outside of school and their families.

More germane to this study is the effect of NCLB on teaching as a profession. To say it affected the profession may be an understatement as its policy environment placed teachers squarely in the crosshairs of school improvement efforts (Borkowski & Sneed, 2006; DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Sunderman et al., 2005). This, paired with the genesis of policies to evaluate, rank, pressure, prescribe, and script the work of teachers in the name of school improvement, would profoundly change the profession, perhaps for decades to come (Brownell et al., 2005; Porter-Magee, 2004; Seed, 2008; Selwyn, 2007).

The NCLB era corresponds with the period in which many states began to see turnover rates increase (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Sun et al., 2017; Wronowski & Urick, 2019), teacher preparation program enrollment sag (Dover, 2022; Partelow, Lisette, 2019), and alternative certification numbers increase (Selwyn, 2007; Simpson et al., 2004). Given this realization, many scholars contend the legislative environment created by NCLB in most states may have been harmful to some degree toward the profession, and that his posture may have failed to yield the quantitative data to say it was worth the collateral damage it caused (Hursh, 2007; Smyth, 2008). The rise of the institution of "instructional coaches" surged during NCLB as a class of middle managers designed to closely monitor, evaluate, and "coach" teachers in the praxis of pedagogy. Significant funds made available to schools for the work of improvement were used to hire instructional coaches, most often positions that pulled quality, high performing, veteran teachers out of the classroom and placed them in socially complicated positions, often on staffs where they used to teach (Galey, 2016; Hursh, 2007; Porter-Magee, 2004). Though NCLB, due to its neutered position as a federal-level system of recommended policy, was not a set of discrete laws for direct implementation by states and local districts, it was powerful enough to irreversibly affect the teaching profession in ways from which it may never return (Porter-Magee, 2004; Selwyn, 2007; J. M. Smith & Kovacs, 2011). As such, in the discussion of policy environments that interact with teachers' well-being at work as complex agency-rich individuals, it must be seen as a dynamic agent, evidenced by the following specific studies.

A 2019 inquiry probed the issue of how NCLB may have affected teachers' well-being (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). The research team here used two competing structural equation models to study over 60,000 surveys of teachers who left the profession during the NCLB era. This quantitative methodology zeroed in specifically on a comparison of those who cited

accountability policies as a factor in their employment decisions, and those who did not. As increased federal and state accountability measures for struggling schools trickled down to teachers in a deluge of new policies of control during the NCLB era, this study explored an important dimension of my research question.

Though it did not articulate a specific theoretical lens (a potential weakness), it appeared to incorporate some elements of Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BNT) (Deci & Ryan, 2014) to build out a "teacher de-professionalization and demoralization framework" (p. 17) through which to examine survey results from the National Center for Education Statistics. The study's strength lies in its sample size and strong analytical methodology. It used Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), a Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) values to compare its CFA models. Particularly exciting for the research question in this study is the finding of a relationship between teachers' perceptions of accountability policies, perception of their working conditions, and turnover. This basis for more study on how policy environments interact with teachers' well-being is encouraging and by zooming in on the concept of turnover, in the current policy environment and setting of this study, Wronowski's and Urick's work is undoubtedly important. Where it falls short is in its thin, only subtly articulated conceptual lens, its rigid positivist design, and its lack of study of identity-based phenomena in its model. While admittedly, none of those factors were part of the research aims, it bears mentioning that, to build on this and other narrower studies, the work I am proposing is important and timely.

Another large quantitative study on the NCLB era provides statistical dialogue on a buffet of education sector phenomena including the positive and negative effects of the policy environment on teachers' work (Dee & Jacob, 2010). This study was a meta-analysis of roughly

10,000 U.S. school districts' finances, teacher qualifications, and student achievement numbers during the era gathered from public records, school report cards, teacher surveys, and dozens of studies on the NCLB era. While solid findings were made in all areas, the discussion of the study here will focus on the teacher and classroom dimensions. The strengths of this sample size and comprehensive nature are clear. The research team left no stone unturned in a herculean effort to create a catalog of the drastic impact of NCLB.

The study used the principal-agent model as a theoretical framework and quantitative regression model to look at how trends in teacher compensation, curricular decision-making, and pursuit of graduate degrees changed during NCLB. They then analyzed their data using a difference-in-differences analysis to examine how the regression model explained changes in these phenomena in teachers' working lives over time. As a novice appraiser of literature, I found the collage of phenomena and wandering nature of the meta-analysis to be disorienting as it seemed to spread itself thin across so many foci. That does not mean its breadth is an objective weakness, but its sheer size and scope make its findings harder to digest.

Nevertheless, the design of the study's quantitative methodology is a strength that, paired with its sample and topical focus, gives it authority in findings. As such, what they found was a mixed bag of positive and negative results. While they saw a modest increase in teacher compensation and advanced degree attainment during the era, they also found troubling trends of curricular decision-making toward tested content and away from things like science, social studies, and fine arts. This "narrowing" of the collective curriculum that became known as "teaching to the test" was one with mixed results in terms of teacher perception with some seeing it of added value to the urgent nature of low student achievement while others saw it as a confining and constraining phenomenon. They also saw differences between teachers'

experiences in districts with "at-risk" student populations and those without. This is particularly troubling as it underscores a growing angst amongst teachers in those contexts as they were a primary target for NCLB policy. The study also found that many teachers found increased professional development opportunities and funding allocation for school improvement efforts to be positive trends of the era.

To approach the NCLB era's interaction with teachers' well-being from the qualitative methodological side, I looked at an influential study from scholars at the University of Alabama-Huntsville (J. M. Smith & Kovacs, 2011). This mixed-methods study examined how "standards-based" reforms on teachers specifically has bearing for my study. This work analyzed approximately 100 surveys collected from every school serving students in grades K-8 in a mid-sized southern school district. The survey used standardized questions, each ranked on a 5-point Likert scale, to gauge each participant's level of "agreement" (p. 205) with each statement. It then left an open-ended, constructed response option for the participant to record a narrative response. Responses were coded by a research team with a methodology to preserve inter-coder reliability and fidelity in response analysis. The design of the study is a clear strength with seemingly every diligence pursued to ensure a reliable data set from which to draw conclusions. The design lacks a clear theoretical framework which confuses the results a bit as they strayed from any unified conceptual vein. Nevertheless, this study was strong in gathering and sharing teachers' identity characteristics as well as their school type and student demographics in those schools. It did attempt to pair some teacher identity markers with results, particularly in the case of teachers working in low-income schools as their results are of specific importance, but there is, perhaps because of the lack of theoretical framework, no view of how different teachers of

various identities may have responded in unified or differing ways from colleagues of different demographic groups.

The study's findings, though perhaps not reliably generalizable due to the narrow geographic setting, are damning for NCLB with respect to its effect on teachers. It found, definitively, that NCLB's negative effect on teachers is real. It found that dimensions of teacher stress, dissatisfaction, and curricular erosion, are particularly acute in low-performing schools, which are typically high-poverty and high-minority schools at higher rates, and that in those schools there has been a drastic amount of pressure to improve scores. It also found that teachers in low-income and affluent schools alike, in the NCLB policy environment, were less likely to encourage others into teaching and more likely to be thinking of leaving the field themselves. It reiterated the finding that the differences between high-poverty and high-minority schools with more affluent schools were fairly small, indicating that "teachers in disadvantaged schools may hold these negative feelings a bit more acutely, but the feelings were common across all types of schools" (p. 215) They assert that their review of the literature on NCLB has documented the "loss of a sense of professionalism, PD opportunities, curricular and pedagogical autonomy, and commitment to the field" (p. 220) and their study supports those previous findings. It would be irresponsible to omit that this study found a difference between the tone of answers of the survey and those of the constructed response. Where results from the quantitative side were ambivalent to positive with respect to NCLB, qualitative responses were descriptively negative. This incongruence does not change the results but is important to consider in terms of research design.

A 2006 policy critique built on these findings by discussing NCLB's effect on teachers by examining three "images" or "central common conceptions symbolic of basic attitudes and orientations" about teachers and teaching that are explicit or implicit in NCLB: "images of

knowledge, images of teachers and teaching, and images of teacher learning" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, p. 668) The authors argued that NCLB left teachers void of agency and oversimplified the process of teacher learning and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). While weak in its biased, non-empirical structure, this critique offered precise, scholarly synthesis, criticism, and recommendation to the discussion of NCLB legislation and accompanying policy tools that supported it in the decade following its ratification.

This study is particularly valuable to the literature here as it explicitly attempts to discuss how teachers' view themselves in a policy environment. It never names a particular theoretical framework, but the soul of SIT seems apparent in its discussion. This is the first study I found that seemed to attempt a synthesis of different components, or "images," of a teacher's identity under laws like NCLB. It used a synthetic methodology and discussion to conclude that the policy environment under NCLB undermined the broader democratic mission of education, narrowed curriculum, and exercised both technical and moralistic control over teachers and teaching. It then assumed that lawmakers should endeavor to draft education policies that aim to "build a richer framework for teaching that embraces its myriad complexities and acknowledges teachers' agency, activism, and leadership in generating local knowledge" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, p. 668).

Common Core

The Common Core debate was one of intense posturing and cultural warring during the mid-2010s (Au, 2013; Jochim & Lavery, 2015; Porter et al., 2011). The left-leaning desire for curricular standards alignment across states as a potential vehicle for shrinking achievement gaps in American schools clashed bitterly with the right-leaning bid for states' rights and decentralized control of schools (Jochim & Lavery, 2015). Some see the Common Core debates

as a watershed moment in how education policy can quickly become "general purpose politics" (Borkowski & Sneed, 2006; Ujifusa, 2021). Often this embattled dialogue departs from the classroom implications, academic definitions of terms, and scholarly objectivity and becomes a dance of identity enacted on the stages of social media, school board meetings, and informal conversation at work (Jochim & Lavery, 2015). As with many political issues, a "slippery slope" quality emerges as a primary concern for detractors. This was true of Common Core as critics portended a world devolved into government overreach and increased student failure as a result (Au, 2013).

While much of the debate over Common Core played out on news talk shows and social media (Hamlin & Peterson, 2018) another critical component of the issue was the position of the practitioner corps tasked with, in some cases, drastically changing their work while engaging in the socio-political dialogue. Regardless of the different schools of thought around the legislative push for Common Core, one must recognize how different an experience for teachers the full implementation of CCSS was (Jochim & Lavery, 2015; Porter et al., 2011; Zhang, 2014). While old adages about people's allergy to change are often broadly unhelpful, the cognitive, emotional, and practical shifts the drastic changes to pedagogy and content that were signaled by CCSS are evident. The following studies situate the Common Core movement next to the teaching profession and review the impact it has had in the decade since its inception. Few empirical studies incorporate both Common Core policies and teachers' working lives or mention the complex dimensions of studying teacher well-being as it relates to their work. While studies exist on neighboring topics, they were often either unempirical in their design or focused on other educational phenomena apart from teachers' identity and well-being.

Troia's and Graham's (2016) regression analysis of survey results from close to 500 writing teachers' perceptions of Common Core writing standards is sound scholarship on the topic (Troia & Graham, 2016). The respondents, teachers in grades 3-8 across multiple U.S. states, were surveyed to determine if teachers' preparation to teach writing, and personal beliefs related to writing, accounted for a significant amount of variance in their attitudes and beliefs toward the policy environment. This study was strong for its incorporation of the importance of teachers' beliefs about themselves as inextricable from their work. While this seems affectionate in dialogue about teaching as a profession, this work shows that, empirically, an even vaguely unsupportive policy environment can have a negative effect on teachers' senses of self (Troia & Graham, 2016).

Participants used a 67-question survey to describe their perceptions of the version of the Common Core writing and language standards adopted by their state, their preparation to teach writing, and their self-efficacy beliefs for teaching writing. The regression analysis applied to the survey responses is strong quantitative work. As with a lot of studies associated with dimensions of Common Core, it is hard to ascertain the theoretical framework for the study. Troia and Graham certainly employ popular theoretical elements such as SDT in its orientation toward the concept of "competence" (Deci & Ryan, 2014) and Self-Efficacy Theory (Maddux & Stanley, 1986) in its fervency for support of teachers' perceptions of their own efficacy with respect to teaching writing. Nevertheless, the theoretically thin nature of the study is a weakness, along with a low (4.4%) response rate and issue inherent in surveys as they rely on self-report data. Those shortcomings aside, the study is a strong, methodologically sound quantitative inquiry into a dimension of the interaction between policy and teacher perception that desperately needs more research.

Zhang's 2014 qualitative inquiry into how Common Core State Standards (CCSS) interacted with new teachers' work attempts to enrich the research but falls short (Zhang, 2014). This study is comprised of open-ended surveys used to gather data from just 17 new teachers with little if any conceptual framework from which to analyze findings. As such, findings are anemic, vague, and broadly agnostic of well-being as a concept. While qualitative research may not always yield strong correlations or conclusions (Aurini et al., 2016; Reeves et al., 2008) the absence of theory caused this study to have a superficial implication.

The main finding is that some of the participants articulated difficulty with implementing CCSS and underscored the complex and laborious work teachers do to try to start with a standard, operationalize it into objectives, and then design lessons, activities, and assessments to teach and evaluate student mastery. The study does provide some strong discussion of the importance of collaboration but falls short of providing a strong theory to explain that or any other phenomena it discusses.

A 2014 dissertation from Clark Atlanta University attempts to discuss the way teachers feel about the instructional support they received during the Common Core era (Simmons, 2014). This inquiry was qualitative in its methodology as it attempted to investigate how teachers perceive the instructional support provided by district and school level administrators in implementation of the CCSS. Theoretically, it employed phenomenology for its strength in describing "the meaning of lived experiences of human beings" (p. i). The description of this theoretical framework is inconclusive in any implications for the research design. The methodology involved "collecting and recording stories" (p. 41) of a collection of teachers to describe perceptions of their efficacy under CCSS. Participants form a diverse population as they represented elementary, middle, and high schools and various demographic groups, but are

geographically concentrated in Atlanta, Georgia, which may be a weakness in generalizability. Encouragingly, the author includes demographic information on the schools and participants though the sample size is small consisting of 36 participants with 28 completing surveys and the others sitting for interviews. It was unclear why the author employed a different methodology for its phenomenological work, but it does cast some doubt over the reliability or generalizability of the results. The research revealed 11 themes from the stories collected which represent just under a third of the respondents showing a disjointed set of findings. Said findings wander between different narratives of teacher perception, that while important, are too incoherent and individualized to generate discussion.

A research team from various universities in Oklahoma and Arkansas published an important mixed-methods study in 2016 with results that have achieved a modest level of generalizable attention (Matlock et al., 2016). This work used survey data from over 1,000 participants across the country to synthesize and describe how teachers viewed Common Core with respect to their work. For standardized responses, quantitative, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate the relationship between teachers' views toward the CCSS within each of the demographic characteristics, treating each participant's views score as the dependent variable and the demographic characteristic as the independent variable. Significant additional quantitative tools and models were employed to further analyze the data to create reliable results to enhance their potential for generalizability. Open-ended survey questions were also given to gather narrative data from participants on their perceptions of CCSS and their implementation.

The study found strong correlations between teachers' demographics and how they viewed CCSS and its implementation. Teachers of younger students, teachers newer to the

profession, and teachers with plans to leave versus stay all viewed the CCSS more positively, though all participants demonstrated a moderately positive posture toward the laws. Open-ended questions told a different "dark" story (p. 303). Using Mixed Mental Method analysis of open-ended responses revealed three central themes of teachers' perceptions: "organizational marginalization, lack of agency to meet students' needs, and imbalance of professional risk and reward" (Matlock et al., 2016, p. 303).

The strengths of this study are extensive. Its ambitious mixed-methods design achieves both positivist and interpretivist importance supported by precise data analysis methods and a balanced discussion underscoring the complex, dynamic quality of teachers' work and their perceptions about its place within the Common Core policy environment. This is particularly exciting in the dialogue of teacher well-being though not explicitly stated in the study. It is easy to assume the theory that underpins this study, but a potential weakness is that it is not clearly stated. The study begins with a discussion of major scholars in teacher job satisfaction and self-efficacy research (Bandura, 1993; Goddard et al., 2004; Ma & MacMillan, 1999) so there is an assumption that elements of the theoretical themes of those fields was formative to the work.

In 2015, a research team from Auburn University at Montgomery in Alabama executed a small, mixed-methods study to look at 35 teachers' "perceptions of implementing the CCSS" (Burks et al., 2015). The study incorporated a questionnaire of selected-response, Likert-scale, and open-ended items. Findings were mixed and lacked definition for any concrete recommendations. Roughly half of the sample were comfortable with dimensions of implementation while the other half were not. A lower percentage (20%) reported having significantly implanted CCSS in their classrooms while over half (55%) reported having not received adequate training to support implementation (Burks et al., 2015).

While the study is frail in its scope, theoretical framework (which is nonexistent) methodology, or findings, I am including it here because it seems generically representative of the building and classroom-level ennui rife throughout policies like CCSS within the ecosystem of the school reform movement. This study does not make any headlines with findings or contributions other than to underscore the elusive nature of studying teachers' work and the extant imperative to produce fresh dimensions of research. It is also largely absent any clear discussion of well-being as a construct.

A larger study with similar methodology and results was Swars' and Chestnutt's 2016 mixed-methods examination of the perceptions of Common Core implementations amongst math teachers in elementary schools (Swars & Chestnutt, 2016). Like the Burks study, findings are ambivalent, but important in their underscoring of the true complexity of the phenomena they are attempting to explain. With a larger sample size (n = 73) but similar theoretical superficiality and simplistic design, the study adds to the literature to some extent but may not be considered seminal in its impact.

The policy environment's appetite for uniform, standards-based control over teachers' work in the name of student achievement is clear in the cases of NCLB and the CCSS. The studies reviewed above show at least some movement toward legislative control over what happens in classrooms over the last two decades. The way teachers' well-being was affected during these periods, their collective impact on the profession, and the extent to which their implementation interacted with the student achievement gains they sought will remain fixtures of research for decades to come. Here, it is important to attempt as exhaustive a review of this literature as possible. While much work has been done, much of it is theoretically insufficient and unfocused to satisfy the demands of my research question. Only passing references in the

studies reviewed touched on the importance of teachers' identity in their work, and no explicit mention of SDT or SIT emerged. The empirical strength of the Matlock study was related but singular, while the shortcomings of many of the other studies increases the urgent need for emerging research like that conducted here.

State-Level Control

While this inquiry will focus on state-level controls, there needs to be research that examines similar controls in the United States, broadly. Above, I reviewed large federal programs that categorically informed and continue to inform the state-level policy environment for American schools. The CCSSs were rejected in many states on constitutional grounds with those state governments opting to create their own standards that complied with federal program regulations but retained localized control (Matlock et al., 2016; Porter et al., 2011; Zhang, 2014). The result of this was many states crafting new standards that bore close resemblance to the CCSS. As such, the federal CCSS policy environment closely affected state and local standards and affected the classrooms of teachers, even in states where the CCSSs were rejected (Kendall et al., 2012; Mathis, 2010; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013).

By that same token, NCLB's local impact was severe. In the interest of maintaining federal funds by complying with the demands of the federal program, state and local governments scurried to create policies that complied with the outlined goals and demands of NCLB. Like the policy environments created by other federal pushes like Title IX and IDEA, the NCLB era was a period of intense state and local change in the name of complying with the federal program (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Concepts like technology in the classroom, data-driven instruction, instructional coaching, merit-based pay, evaluating teachers and making employment decisions based on their "highly qualified" status, emphasis on math and reading

above other content, and moves toward getting schools to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) are all examples of how this happened in schools at the local level (Mathis, 2010).

A 2000 report by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) demonstrated the pre-NCLB fervor for this kind of "trickle-down" control over teachers in a policy environment (C. L. Smith, 2000). The report found significant moves at state and local levels in member states to recruit and keep quality teachers. It included harsher standards for licensure and evaluation and increased compensation. It also outlined new incentives for teachers who achieve advanced certification like National Boards certification and prescribed stipend support for the mentorship of other teachers. All of this was done in alignment to federal programs' professional development guidelines. The report also found attention being paid to attempts to recruit quality teachers, particularly to low-performing schools where critical areas of shortage occur (C. L. Smith, 2000).

In terms of how policy entrepreneurs in a state may influence the environment for teachers, a 1998 study by researchers at the University of Houston provides some valuable findings (Mintrom & Vergari, 1998). This correlational study with a strong analytical methodology found that "policy networks serve to support the diffusion of policy innovations" (p. 145) and underscored the importance innovation to utilize "both external and internal policy networks" (p. 146) as they "serve as the source for generating new ideas and for providing the policy entrepreneurs with insights into how approaches used elsewhere could be applied to their own situation" (p. 146). With apparent methodological strengths and deep connection to my research question, this study, as with many I am finding in this arena, is not broad enough to discuss to what extent classroom teachers are involved in the building of policy entrepreneurship networks, and even less so how their daily work is impacted by that environment.

Controls of Modality

Apart from but alongside controls touted as important for student achievement, policy environments are not solely created by formal legislative bodies and their political machinations. The definition of a policy environment for the sake of this study includes district and building-level policies not tied to specific standards-based laws being passed at state or federal levels like Common Core or NCLB, it could also include other political tide turns like the shifting regimes discussed in the Spanish study of the Francoist purge in the 20th century (Zúñiga et al., 2011), or the local pressure discussed ethnographically in Craig's work on Houston Public Schools' shift toward greater prescriptive oversight of teachers (Craig, 2009). In addition to these dimensions of political control over teachers' work, the history of American education has seen interaction with their collective well-being amid changing modalities in pedagogy. These modalities take the form of various initiatives, programs, fads, and other educational tools and methods that are pitched, purchased, and quickly ushered into schools for teachers to implement (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Ingersoll, 2006; Labaree, 2007; Ma & MacMillan, 1999; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). While elements of Common Core and NCLB are similar here, often these modalities are not as sweeping or political. The following review will be of such adoptions from early in the infancy of public schools in America through the COVID and post-COVID eras.

History of Policy Modality

The Lancasterian School model was an early such formative pivot in how public schools in the United States went from the one-room schoolhouse model of the post-Revolutionary era up until the Industrial Revolution (Lancaster, 1810; Rury, 2006, 2013). This model was borrowed from a European design of maximum efficiency in the delivery of normal schooling.

This is where school design started to involve long rows of desks in a classroom with a teacher in front of a blackboard and a principal coming by often as her manager to ensure she was working as she should. This model was isomorphic of the factory design that revolutionized the world in the mid-19th century and heavily influenced by the capitalist marketplace. The conventional wisdom was that the efficient, uniform, closely-monitored, rigidly-structured industrial paradigm could not only result in the mass production of quality learning for students, but train them to be diligent workers, already primed and groomed in the aforementioned tenets of successful industry (Berliner & Biddle, 1997; Tyack et al., 1984; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Late 19th Century. This period took the prairie teacher and private tutor who stood as autonomously singular, esteemed authorities of education over their small, highly localized pupils and turned them into cogs in the machine of the rapidly urbanizing world (Rury, 2013; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). For the first time, teachers were seen and treated as employees who, while still enjoying a considerable amount of authority over the guidance of pupils, were punching clocks, receiving close oversight, and paid less than other respected professionals mainly because they were women (Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Seller & Woody, 1989). Little empirical literature exists on the Lancasterian model other than to position it as a profoundly formative missing link in the evolution of modern American schools (Lackney, 2015) and the understanding of how teachers' well-being may be injured via control of their work as schools as organizations change with the times.

Early to Mid-20th Century. The Industrial Revolution to the Civil Rights Movement saw public schools bloom and grow, most often in step with the industry discussed above (Rury, 2013; Tyack et al., 1984; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). While some changes to the teaching profession took place during this time (dubbed the "progressive" era and dominated in thought and practice

by the work of John Dewey and his contention that people are the curriculum over skills and content) the aforementioned changes that occurred after the *Brown* decision were more drastic with longer implications (M. Brown & Swihart, 2021; Delpit, 2011; Egalite et al., 2015; Harris & Sass, 2011). The late 1960s and 1970s were divided on how the U.S. Constitution informs work in schools with Supreme Court cases like *Tinker v. Des Moines* more appropriately defining what rights kids have in school and what teachers and administrators can and cannot do in the execution of their charge to educate and guide them (Russo, 2020; Schumaker, 2020; Shackelford, 2014).

Learning Styles in the Early 21st Century. Teacher education programs in the late 1990s through the late 2000s obsessed over "learning styles" in a now-defunct theory that appealing to students' learning preferences would increase their mastery of content (Curry, 1990; Nancekivell et al., 2020). The NCLB era spawned numerous smaller modalities in schools such as an emphasis on technology in the classroom with little evidence at its effectiveness for raising student achievement by itself (Newton & Miah, 2017; Union et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2020). This era also introduced the concept of high-stakes testing that increased the urgency for teachers to "teach to the test" thereby narrowing the curriculum in schools and potentially increasing feelings of anxiety, existential dread, and burnout amongst students and teachers (Barrett, 2009; Crocker, 2003; Dee & Jacob, 2010; Lazear, 2006; Menken, 2006).

Pandemic-Era Modalities. The pre-COVID years saw a surge in emphasis on adopting ideas such as project-based learning, standards-based grading, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) all desiring at some level to be "innovative" in abandonment of traditional teaching paradigms to open new generations of students up to rigorous learning experiences that would prepare them for the 21st century marketplace (Admiraal & Kittelsen

Røberg, 2023; Chetty et al., 2011; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Zhang, 2014). The late 1990s school choice movement brought the concept of charter schools with a boom in sprawling, corporate minded nationwide charter networks emerging. Many of these networks such as KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Yes Prep have seen quantitative achievement in some places (Davis & Heller, 2019; Lopez, 2011; Teh et al., 2010), but have been criticized by detractors for employing a dehumanizing "no excuses" methodology allergic to the social and emotional health of students and contributes to broader societal ills like the school-to-prison pipeline (Angrist et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 2017; Davis & Heller, 2019; Torres, 2016).

The post-COVID years have and will continue to emphasize a need for teachers to change their work to incorporate dimensions of social-emotional learning, intensive remediation and differentiation to mitigate "learning loss", and a deluge of new special education and 504 plan requests from parents concerned about the pandemic's long-term effect on their students' well-being and skills (M. A. Brown, 2021; Gülmez & Ordu, 2022; Lacomba-Trejo et al., 2022; Lund & Gabrielli, 2021). With the swirl of new programs, ever-changing public perception, and market-driven buffet of new things to try, buy, and manage regarding teachers' well-being at work, teachers are often at the intersection of policy and practice (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). While much has been researched on the outcomes for students of the different fads and modes reviewed here, nothing really attempted to describe how these different periods of product interest interact with teachers' well-being and feelings of self-determination. Existing dialogue is often prosaic by way of blog posts, opinion pieces, and earnest essays for the public to mobilize change. This review underscores the need for qualitative inquiry into teachers as the frontline implementers and agents of where and why these different eras interact with their work and well-being.

Control in the Culture Wars

With many similarities to controls placed on teachers due to federal thrusts for standards to improve student achievement, and various eras of modalities that attempt to explain what good teaching is, controls prompted by cultural war dialogue. This dialogue is characterized by political and cultural events may represent a different type that has not been as well studied. While the policy environments of Common Core, educational technology, increased academic rigor, and learning styles impact the well-being of teachers, policies that interacts with teachers' work on the grounds of social and cultural issues could present a different psychological effect on their work. The main difference is in its deep connection, not only to the work of teachers, but to their identity and the foundational ethical, moral, and spiritual purposes related to the work they do (Blase, 1986; Delpit, 2006; Maddux & Stanley, 1986; Olsen, 2008). This may pose an even more serious threat to their well-being. Some studies suggest a sizable portion of public school teachers approached teaching as a career because they felt to some degree it would position them to "make a difference" or "make the world a better place" (Delpit, 2006; Nalipay et al., 2023; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014; Tiilikainen et al., 2019). While elements of other kinds of policy may get at tertiary components of these goals, culture war legislation that aims to affect what and how teachers teach, may more closely impact these foundational values, and malnourish the psychological needs of teachers. To mitigate this potential risk, more study on how teachers describe their self-determination amid these kinds of laws is important with profound implications for school systems and leaders.

The Pandemic Years

Public school teachers have long been studied as potential pawns within a broad chess match of what scholars have called "initiative fatigue" (O'Quinn, 2018). This phenomenon is

characterized by a frenetic work environment where demands on what teachers do and how they do it quickly change with urgent pressure for results (M. A. Brown, 2021; Monahan et al., 2023; E. Ng & Stanton, 2023). Often emerging programs are layered on top of existing ones resulting in a superficial and quixotic bramble of tools, mindsets, and committees wherein teachers are tasked with doing their complex work which (Ingersoll, 2006). Frequent shifting of duties and quality of work for teachers is not a new phenomenon. Public education in the school reform arena has long been a petri dish for rapidly changing demands on teachers' time and attention (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Often, this lack of constancy comes at the behest of the legislative whims of the day.

As briefly discussed above, the pandemic era of 2020-2022 and its aftermath have potentially accelerated the cultural warring over parents' rights, decentralized government, the First Amendment, and where teachers' rights align or collide with those of students and their families (M. A. Brown, 2021; Chan et al., 2021; E. Ng & Stanton, 2023). It is clear in the most recent literature that COVID-era trends in student achievement, adverse childhood experiences, teacher turnover and burnout, larger societal issues such as gender identity and systemic racism, and the role of newly emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence in education have created an embattled political environment (M. A. Brown, 2021; Dhawan, 2020; E. Ng & Stanton, 2023).

In the immediate years following the pandemic, states began passing laws aimed at controlling the level to which schools can conceal information about students' preferences concerning their gender identity from their parents. This legislative thrust also established guidelines on how parents can interrogate and have removed materials from public school libraries in some states. The debate over which restrooms people who identify as transgender are

allowed to use found new life in schools after exhausting itself in the private marketplace sector. Alongside these larger societal questions was the specter of "learning loss," a new term to codify the large-scale impact of what was for most kids nationwide, close to two years of profoundly disrupted formal learning in public school (Dhawan, 2020; Doucet et al., 2020; Monahan et al., 2023) Some scholars do not think the damage done to the continuum of academic achievement by the pandemic disruption and trauma response that ensued will be repaired in many decades (M. A. Brown, 2021; Hasan & Bao, 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020). That is not to make light of the serious social/emotional developmental disruption presented by the pandemic (Cormier et al., 2022; Hoffman & Miller, 2020; Monahan et al., 2023). Research is starting to bear out that the only way in which students came back to school after distance learning more out of practice than their academic ability was in their social and emotional growth (Cormier et al., 2022; Lacomba-Trejo et al., 2022; Sintema, 2020). The 2021-2022 school year saw dramatic rises in behavior referrals, suspensions, acts of violence, self-harm, suicide, and referrals to inpatient facilities for students (Cormier et al., 2022; Gülmez & Ordu, 2022; Welsh, 2022) Some scholars do not think the harm done by the pandemic will fully be known for years and will have seismic effects for American society (Chaturvedi et al., 2021; De Figueiredo et al., 2021; Khan, 2022).

School districts' accreditation statuses, superintendents' job security, and teachers' resolve were other societal factors likely affected by the pandemic era. Teaching as a profession may have inched closer to losing its ability to continue as-is in the face of a bleak landscape where all three of its previously outlined psychological needs became strained (M. A. Brown, 2021; Chaturvedi et al., 2021; De Figueiredo et al., 2021). Coupled with the financial strain posed by rampant inflation, the pandemic era has taken an old problem and magnified it under the modern microscope for more to see (Ball et al., 2022; Chaturvedi et al., 2021). Literature is

starting to show, in some cases, that what teachers must go through in classrooms daily is too difficult, disorienting, destabilizing, and dehumanizing to soldier through (Audrain et al., 2022; M. A. Brown, 2021; Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). With attacked workplace bandwidth, meager compensation extended from funding formulas, and support from what was once thought to be a school's most fervent support network; the parents of the students who attend the school, COVID may have contributed to teaching being a profession that is somewhat beleaguered in 2024 (Audrain et al., 2022; Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Peetz, 2023).

Teacher well-being during and since COVID is one of the more well-studied phenomena I encountered in this review. Several key studies examine how the pandemic itself, teaching during it, and the difficulties that have followed have all interacted with teachers' feelings of stress, anxiety, low self-efficacy, and intent to remain in or leave the profession. These studies are recent and hold explanatory implications for non-COVID related school policy dialogue. A section from the book *Primary and Secondary Teaching During COVID-19: Disruptions to Educational Opportunity During a Pandemic* (Reimers, 2022) looks at the situation in Arizona and why teachers stayed or exited the profession during the pandemic (Audrain et al., 2022). The Arizona study reveals no categorical change in teaching force because of the pandemic (as shortages were already dire pre-pandemic) but offers implications that "teacher recruitment alone is insufficient" (p. 360) to improve the staffing issues in Arizona schools in the face of rapidly escalating controls on and demands of teachers pre- and post-COVID. The study pulled solely from public, quantitative data on positions filled and vacant and as such is less generalizable for explanations of how the pandemic impacted employment choices by teachers. The study lacks a clear theoretical foundation and seems to be content with its superficial design. The synthetic

discussion of escalating factors in Arizona schools was compelling and vaguely intentional toward future research.

A more robust 2021 study captured more relevant data from 151 elementary teachers across the US during the summer of 2020. These teachers completed an online survey that gauged their experience teaching during the Spring of 2020 after the March shutdown of schools and pivot to distance learning. Findings from the path analysis of their model (informed by the job demand–resources framework) indicated that "task stress and job ambiguity were closely related to teacher well-being" (Chan et al., 2021, p. 533). The study was strong in its mixed approach with standardized and open-ended response survey questions. The findings do not apply closely to policy decisions in that policies are not explicitly mentioned by teachers, but strong implications for policymakers are clear in the assertion of the research team for them "to allocate more attention and resources to support teacher psychological health by strengthening emotional support, autonomy, and teaching efficacy" (p. 543), post-pandemic. It also found that the environment in the summer of 2020 already had teachers nationwide contemplating a different career due to fear, stress, ambiguity, and feelings of low competence in the unfamiliar environment. These findings are germane to a study of policy environments by nature of the situation of them directly before post-COVID policies began to emerge.

At the other end of the COVID impact timeline, a qualitative study of 16 teachers from Turkey examined the effect of returning to the classroom on teachers' well-being (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). While this study does not yield descriptive factors of the effects of the return to in-person learning on teachers, it focuses on how student struggles in the return season, and policies enacted to support and mitigate those challenges, affected teachers. The study utilizes a conceptual emphasis on "classroom management" (p. 257) as the sole theoretical lens from

which to look at teachers' post-pandemic experience, a weak characteristic of the design, and is also distanced contextually, and weakened by a low sample size. It is strong in its effort to collect narrative data, and while only 16 teachers participated, was successful in finding a diverse sample with various degrees of experience. That said, the team could have provided more description of teachers' perceptions based on their various levels of experience. There was a single statement centering the descriptions of novice teachers, but nothing else about how teaching experience may have interacted with responses. Analysis did employ coding and reliability methods to support generalizability and ethical responsibility creating an authoritarian tone surrounding their analysis of findings. The concept of "classroom management" was the central phenomenon studied and any policy discussion was based on that. As one of the more important classroom phenomena in teaching, this focus is particularly attractive to a discussion of how policy interacts with teachers' well-being as connected to their work.

A 2022 study of 614 Chilean teachers provides another dimension of descriptive strength to how teachers experienced the COVID policy environment. Using a cross-sectional design and incidental sampling method, researchers collected self-reported data "assessing emotional symptoms, COVID-19-related worries, life satisfaction, affect balance, and resilience" (Lacomba-Trejo et al., 2022, p. 2). Descriptive analyses by way of Pearson's correlations, hierarchical regressions, and mediation models were conducted to discuss findings. The results showed that "emotional symptoms" (p. 2) of mental health problems increased worry and lower levels of life satisfaction and resilience. Results from the mediation models showed that the negative impact of "COVID-19-related worries on emotional symptoms" was improved gradually by "affect balance and resilience" (p. 3) policies. A weakness in sampling is apparent with close to 100% of participants being of one gender and a specific age of children taught. This

does not negate any findings, but it is a limiting aspect of the survey responses. The study is extremely strong in its methodology and seems to draw heavily on SDT-adjacent theory. The work here is exciting in its desire to analyze who teachers are and how they felt about their work during and since the pandemic in a quantitative way. It seems significant effort was taken to contribute positively to the literature with sound implications for policy. While it does not explicitly articulate the policy environment stemming from COVID, it does provide reliable, generalizable discussion of how this moment in time has interacted with teacher well-being.

The field of research synchronizing post-pandemic life and how teachers are experiencing it is new and superficial to date. While strong studies have been conducted to show some damaging and traumatic effects, there is not much on the interaction between policies and teachers' work during this time. Parallel to the pandemic was a worldwide demand for racial justice, partially catalyzed by the 2021 murder of George Floyd in the US. The following arm of this review will focus on the literature on this and previous policy environments and teachers' well-being therein.

Teaching Amid the Race Wars

The landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was one of the earliest drastically formative periods for schools as influenced by a policy environment. With the resounding victory for civil rights in *Brown* came a new predicament in American schools wherein teachers would be tasked with the instruction of students across lines of the aforementioned profound human difference (Delpit, 2006; Griffin-Smith, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tatum, 2004) in racially heterogeneous student bodies. Indeed, this era not only introduced this predicament for white teachers, but went a long way to decimate, for all time, the corps of

black teachers in the United States as many of them lost their jobs to white teachers in newly desegregated schools (Delpit, 2011; Egalite et al., 2015; hooks, 1994; Thompson, 2022).

Building on the work of Paulo Freire (1968), Lisa Delpit's landmark 1988 essay *The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children* spelled out the chronic issue created by the liberatory effect of *Brown* (Delpit, 2011). Meanwhile, Annette Lareau's massive ethnographic study on childhood poverty, *Unequal Childhoods* emerged right at the beginning of the NCLB era deepening the scholarship on 21st century teaching by using a longitudinal research design to center poverty and its effect on children as the most sociologically important dimension of public life to consider (Lareau, 2011).

While this cursory review the volumes of important work in this area seems quick, it is only to make mention of the deep effect *Brown* had on schools as microcosms of society (Bećirović & Bešlija, 2021; Dewey, 2001; Douglas et al., 2008; Hyland, 2005; Tatum, 2004), but stops there as they have not, nor did they aim to, connect in any direct way to teachers' well-being as a result of their time in the classroom. What this body of work did spur was a movement for examining teaching and learning through the lens of educational equity which could absolutely, aligning the assumption to the earlier definition in this work, interact with teachers' well-being.

1994's *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks, the work of Cazden and Leggett in the 1970s and 1980s, and the endurance of Freirean theory in schools, set the stage for Gloria Ladson-Billings' 1995 landmark theory dubbed Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to enter the literature on the difficulty and importance of teaching across lines of difference (Cazden & Leggett, 1976; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995). From the mid-2000s to the pandemic era, the concepts of "educational equity," along with "diversity, equity, and

inclusiveness (DEI)" became policy staples at every level of the environment (Bećirović & Bešlija, 2021; Oakley et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2023). Some formal laws were enacted, many states began combing data and hiring consultants to do "equity audits," and professional development for teachers as well as teacher preparation university programs began infusing every level of school life, particularly the work of teachers (Bećirović & Bešlija, 2021; Delpit, 2006; Esposito & Swain, 2009; Tatum, 2004). Ladson-Billings' 1995 essay was subtitled "but that's just good teaching" and asserted that to be a culturally relevant or responsive teacher, one should hold of equal epistemological value the development of "academic achievement, sociopolitical consciousness, and cultural competence" for students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This pushed pedagogical theory forward for teachers in American schools, particularly those highly stigmatized and ridden with oversight during NCLB (Dover, 2022; Kozlowski, 2015; J. C. Ng, 2006; Sun et al., 2017).

The world of teaching and learning in public schools has occurred parallel to and intermingled with the outside world. As protests erupt, news stories are shared, and videos of police brutality circulate, the dialogue in and about schools changes with the policy environment may often change with it. The highly publicized murders of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Michael Brown in 2014 not only spurred the formal creation of grassroots activist networks like Black Lives Matter, but increased the volume of desire and demand for institutions to simultaneously critique and reconcile history (Pandey et al., 2023; Ujifusa, 2021). This bred the need for pathways to a more equitable future for historically disenfranchised communities and students coming from them. It is difficult to find studies on how the culture of emphasis on "educational equity" has affected teachers' work or well-being. Much exists on these programs' effects on

students (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Borman & Kimball, 2005; Carter, 2016; Munoz & Dossett, 2001), but the teacher role is much less analyzed.

A 2021 study gets close to investigating this phenomenon (J. L. Smith et al., 2021). This work uses the higher education context to examine the strength of the correlation between diversity fatigue and faculty's support for a diversity-enhancing intervention. The study examined the high value of diversity-enhancing initiatives and interventions in college and found that some faculty simultaneously value diversity as a matter of personal connection and importance, and feel tired by the labor that must be undertaken to devote oneself to diversity efforts. The researchers studied a host of college students, but also surveyed a population of professors (n = 40). They developed a "new scale of diversity fatigue" (p. 659) resulting in four studies of a six-item survey to measure diversity fatigue at multiple institutions of higher education in the United States.

The findings, achieved by a multi-faceted and reliable, quantitative methodology, describe a phenomenon in which said fatigue is "meaningfully associated with someone's support for diversity interventions" (p. 659). They articulate that constant diversity initiatives may create a fatigue that can be "dampening" to a faculty's will to implement the policies that accompany them, thereby potentially undermining the very effects they were hoping to achieve. Conceptually, the study viewed this phenomenon using a conceptual model created by the researchers in which "diversity fatigue" interacts with the "value of the intervention" (p. 661) with mitigating factors. Overall, the study is strong in its conceptual framework, quantitative methodology, and efforts at ethical reliability. It is weak in its small sample size and higher education context, though results could be generalizable to the K-12 setting. It is also

inconclusive whether the fatigue they operationalize is specific to diversity initiatives or is part of the fatigue associated with new initiatives in general.

It may be applicable to think about the issue through the lens of the "equity" thrust merely as one of the fads or modalities, but it may be more. As SIT outlines, a human's membership of a group as part of their identity cuts deeply to their core and influences their behavior and sense of self (Tajfel, 1974; Tatum, 2004). As such, it seems obtuse to view controls on teachers' work where connected to the intersectionality of racial, sexual, and socioeconomic identities of students on the same level as things like learning styles and use of technology. This is a place where additional research is needed to unpack where a policy environment generated by highly publicized and provocative social moments interacts with teachers' well-being.

How History and Gender are Taught

Critical theorists assert that those who hold power in a society do so through the controlling of narratives (Alvesson & Deetz, 2005; Clegg, 1993; Kelber, 1988; Sebastian, 2022). Schools have existed within the ecosystem of this debated phenomenon for decades in American education (Bećirović & Bešlija, 2021; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Taylor et al., 2023). The ideological and practical journey from the desegregation of public life through the most recent thrust for social justice in schools has somewhat intensified in the last three years (Cooley, 2014; Marston et al., 2020; Powers et al., 2021).

My study illuminates how elements of the pandemic and parallel social justice activism have created a unique policy environment in which teachers exist, and that it interacts specifically with their personal identity and well-being. To study that phenomenon, it is important to review literature that exists within this narrow window about legislation and policies that have emerged around how concepts of historical power, privilege, and oppression

across lines of racial and gendered difference are taught in schools (Bissell, 2023; Cooley, 2014; Jamnah & Zimmerman, 2022; Rivera Maulucci, 2013; Ujifusa, 2021). Chapter IV explains the Oklahoma setting of this study, so I will start more broadly as multiple states across the United States have implemented similar policies in the post-pandemic years.

Certainly, other culturally embattled moments may have helped construct educational policy environments in U.S. history, but little research exists on their interaction with teachers' work and how that work informs their levels of well-being. Early debates over the purposes of schools in America (Lackney, 2015; Rury, 2006, 2013) clouded the progressive era. First Amendment issues surrounding the separation of church and state (Balmer et al., 2017; Elifson & Hadaway, 1985; Kauper, 1962), war protesting (Russo, 2020; Schumaker, 2020), and what students can and cannot say at school (Bader, 2006; Rauchway, 2007) have not only influenced school policy but broader public policy. Post-Columbine, the issues of school violence, arming teachers, school resource officers, and how the concept of bullying informs a school's culture of safety continues to ebb and flow with the tides of horrific acts in schools every few years (Caven, 2022; Cowper, 2019; Fisher et al., 2022; R. G. Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; May et al., 2004; Stretesky & Hogan, 2001)

These issues can create policy environments as political figures may seek to capitalize on public unrest concerning schools to gain deeper dimensions of influence, and one where all stakeholder groups in a school are affected. The post-COVID push for laws about what teachers can and cannot do in their classrooms, particularly on the teaching of history and gender, are different in that they blend the high-stakes ideology of the standards-based accountability of the NCLB and Common Core eras with the deeply personal, human quality of the Civil Rights era. The risk combination for teachers to experience harm to their well-being and sense of self could

be potentially higher in the current policy environment than previous ones (Audrain et al., 2022; Bishop-Monroe & Garcia, 2023; Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Monahan et al., 2023). Whereas other periods could have posed risk of harm in solely a professional or personal capacity, the current policy environment may pose a risk to both, thereby compounding the potential risk (Figure 1). This risk could be powerful in its interaction with teachers' self-determination in their work (Ford & Forsyth, 2021; Nalipay et al., 2023; Power & Goodnough, 2019) and demands qualitative study. What exists at present is only emergent literature examining these laws and how they interact with schools.

Policy Control and Teacher Well-Being

The literature reviewed here outlines a political dynamic wherein the work of teaching is often the target of government policy (Craig, 2009; Shober, 2012; Sleeter, 2002; T. M. Smith & Rowley, 2005; Zimmerman, 2022; Zúñiga et al., 2011). The review here shows these controls imposed for a variety of reasons. They can be in the name of outcomes for students; as different pedagogical methods go in and out of vogue (Curry, 1990; Nancekivell et al., 2020; Newton & Miah, 2017; Union et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2021); and because of larger socio-cultural questions and conflicts in broader society (Chan et al., 2021; Gülmez & Ordu, 2022; Lacomba-Trejo et al., 2022; Reimers, 2022; J. L. Smith et al., 2021). Some of the studies reviewed here hint at interactions between these different trends and potential elements of teachers' well-being (Acton & Glasgow, 2020; Chan et al., 2021; Farley & Chamberlain, 2021; García-Álvarez et al., 2021) but fall short of a specifically robust investigation of the research question for this study. Existing research comes in the form of survey data (American Federation of Teachers, 2017) and multiple studies with varied modes of analysis (Acton & Glasgow, 2020; Cropley et al., 2006;

Herman et al., 2018; Saeki et al., 2015; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014) on the extent to which these policy environments have interacted negatively with teachers' well-being.

Acton and Glasgow's 2020 literature review examined professional development and teacher preparation with respect to well-being in the neo-liberal policy context. (Acton & Glasgow, 2020). They found importance associated with prioritizing teacher well-being in teacher preparation programs and professional development and elevated the importance of social connection between colleagues for the well-being of new teachers. With these important findings, the review is contextually limited as it takes place outside the U.S. (Australia) and focuses on a synthesis of literature rather than original empirical study.

Cropley's 2006 doctoral dissertation examined sleep as a discrete part of well-being in elementary and secondary teachers in the U.K. This study was quantitative in its study of surveys completed by 462 teachers to look at how a person's ability or inability to "switch off" their work once home affected their ability to sleep (Cropley et al., 2006). The study found that people reporting higher "job strain" and "work rumination" found it more difficult to switch off and therefore had a worse quality of sleep. This study is important in its clean connection between teachers' work and their well-being via sleep quality. This black and white link between work and well-being is essential in the understanding of why or how controlling policies may interact with teacher well-being. The shortcomings of the study are its European context, narrow focus, and superficial definition of well-being, and its quantitative methodology, while important, could use qualitative data to support the connections it found.

A 2018 study from a team at the University of Missouri is important to this interaction though only tangentially connected (Herman et al., 2018). The main purpose of this work was to quantitatively connect dimensions of teacher well-being (stress, burnout) to student outcomes.

While this is important research, it is less applicable to the research question of this study. It is included in this subtheme of the literature review, however, as it nears a better understanding of the multifaceted nature of teacher well-being and positions it importantly in a policy environment stressing dramatic increases in student achievement outcomes. The study includes brief descriptions of how the very aim of education (student outcomes) if agnostic to the means (teacher well-being) will be aberrated and superficial in execution. Though further away conceptually, this study was the closest to mine geographically (U.S. Midwest) and held some of the more robust conceptual dialogue that deepened my understanding of the work to be undertaken here.

A 2015 literature review published in *Contemporary School Psychology* examined the "psychosocial" link between high stakes testing culture in the CCSS era with teacher well-being and student outcomes (Saeki et al., 2015). This review further solidifies the impact policies may have on teacher well-being and provides more evidence of a potential link between that well-being and student achievement. It is robust in its review of the literature in a dynamic, nuanced way, but falls short of new empirical findings. Its position outside the educational leadership sector (school psychology) damages its impact for this work a bit, but its focus on elements of teachers' work with students in the CCSS era is important. Some of the research suggested by its implications is like that conducted in this study, which provides an important foundation of scholarly demand for this study and others like it.

A 2014 European study examined teachers exiting the profession quickly, either before even starting or soon thereafter (Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). A portion of the quantitative study looked specifically at policies contributing to the trend of teachers leaving the work but is muddled by other factors. The main reason the study found that teachers exit is a lack of

opportunity for advancement in the field, a finding that is tangentially related to well-being but outside the scope of my work here. The study outlined a few ways in which policies may interact with traditional indicators of low well-being like stress and burnout but failed to generate much in the way of conclusive evidence that low well-being caused mass exits from the work in its European setting.

While these studies are valuable, research on teacher well-being with respect to policy is new (Feingold, 2021; Feingold & Weishart, 2023) and suggests that the general public is even divided in how they view them (Lin et al., 2024; M. Polikoff et al., 2024). Recent data also suggests teachers are not completely unified in how they view this policy paradigm (Woo et al., 2023). Qualitative data on this topic is needed to infuse the literature reviewed here with teachers' authentic descriptions of their well-being in the policy environment. The popular dialogue in the United States suggests teachers are feeling pressure from policy after COVID and that pressure may be eroding their well-being. Though not empirical research, 2022 National Teacher of the Year, Kurt Russell's 2023 *Education Week* interview aligns to this general feeling and underscores its importance (Schwartz, 2023). Because of the recent nature of this topic, research is scarce. News media is starting to comment more on this phenomenon, and some reports have emerged since 2023 on its effects, but empirical, qualitative research like that conducted in this study is scarce. Polikoff's 2022 analysis of Understanding America survey data in looked at parent perception of teachers' work during COVID (M. S. Polikoff et al., 2022) but failed to gather the teacher perspective; and Horowitz's 2022 analysis of Pew Research survey data revealed mixed findings among parents about issues of history and gender in schools, while solidifying that people generally follow party lines on issues related to their children (Horowitz, 2022).

With schools as complex institutions, it cannot be said that the policy environment is the sole culprit in these negative orientations to the work, but there is much to be said for the data about how teachers feel about their work and what is happening with respect to student achievement, teacher shortage, and what seems to be an increasingly embattled school policy environment in many states. The literature reviewed here has focused on teacher satisfaction, turnover, and quality connected to various, singular policies, but has not examined teacher well-being and how a broader policy environment may interact with it to the extent that no new study is necessary. Here too, the focus was on parents' perceptions and left out the teacher perspective in the quantitative analysis. Woo et al.'s 2022 analysis of the American Instructional Resources Survey was titled "Walking on Eggshells" (an image echoed by participants in this study's findings) and is important in that it captures various dimensions of the teacher perspective in a policy environment but fails to gather qualitative data on the specific research question of my study. Woo's analysis found that teachers are impacted by policies but fails to show connections to why and how this takes place. This is a dimension of research where qualitative methods are necessary and valuable. Particularly, the survey analysis does not position participants within diverse characteristics of their lived experience like where they live geographically within a state (a dimension this study does probe).

Given these gaps in the literature, this study may contribute by creating knowledge about who teachers are and how that identity interacts with the well-being they derive from their work. As such, it may hold important explanations to inform the practice of policymakers and school leaders as teacher shortage, low quality, and burnout rise (M. A. Brown, 2021; Farber, 2023; Park & Shin, 2020). The following methodology will aim to examine this dynamic in a narrow

context to explain how it may occur via teachers' descriptions of their work through the conceptual lens articulated earlier.

Chapter IV: Methods

The lack of literature on how teachers view their well-being in a controlling state policy environment makes it important to build new research germane to the research question here:

> **Research Question:** How do secondary Social Studies and English teachers describe their well-being in the controlling post-COVID state policy environment?

With the urgent nature of where public school teachers are in terms of quantifiably low markers in several variables, it is imperative to study the interaction outlined here.

Qualitative Design

The outlined gap in the literature suggests a qualitative approach to the research question is astute. While quantitative means could offer important insight into the well-being of teachers in the current policy environment, this design aims to generate a nuanced look at how teachers perceive their own well-being with respect to descriptions of their well-being in 2024. The interview process built into the qualitative paradigm was designed to tease out more of the human element in how teachers view this. With a research question as deeply human as the one investigated with this study, it underscores the prudence of a methodological design that gets to the inevitable intersectional details inherent in it (Aurini et al., 2016; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I used semi-structured interviews of 30 public school teachers in Oklahoma, diverse by school type (urban, suburban, and rural) and comprised teachers with an average of just over 13 years of teaching experience in the study setting. The size and diversity of the sample is a strength of the study as similar findings between teachers with different identities and experiences are important to generalizability.

Oklahoma Setting

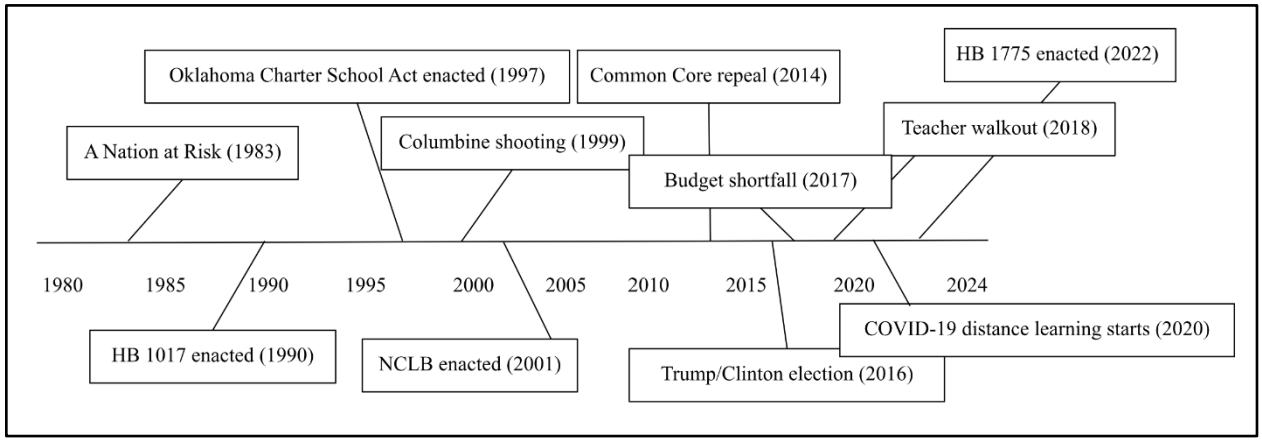
Oklahoma is appropriate for examining teacher well-being within a policy environment as conservative political leaning can often be in tension with public schools as a large social

support system (Beaman et al., 2023). Its funding formula and other school finance dimensions have long been topics of debate (Leachman et al., 2017; Maiden & Evans, 2009; Wall & Maiden, 2021), and the state has seen critical teacher shortages (particularly in secondary content) (Castro, 2023; Raymond, 2024), low student achievement (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), and elevated levels of adverse childhood experiences (Beaman et al., 2023).

Oklahoma has seen political upheaval and contentious legislative thrusts with respect to public schools for decades (Chew & Tennell, 2021; Gormley Jr. & Phillips, 2005; Sinha, 1997; Wall & Maiden, 2021). In 2018, every public school in the state walked out of school to protest low pay. The three-week walkout resulted in the Oklahoma Educators Association (OEA) securing a modest $5,000 raise for teachers, but the process by which it happened was beyond tumultuous and disruptive to student learning for three weeks. In addition to the walkout, Oklahoma schools have experienced other political moments such as prayer at school events, school officials' Second Amendment rights on campus, the education of indigenous students (many of whom are on their own ancestral lands), corruption inside an online charter school that boasted close 70,000 students during the pandemic, private school vouchers, and faith-based charter schools. In many states throughout the course of American history, schools have often been situated precariously but immutably at a crossroads of public life (Labaree, 2007; Rury, 2006; Tyack et al., 1984), and this is certainly the dynamic in Oklahoma.

Figure 3

Timeline of Education Policy in Oklahoma



Geographically, Oklahoma is similar to other states as its dynamic of diverse urban concentration around two major cities (Oklahoma City and Tulsa), with sprawling rural areas that are home to hundreds of miniscule school districts, many of which serve indigenous students and their families (Hamlin et al., 2023). Urban districts in Oklahoma feature traditional neighborhood schools that show enrollment decline over time with the advent of charter schools, magnet programs, and legislative efforts to open district borders and allow students to attend suburban districts without moving (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Suburban districts in Oklahoma are not unlike those in other states. These areas are often affluent, more racially homogenous, and socio-politically conservative with great economic and political power in the state. Districts such as Norman, Edmond, Jenks, Bixby, Mustang, Owasso, Broken Arrow, Putnam City, and others feature schools that have swelled over the last 50 years to form huge school districts attracting families from urban and rural contexts often fleeing “bad” schools (Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Sinha, 1997). This paradigm is exacerbated by the beckoning of media reports of high test scores, 8-figure bond issues, post-high school success, and attractive extracurricular offerings in suburban districts (Alvord & Rauscher, 2021; Crampton et al., 2004).

The phenomenon of a policy environment interacting with teacher well-being seems to have been particularly evident in the pandemic and post-pandemic eras in Oklahoma. Shifts at the gubernatorial level as well as that of the state superintendent of education and the state board of education have coordinated to pass legislation quintessentially connected to this project, namely House Bill 1775, the so-called "Critical Race Theory" law (Farber, 2023; Hill, 2022; Meyer, 2022). As Oklahoma's primary *de jure* policy germane to this study, HB 1775 aims to ensure teachers do not cause harm to students by indoctrinating practices in historical conversations on race and gender in classrooms.

In general, politically conservative adherents argue that theory such as CRT places undue stress on students' sensibilities, particularly those the theory position as holding socially dominant demographic characteristics (Alvesson & Deetz, 2005; Sebastian, 2022). They posit that such so-called progressive academic posturing could make students of said demographics experience emotional harm, social isolation, and academic disruption from feelings of guilt and existential dread based on historical acts of oppression with which they have no first-hand connection (Hill, 2022; Krebs, 2022; Meyer, 2022). The conservative side sees an ethical duty they possess to ensure students' tax-funded education is not politicized or biased but is politically agnostic and refrains from indoctrinating practices.

On the other side of the aisle, people who adopt generally progressive politics see education driven by CRT as wholly necessary for the social development of students and integral in shaping a generation of democratic agents who aim to make the world a more equitable place by assuming an aggressive posture of social justice advocacy and activism (Delpit, 2011; Hyland, 2005; Tatum, 2004). For this side, there is an ethical imperative to raise children,

through public schools, who are passionate about engaging academic theory to inform tangible acts of societal improvement.

CRT, though existing as an arm of Critical Theory since the 1970s (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015), was thrust into the limelight as less of an academic theory and more of a political engine via its inclusion in foundational materials of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. It appears that detractors of BLM, before at smaller scale, but particularly aggressively during the George Floyd protests of the summer of 2020, may have cross-referenced the presence of CRT in both BLM literature and public school curricula for teacher PD and student learning, thereby summoning them to political action. The culture war that transpired seems to have gained steam quickly. Virtual and in-person parents' rights groups sprung up in Oklahoma creating energy compounded by disdain from the distance learning debates and political dissatisfaction with the outcome of the 2020 election. The collective impact of this speculation seems to have created an extremely embattled condition with respect to schools and what teachers do in their classrooms in Oklahoma. This collection of complex phenomena makes Oklahoma an ideal setting in which to probe the research question here.

Diverse Sampling

The participant group was sourced to create a diverse, dependable, and authentic set of data from which the research question can be analyzed. To this end, a mixture of criteria-based and snowball sampling methods was used as participants needed to fall within a few key areas to provide meaningful data while still getting a large sample size of 30 teachers.

Table 1

Participants

Teacher	Tenure	Gender	Race	School Type	Subject	Certification
1	20	F	White	Urban	English	Traditional
2	1	F	POC	Urban	English	Alternative
3	5	M	POC	Urban	Social Studies	Alternative
4	9	F	White	Urban	Social Studies	Traditional
5	12	M	White	Urban	English	Traditional
6	3	F	White	Urban	Social Studies	Traditional
7	19	F	White	Urban	Social Studies	Traditional
8	19	F	White	Urban	Social Studies	Alternative
9	5	F	White	Suburban	English	Traditional
10	20	M	White	Suburban	Social Studies	Traditional
11	2	F	POC	Urban	Social Studies	Traditional
12	5	F	White	Suburban	English	Alternative
13	15	F	White	Suburban	English	Traditional
14	33	M	White	Rural	Social Studies	Traditional
15	4	F	White	Suburban	English	Traditional
16	11	F	White	Rural	English	Alternative
17	15	F	White	Rural	English	Traditional
18	5	M	POC	Urban	Social Studies	Alternative
19	26	F	White	Urban	English	Traditional
20	32	F	White	Rural	English	Traditional
21	14	F	White	Suburban	Social Studies	Traditional
22	21	F	White	Suburban	English	Alternative
23	10	F	White	Suburban	English	Alternative
24	24	F	White	Rural	English	Traditional
25	5	M	White	Urban	English	Traditional
26	25	F	White	Suburban	English	Traditional
27	8	F	White	Suburban	English	Traditional
28	18	F	White	Rural	English	Traditional
29	11	F	White	Rural	English	Traditional
30	4	F	White	Urban	Social Studies	Alternative
Total	13.7 avg.	80% F 20% M	87% W 13% P	43% U 33% S 24% R	63% Eng. 37% SS	70% Trad. 30% Alt.

Tier 1 of sampling enlisted teachers I know personally as points of contact to others who teach English or History/Social Studies in Oklahoma. On ethical grounds, I did not interview teachers at my current school but conducted mock interviews with them to hone interview questions and

practice coding. As part of a leadership cohort two years ago, I made considerable contacts with school leaders in rural districts on which I relied heavily to source participants in the rural context. Tier 2 involved asking contacts made via Tier 1 means to connect me to more participants, while Tier 3 involved using websites of schools across Oklahoma to compile a list of email addresses of secondary English, Social Studies, and History teachers from urban, rural, and suburban school districts to initiate participant interest and fill out the remaining sample. Having trouble finding rural participants, I visited six schools in northeastern Oklahoma and delivered study recruitment materials and sign-up instructions in person. Word-of-mouth referrals within the snowball method were, by far, the most effective means of sourcing participants.

The aim was to include at least 30 teachers, with 10 from each context. The diversity in types of school districts is important in the attempt to gather data on where teachers' well-being may or may not be, according to them, influenced by the intersection of the policy environment and their own personal sociopolitical belief system as informed by SIT. Whereas it is dialectically irresponsible to assume an urban, suburban, or rural context as an ideological monolith, the different contexts within a state are often colored by a homogeneity of ideology with urban areas tending to lean left of the political center and rural leaning right. Suburban contexts in Oklahoma can be more mixed but tend to lean right of center, as well. For this study, ideological diversity was important in sampling to ensure results were not clouded by any one ideological paradigm, particularly in a professional context, as multifaceted and ideologically complex a context as the teaching profession is in Oklahoma. As seen in Table 2, I was not able to get a clean distribution across school type, but each context is well-represented. The rigid

view I had of political views within geographical contexts was also challenged as many outliers emerged in the findings.

Beyond the geographical context of the sample, participants needed to have experience teaching in the Humanities, primarily students grade 6-12. The subject area and grade-based criteria are essential because, while elements of the legislative paradigm can punctuate the experience of STEM teachers and those in the pre-kindergarten, elementary, and college contexts, the study needed to remain narrow to generate data that are readily comparable among participants. Because of the chronologically narrow window in which the policy environment has changed in Oklahoma, it was important to include only those currently teaching or who taught formally between 2019-2024. In the end, I found participants who have been teaching for an average of just over 13 years as it was important for a broad perspective on working in other policy environments to discuss, comparatively, their work in this one.

The experiences of teachers now retired or those moved to other sectors are valid and important. Veteran teachers in Oklahoma have been working amid a variety of changes in the policy environment for decades (up to and including the statewide teacher walkouts in 2018). Nevertheless, the current political landscape is the nucleus of the study as it pertains particularly to laws emerging in the post-Trump era. Ideally, any explanatory generalizability in this study could be used to study other legislative eras in Oklahoma and elsewhere, but for the scope of this study, those currently teaching in English, Social Studies, History, Civics, Government, or other Humanities disciplines are the only ones I included in the sample.

Finally, teachers included in the sample must have experience in public schools. While these issues certainly inform the opinions and experiences of teachers in private and homeschool contexts (homeschool families being a comparatively large and fascinating population in

Oklahoma), public school teachers are the only ones for whom the policy environment generates compulsory guidelines that direct connect to their work, employment security, and sense of professional identity.

This study does not suggest the work of those in private schools are invalid. Certainly, there are perhaps greater constraints on a teacher in a faith-based and/or generationally prestigious school with an extensive list of mandatory ideological and ritualistic curricular obligations and potential pitfalls. Such a study would be additionally important more broadly, but to generate usable data to study teacher well-being in the current policy environment in Oklahoma, it was important to include only those teaching in schools the laws apply to, which are traditional public schools and public charter schools.

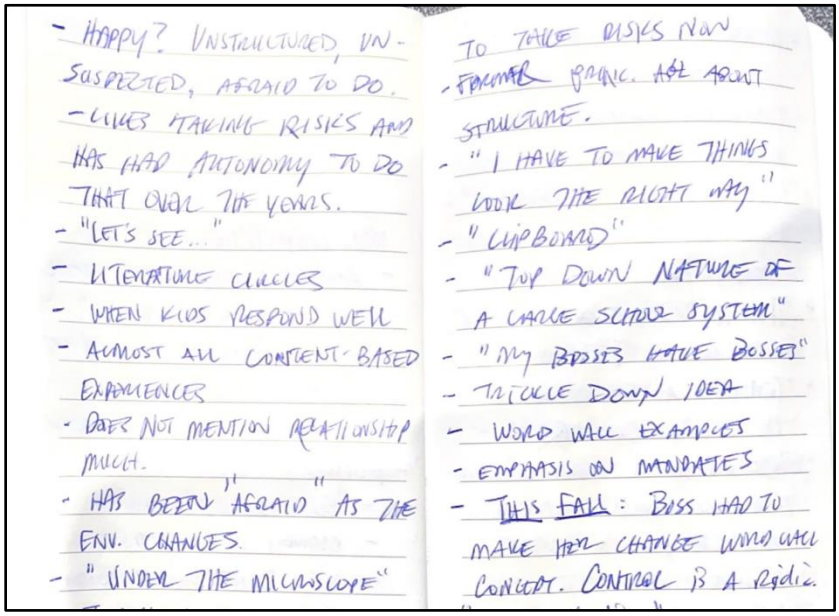
Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted in person and by video conference using Zoom. The convenience offered by growing literacy with video conferencing expanded the capacity to obtain data from a diverse sample of the population. Interviews ranged from 30-80 minutes and were recorded in Zoom for remote interviews and Audacity for in-person interviews. Participant consent documentation was gathered via the reading of an oral informed consent form (Appendix D) following all ethical and appropriate university and personal participant stipulations. Each participant received a copy of the completed informed consent document as signed by me and including the contact information for pertinent university personnel. Interview recordings were transcribed using Trint. In addition, I took extensive hand-written notes (Figure 4) during each interview that were scanned and used as collected data for where key ideas from the conceptual framework and research question appear in the dialogue to adjust probing questions and coding as needed, formatively.

Questioning began uniformly for each participant and expanded to take them through probes that changed based on responses with subsequent, pre-drafted questions used. Questions (Appendix A) were subtextually developed on the tenets of SDT and SIT, emphasizing how teachers feel about their work in the current policy environment. Using a semi-structured interview design, questions changed slightly from interview to interview, as needed. Naturally, as a novice research interviewer, I found the need for adjusting and rearranging between different conversations and the freedom to do so was helpful. Questions did not explicitly mention either of the theories in the conceptual framework, nor did they mention specific policies, the term "well-being", or the term "policy environment," rather they were worded broadly to allow participants to describe their experiences in the post-pandemic setting without any coercive or biased hedging from me as the researcher.

Figure 4

Example Scan from Handwritten Notes



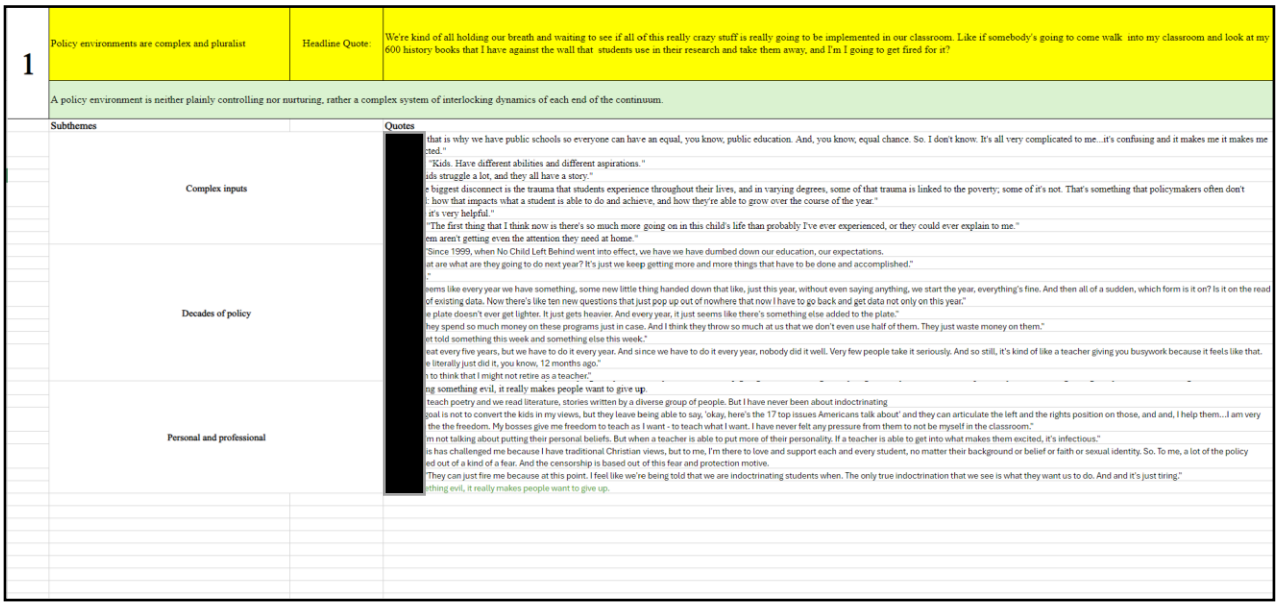
Data Analysis

The 30 interviews that took place yielded roughly 24 hours and 300 pages of transcribed data on how teachers are experiencing their work in the post-COVID policy environment. Those data are diverse, complex, and vastly nuanced in the descriptions of their experiences. Transcripts were analyzed via 32 a priori codes and 175 emergent codes (Appendices B and C). Emergent codes came from all levels of data collection, but the hand-written notes, taken during interviews and scanned to cloud storage (Figure 4), were particularly helpful for finding important thematic responses by participant. Coding utilized a mix of automated and manual methods and organized data in an Excel spreadsheet (Figure 5) with the formal coding process in Trint. That Excel codebook was a 10-tab workbook with a tab for *a priori* codes, emergent codes, an outline of the major coding themes (transferred to the seven themes in the findings chapter) and subthemes, and a tab for each major findings theme.

In interviews, instead of asking a participant, "is your well-being high or low in the current policy environment," I would say "describe your work over the last few years and your feelings about it, " and let the coding process, based on the conceptual model of the study, flesh out the dimensions of positive and negative well-being in the data analysis stage. Working from the code tabs in Excel, I pulled each concept into Trint that searched all transcripts and tagged any instances of that code. I then went through all tags to assess which were authentically connected and which were coincidental. For connected tags, I pulled quotes from transcripts and added them to the thematic codebook tabs under each subtheme with representative quotes per subtheme and broadly representative quotes for the overall theme itself. Information (subthemes, corresponding quotes, and teacher identification markers) was pulled from the thematic tabs directly into the manuscript, set in context, and discussed as germane to the research question.

Figure 5

Example of Thematic Tab in Codebook



1	Policy environments are complex and pluralist	Headline Quote:	We're kind of all holding our breath and waiting to see if all of this really crazy stuff is really going to be implemented in our classroom. Like if somebody's going to come walk into my classroom and look at my 600 history books that I have against the wall that students use in their research and take them away, and I'm I going to get fired for it?
	A policy environment is neither plainly controlling nor nurturing, rather a complex system of interlocking dynamics of each end of the continuum.		
	Subthemes		Quotes
	Complex inputs		[redacted] that is why we have public schools so everyone can have an equal, you know, public education. And, you know, equal chance. So. I don't know. It's all very complicated to me...it's confusing and it makes me it makes me ted." "Kids. Have different abilities and different aspirations." ids struggle a lot, and they all have a story." e biggest disconnect is the trauma that students experience throughout their lives, and in varying degrees, some of that trauma is linked to the poverty; some of it's not. That's something that policymakers often don't how that impacts what a student is able to do and achieve, and how they're able to grow over the course of the year." it's very helpful." "The first thing that I think now is there's so much more going on in this child's life than probably I've ever experienced, or they could ever explain to me." em aren't getting even the attention they need at home."
	Decades of policy		Since 1999, when No Child Left Behind went into effect, we have we have dumbed down our education, our expectations. at are what are they going to do next year? It's just we keep getting more and more things that have to be done and accomplished." " eems like every year we have something, some new little thing handed down that like, just this year, without even saying anything, we start the year, everything's fine. And then all of a sudden, which form is it on? Is it on the read of existing data. Now there's like ten new questions that just pop up out of nowhere that now I have to go back and get data not only on this year." e plate doesn't ever get lighter. It just gets heavier. And every year, it just seems like there's something else added to the plate." hey spend so much money on these programs just in case. And I think they throw so much at us that we don't even use half of them. They just waste money on them." et told something this week and something else this week." eat every five years, but we have to do it every year. And since we have to do it every year, nobody did it well. Very few people take it seriously. And so still, it's kind of like a teacher giving you busywork because it feels like that. e literally just did it, you know, 12 months ago." to think that I might not retire as a teacher."
	Personal and professional		ng something evil, it really makes people want to give up. teach poetry and we read literature, stories written by a diverse group of people. But I have never been about indoctrinating oal is not to convert the kids in my views, but they leave being able to say, 'okay, here's the 17 top issues Americans talk about' and they can articulate the left and the rights position on those, and and, I help them...I am very the the freedom. My bosses give me freedom to teach as I want - to teach what I want. I have never felt any pressure from them to not be myself in the classroom." m not talking about putting their personal beliefs. But when a teacher is able to put more of their personality. If a teacher is able to get into what makes them excited, it's infectious." is has challenged me because I have traditional Christian views, but to me, I'm there to love and support each and every student, no matter their background or belief or faith or sexual identity. So. To me, a lot of the policy ed out of a kind of a fear. And the censorship is based out of this fear and protection motive. They can just fire me because at this point. I feel like we're being told that we are indoctrinating students when. The only true indoctrination that we see is what they want us to do. And and it's just tiring." thing evil, it really makes people want to give up.

Note: Quotes included by subtheme (identifiable data redacted)

Appendix B contains a list of *a priori* codes aligned to the study's conceptual framework. With Appendix C including the emergent codes. Every attempt was made to research how best to predict potential response themes for coding purposes while allowing for emergent codes (Aurini et al., 2016; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Fossey et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2020). I assumed the roles of drafting questions, conducting interviews, developing codes, and coding transcripts, eliminating any issues with inter-coder reliability.

Chapter V will unpack the findings in depth, but broadly speaking, *a priori* codes were not found to be as significant as predicted. As data were analyzed it became clearer that the knowledge being generated on teachers' identity and its interaction with policy was less partisan and more professional. Where a divergence of experience was expected from the explanatory importance of the conceptual framework, more cohesion developed between participants along different points of the sociopolitical spectrum. For the methodology, this meant potentially that

more codes emerged than were set in advance. The unpredictable nature of qualitative data generated a new excitement aside from the potential hypothesis that existed at the start. Chapter V will fully summarize and discuss these data.

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Chapter V. Findings

The 30 interviews collected for this study present authentic data on teachers' perspectives of their well-being in a controlling state policy environment. While clear spectrums of emotion from engagement to resignation; joy to sorrow; commitment to surrender; and optimism to cynicism exist in the data, all responses seemed honest, focused, and given with great care to answer questions fully and responsibly. There was a clear weight to responses about teachers' work revealing a seriousness and gravity to the way participants view their profession. The themes that emerged compose a framework of concepts from which to view the research question and probe how teachers in Oklahoma see the controlling state policy environment interacting with their well-being inside and outside of the classroom.

Themes

While differences in perspectives among teachers existed in the data, some clear themes emerged from the interviews that explain teacher well-being in the controlling post-pandemic policy environment in Oklahoma. The diverse sample of teachers interviewed yielded these collective themes:

1. The controlling policy environment's interaction with teachers' well-being is complex and pluralistic
2. Relevant connection of policy to their work is important for teachers' well-being
3. Supportive leadership strengthens teacher well-being but may be inadequate amid elements of a controlling policy environment
4. SDT helps explain some dimensions of teacher well-being levels with respect to policy

5. SIT was elevated more with respect to the teacher profession than in social and political affiliation and may explain elements of the policy environment's interaction with teacher well-being
6. Long tenure may shield well-being from controlling policies as it may build more endurance and resources for daily practice

These themes represent the process of distilling the descriptive data into an accessible explanation of the current teacher experience in Oklahoma.

Complexity and Plurality

Teachers' descriptions of their well-being are not simple or singular. Interview data suggest a level of complexity in emotional toll, stress, and psychological strain. It appears that the ways in which control from state-level policy imposes itself on the well-being of teachers are elusive and perhaps even subconscious. These phenomena is often described by teachers voicing feelings of being scared, anxious, and in an impossible position. These descriptions are characterized by zero-sum, lose-lose type situations in which teachers feel trapped and risk harming some dimension of their work, or students, with every decision. To unpack the ways in which the policy environment interacts with teachers' well-being, it is important to start with data that show at least some level of complexity in the concept itself.

When asked about the future of education in Oklahoma, a near 20-year veteran (Teacher 8) at a large urban district in Oklahoma said:

> *We're kind of all holding our breath and waiting to see if all of this really crazy stuff is really going to be implemented in our classroom. Like if somebody's going to come walk into my classroom and look at my 600 history books that I have against the wall that students use in their research and take them away, and I'm I going to get fired for it?*

Teacher 8's sentiment speaks to complex dimensions of fear of being fired, outside oversight, instructional material selection, and a quality described as "really crazy." These sentiments

illustrate the plurality of a teacher's work and the many ways a single fear stemming from policy can interact with their well-being, creating a "holding our breath" quality, one negative toward a teacher's well-being.

Participants hinted at various dimensions of control and nurturing across responses. Rather than characterizing Oklahoma as a solely controlling or nurturing policy environment, their responses suggested a complex experience of well-being in 2024. Clearly, according to the teachers in Oklahoma who participated, a state policy environment is neither plainly controlling nor nurturing, rather an arrayed system of interlocking dynamics along a continuum of well-being. That controlling-nurturing dichotomy was well articulated by all participants.

While a participant's state of well-being with respect to how they are experiencing their work became clear early in each interview (and sometimes in communications to set up interviews), the catalytic and influencing phenomena were in a state of disorder. This complexity is seen in a few ways in the data that explore various dimensions of complexity, multi-partiality, and variation that set the work apart from every other professional sector (Berliner & Biddle, 1997; Lackney, 2015; Shackelford, 2014; Tyack et al., 1984; Zimmerman, 2022).

Complex inputs. The data here affirm a concept that is not new in educational research (Audrain et al., 2022; Rowan, 1994) that the inputs of public education are varied in every imaginable way. The complexity of inputs is important to the research question here as it challenges the concept that the interaction between state-level controls and what teachers accomplish in their work is simple. A refrain in the data was that policymakers have an oversimplified, superficial understanding of the work teachers do. In this way, state-level controls may erode teacher well-being if indicative of a mindset that the work to be done is simple and static.

A 5-year teacher from a suburban middle school described the situation in their classroom as evidence of this:

> *The first thing that I think now is there's so much more going on in this child's life than probably I've ever experienced, or they could ever explain to me.*

The complexity of where students are coming from in terms of background and social dynamics is high, making the work difficult and varied in its execution. A teacher from an urban district spoke often of the "trauma" students experience as a dimension of their work that makes it complex:

> *The biggest disconnect is the trauma that students experience throughout their lives, and in varying degrees, some of that trauma is linked to the poverty; some of it's not. That's something that policymakers often don't understand: how that impacts what a student is able to do and achieve, and how they're able to grow over the course of the year.*

These descriptions of trauma and "so much going on" seemed to bear on teachers' descriptions of well-being, particularly since policies teachers are compelled to enforce were, in their minds, not created on a similar understanding.

Teachers spoke candidly about how "kids have different abilities and different aspirations" and concepts of "struggle" that "a lot" of the students bring into their experience—that "they all have a story." Along every line of difference within the spectrum of human experience and identity, teachers report the daily realization of difficulty, joy, importance, and human connection to their work at is most basic level: to "meet students where they are" and help them succeed in school. That concept of "success" is another that is hotly debated where the worlds of school and industry sharply diverge in their conceptualizations of how uniform the outputs of the process should be (Carter, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Zhao et al., 2021). Teacher 23, who described their well-being as particularly low with frequent thoughts of exiting their work, spoke about their broader fears amid the complexity of their daily work:

> *I want public schools to be good. And I want them to continue to, advocate for kids with special needs and kids who are homeless and kids who, you know, don't speak English at home and, kids from poverty. And I think, you know, that is why we have public schools so everyone can have an equal, you know, public education. And, you know, equal chance. So., I don't know. It's all very complicated to me...it's confusing and it makes me feel conflicted.*

This sentiment was expressed by 65% of participants interviewed for this study. Teachers repeatedly said they battle feelings of conflict with their personal desires for their work and the daily manifestation of that work in the lives of students within a system that is, to them, faltering. This shows a connection. Teachers seem to think policies are created with a simpler view of their work than they have. This policymaker view is described as different than what is needed, in their view, to support their work with students. This was described as a significant detriment to teacher well-being in the data. A 4-year teacher at an urban alternative school, spoke directly to the likelihood that the current policy environment is meeting the needs of the complex dynamic outlined here:

> *I think a lot of times policies are made out of this ideal view of our world, and it's not that way. It's really messy. People are messy and broken, so to have the policy play out, whatever that may be, doesn't always seem in reality like it's very helpful.*

This disconnect seems to be a contributing factor to various levels of well-being in teachers. The extent to which the policy environment diverges from the complex needs of the work creates a dissonance for teachers that lowers the nurture that environment can provide.

Decades of policy. The average career length of teachers in this study was 13.7 years (Table 2). The longest-tenured participant was 33 years with several over 15 and a handful between 20 and 30. The descriptions of these teachers were important as they were able to articulate the “pendulum swing” of policy that has interacted with their career from the late 1980s through the pandemic. Teachers who have taught in Oklahoma from *A Nation at Risk* through COVID-19 have seen many intense policy eras intersecting every possible social

phenomenon. They have weathered political tumult, social reckoning, natural disaster, school violence, and collective bargaining disputes (Figure 4).

As such, interviews suggest that the veteran teacher corps in Oklahoma is well-versed in navigating policy, policy changes, and policy agents that come and go around them. There is evidence of some degree of policy fatigue (O'Quinn, 2018) as well as some negative, controlling elements of this end of the "pendulum" phenomenon. However, participants mention that phenomenon blandly is resigned to it as part of a reliable status quo. A 20-year veteran who spent time in other states teaching, as well, articulated the effect of this dynamic on their work:

> *It seems like every year we have something, some new little thing handed down that like, just this year, without even saying anything, we start the year, everything's fine. And then all of a sudden, which form is it on? Is it on the read the review of existing data. Now there's like ten new questions that just pop up out of nowhere that now I have to go back and get data not only on this year.*

This sentiment was echoed by 17 participants interviewed. The feeling that "every year" there is going to be "something else" pops up a lot in the data as a negative element of their work that contributes to lower well-being. This quote is representative of the thoughts of many of the veteran participants and seems to be inhibitive to their well-being. Their feeling that "this too shall pass" could be construed as an optimistic quality of resilience but came off in interviews more as a grim resignation that things are not likely to improve. The darkness inherent in that quality seemed to be a strong connection between the controlling state-level policy environment and low teacher well-being, even amongst veteran, highly qualified teachers.

A 20-year veteran social studies teacher also mentioned the looming, "next year" demand for "more" as being one that is hard to put up with:

> *What are they going to do next year? It's just we keep getting more and more things that have to be done and accomplished.*

This description is telling as it speaks to a layering of responsibility that makes it hard for a teacher to follow policies and experience positive well-being. A 27-year veteran of a suburban district outside of Tulsa expressed the fatigue that arises from a daily paradigm in which “I get told something this week and something else this week."

A veteran of a single suburban high school outside Tulsa, also spoke in doomsday terms with respect to their career about the fickle, controlling policy environment:

> *In my life it gets harder and harder and harder every time something new comes out. I will put up with it, but it has recently occurred to me that I might not retire as a teacher in Oklahoma. I haven't reached that point yet, but I have begun to think that I might not retire as a teacher.*

This was one of the more extreme positions on this dimension of how the policy environment interacts with teacher well-being but is a poignantly negative sentiment of a teacher thinking about leaving the profession because of the status quo. This status quo was articulated by this teacher as a state of constant flux, where they are looking at the door waiting for how controlling policies may enter their space. The “harder every time something new comes out” claim has this teacher potentially in such a well-being deficit, they may not be able to continue in their work. As they hold a tremendous amount of cultural capital as a teacher in Oklahoma that seems to be at odds with how that capital is eroded over decades of layered policy decisions at many levels. That erosion is present in the descriptions of many teachers in this study who described their well-being as critically low. It seems that often teachers’ well-being, and the decisions they make out of it, are not quick, automatic ones, but occur slowly and procedurally over a career of policy disequilibrium.

Personal and professional. Another area of findings characterizing the complexity of teachers’ experience is how teachers seem to view the relationship between their personal values and opinions and their work. Participants routinely judged a policy action in the environment as

self-motivated or serving some element of a political or social commitment on the part of the person pushing the policy. They spoke often that it was “not my job” to coerce students to one side or the other of an issue but to conduct themselves with a professional objectivity serious enough to be Hippocratic in its importance to them. This is potentially why the accusation of “indoctrination” felt so damaging to the well-being of teachers in this study. It seems many teachers view indoctrinating practices amongst the most abhorrent to their sense of professional ethics. A middle school English teacher of 14 years in a suburban district, articulated the threat to well-being in this dynamic well:

> *A lot of educators kind of feel that, when you're trying really hard to do your best, and keep going, and the message that you get from your state leadership is that you're not doing enough or you're indoctrinating children, or, heaven forbid, doing something evil, it really makes people want to give up.*

This sentiment reflects teachers’ assumption that policy agents are not holding themselves to a similar ethic of care. The formal accusation that politicians, high-ranking educational state officials, and sometimes district or building-level personnel are operating toward public policy out of personal agenda shows up frequently in the data and underscores the complexity of teachers’ work and policies’ interactions with it. The senior member of the sample, a rural History teacher of 33 years spoke about their commitment to this ethic:

> *My goal is not to convert the kids in my views, but they leave being able to say, 'okay, here's the 17 top issues Americans talk about', and they can articulate the left and the rights position on those, and I help them...I am very happy with the freedom. My bosses give me freedom to teach as I want - to teach what I want. I have never felt any pressure from them to not be myself in the classroom.*

This divestment from a spirit of indoctrination is important as a component of 15 different teachers’ descriptions of policy decisions in this environment that seemed to be designed to fight indoctrination of students.

The attack against teacher well-being are present in these response data. It was difficult to find any data that spoke of this dimension of the policy environment in positive, nurturing terms. One of the most common sentiments in the data is one of fatigue with many manifestations of policy with one teacher articulating that fatigue as a predictor of thoughts of leaving the profession altogether:

> *They can just fire me because at this point. I feel like we're being told that we are indoctrinating students when. The only true indoctrination that we see is what they want us to do. And it's just tiring.*

The variation described by these teachers is important to the literature as it shows a wealth of diversity in how teachers experience their work. It could be said that a central ill within any societal prejudice is the confining of a people group to a monolithic, homogenized way of being (Sebastian, 2022). Qualitative data such as these underscore the varied experiences of teachers and provide important explanations for policy agents as they attempt to enact improvement efforts in schools. The level to which the innate complexity of the work, the "every year" quality to policy tumult, and current dialogue on how teachers do or do not assume an unethical role as an indoctrinator of student thought all combine to create a controlling, chaotic work experience for teachers in Oklahoma, from a policy perspective. Subsequent themes will drive this point home as one of the most pronounced concepts discussed by teachers is the level of connection they feel toward policies and how it influences their well-being at work.

Relevance and Connection

As shown in Appendix A, the questioning process had teachers formulate their personal definition of public education and then discuss the extent to which different dimensions of policy agents either seem to align or misalign with respect to their definition. This was one area of the data with the most precise connection between a controlling state policy environment and

teachers' well-being. The following quote from veteran of 32 years in a rural district, is particularly representative of a strong thread that ran through this portion of the responses:

> *The people that are making the policies need to have been the ones that are in the trenches and know what is going on. I would like obviously more legislators to support public education because they've been in public education. I know that a lot of people, teacher wise, are running for offices now or the last election had several. I want our lawmakers and legislators to understand before they make laws that don't apply and aren't practical.*

It seems the further a controlling policy environment grows from the daily reality of teachers' work with students, the more it is described as negative toward their well-being, with this most often occurring at the state level. Every participant took the opportunity here to express their desire for policy to be practical, to be drafted by people who have proximity to the policy's effects and are operating on an empirically informed schema instead of from a place of party line political identity or self-serving agendas as shown in the previous band of data. This desire for policy agents to have practical knowledge of the daily work of a school was most expressed in the data via a deep desire for the "most important" aspect of most teachers' work which is "the kids. Definitely the kids. I really, really enjoy working with my kids." This quote from a 27 year teacher from a suburban district outside of Oklahoma City, is representative of another dimension that will be fully discussed later, but for this point on the importance of connection, participants described how misalignment between policies and "the kids" is corrosive to their well-being.

Cascade of alignment. The more a policy environment is connected to the daily work of teachers in a way that is relevant and supporting, the more it is described as nurturing. This is seen occasionally at the district level, but most often at the building and interpersonal level. A cascade of alignment from state to local level increasing in familiarity with daily work emerged from this study where most participants described a connection to, and even affection for,

policies at the building level from principals and colleagues they know and trust. Conversely, they shared negative feelings about policies from the state department and legislators almost always qualifying that phenomenon with statements about how the people making those policies have “no idea what happens in schools.”

When asked about what is supportive in their work, along with colleagues at the horizontal level, participants described “love” and “respect” for a school principal. This will be unpacked in a future subtopic, but it seems building-level leadership holds a tremendous amount of power to carve out elements of nurturing for teachers regardless of the policy environment outside. A 10-year veteran from a suburban middle school, got more specific and personal with their experience of the cascade and zeroed in on a particular policymaker as indicative of the disconnect at the higher level. Their description of the emotional impact of some of these decisions is germane to an inquiry into how policies interact with teacher well-being:

> *I think our state is awful. I think that our school, we're very spoiled. We have wonderful administrators; we have a fantastic superintendent. We have a very supportive board. We are spoiled by that...We think we have a lot of power as teachers in this school district, which is awesome, but not. It's very skewed when you look at the state level because I think most public school teachers in the state feel like a piece of crap. We're viewed to be unprofessional. It's kind of how you feel most of the time, especially right now with this Ryan Walters joke of a person. He's just crazy. I guess I've got really positive feelings on my district level and really negative feelings on the higher levels.*

This quote articulates the many dimensions at which teachers describe policies aligning to, or deviating from, a paradigm that positively influences their well-being. The concept of “purpose” was one articulated often in teachers’ descriptions of their work in the policy environment. This cascade underscores the basic psychological need humans have for relatedness in their work. Damning statements suggesting irrelevance, obtuseness, and elitism were numerous within the responses about decisions by state leadership. Responses about the district level were often positive or ambivalent, with the building level by far described the most affectionately,

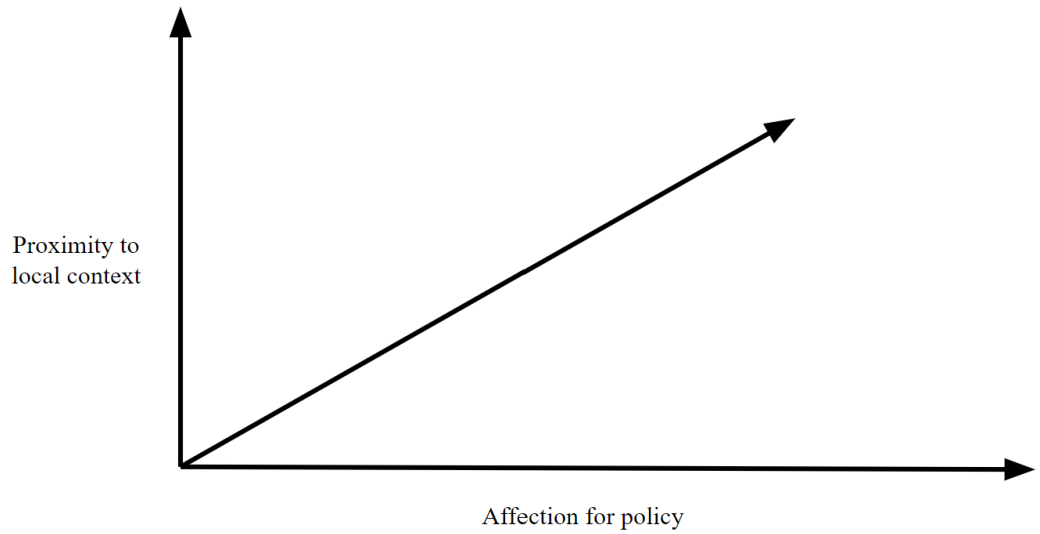
particularly because teachers saw those making building-level policies as having the most relevant, connected compass for policy-making that affects the teacher's role. The way teachers "feel" about the cascade is important because its presence is not empirically important in and of itself. While teachers voiced affection for building and district leaders as connected to their work, it could be their description of their "feelings" about this cascade are somewhat ominous in the dialogue, like in this description from a veteran English teacher in a small rural district:

> *I think it's hard for me to truly dwell on state level things when the district and especially the school level things feel right. As long as my school feels like it's good and my district feels healthy to some degree, I'm in it and I feel good, and I feel confident about it.*

This low confidence is important in the conversation of well-being as it indicates a negative aspect of control within the study's theoretical framework. SDT asserts that a person must feel competent to be intrinsically motivated and the quality of confidence should be seen as important to that psychological need. With it absent, due to the policy affection dynamic illustrated here (Figure 6), well-being is challenged in the ways the data describe.

Figure 6

Affection Toward Policy Based on Relevance



Removal equals low credibility. The interaction depicted above does not seem to be opaque or shrouded in a magical quality that is hard to decipher. It seems teachers have a deep personal connection to their daily work and policies that garner their affection quickly in any iteration that honors and incorporates that quality of relevance and connectedness. By that same token, the cascade shows how distance between a policymaker and the practical lives of teachers' work erodes teachers' sense that the policymaker is credible, and the policy is worth their time and effort. This was clear in many interviews, considerably so in the data from. A fifth-year charter school teacher in a large urban district who said:

> *The policies are not beneficial to everybody. Do they have the kids in mind first? I think they have the policymakers in mind first, and those of us that work in these communities, we have an idea of what our babies need and what they need to know and what they need to stand up for and what they need to stand up against at a level that (policymakers) can't understand.*

Some of the harshest indictments of policymakers came in the descriptions of their decisions as not being based on practical classroom realities. The SIT dimension started to emerge in these descriptions as a stark "us versus them" mentality present between teachers and high-level policy makers. Occasionally building and district-level leadership were characterized as "them" but the lion's share of data positions teachers, principals, and district leadership on one side with the state department, superintendent, board members, and legislature on the other. It started to become clear here that teachers see their social identity as a teacher as perhaps more important than other social group memberships they possess, and had strong words for policymakers without, in their estimation, relevant knowledge of "real" school life from which to make policy decisions. A 15-year veteran teacher from a rural district outside Tulsa brought up issues of the "lived" quality of their work:

> *I think it makes a big difference when you actually live it and know what it's like, not just coming down and trying to make changes because you think you know better when you don't even know the people you're serving.*

Along with this sentiment from a 32-year rural veteran teacher:

> *There's a definite misalignment between my views and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction right now. I feel like he's really just out of touch with the needs of our state and the needs of our education system and the needs of our students. So, and I think a lot of other policymakers, unfortunately, are in that same example.*

There exists in the data a described disconnect between many dimensions of policy and teachers' lived experiences. A characterization of the state superintendent and other policymakers as "out of touch" is important as it underscores the feelings experienced by teachers who are subjected to policies not created with the "needs" of teachers in mind. This dynamic seemed to be a heavy predictor of low well-being. The divestment teachers seem to feel when subjected to policies misaligned from their priorities and "needs" as they see them, is apparent in the data and seems to predict teachers experiencing a policy environment as controlling. This subtheme opened with a teacher describing the "in the trenches" quality of a policy agent that may have a teacher's best interest at heart. The data across the board of this study supports an assertion of importance in that quality. A 19-year veteran English teacher at a large urban high school described a higher description of personal well-being, and spoke incisively about the ways in which the "in the trenches" importance is crucial to their view of where policies originate:

> *They should spend one week in my classroom because the bigwigs and legislators in their suits and ties, if they came into the classroom for one day, they would get respect. But then after that they would have to somehow show it.*

A veteran of 11 years in a rural district, also described the importance of connection to classroom practice for people "from the top" as a prerequisite to what they characterized as "understanding":

> *From the top, it's a lot of people who don't have a lot of classroom experience. And I think in an effective administration system, as people who have been in the classroom and understand how a classroom works and, these policymakers and stuff, I just think they have no clue what it's like to be inside a classroom, and they have no clue what it's like to be a teacher.*

The previous subtheme on complexity and plurality is important to a common sentiment of "what it's like to be a teacher." Teachers articulate a dynamic in which the likelihood that someone without practical, relevant knowledge of "a day in the life" will be able to make policies to empower them to meet the "needs" of their students is low. These descriptions were some of the most emotional and palpably negative with respect to teacher well-being. The insular identification of teachers to their work, with a clear resistance to "outsiders" seemed to predict negative well-being in a policy environment rife with state-level controls.

What we should be doing. The relevant connection, or lack thereof, of policies to teachers' work is further articulated in the data by frequent use of the word "should" or similar concepts. The data suggests a keen sense amongst teachers of what they "should be doing" which, for most of them is to simply be allowed by policies to "just teach." While teachers described their work as highly varied and complex, they simplified their definition of how to do it in such terms. This desire to "just teach" seemed to be a simple statement that holds a vast complexity within it, like a simple manhole cover that, when opened, reveals a cavernous and complicated network of machinery and engineering below the surface. To "just do my job" in most teacher descriptions was not articulated but was a refrain too constant to ignore. This finding seems intricately connected to the basic psychological need for autonomy present within SDT. A 19-year urban high school veteran History teacher outlined anger and frustration with policies that inhibit them from doing their work as they feel it should be done:

> *I truly believe all teachers are good people and they're just trying to do their job. They're trying to teach our curriculum. Just let teachers teach. I feel blessed I'm in a school that*

> *lets me do that...We just need teachers to teach. Stop trying to put so much stuff on their plate.*

This quote is representative of many responses wherein teachers petitioned to be freed of controlling policy from irrelevant sources, and freed up to do what they felt was best in their work with students. Anger, fear, disillusionment, and anxiety were emotions that came up often in these descriptions as evidence of how detrimental this dimension of the controlling policy environment can be to the well-being of a teacher. Additionally, the "waste of time" code was an important predictor of teacher descriptions of irrelevance in policy and its connection to their work. The extent to which many participants (one third of the sample) feel much of what they are mandated to do, across school sizes, types, ages taught, and experience levels, is a "waste" of their time was alarming and may be a clear predictor of how their well-being is being affected by the policy environment.

One of the more unfazed of the sample, a 26-year veteran of a large urban high school where they have been their whole career through myriad turnover at every level, described their work among the highest in terms of current well-being. This divergence suggests some difference between this teacher and their less resilient colleagues. This teacher is a member of a dozen professional organizations and is currently involved in research on curriculum which may speak to a connection between continued education and resilience in teachers, but needs additional study. This teacher spoke positively about the policy environment in all dimensions of the interview, but grew negative when describing their view of policies that inhibit their need for policy relevance:

> *It just felt like a ridiculous waste of time. And then nobody's ever even I mean, other than we had to take a picture of it and turn it in on a Google Drive. Nobody's ever been to look at it. Nobody's ever followed up on it. Nobody's ever asked to see it again. Nobody's ever checked it off a list. It just felt silly.*

That “silly” description, from a participant as seemingly unfazed by things other participants characterized as highly allergic to their work, was poignant as it further illustrated the desire, of even extremely resilient veteran teachers, for relevance in the policies they are required to implement. A similarly positive veteran of 15 years in a large suburban district, also described a desire for policy relevance to what their “job” is all about when asked about actions they would take if assuming a high-level policymaker position:

> *Get some of their policies pared down to the essential, because it really needs to be about letting teachers do their job, which is educating our kids. And stop looking for ridiculous things to attack us over that have no place, you know, kind of like this new legislation.*

Pertinent to this inquiry's research question, it seems that, void of qualities of proximity and relevance, controlling state-level policy can erode teacher well-being over time. There was not a single participant who, when describing policies as irrelevant or disconnected from their work, even when that policy was not particularly culturally loaded or high stakes, did not describe feelings of frustration, anger, divestment, or fatigue. In such an environment, it seems teachers must either change environments (quit, transfer), or develop a defense mechanism for daily tolerance of irrelevant policies.

Desire/hope to avoid. The erosion, and subsequently essential defense mechanisms above, are characterized by data from teachers about what they do when policies and their work do not align. The data here describe a paradigm wherein teachers must turn off some or all their analytical faculties just to get through a day in the policy environment studied here. That “turning off” was described by responses that show a desire, hope, or attempt to simply ignore and avoid the policies in the spirit of self-preservation. This inclination to avoid could be characterized as the well-known psychological tool of “flight” in Walter Cannon’s 1927 work on how humans respond to stress (Cannon, 1927).

Participants in this study across all conceivable demographics expressed some element of a “flight” response. A 19- year history teacher in an urban high school, claimed "I tend to block out a lot of the policies and ignore them"; while a 9-year veteran teacher from Tulsa asserted a focus on "what I can control, and the word that I use a lot of times is 'locus' of control. So, I think, over time, that will work its way out"; A 5-year ELA teacher from suburban Oklahoma City seemed resigned to "try and stay in the center and just avoid it all"; while a similarly experienced colleague was more dismissive saying, "I try to stay away from that." Another teacher from around Oklahoma City, who was the most negatively descriptive of their well-being, expressed guilt and did not want to go in depth saying, “To be honest, and this probably sounds horrible, I try not to think about all of that"; an 11-year veteran from rural northeastern Oklahoma seemed panicked describing their resolve saying, “I'm not going to worry about that stuff. I'm just going to keep doing what I'm doing. I'm not going to worry about that stuff;” while a 14-year veteran middle school teacher from outside Muskogee spoke of high-level policy most negatively, admitting, "If I can at all pretend like I don't know anything that's going on with the State Department, I do that."

The inclination here to disconnect from policies and not think of it is at odds with a human’s basic psychological need for relatedness. Where that is important in their connection to other people in their work, they also have the need to be connected to policies in a way that breeds feelings of meaning, relevance, and motivation. Outside such an environment of connection, it seems teachers can experience negative, controlling aspects of policies on their well-being. To investigate the interaction in this study, these data provide a strong description of how policies unrelated to teachers’ daily work may challenge their ability to be intrinsically motivated. Alongside other data in this study where teachers identify socially with their

membership in the teaching profession, it may be most dangerous to their well-being to challenge their need for connection in this way.

Supportive Leadership

Data in the previous section outlined the ways in which policy irrelevant to their work seems to interact negatively with their well-being. Interviews were frequently negative with respect to high-level policy agents as architects of irrelevant policies. Conversely, descriptions of building-level leadership, and policies created by their relevant connection to teachers' daily work, were more positive. A 19-year veteran teacher from a large urban high school, said:

> *I think overall the environment at my school has been good. I feel really protected by our administration. They let us teach because if anything big happens, it seems like they take the brunt of it.*

This was a common sentiment among participants (75% of teachers interviewed in this study). As the cascade outlined in the previous section shows, the closer the author of a policy is to the daily work of teachers, and the track record that author has with respect to relevant classroom experience, the more it seems teachers view the policy as worth their time. Building on the affection garnered by principals for that proximity and relevance, interview data show a trend where principals may emerge as insulators between teachers and high-level policy agents, thereby protecting teachers from experiencing more harm to their well-being. This aligns with previous findings about how principal leadership is important for teacher satisfaction (Torres, 2016) and efficacy (Herman et al., 2018), but in terms of intervening in the reduction of well-being at the hands of a potentially controlling policy environment, the literature does not exist.

Principal as insulator. A 26-year veteran History teacher from an urban high school in Tulsa articulated this well as they discussed how building-level leadership interacts with the emotion in their work:

> *We have an admin that, well, I've had his children in my class, so he knows I do a good job. He's very complimentary. He is the hardest worker in our building. So, when he asks us to do this, that, or a couple of other little extra things, I look at it as he's the hardest working one in our building anyway, so I would pretty much do whatever. He's the one that's painting the building in the summer and he's the one that's there at 4:00 because he wants to sit in on certain IEP meetings because he wants to know. So, when I have an administrator that is a good example of going above and beyond, it makes it easier for staff also to go above and beyond.*

Throughout the transcripts in this study, dozens of positive references are made to the importance of administrative support in general and as related to policies. The quote above shows an interplay between both. While painting the building in the summer is nowhere close to a direct state policies (though it may be part of the policy environment in Oklahoma in terms of resource allocation), it signals something in the teacher's mind that somehow makes following *de jure* policies more palatable. When directly intersecting *de jure* policies, like the teacher's example of the principal being present in IEP meetings after school, administrator support, presence, and expertise is often described as protective or insulative. This phenomenon was seen particularly with respect to state-level policies or other work stressors and emerged in the data as a primary lever in teachers' descriptions of an environment as nurturing. The teacher's statement that "I would pretty much do whatever" is one that came up in several iterations and is relevant to this research. The value of that finding is what seems to be a strong correlation between principals' work and the resolve of teachers to do more, withstand stress, follow high-level policies they may not agree with, and to feel at a deep level that they are valued in the school.

On the other side of that coin are the acts of principals that are unsupportive and hard to align to for teachers. A veteran ELA teacher from suburban Oklahoma City, whose data were most descriptive of critically low well-being as evidenced by their outlying claim that "As soon I cannot teach, I will not teach...it is a nightmare," spoke candidly about when that sense of wellness began to slide:

> *I taught third grade at a title one school in [city name] and it was a nightmare. I hated every second of it. My administration was absolutely terrible. They did nothing to help, nothing to support. They did a lot of love and logic, so if a child would cuss to me out in the classroom, they would come back with a sucker because they were cussing me out because they were hungry, and that was a problem to me, so I got out of that and now teach at a junior high in [different city name].*

This teacher articulated the dangerous side effect of the absence of nurturing. The principal from the rural context above was instilling within teachers a desire and energy to go "above and beyond" while the support void created by the latter principal contributed to a site change for this teacher as well as the beginning of a well-being decline from which they have never recovered. A colleague of the latter, who described much higher levels of well-being, spoke about their principal as a primary driver of that positive state particular in the current policy environment where elements of "attack" seem to breed anxiety in their work:

> *I'm very thankful for my building in the current administration. They have the teachers back 150% and that makes me feel so protected, especially since my subject's been attacked. It feels good that they have my back and they're like, 'no, we're going to support you.' That feels really good. They seem to really have common sense like they know something's good or not, and they can explain it well. My current principal: I would do whatever she told me to do.*

The mention of "common sense" is important to data in the previous section as it outlines the perception that the principal has a keen sense of what teachers "should be doing" in their classrooms and is creating an environment where that is possible. Another veteran teacher from this suburban district, who teaches middle school ELA, spoke positively about their principal echoing the refrain of "listening" as an important characteristic of a principal who can stave off the effects of what some teachers may see as assaultive policies:

> *We have a great principal who always listens to the teachers. I do feel like they do their best to support us so that we can do our job...I think just having supportive administrators who will listen when there's an issue and will work to address that issue to the benefit of the majority, honestly helps.*

This description underscores the value teachers place on principals who operate on a foundation of "common sense" and relevant experience.

Many teachers spoke about teaching distance learning during the lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic as being particularly hard. While virtually none of them faulted any policymaker at any level for the pandemic or even policies requiring distance learning at its peak, A 19-year high school History teacher from Tulsa and others did speak of how principal intervention helped during the difficulty and instability of the lockdown season:

> *I don't know how long I would have lasted during COVID if I didn't have other teachers that were so supportive and an administration that was so supportive. I thought about quitting probably every week for about two years when COVID started, but it was the kids and support from my admin that kept me there. I really do think that because that's what I've seen make the most difference. I love my admin and a good admin is really hard to find.*

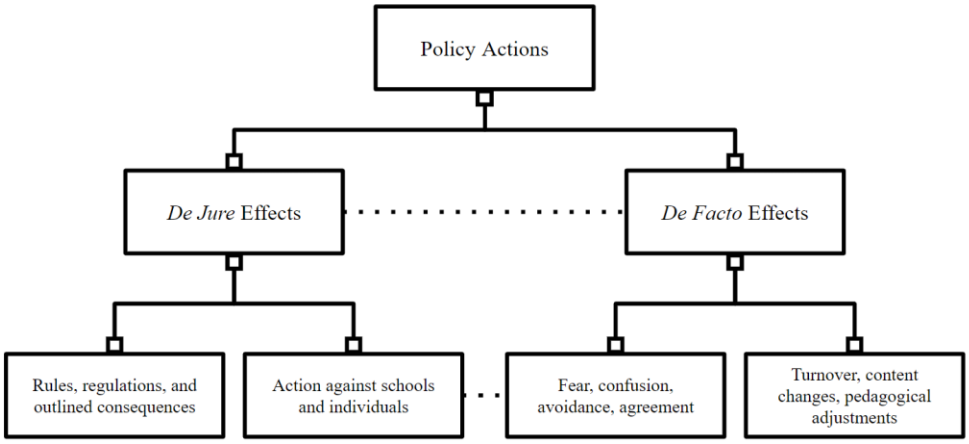
The sentiment that "a good admin is really hard to find" was puzzling, empirically because the majority of participants spoke kindly of their principals as being a positive presence in their experience of well-being but speaks to the fact that they may have had experiences in other contexts that were less positive, or know people going through more negative experiences currently, like the teacher above who described active plans to find a way out of their career as a teacher. A frequent characterization of some school environments as different qualities of "secure and comfortable" creates important descriptive data as those qualities are highly nurturing in the way teachers experience them. Some may even say that qualities of comfort and security are the most central to a definition of nurturing as predictive to high well-being (Ford & Forsyth, 2021; Forsyth et al., 2011; Ma & MacMillan, 1999; Raymond, 2024; Torres, 2016).

Trickle-down policy effects. As rosy as the picture painted by the principal landscape above is, it is a bit at odds with data on the strength of high-level policy to erode even that highly insulative dimension over time. The cascade outlined in the previous section summarizes how

teachers see their affection for policy increase as the connection of that policy nears. Another cascade described in the data is a “trickle-down” effect (Figure 7) where policy decisions from the highest level invariably make their way to the daily work of teachers, regardless of a principal or other interceding entity’s best-intended efforts. This phenomenon seems to happen in both de jure and de facto dimensions with potential harm present in both (Figure 7)

Figure 7

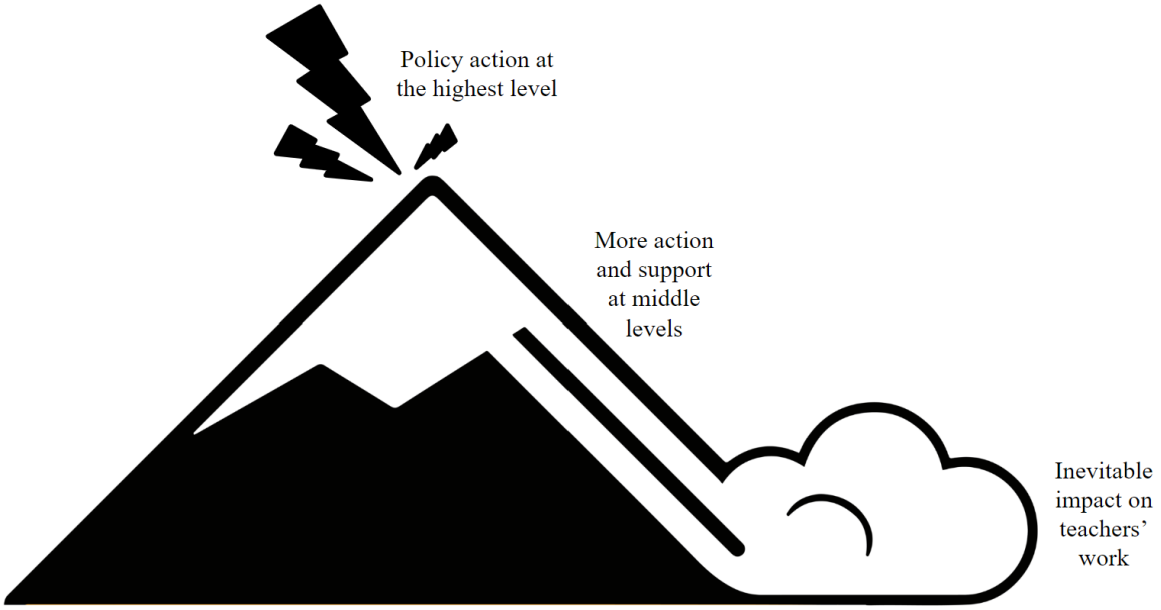
De Jure and De Facto Policy Effects



The hierarchy illustrated here is described by teachers with a quality of inevitability. As they spoke about different skills, mediating agents, and qualities that make it “not so bad,” there was still a sense from teachers that policy actions at the highest level will make their way into their classrooms eventually (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Avalanche of Policy Effects



Many participants described this quality verbatim, and others unpacked it more tangentially. Regardless of the semantics of the descriptions, the policy environment may be strong and enduring in its aims to control or nurture the work of teachers and thereby their well-being. Teacher 25 stated this succinctly while describing a misalignment in policy values between their work and that of the state:

> *I would say it (misalignment) is more the state because I feel like that is where the trickle-down happens.*

Several teachers exonerated their beloved principals by saying things were "out of their hands" because of the trickle-down phenomenon described by a 24-year veteran English teacher from rural Oklahoma. There was a resignation to these descriptions that underscores the power and constancy of a policy environment from the highest level and its ability to eventually affect a teacher's experience. A highly decorated 12-year history teacher from an urban middle school

used that tone of resignation to describe the situation at a large urban middle school with respect to standardized student achievement metrics:

> *I think that they've (building leadership) been put into a situation where they can't value what needs to be valued. They have to value school report cards and they have to value test scores. They're being forced to focus on things that shouldn't be as important by the state, but I don't think that it's anything that they're choosing to do.*

The collective phrasing of "us" is another common descriptor in teachers' responses. It holds particular importance to the theoretical strength of SIT wherein it is clear that teachers identify heavily with the professional corps and experience dimensions of the policy environment from that place of belonging. This description positions the collective teacher experience opposite that of the administrative in a potentially dangerous way as the psychological need for relatedness in SDT is challenged there. Descriptions of principal support by teachers who spoke highly of their bosses were among the most affectionate of the findings. The description of a principal as the one painting the building in the summer for whom a teacher is willing to "do whatever," spoke of the trickle-down effect in that principal's life as another instance of an exonerating tone for anything the principal is "forced" to do from a policy standpoint:

> *I've been saying how wonderful my principal is, but sometimes when he has some great ideas, he gets shot down from the higher level. When he tries to dig in his heels on a policy, he gets told from the superintendent level that, nope, that's not going to be a doable thing.*

This is a description where the principal is included in the collective teacher identity group with the superintendent opposite them. This further articulates several dimensions of this study's findings as it is clear schools and the dynamics within their human capital are complex and highly pluralistic, it emphasizes the key role a principal plays as an insulator from policy effects, and it shows the inevitability of the policy environment's interaction with work regardless of

intercession. A veteran History teacher also described a “hands tied” situation with their principal in a small rural K-8 context:

> *When I taught in elementary, our elementary principal, in his defense, was trying to follow the training he'd been given on it (TLE) but was much harsher initially. It was very frustrating because you felt like he had to make up things for us to improve on, to show improvement even when he knew that we don't all need improvement. It's just discouraging when it could have been encouraging.*

The emotions expressed at the end of this quote underscore the importance of the policy environment to a teacher’s emotional well-being. An element of discouragement was a refrain through many interviews and one directly corrosive to well-being. A 5-year veteran from a large urban district described the environment in which they have recently seen a superintendent change and accreditation sanction due to lack of adherence to new state policies, post-COVID. They, as well as others from the same district, spoke about the violent impact of this more direct manifestation of the trickle-down effect:

> *This year specifically has been one of the more challenging at this point, though, because of our state's attack on our district and the ways that is trickling down to the administration, to the teachers and the pressure that is putting on our system. It's kind of creating a very challenging culture right now, and students are also noticeably feeling the effects of that.*

This dynamic is particularly important to include as it accentuates the strength of the policy environment to affect teacher well-being, even when confronted with a powerful force of intercession like a trusted principal as an insulator.

Pervasive fear. The trickle-down effect can challenge even the most supportive principal dynamic. The data show that, at least in part, it does this by creating and spreading one of the most primal of a human’s psychological inclinations: to feel fear, dread, anxiety, or panic in one’s environment. One of the most consistent refrains in the data is that of some sense or iteration of a fear complex. Terms synonymous with this emotion occur often in the data. The

descriptions of this emotion by teachers, along with descriptions of guilt and shame, are some of the most compelling and where teachers showed the most emotion in interviews. Speaking of a desire to be politically active about education policy on social media, a 14-year veteran middle school teacher expressed reticence out of fear in saying, "I haven't posted it yet because. Yeah. I'm afraid of reprisals." A novice History teacher at a large urban high school, connected the attack on the district described above to fearful emotions:

> *Because of this talk of the school being taken over by the state, they're so scared that they don't want to do something different to try to fix that.*

A 19-year veteran in the same district expressed fear and dread for the future of education itself, which is a grander, but equally jarring feeling for a person who has chosen this work as their career:

> *I truly am scared about the trajectory and the political rhetoric and policymaking that's happening right now. It bothers me, frightens me. I'm just kind of scared about the way things are going right now. And I'm easygoing and relaxed, and stuff rolls off my shoulder and always has, but I never felt that way before.*

This teacher's description of the environment as different than "before" is important, particularly for veteran teachers who have weathered other policy eras in Oklahoma. Later discussion will unpack this concept, but as related to the fear participants described, that sentiment is important here. This teacher, as with as a dozen other participants, often double-checked that interview responses would be confidential, while a handful more made jocular glances at the ceiling and wondered if "someone is listening." A 15-year veteran teacher from a rural school spoke about the fear associated with parent complaints based on accidental inclusion of content they may object to by saying, "I'm scared to do anything. Somebody's going to get mad and put us on a list."

Another veteran of over 10 years, described the prevailing nervousness, regulation to content, and perceived confusion:

> *At this point I am nervous to teach anything. Again, 'critical', you know, 'critical reading', 'critical writing', 'critical thinking'.*

The inclusion of a term like "critical" previously thought by teachers to be a positive, amoral skill for a public school education in weaponized political rhetoric on "indoctrination" seemed to be damaging for teachers from a politically neutral place of mourning the death of content-specific discipline. The dread described in these interviews was palpable. Teachers were apt to cry, turn red in the face, raise their voices, stand, fall silent, laugh, or tremble when describing emotions associated with the interaction of these policies and their fear surrounding it. These building-level phenomena—supportive principals, the power of a trickle-down quality of policy, and the fear generated in that environment—assert the importance of the study to the body of literature.

Another dimension of data that was common across many interviews was the metaphorical description of the current policy environment as one where something could go wrong, or a teacher could come to harm at any second without warning. A 5-year teacher articulated this quality and its effect on their role as an English Language Arts department head in a large suburban middle school:

> *It feels a little bit like a landmine kind of situation. Like, don't step here or it might cause a problem and don't step here. Or it could blow up these issues or whatever. And so, it feels that way sometimes. And so especially as department head, I feel like I have to know where the landmines are in order to help instruct other teachers to know how to handle things.*

The "impossible" nature of the "landmine" imagery was present in a large part of the data. quality wherein teachers at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum feel trapped and unable to do their work safely but for opposite reasons will be explored in a future subtheme. The language

of “landmine,” “minefield,” and “eggshells” as indicative of the fear paradigm created by the current policy environment must be seen as evidence of low well-being due to state-level controlling policies.

The theoretical intersection of SDT and SIT has been discussed, but it is important to underscore here the power a policy must affect a person’s well-being particularly because their work is so intertwined with their sense of self, determination, and identity. The following subthemes will unpack the importance of this theoretical intersection in the data and then provide a hopeful look at a positive trait and further discussion of well-being complexity within this policy environment. As these dimensions are explored, the stark element of fear within virtually all participants’ descriptions must be held in importance as it potentially interacts with the rest of the data.

Self-Determination

The basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence predict descriptions of nurturing environments where self-determination is apparent. The quotes included in the evidence above suggest a positive interaction between the nurturing of teachers’ basic psychological needs and high well-being. A 19-year veteran high school History teacher, one of the most highly reporting participants in terms of well-being, spoke about their school site as a place of profound support:

> *I feel blessed. I'm in a school that lets me do that. Is that really does give you a lot of freedom, support and. Just like, 'oh, I can breathe'.*

This quality of being able to “breathe” is important as it suggests a potential level of well-being worth investigating. Alongside data more negative or indicative of low well-being, data that suggest a teacher feels “blessed” and can “breathe” are important to probe. This subtheme of findings will look at quotes that explicitly support the possibility that the nurturing of these needs

not only leads to intrinsic motivation but that the intrinsic motivation achieved seems to predict a level of higher well-being in teachers. This section will look at all three basic psychological needs and their bearing on teachers' motivation. It will be important to hearken back to the definition of well-being as an intersection of SDT and SIT as the next subtheme will unpack the latter in the data. That definition, where well-being is operationalized as a quality of work that arises from self-determination in a job that is deeply connected to the teacher's sense of belonging, will be important moving forward.

Autonomy is described as important. The "I can breathe" sentiment above speaks to a "freedom" the teacher feels in their work. While "autonomy" is often erroneously defined as simply synonymous with "freedom," the quality described above, paired with feelings of being "blessed" and being able to "breathe" gets closer to the theoretical definition of autonomy, which has more to do with *volition* than liberty. It is important to analyze these data through these terms. Sentiments about "just being able to teach" or even ones that mention "freedom" or "being left alone" cannot be discounted simply because they speak more toward liberty than volition. When considering the other sentiments concerning them as sketched out above, often, an expression of "just leave me alone" attaches to deeper qualities of well-defined autonomy in the subtext. A 32-year, rural History teacher used the actual terminology to connect what they see as an earned quality in their work as indicative of high well-being:

> *If you earn their trust, they give you complete autonomy to make decisions. I have never gotten pressure to follow a strict pacing guideline, which I hear from other teachers in other schools, which would, drive me crazy.*

These data are communicating a desire for simple liberty, but when attached to the earned trust and support, paint a fuller picture of teachers working in an environment of volition at the local level. Building on that idea, a 15-year veteran from a rural middle school, uses the term with

respect to their intention to remain in the work at their current school with long-term commitment:

> *I still feel great about my future in this work because I really love the position I'm in now. I just have so much autonomy in this position.*

This teacher discussed a role switch that took place last year that has made a significant difference in their well-being. In their previous role within the same school, they expressed deep feelings of "burnout" and credit the role switch, particularly in terms of autonomy, as important for an upswing in well-being in that abbreviated time. In similar terms, Teacher 12, a suburban middle school English teacher, described an autonomous environment and its positive effect on well-being because of the student connection they can make in the autonomy-nurturing environment:

> *I really enjoy the autonomy that I have. When I'm teaching something, I like to make the real-world connections with the students, so sometimes I feel like I'm just hanging out with them.*

This quality is important as it describes a teacher who does not feel like their work is toilsome. They described a paradigm in which their work feels recreational and joyful rather than painstaking and stressful, a clearly positive descriptor of a work environment nurturing to a teacher's well-being.

The concept of autonomy came more into focus in the data through participants speaking about it in other terms. A newer teacher at a struggling district, and one of the participants with the lowest descriptions of well-being, spoke about a dark quality in the current environment where they feel utterly marginalized in personal terms saying, "I just don't think there's any way to win when someone's against how you live." This apparent assault on their personhood seemed to be a theme in their responses and others where they felt minimized and paved over by their work.

Most of these data focus on the positive manifestation of an autonomy-rich work environment. While the claim above about one's personhood being attacked as antithetical to autonomy is clear, there were many other descriptions of environments that hampered or interrupted autonomy in teachers' work. Many of these were fleshed out above in the subtheme on fear. While it would be oversimplified to suggest that fear is antonymous to autonomy, the descriptions of "minefield" and "eggshell" dynamics above characterize them as disruptive to the volitional environments described here. Many other teachers' descriptions of autonomy as that symbiosis of one's will, and the system's demand is absent in the fear-stricken descriptions above. Along with those of fear, descriptions of exhaustion, stress, and discouragement show up in the data as antithetical to autonomy, and seem to point to teachers' desire for autonomy-supportive policies in their work. These can either be directly impactful trends in how they are managed or indirectly experienced qualities due to policies that hold students and parents accountable, thereby creating autonomy in teachers' work. These data support the tenets of SDT in that teachers who describe autonomy-rich environments, even within the larger policy environment, also describe higher levels of well-being and motivation in their work.

Relatedness is a clear lever. With an empirical emphasis placed on autonomy support in teachers' work, the connection teachers feel within their context emerged as even more important to their well-being. Whether colleague to colleague, teacher to principal, teacher to student, teacher to home, or teacher to the system at large, the basic human need for relatedness within SDT was clearly pronounced in the data. Many participants mentioned some dimension of "relationship" as a key positive force in their work. This was almost always described through the lens of student-to-teacher relationships and connection with colleagues. The concept of relatedness within SDT as a theoretical component of this study is complex in that there is an

element of relatedness *to* policies and an element of relatedness support stemming *from* policies. The conceptualization of relatedness *to* a policy environment was largely negative and connects closely with the lack of volition teachers feel in the policy environment as described in the section on autonomy. This section will focus more on how a policy environment does or does not support the human connection teachers need in their work for it to interact positively with their well-being. In interviews, teachers were simply asked what they like about their work. If needed, they were prompted to think about moments that bring them "joy" or that do not "feel like work" throughout a given workday. By and large, the first thing teachers mentioned was some quality of "connecting" with students. Ahigh school English teacher at a large urban magnet school described this as an important part of what they like about their work:

> *If we happen to bring up something that they and I have in common and are able to share something about why we like that thing, or if we have an experience that we both had, or if, like, they're trying to tell me something that they think is really interesting or cool or something they've recently done. I get a lot of joy out of those moments right now.*

All 30 participants mentioned joy derived from student connection to some degree. This quote articulates this importance as a concept central to high well-being for teachers. In conversations about policies and how they interact with teachers' well-being, these data are important.

Secondary to student connection in the data is the theme of connection between colleagues in ways that, when nurturing, contribute to increased well-being, and when challenged, contribute to a teacher feeling negatively controlled and forfeiting well-being. A teacher with critically low described well-being characterized their environment as one of severed connection that is important to this dimension of the data:

> *My work environment has gone from me having a really tight circle of friends that I could trust to two, maybe two people. Three maybe. And so, I get to school, I teach and I leave. Like, not being there is more enjoyable for me because the people I work with I don't trust. Because of just an absolutely terrible experience.*

This teacher spoke about a staff schism that occurred and severed the workplace connection once enjoyed. Their description here of that dynamic's effect on their motivation to be at work is important, particularly from a teacher experiencing such a dramatic decline in well-being. This quality of being "together" is descriptive of a school environment where motivation is likely to be more intrinsic and well-being to be higher. Another teacher from this district described their work as supporting relational connection and spoke of their sense of duty to the team and belonging on that team as being important, directly below the personal dimension of volition outlined in the previous section. These descriptions are important as the "what I can control" sentiment often came on the heels of a description of the broader policy environment being at odds with their well-being. Here exists a connection between relatedness at the school level as an important part of the cascade effect. This teacher describes a desire to avoid broader policy to focus attention smaller. This "locus of control" allows them to leverage relatedness on their team as a primary dimension of achieving success in their work. Teachers' many descriptions about the importance of "getting along" with those they work with are important as it provides a diametrically opposed quality to that described negatively by the dissatisfied teacher above. The "getting along" not only serves the utilitarian purpose of getting excellent work done, but it also supports the basic human need for relatedness and thereby contributes positively to well-being in these data.

Competence is key but is challenged by policy. The tenets of SDT stress the importance of teachers feeling at least the potential of being good at their jobs. These data show the human desire for competence at work to maintain intrinsic motivation. The way the policy environment does or does not support this need is important to study. A future subtheme on teachers identifying with the profession in a uniquely personal way will unpack a different

dimension of this need. Here, it will become clear how important the nurturing of this psychological need is for teachers. A 12-year veteran middle school teacher at a large urban district, spoke about their sense of purpose and confidence as they approach the work at hand:

> *If I am not in it then who would be that teacher that these kids would have if it wasn't me? So, I feel confident in my abilities, to be able to connect with students. I've been fortunate enough to teach long enough to hear from students that have graduated, so you know, we talk about transformation, and I've had that experience, so I know that this job is important.*

This description is important as it connects the teacher's sense of purpose with the observed outcomes of the work as either aligning to or diverging from that purpose. The teacher being able to clearly see success in "transformation" seems key to their well-being. That feeling of competence is apparent in this description longitudinally and is an important predictor of this teacher's ability to be well in the policy environment. Teachers in the study who spoke about the work from a place of successful purpose realization were among some of the most positive in terms of descriptions of well-being. A participant from a medium-sized rural district in northeastern Oklahoma, also spoke about former students coming back later and affirming the effect the teacher had on their lives:

> *You started getting responses back from kids who had been long gone to college say, 'I'm so happy I paid attention to you when you taught the research paper, because that really helped me get through college. I knew how to do research and I knew how to put the paper together.' Getting those reports back, or people read certain books and things, and you realize that the kids like that and got something from that is very satisfying. I felt like it was my calling.*

Here again is a teacher getting descriptions of success back from former students that connect deeply with their sense of purpose, described here as a "calling." These data further underscore the complexity of the work as metrics of self-efficacy are extensively delayed. Where modern reform efforts position data-driven methodology as a short-term gain concept, these data describe the long-term purpose and relational connection to former students solidifying for teachers how

their work is important. A 14-year veteran of a rural middle school described the negative side of this dynamic and how that interacts with their sense that their work has purpose:

> *I guess is kind of a calling for me and I just trust that I have - that what I put into it will be multiplied, even if it doesn't feel like I'm making a big impact at the time. I don't always necessarily see the fruits of my efforts. If growth in students is slow or I don't always feel successful, I just trust that I'm making a difference, and I know it's really important and needed.*

The feeling that controlling policies, particularly from the state level, were inhibitive to teachers' ability to be competent in their work was voiced by 60% of participants. As a vital component to well-being as outlined in SDT, this is an important finding.

The three dimensions of psychological need as outlined in SDT were valuable lenses through which to analyze the data. It was telling to see the different dimensions of the theory show up organically in the data as teachers spoke candidly about their well-being in the current policy environment. It became clear that humans' need to have autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their work positively correlated with improved well-being perhaps via a deepened quality of intrinsic motivation. That latter phenomenon was less easy to nail down. The following findings in the data will unpack the elusive nature of intrinsic motivation and how it showed up in the data.

Intrinsic motivation. The descriptions of motivation from teachers' experience in their work are important apart from the desire to have them point in any unified direction. A study of teachers' stories that points in a clear and unified direction at every dimension is an attractive but potentially unrealistic idea. As such, the descriptions of teachers' motivation in the current policy environment are diverse. They represent people with an enduring motivation to continue in the work as well as a destroyed resolve to stick with it. The data describe a phenomenon wherein teachers from all experience and well-being levels are experiencing motivation and de-

motivation differently. A participant who has since walked away from the classroom, spoke about a motivation to accept a new role to inform society about the importance of their content area:

> *I feel like I in the last few years, I was just more motivated to like, you know, like I said, one of my reasons for taking this position is that I can help inform the community about what social studies education is.*

Another teacher with solid plans to leave Oklahoma after the current school year, spoke of a decline in motivation in the policy environment due to attacks on their district by state-level policymakers:

> *I have lost a lot of that motivation, and there are a lot of days now where I kind of am not the most excited or motivated about it anymore, and it does get quite challenging this year in particular.*

This teacher characterized the increase in difficulty not from a place of student-related issues, but in the policy arena as strict mandates from the state have “attacked” their school district and created the “trickle-down” quality described earlier. They spoke in a resigned manner about how years of the policy environment have made success realization scarce and challenged their foundational ideals about the work by saying, "I just knew that I could make a difference.” One of the lower reporting participants in terms of well-being spoke more positively of a motivation to continue because of a perceived realization that they are “making a difference in people's lives."

While these participants do not represent the whole sample in terms of their future professional plans, these data outline a complex description of intrinsic motivation and its converse. It would have been nice to see some clearer descriptors of intrinsic motivation, but the concept proved more elusive. Most codes that explicitly mention “motivation” dealt with teachers’ descriptions of the phenomenon in students rather than themselves or colleagues. The

data seem to suggest that student motivation has dipped in the current policy environment with frequent indictments that students "don't care anymore" coming up in various iterations. It is clear this quality interacts negatively with teachers' enjoyment of the work, but it is unclear the extent to which there is a relationship between teacher and student motivation. Most often, teacher descriptions of students' low motivation came from generational differences, COVID-related effects, and lack of support by parents and other outside entities such as technology exposure and general ennui of the day. For application to the theory, it seems the basic psychological needs were supported while teachers had a harder time making heads or tails of their levels of motivation in the work. One could assume the motivation is there due to other responses, but clear descriptions of intrinsic motivation were hard to come by, further solidifying the complex nature of the work and the even more complex descriptive data in a unique and hands-on policy environment from the highest level.

"Teacher" is an Identity

Prior to data collection it seemed the study, based on SIT, would yield data to suggest that teachers experience the policy environment differently based on their belonging in different ideological groups. This did not emerge from the data as I thought it would (Table 2). Instead, it became clear that teachers' identification as members of social, political, and popular groups interacts somewhat with how they describe policy environments as controlling or nurturing, but more so by their membership in the teaching profession itself. It seems that a teacher's desire to belong to the broader professional corps is stronger than their desire to belong to smaller ideological groups, at least where education policy is concerned. A new teacher with a diverse, nontraditional background and path into the work, described the resolve to stick with it against the way the policy environment challenges their stated progressive personal views:

> *I have my moments of fatigue and days where I'm just done and I'm like, 'I'm not coming back'. And I say that in my head, but it's not true because I don't want to do anything else.*

The commitment teachers have to their profession is apparent in the data. It is so apparent that it seems to transcend the negative aspects of the policy environment's interaction with their work. Their assertion that "I am a teacher" as a foundational component of their identity is stronger than I predicted it would be. However, the teacher shortage was another theme expressed in the data. Teacher 22, a 21-year veteran from a large suburban district, spoke about those who have not been able to maintain their same level of resolve in strongly negative terms saying, "The people who are giving up, I have so little respect for them."

"I am a teacher." The level of personal identification teachers feel for their work is strong in the data. Even teachers who did not report any other feelings of religious or spiritual connection to their purpose for the work used terms like "calling" and "meant to" to describe the connection. One teacher described it by saying, even with a slew of negative descriptors of well-being, "I still feel that it's a calling," while another, in a fatigued way spoke on the deep importance they feel in their work saying, "I know that students so desperately need a good teacher, and there's just not that many around anymore." A 5-year veteran of an urban charter school spoke of a decades-long commitment to the work as still very much alive despite frustrating policies saying, "I've always been a teacher, you know, just because of who I am. I've always kind of done it." And Teacher 28 spoke of the post-distance learning rejuvenation of having kids back in buildings saying, "I was so excited about them coming back, you know, because I am one of those people." The connection so many teachers seem to feel between their work and humanity seems to be a powerful predictor of positive well-being but can also turn negative quite directly because of that commitment. An 18-year veteran who retired early due to

descriptions of burnout, became visibly emotional speaking about how the last couple of years in the policy environment potentially accelerated their exit:

> *I think that teachers are called and if you're not called, then you might be in trouble, because it is a thankless job. I'm not a I like I'm not a churchgoing person. I'm not a big religious person, but I do have a communication with, Christ, and I feel like that's what I was supposed to do. And I (starts crying) I have to tell you; I feel guilty about leaving because I am abandoning a sinking ship.*

This confession adds a dimension of complexity to the earlier claim by the sentiment above of low respect for teachers who leave early. It appears there is a high quality of cognitive dissonance for teachers in their decisions to stay or go, particularly because of the personal connection they have as members of the grander teaching profession. A 19-year veteran History teacher from a large urban high school spoke about their career as a foregone conclusion in their life as they wanted to do the work from an early age:

> *I've really loved my career. It's everything I thought it would be. I decided in ninth grade to be a history teacher. And I truly love teaching.*

This "love" of teaching is a quality seen in the data to show deep identification with the profession across interviews. 80% of participants voiced some level of close identification with the work as a component of joy and personhood. The identification they feel for the work seems to interact with their well-being under control by policy as said controls not only inform their work but *who* they feel they are. Affirmations of the work as "calling" and "purpose" were some of the most descriptive of positive well-being. It seems that teachers operating with this compass were experiencing their work and well-being more positively than others. Those who identify from this closely held place of connection to the profession of "teacher" seemed to transcend other elements of their identity.

A middle school English teacher of 5 years from a district in suburban Oklahoma City described a sense of respect from outside the profession as influencing their well-being:

> *I feel like I am in like several circles that like respect teachers. And so, I feel like that does help the job. This is also a different side of the coin this year. Like, I have lots of parents that are very supportive this year and that has helped my job.*

Here we see the importance of the job becoming a negative descriptor of well-being as it is at odds with wages in the policy environment. In this sense, the connection and sense of purpose teachers get from their work backfires as it makes the negative interactions of the policy environment more vexing and acutely pronounced. A relatively positive veteran teacher in a large suburban district described the disconnect between the perception of the outside world with the reality of the work inside their school:

> *Most people do not realize. What it's all about and how difficult it can be. And you know some what a balancing juggling act it can be. And they, you know, see it as, oh well you get we get Christmas vacations and summers off. And that's kind of where their thinking stops. They are just not aware of what the job actually is.*

Another of the most seemingly unfazed participants in the policy environment expressed an energy they derive from aspects of the work that seem to erode the resolve of others with the "importance" of the work as a potential galvanizing agent in their resolve:

> *I know that this job is important. I know it's worth it. I find purpose in it. I personally enjoy the grind.*

They came back around to affirm their personal connection to the greater profession of teaching aside from their previous frustration with public perception saying, "It's just my niche. It's what I was called to do." A 20 year veteran who confirmed they will be leaving at the end of this year, articulated the complex nature of the emotions of connection and potential to walk away from the work in the current policy environment:

> *I believe that I was put on this earth to work with kids, I just, and, and so that's why no matter what I've done in my life, I feel like, being a teacher is something that, I kind of was maybe put on this earth to do, and it kind of permeates all other aspects of my life.*

The data seem to suggest an important quality of belonging germane to SIT. That quality is that teachers identify as teachers before almost any other level of belonging. This identification comes into play more in the next section as it becomes clear that the connection and duty teachers feel to the larger profession is more pronounced than other dimensions of belonging within their identities.

Identification as a teacher matters more. Human identity is a complex and multifaceted thing to study. The concept of intersectionality asserts that different dimensions of a person's identity can be coordinated or at odds with other parts, and all of it wildly dependent on societal systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Boyd & Arnold, 2000; Delpit, 2011). This quality is clear in the data gathered here. While I originally thought socio-political allegiances would interact with people's well-being in the policy environment more than others, it appears their allegiance to the teaching profession was stronger. A participant who described teaching as a prescribed path and not a calling due to parents who were teachers, voiced a quality process of "comfort" in the profession:

> *I've always been somebody who really stays in my comfort zone, and school is what I knew, and teaching is what I knew because of my parents. And I never really gave myself an opportunity to see myself in another profession.*

It could be a coincidence that this person reported the lowest well-being and said repeatedly that they are currently desperate for a way out of the work. It seems their lack of identification with the work at the same level as other participants may predict their lower well-being on a daily basis. Other interviews seem to support a sense that, if they felt more "called" as others do, they may possess a stronger resilience in the face of controlling policies with the potential for higher well-being.

A veteran middle school Social Studies at a large urban charter school, articulated a complex interaction between calling and bandwidth being a person with decades of experience and a deep commitment to the work, but a faltering resolve due to factors within the policy environment completely divorced from their personal views, but exacerbated by the attack on the true work of teaching as they see it:

> *My vocation is social justice...In order to be committed to the activism in your community requires the sacrifice of self for the well-being of the community, but at the same time recognizing that your shoulders can literally and figuratively only carry so much."*

This articulation of the work of teaching as a central component of their identity is important as it puts them at risk of great harm or poised for high well-being, personally. One of the longest-tenured and positively reporting participants (26 years), spoke about trust and how their well-being is connected to their identification as a teacher first and other things second:

> *I think a lot of that struggle. I've been trusted, or at least not mistrusted. 'You're not distrustful of what I'm doing?' I think they also knew I take my existence seriously as a career, right? So, they know I can be trusted with my classroom. But I've also seen other people have a different experience. I've seen people be micromanaged. I've been micromanaged at times."*

This description of the profession as an "existence" is important, particularly from a teacher who reports great resilience and resolve in the face of a policy environment they characterize as "micromanaging." This teacher described the policy environment as diametrically opposed to their personal views throughout the interview process but kept coming back to that quality of "existence" within the grander context of the profession as a galvanizing quality in their work. This will be explored more in the discussion to follow but is as close as this study gets to clear implications for practice in conversations about teacher retention, satisfaction, efficacy, and accountability. Unfortunately, "make every teacher feel as deeply connected to their work as the

positive ones" is a tall order. The seemingly nebulous quality of true belonging within the teaching profession is clearly a strong predictor of how SIT pronounces itself in the data.

The power of work, and connection to a job, that a person finds "truly satisfying" cannot be discounted. The data here suggest that quality, paired with the sense of belonging people feel to the profession as a whole, may compensate for negative feelings about the policy environment. Other data reveal that, while membership to the profession as a close-knit group of people working for common reasons, the policy environment can still institute negative dimensions of the "trickle-down" effect discussed earlier. This effect can create a negative relationship to a teacher's well-being outside their membership in ideological groups *because* of their sense of belonging to the broader professional group. It seems the deep connection people feel to other teachers on their societal "team" becomes malignant when that entire broader profession is challenged. Whereas positive feelings of meaning and satisfaction can be achieved agnostic of a teacher's political affiliation, negative ones can emerge as well.

Everyone is angry. The United States is a country where people experience dissatisfaction with the socio-political dimensions of public life but for opposite reasons. One would think that one side of the political aisle would be happy about the status quo while the other is not. Anecdotally, it seems conservatives are upset about a society quickly becoming too pluralistic and accepting, while the left is upset that it is nowhere near muti-partial and inclusive enough. This peculiar quality was pronounced in the data and seems to underscore the finding that regardless of a teacher's socio-political leanings, they are experiencing dimensions of the policy environment as controlling, rather than nurturing of their well-being.

Table 2 organizes participant demographic data alongside their rank of well-being within the sample and rank on the socio-political spectrum within the sample.

Table 2

Participants Ranked by Described Well-Being

Teacher	School Type	Tenure (years)	Well-Being Rank	Political Rank
1	Urban	20	2.1	4.7
2	Urban	1	1.5	4.8
3	Urban	5	2	4.9
4	Urban	9	2.9	4.6
5	Urban	12	4.8	1
6	Urban	3	2.8	4.5
7	Urban	19	4.1	2.4
8	Urban	19	4.1	2.8
9	Suburban	5	4.6	2.7
10	Suburban	20	0.9	2.3
11	Urban	2	3.1	4.3
12	Suburban	5	4.2	3
13	Suburban	15	3.8	4
14	Rural	33	4.3	0.4
15	Suburban	4	0.4	0
16	Rural	11	0.7	1.5
17	Rural	15	3.6	3.9
18	Urban	5	1	5
19	Urban	26	4.5	3.4
20	Rural	32	2.6	3.8
21	Suburban	14	2.3	3.8
22	Suburban	21	1.1	2.1
23	Suburban	10	0.2	3.1
24	Rural	24	5	0.2
25	Urban	5	0.5	4.2
26	Suburban	25	4.4	2.5
27	Suburban	8	0	2.6
28	Rural	18	0.8	0.9
29	Rural	11	2.5	4.1
30	Urban	4	3	4.1

Note: For participant well-being rankings, five is the highest described well-being of the sample (n=30) with zero representing the lowest based on the criteria of well-being descriptions. Political rank is operationalized as five being the most progressive-describing participant and zero being the most conservative.

With a conservative paradigm in the personal politics of current state leaders at every level, one would naturally expect conservative teachers to feel empowered and safe in the current

policy environment. One of the most politically conservative participants in the sample, was one of the most descriptive of low well-being:

> *Just because you're gay or you think you identify as the opposite sex doesn't mean you're a bad person. I base that off of how you treat people, and so I do avoid pronouns. I just don't say it honestly. I call them by whatever name they give me. That's fine as long as it's not like; one week they're one name and the next week they're not. That's just too much for me. I already have to remember like 140 names. But I do think some of those issues are going to start being more of an issue. It's sad, though, because most of Oklahoma's conservative, it's just the kids that want that different lifestyle are the ones who are speaking up more. I don't think that's going to change anytime soon unless the actual students decide they're going to speak up the other side. I can't imagine the state with Ryan Walters (doing anything about it), it seems like he's going the other way."*

Their characterization of change as unlikely shows a deep resignation to a perpetuation of the status quo. Their points of frustration are clearly within a conservative paradigm, and while *de jure* policies seem to align to their stated values, they are nevertheless stressed and hopeless at the *de facto* level. Another teacher reporting many conservative socio-political mindsets described similar frustrations albeit less specific with more of an omen of quitting:

> *I don't understand these rules. I don't understand. I got to go, and I always thought that I would work - I wouldn't retire until they kicked me out. You know, I felt like they kicked me out. That for me was, 'I don't understand this culture. Understand this world'.*

This second conservative teacher describing their feelings of being badly disillusioned underscores a pervasive feeling of low well-being outside the predictable partisan parameters of the broader political system. A left-of-center leaning teacher, spoke accusingly of the policy environment and its effect on their well-being and intent to stay in the state:

> *If you want a prime example of how government can make or break an education system, I would look to Oklahoma...I have very solid plans to move out of Oklahoma at the end of this year.*

The markers of low well-being here are stark. The first conservative teacher above spoke of growing up in the district where they teach and having deep ties to their school but, under the controlling policy environment, find it impossible to, not only stay at their school, but stay in the

state where they were born and raised. Here we see the controlling policy environment's bearing on their professional life cut deeply into their personal life and future.

A 24-year veteran from a rural middle school was another participant who recorded very conservative views in the data who articulated how someone from their place on the ideological spectrum is still battling elements of the policy environment:

> *I think the tussle between the Republicans and the Democrats in particular, a governor who's stirring up this problem with the vouchers and that kind of thing, I think that puts us all in a little bit of limbo with all of that, not quite sure how that's going to work out and turn out and how it's going to affect the public schools in the long run. And I think people really worry about that...I think they're doing what they think is the popular thing to do, actually, with the people who voted them in. And I think some Republicans are - and I'll tell you this - I am a Republican and I'm a conservative, but I don't agree with our Republican governor on all these school issues. The lambasting that he's given about some of our teachers, and his superintendent also, but I think that they are politicians.*

Here is another conservative teacher upset with conservative policymakers over the way they have "lambasted" teachers and attacked the core of what they believe public schools are. This description is telling as it transcends the political aisle in the name of allegiance to teaching as a profession and public schools as institutions of social support. Ideally, descriptions of social supports like public schools would be decried by conservative voters, but here we see a Republican constituent upset across lines of difference out of a reverent deference to the teaching profession.

This can be a difficult position to put a teacher in as it breeds cognitive dissonance that is apparent in the data. This teacher is semi-retired and spoke a lot of the joy they experience in their small, rural school, but also of the fatigue and growth away from the current generational posture of schools as catalytic in the decision to leave. A centrist participant in the sample (who recorded some of the lowest well-being descriptions) spoke of their view of issues in Oklahoma:

> *As soon as my husband can retire, we're leaving Oklahoma. I'm hoping that I'll be able to hold on. I think he has seven years left. Maybe it's eight. Yes, eight years left. And I'm*

> *hoping that I can manage to stay here in education that long, but I'm not hopeful. It's become a minefield.*

This description illuminates the quality of teacher well-being in the policy environment as low regardless of their position on the socio-political spectrum. This finding is important as it underscores the complexity of teachers' work and the deep connection to their identity the work commands. The way the data on teacher identity diverged from the theorized prediction at the beginning is important as it solidifies the personal connection teachers have to their work in the literature. It is hard to find any single unifying factor amongst the participants other than their job. They span every race, experience level, geographic area, background, and orientation of personal views possible, yet they all spoke about a quality of stress, mistrust, and lack of well-being in the policy environment. While the levels of severity of those qualities certainly exist on a spectrum, they form the only universal trait of the sample. The finding that teachers are not saying, "I am at odds with this policy environment because I don't agree with the politics of it" but seem to be saying, "I am at odds with this policy environment because it is harmful to my work as a teacher" is important to explore. The following findings will explore the levels of severity mentioned above and highlight themes somewhat descriptive of the variation in the extent to which teachers are describing their well-being in the controlling state-level policy environment.

Long Tenure and Controlling Policy

Years of experience is less a predictor of teachers' descriptions of the policy environment as controlling or nurturing but more of higher well-being regardless of how they describe the environment. Veteran teachers did not describe the policy environment as nurturing any more than more novice teachers but did seem to describe its effects on their well-being as less corrosive. A 26-year veteran, who has spent all that time at an urban high school that leads its

district in teacher turnover, described a resolve important to the broader conversation of how a teacher can carve out positive well-being in a policy environment like that described by other teachers above:

> *Over time, you find ways to use things in ways that work for you and your students and still fulfill the mandate or what administrators want to see.*

It seems in these data that a wealth of experience is an important descriptor of higher well-being. With some outliers present, the teachers who spoke of well-being as being higher than others seemed to describe ways to achieve that as harmonious with more years of experience. Teachers described several dimensions of how years of service interact with their well-being. They often spoke of not being unwell themselves but being worried about younger teachers. Descriptions also often deflected descriptors of low well-being onto other teachers in general. There was a clear trend in the data of teachers mentioning retirement and their proximity to it as a predictor of their well-being. They also described their experiences amid the teacher shortage in Oklahoma, their school district, and their buildings as being interactive with their well-being.

Experience is valuable. The longevity of a teaching career comes up in the data, often in a way that somehow predicts a teacher as describing their well-being as high or as an insulative element between them and policies they feel an aversion to. The extent to which it seems teachers develop coping skills and a schema for well-being across their career is apparent. A veteran rural middle school ELA teacher spoke about that dynamic in their description of a career they described as profoundly joyful and meaningful through many tumultuous policy eras:

> *God had placed me there for that reason. And I enjoyed it so much. I enjoyed that age of kids. And, got along with them. We never did have any disciplinary problems and it was just super enjoyable. After the first few initial years when I had to work myself to death, I thought, you know, getting everything ready in the way I wanted it and everything, I became more relaxed and, I became more confident... At my age I wouldn't do anything different with my career right now. I've had a great career. Wonderful. And I'm very thankful for that."*

This combination of praxis and spiritual calling could be a powerful one to predict how a teacher will experience their work. This participant gave some of the highest descriptions of well-being in the data, and this combination must be important in their development of well-being supportive habits. The longest-tenured teacher in the sample of 33 years (with 28 at the same school), described a wealth of experience and passion for the content as important for their well-being:

> *I think if I did not have that passion for the country and its history, I would not have been a teacher this long. People ask me if I teach American history five hours a day, you get bored doing that, and I say no. In my mind, every time the audience is hearing it, many of them, for the first time and that's what makes it fun and interesting for me. I, honestly, in a small way, having never served in the military, see this is my way of serving the country and keeping our stories alive.*

This teacher's passion for the content seems to have a kind of rejuvenating and deeply personal dimension of fulfillment for them. Over three decades of policy tumult, they have been able to maintain a freshness toward the work in a way that must contribute positively to their well-being. The second longest-tenured teacher in the sample, described a similar development of 32 years in the work that has led to their ability to do it for so long and to derive a level of enjoyment that saw them leave the work twice only to return because, according to them, they missed it so much:

> *I've become very politically minded and most of my concerns politically are in education again because that is my life and it's been my life for a long time. I feel that we're not being supported at our state level. Instead of working on and encouraging people to become a teacher, because believe me, I think it's the most wonderful career around. Why would anybody in the current climate that they're experiencing right now, want to become a teacher so that they can be accused of things that aren't happening? And that's not at all what the career is. We have a choice. I'm going to go ahead and say the state superintendent's job is to support public education, and he's done nothing but alienate and make it worse. I feel not at all supported by a legislator or our superintendent. You know, I'm 60 years old. I can walk away, but a young teacher can't, so I can't imagine why anyone would want to become a teacher just so that they can put up with that kind of climate. And that's too bad because it's a great career.*

This description is significant as it explores several dimensions of how a teacher may be able to leverage experience in the development of well-being support in their work. Their description of policy actions from the state superintendent that they see as directly violent toward the teacher's position is important as they immediately put distance between them and the danger, based on their age. The safety they describe by being the age they are and being able to walk away is important as they translate that freedom into being more politically active and advocating for younger teachers.

Their incredulity that a teacher would want to enter the current teaching force in the climate teachers have to work within is important as it portends a collection of characteristics that may be contributing to an exodus from the profession that several teachers in the study mentioned. It was hard to figure out where to position this quote as it touches several of the subthemes due to its comprehensiveness and authenticity. It seems the primary dimension of the description, however, is the safety and agency the teacher feels due to age. A second part of the quote comes up later under the "close to retirement" subtheme as the teacher has a brash "what are they doing to do, fire me?" attitude with respect to the current policy environment. A veteran participant of over 25 years, described their change literacy as a powerful presence in their career which they described as being rife with supported well-being:

> *The politics from the state level. I don't see. They have not affected me at all that I can see. Things would never stay exactly as they are. One thing you can count on is change. I feel like I'm in a really great spot. Things are good and, in my district, things seem to be improving.*

This description comes from a teacher who clearly has developed a thick skin with respect to policies over the years and is describing their well-being as exceptionally high. One may erroneously characterize this teacher as embodying a "head in the sand" posture, but it is clear in

the description that they have developed a strong prediction of change that allows them to adapt to policy environments in a way that nullifies their impact. Different from pure avoidance, there is a grit to their description that sounds more like strength than divestment from reality. One could even characterize their outlook as one as hyper-connected to reality with an agile emotional schema for meeting and working through policy tumult.

The hearty constitution of these "ultra-marathoner" teachers was not without cracks as others described fatigue and doubt about the future alongside descriptions of strength and grit due to experience. A teacher of 19 years in the work, was one of the participants who described their well-being positively, but went a bit dark in this area speaking of their membership to an "old guard" teacher subgroup:

> *It's just made me nervous. I have not thought about leaving or doing something different, but man, if they keep going this way I might need to. Then I don't. I kind of feel like I come from this old school breed. The newer teachers coming to my school; everything is all technology. I don't really like it. I put PowerPoints up and I talk to them, that's what I do. I just noticed talking to the really young teachers I know sound very different. I think I'm part of that old school guard.*

Their back-and-forth description of leaving the work or staying, only to settle on a quality of indifference based on being "old" is telling. The idea that they may be able to weather this season, but that they are certainly feeling their age in a way that may be edging them out of the profession, pedagogically is important as it cuts across the breadth of theoretical foundation of this study. A 21-year veteran, spoke of an elevated level of fatigue due to experience and hinted at some decisions potentially already made in this arena:

> *It gets harder in my life. I can keep it out of the classroom. It's not, it's not what my kids are interested in. There, to be honest with you, they're way more interested in grammar than in politics. But in my life, it gets harder and harder and harder every year. You know, every time something new comes out I will put up with it. It has recently occurred to me that I might not retire as a teacher in Oklahoma. Let's just say that I haven't reached that point yet, but that I have begun to think that I might not retire as a teacher.*

This description is important as it shows, in real time, the pendulum swing between resolve and fatigue in the policy environment. The "every year" quality that was described in a previous subtheme is important over a career of more than two decades as it frustrates the schema of resolve a teacher develops through many years of expertise building. Plainly, if a teacher with this many years and practical experience can reach this level of "doomsday" thought, certainly the policy environment's trickle-down quality is strong and pronounced alongside teacher well-being, currently.

"Not me but others...." Participants spent a lot of time distancing themselves from colleagues in a way that minimized their personal aversion to the policy environment while speaking on behalf of others who are having a challenging time in it. This deflection came up often enough to take notice as it signals a lack of personal connection to decreased well-being in the policy environment but may interact with that well-being via the stress it puts on relationships in the highly connective colleague-to-colleague interactions. Teachers who spoke positively about their well-being often qualified their descriptions by saying that other teachers they know are struggling. A 5-year ELA teacher from a suburban middle school described a complicated dynamic where they feel well-supported and empowered in their work, but live with two teachers having a quite unique experience in the same school district:

> *Both of my roommates are probably looking for their way out of education. Both of them are done with education. I think if there was an open job tomorrow, they would take it. I truly love education and I love what I do as a teacher. Sometimes I feel like it's hard for me to articulate it because I just truly love it. And I don't really know why exactly I love it. I also really am intrigued with helping teachers in the building. Like it makes me really sad to like, see so many teachers leaving the profession. I want to help teachers stay in this profession and not just leave. Like the "remember your 'why'" idea. I want people to truly thrive in this profession and not leave, so I feel like it's a really odd balance especially in our house. Living with two other teachers, two of them are ready to go. One's on year six and one's on year eight.*

The stark difference between this participant's well-being and that of their roommates underscores the complex way in which the policy environment interacts with teachers' well-being and raises questions about how the struggling teachers' low well-being interacts with the higher well-being of other teachers over time. This is particularly important because this participant is in their fifth year of teaching, well behind the experience level of the roommates who are planning to exit the profession. This dynamic creates the potential of a model wherein their high well-being could be explained away by their roommates as "just wait a few more years." The optimism and desire to help other teachers clear in their response is essential to their well-being in the current environment but is sharply at odds with that of those closest to them. Somewhat at odds with the previous finding that experience seems to breed tools with which to support higher well-being, this description has a tinge of erosion that may occur over time for teachers in the policy environment. Additional study could be helpful for understanding the markers of this participant's higher well-being and how they fare over time. A 26-year veteran participant also spoke of other teachers having a harder time with respect to administrator policies:

> *I guess for the most part, they feel like I can be trusted with my classroom. But then I've, you know, I've also seen other people have a different experience. I've seen people be micromanaged.*

Here, this participant attaches the relatively enjoyable experience on their end to the work they have done to build trust but are clearly affected by the negative experience of colleagues. The longest-tenured teacher of the sample (33 years), gave a similar description of a quality of earned latitude different from that of colleagues:

> *I have never gotten pressure to follow a strict pacing guideline, which I hear from other teachers in other schools, which would, drive me crazy. And other teachers echoed this. Now you've got to earn their trust. But within your first year or two there, they know if you're teaching or not.*

This is another description of a teacher with proximity to the experience of colleagues, but maintaining a perception of distance based on how they view their quality of work in the policy environment. This description places an assumption of discernment on administrative staff while assuming teachers who are having an experience of lower well-being somehow "deserve" it due to not doing work at the same standard or others who are given more freedom. This vaguely judgmental posture was present also in the description of an 11-year rural teacher who said:

> *Those of us who strongly believe that students need to be learning during school time, are feeling like we're the minority. And there are a lot of teachers, I don't know if they're making the same money I am, and they're not doing their job.*

Here they seem to attach some of the higher accountability measures that exist in the policy environment to the fault of other teachers who are "not doing their job." This distance seems to be important for this participant as a means of protecting their well-being from that of teachers they perceive as being of lower quality. Two participants with longer tenure than most in the sample, spoke harshly about other teachers they see as not doing a respectable job daily. They both communicated that some of their biggest frustrations at work come from the failings of other teachers to maintain the same standard they hold themselves to. This revealed a complicated dimension to teacher well-being in a policy environment that turns responsibility for the environment on teachers of low quality rather than policymakers with low connection or expertise in the work. Similar to these, a 9-year veteran teacher who recently left the profession spoke of a responsibility to help struggling colleagues with faltering well-being, even to the point of projecting a disingenuous air of high well-being when that quality was nonexistent:

> *I absolutely struggled, a lot and probably more so than I let on to other people too. I tried to be a support system for other teachers and advocate for other teachers, so I always put on like a very strong, you know, facade in front of everybody.*

This description signaled the possibility that this study's qualitative nature may breed a similar quality in other participants. It occurred to me that the kind of folks who sign up for an interview about teacher well-being might be among the more self-determined, emotionally well-resourced teachers of the general professional population. While there were outliers such as a couple with extremely low reported well-being, participants seemed particularly strong and able in the policy environment. The descriptions in this specific area do not solidify a certain posture on this topic but do underscore the diverse way in which teachers experience policies and how they communicate their innermost feelings to others. A participant with exceptionally high self-described well-being still spoke more ruefully about colleagues in other contexts which they theorized might be more difficult than theirs:

> *I feel like I'm actually in a probably have the best position, in my field in the state of Oklahoma. And yet I still have it's still really hard. So. You know one thing when I think about it, because I really do feel like I'm really lucky to work where I work and where I have worked. However, I don't know how other teachers do it in other schools.*

The idea that they realize their position at a large urban magnet program is ideal and their experience is still “really hard” is telling, particularly with how they feel a sense of existential dread with respect to colleagues in other contexts and about those contexts in general. While it seems teachers may be able to reserve markers of high well-being in a specific, localized context, they feel a sense of worry and foreboding about the broader system. This is one reason the definition of a policy environment needs to be broad as the clean effect of enacted policies directly on a teacher’s work is important but is may only describe a fraction of the policy dynamic in Oklahoma. These data suggest controlling policy environments that inhibit the well-being of long-tenured teachers may present even more dire outcomes from the profession broadly in the future. These descriptions, while diverse and elusive, may point to a profound

sense of identity teachers possess as part of the profession and how deeply they hold their work as inextricably linked to their personal well-being.

Worry for the young. The dread present in descriptions above speaking to the way their colleagues, but not they, are experiencing the policy environment was more pronounced when participants with vast experience spoke about future generations. Hints at this dynamic are present in descriptions unpacked above, but need to be focused on specifically to help explain the way policy interacts with teacher well-being. Fear of a future slide into deteriorated conditions, "slippery slope" theorizing, and blanket portending of a bleak future could all weigh on teachers with respect to their work. This sense of dread is well-articulated in the data. A 32-year veteran teacher in a small rural district, described their feelings of dread for future generations of teachers:

> *I can walk away, but a young teacher can't, so I can't imagine why anyone would want to become a teacher just so that they can put up with that kind of climate. And that's too bad because it's a great career.*

This description was common amongst longer-tenured participants. 60% of participants in some way articulated a sense of fear or dread for younger teachers or those thinking about entering the profession. One was "terrified" for their own college-aged child who was thinking of entering the work. Participants were often particularly emotional during these descriptions.

The number of participants who spoke about teaching as an element of their family's heritage was high (55%). Many teachers (12 of those interviews here) seem to get into the profession due to an older relative doing it before them. One participant spoke of their desire to break that chain to spare their child the threat to well-being imposed by a controlling policy environment which was an alarming sentiment. Their description of their current posture of "survival" in the work is also alarming as they said they are 10 years from retirement. A

resignation to 10 more years of the negative experienced outlined is a potentially damaging existence with low well-being. These stories are important particularly as many of them came from veteran participants of 20-30 years in education. One could say any person in a sector for that amount of time may be feeling similar emotions of dread, but it could be an effect of the controlling policy environment on their well-being. The data here suggest the latter.

A 26-year veteran of the same urban high school in Tulsa, spoke about teachers coming up in the current environment in negative terms. Their characterization was closer to that of other participants who see the newer generation of teachers as having lower quality than them. This was a common finding creating both a dread *for* and *because* of future teachers. The negative symbiosis in this dimension is important to articulate as it clearly contributes to how the policy environment is interacting with veteran teachers' well-being:

> *That's a frustration, right, of like why I decided that in my life, to this, to my whole career, to this profession, and I've had these wonderful experiences. But some of the younger people I'm teaching with just don't view it the same way, which is okay. But I don't know that it's helpful for the profession as a whole if people aren't taking it that seriously.*

The descriptions of colleagues' failings interacting negatively with their well-being are hard to ignore in the data. The "frustration" extant in their described experiences due to colleagues not teaching correctly, not holding students accountable, being too dependent on technology, or otherwise deviating from veteran teachers' perceptions of their colleagues is of importance to this study.

The tenets of SIT emerged uniquely in this study as membership in the teaching profession may be a way of safeguarding well-being, even when membership in smaller ideological groups is challenged. This finding shows friction in that experience when it meets the obvious shortcomings in other teachers. Still, the deep connection teachers feel to their craft is

apparent here and is connected to their well-being, as the policy environment may contribute to the failings of other teachers they work with. The fear of the future of the profession and its impact on students is clear in the interview data. The deep connection to the work may worsen their negative feelings toward others as they notice shortcomings cropping up more in newer generations of teachers.

Close to retirement. Teachers also spoke candidly about the concept of retirement. As a personal finance concept, retirement can be seen as a neutral, basic institution in the life of a teacher, but participants here spoke about it more as some sort of cathartic milestone, the proximity of which either galvanizes their will in the policy environment or causes their well-being to falter as it is further down the road than they would like. An 11-year teacher in a rural high school put it plainly in family planning terms saying, “as soon as my husband can retire, we're leaving Oklahoma." A 21-year veteran participant spoke about their recent change of heart with respect to their career that causes them a good deal of mixed feelings:

> *It has recently occurred to me that I might not retire as a teacher in Oklahoma. Let's just say that I haven't reached that point yet, but that I have begun to think that I might not retire as a teacher.*

This description speaks of the cognitive dissonance teachers experience in the policy environment. A teacher who spoke of being deeply committed at one time feeling like they may have to walk away from the work and the state altogether could be particularly harmful to their well-being given their close connection to the work as a point of identity. A 19-year participant from an urban magnet high school spoke of their relationship to the retirement conversation that begins with a spirit of contentment but turns dark as an element of anxiety with the policy environment sets in:

> *If it stays the same like it is right now, I'll be in it until I retire. I've got, like.*

> *14-15 more years or something like that until I retire. If my position is the same like it is now, I would be thrilled to just continue doing that till I retire. But we're kind of all holding our breath and waiting to see if all of this really crazy stuff is really going to be implemented in our classroom.*

The "but" in this description shows an asterisk teachers hold in their plans given the way the policy environment causes them to experience their work and the planning that goes with it. As one of the more positively responding participants, it was surprising to hear this participant seem to predict a dissimilar experience down the road due to policy. The characterization of the environment as "crazy" was a common one in responses that underscores the incredulity teachers are operating within their work. This teacher was also one of the more centrist participants with respect to personal worldview and saw the policy environment as more harmful to their well-being as a teacher instead of their socio-political persuasion. A retired participant with 18 years experience described plans to do it for longer but retired last year as they felt overtaken by elements of the status quo in Oklahoma:

> *I always thought that I wouldn't retire until they kicked me out. You know, I felt like they kicked me out.*

This description plays with the anecdotal definition of being "kicked out" of a school. The former definition seems to connect a formal quality to that concept wherein a school removes a teacher for not being able to do their job well anymore. This teacher pivots on that definition with the latter being one of being ejected based on the environment pushing them out against their will. There seems to be an element of resignation to the former being more palatable as it would be based on a gradual aging out process, whereas the latter was more violent as it seemed to be less natural and more malignant toward the planning they had done.

A 5-year veteran participant from an urban college-prep high school articulated their plans to cut a five-year career off at that point saying, "I have very solid plans to move out of

Oklahoma at the end of this year." Another participant spoke similarly that they are actively looking for a way out of the profession in the strongest "as soon as I can" terms. While intent to leave is not the only important finding in the data, it is one that was salient in the descriptions of many teachers looking at the reality of the present and fear for the future, either personally, or on the behalf of others. These data are important to the research question as further evidence that teachers are broadly incapable of separating work experience due to policy from personal well-being. The ways in which the controlling policy environment, starting at the state level, is imposing itself on their work, seems in the data, to be damaging to their well-being and full of potential implications for practice. Another way this phenomenon emerged in the data was to also describe teachers' thoughts to the concept of teacher shortage in Oklahoma.

Feeling the shortage. Many of the participants mentioned a problem in Oklahoma that has been popular news in the last decade (Farber, 2023; Raymond, 2024; Sinha, 1997). While other states are not immune to a declining teacher corps, Oklahoma, at least anecdotally in teachers' descriptions, is particularly emblematic of a state where no one wants to teach anymore and those who do are underqualified. Participants in this study expressed at least some interaction the shortage has had with their well-being and usually connect the shortage to issues at the policy level. A 32-year veteran of a rural high school, spoke about the shortage in a way that protects them from recourse from policy enforcers, but does not speak well for policy efficacy in a systemic sense:

> *I was kind of afraid, thinking, am I going to get caught...But, it's a teacher shortage going on. 'I'm old. If you want to fire me because I tell a kid I'll pray for them or, you know, something like that, I guess, you know, bring it on.' That's kind of where I am with it because I have already retired and come back. So, a little, little less uncomfortable for me or a little 'I don't care attitude'. If that's what's going to cost me my job."*

The resignation in their tone here signals a critical lack of well-being due to control. While they present as galvanized and strong in the face of control, the passivity with respect to being fully engaged in the work is troubling.

A 14-year veteran participant became quite emotional talking about the way the teacher shortage has affected their work in a small suburban district. Their response blends the sense of connection and duty they feel to the work with a realistic lack of bandwidth to continue in the policy environment:

> *I think in some ways the teacher shortage has made me want to stay even more. Because I know that students so desperately need a good teacher, and there's just not that many around anymore...I think people leave and it makes people think about leaving because you can't – like, there's just so much spilling out that you can't hold it together. Or at one point where you think, 'oh, I can stay. I can make it better at some point.' You realize you can't – that it's just too much."*

This description speaks of a clash between the identity of a teacher who feels a commitment to the work and importance in its impact on students, and the reality of well-being in the policy environment. The characterization of "just so much spilling out" hearkens to a chaotic deluge of policy effects that make the ability to continue in the work in a successful, bought-in way seemingly impossible. The "too much" refrain speaks to a tipping point teachers either feel they have reached or is in the future with respect to their work and the work as a social system. That tipping point seems to be described as a negative element to well-being in the current environment. This sense of duty is present in a generally positive, veteran participant's description of the shortage and how it drives their resolve to continue in the work:

> *If not me, then who? There's weeks, there's months, with this job, and trying to balance that with life and home, is really tough. But I think it comes back to that, "If I'm not in it, then who would be that teacher that these kids would have if it wasn't me?"*

One of the only times this teacher got negative in their description was in this area. They spoke about the emergence of Teach for America (TFA) as an alternative pipeline designed to stem the

tide of teachers leaving the profession and how they perceived the impact of that movement on teacher quality broadly in the profession:

> *That (TFA) was the first time I really remember hearing people talk about teaching not as a long-term career but teaching as a short-term step to something else. And from there, we've seen the shortage grow more severe. This is a statewide problem of teaching just not being something that people are signing on for, in part because of salaries and mandates. I just don't see that many. I see fewer people now who seem to take it seriously as a career who are doing it for a little while.*

Their characterization of the policy environment as driving a quality issue where teachers no longer "take it seriously" was another common sentiment among veteran participants. The connection they feel to teaching as a part of who they are seemed at odds with their realistic view that teachers are getting scarcer in the Oklahoma policy environment. A 33-year veteran high school History teacher spoke about the pressure on teachers increasing from the policy level as a contributing factor to what they have seen over a 30+ year career in the work:

> *I'm not the only long-term teacher who will say that progressively things have gotten harder to be a teacher. That guidelines and mandates, whether from federal or state level, have progressively gotten more burdensome for teachers. More frustrating, time consuming, and just have taken away from the positives of teaching, which no doubt plays a big role in our teacher shortage.*

This description, from one of the more conservative teachers in the sample, is damning of the policy environment as a catalyst in the shortage as it connects that phenomenon to qualities of "burden," "frustration," and teachers feeling "consumed." This participant spoke at length about the stress caused on them from the low quality and inability in colleagues and then connected those stressors to the way the policy environment has become more "burdensome" for those teachers as well as those they described as more "long-term."

Teachers spoke about a litany of other factors in their daily work lives that contribute to poor levels of well-being. Issues stemming from post-pandemic student behavior, smartphone use, personal hardship, generational ennui, and a decrease in emphasis on academic discipline

came up often as interacting with their well-being. These data are not included as none of these areas relate directly to the research question, but there was a clear sense from participants that "kids are addicted to their phones and vaping but we are worried about library books and CRT." The sentiment that policies are misaligned from the true needs of teachers and society seemed to be a heavy deterrent to positive well-being. Additional study into the way generational changes and daily classroom hardship has changed in recent years to bear down more negatively on teacher well-being may be important moving forward.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

The data here suggest teaching in Oklahoma may be in a beleaguered state. In the U.S. more broadly students are not performing well (FutureEd, 2023; Harris & Sass, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), their teachers are leaving the profession at an untenable rate (Farber, 2023; Sun et al., 2017), and the schools find themselves amid the politics of a nation divided (Hunter, 1991; Kozlowski, 2015; Lawn et al., 2012; Zimmerman, 2022). These findings suggest developments in the diversity and depth of research on the intersection of controlling policy and teacher well-being, may be important work for school leaders and education policymakers in Oklahoma and elsewhere.

Discussion of Findings

The interviews conducted here suggest teacher well-being is in constant motion, and a controlling state-level policy environment is, to some degree, potentially eroding it. The complexity of this problem is important to discuss alongside the data. Teachers' allergy for irrelevance with respect to how and by whom policy is drafted is crucial to the dialogue. The extent to which policy is localized in its management to be seen by teachers as worth their time begs more discussion. The importance of principals' work in shielding teacher well-being from controlling state-level policy, and the potential inability of them to do so in the "trickle-down" of the controlling policy environment, are warring concepts with many implications for practice. The data also suggest elevating student connection as an essential predictor of how a policy will interact with teacher well-being may be an important practice and that the future of profession in Oklahoma is potentially in jeopardy under a controlling state policy paradigm.

Teaching is Complex and Personal

A clear refrain in these data is that the well-being of teachers is a Byzantine concept with qualitative study likely to yield as many questions as answers. U.S. society is in a state of constant change and upheaval and the students society sends to schools bear that complexity. Similarly, teachers are complex individuals as are policymakers and the reasons behind the governing decisions they make. The needs of a democracy like ours in the times we are living in are complex, too. Historians suggest the Industrial Revolution instigated a broad brush of education policy wherein administrative progressivists aimed for the Lancasterian model of schools (Rury, 2006, 2013; Tyack et al., 1984). In this model, schools would grow to look like the factories they aimed to send dutiful workers to. The decades of difficulty schools have gone through trying to stuff the square peg of the human experience in the round hole of an education system designed toward homogeneity and hegemony should not be a surprise (Goldstein, 2015; Rury, 2006, 2013). Educational sociologists suggest that the work of industry, that is to input uniform elements with an imperative output of broad, focused similarity, no matter what, may be at odds with the complexity of public schools (FutureEd, 2023; Tyack et al., 1984; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Zimmerman, 2022).

Schools, as microcosms of society (Bećirović & Bešlija, 2021; Dewey, 2001; Jessop, 1996; Tyack, 2007) are complicated, and conversations about the well-being of those who work in them is important to understand them as the profound human innate in them may never yield a uniform product (Berliner & Biddle, 1997; Zimmerman, 2022). While debate about whether it should or not will not be settled by this study, a summary of the findings here suggests that this complexity exists and begs a policymaking posture that at least recognizes that quality. Any system created to grow dynamism and positive change in this area at scale would surely be

valuable but may be be difficult to find. Intersectional thought suggests that not only are people diverse in broad terms, but they are diverse in terms that zig and zag across one another creating an array of human experience infinitely diverse in the ways it dictates interactions between people (Griffin-Smith, 2021; Lubberts, 2023; Tajfel, 1974; Tatum, 2004). Teachers describing their work as having "so much to do" or a "heavy plate" may be speaking of that complexity with their well-being inextricably linked to those descriptions. Furthermore, teachers who strain to find meaning in systems that fail to honor that quality of intersectionality may say things that accuse the current moment of being "too much" or that they lack the ability to "do it anymore."

A teacher expressing their work as a deeply intrinsic element of their identity is infusing the work with an important dimension of human connection that scholars have suggested is important for that work to be successful (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Griffin-Smith, 2021; Rivera Maulucci, 2013; Tatum, 2004). The inability teachers seem to have to "turn it off" or "not take work home with me" is speaking of a quality of work so inextricably connected to their sense of self that they both stand poised to "change the world" but also risk injuring their well-being if not allowed to do so by policy (Barni et al., 2019; Crocker, 2003; hooks, 1994). The identity of "teacher" that emerged in these data seems to transcend that of other self-identified markers in the study like, "liberal," "Christian," "Republican," "country girl," or "socialist." The responses from teachers were closely related across so many other lines of difference that it is clear teachers feel an allegiance to the work beyond others they may hold. Data show that teachers who can use the policy environment to their advantage can feel volition as they run in step toward a quality of self-determination. Teachers who feel at odds with the policy environment may run the risk of an opposite existence rife with angst, dread, and an existential longing for a

different experience at some level (Bandura, 1993; Barni et al., 2019; Farber, 2023; Wronowski & Urick, 2019).

Irrelevance Harms Well-Being

policies that attempt broad interaction with teachers' work, which is perceived as irrelevant or disconnected from a practically authentic view of what they "should be doing," will be seen as controlling and effect teachers' well-being negatively. The disconnect many teachers described, where policies were created in an "ivory tower" far removed from the daily work they do, is important to remember. Teachers who broadly voiced displeasure with their current work experience often did so because of some element of disconnection they notice with respect to how what they *have to* do interacts with what they, as professionals, feel they *should* be doing. The theory may describe this negative quality as an aberration of self-determination. It is a system's imposition upon human will, divorced from any connection to a quality of trust, respect, or intrinsic value. At best, it seems to turn a teacher into a resigned sycophant, toeing a line to maintain an arbitrary quality of hierarchy. At middling, it sends teachers out of the profession in because, inextricably sewn into the fabric of their identity, the status quo has become harmful and untenable. At worst it leaves people, like five in the sample, severely injured, "traumatized," and plagued by feelings of guilt, incompletion, and failure. If the work had been making toasters or engineering nuclear waste repositories the sense of failure would be bad enough. Since the work is that of human development (Bandura, 1993; Deci et al., 1994; Maddux & Stanley, 1986; Zhao et al., 2021), the sense of failure seems crushing.

Localized Connection Nurtures Well-Being

Conversely, the data seem to describe an environment where the extent to which policymakers and the policies they draft are contextually localized may predict a positive effect

on teacher well-being. Public school, as our largest and most expensive system of social support in the United States (Lopez, 2011; Rhodes, 2015; Rury, 2013; Tyack et al., 1984), is staffed by people who seem to fervently desire localization and decentralization of control. This descriptive phenomenon is politically mismatched, but in the stories of teachers, the reasoning behind it makes sense.

The data do not suggest that teachers resisted top-down policy actions on any sort of theoretical or ideological ground, but on a purely practical one. The sentiment that "they should spend a day in my classroom" holds with it a weight of importance as, logically speaking, if a policy had within it a wealth of knowledge of the experience of its point of application, it stands to reason it would align to the appropriate resources, process, and outcome at all levels of the dynamic. In this way, practical policies that involve the expertise of the frontline practitioners tasked with executing it may, according to the data, nurture teacher well-being by connecting the intrinsic motivation derived from self-determination with their identity as a competent professional (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Tajfel, 1974).

It would be foolhardy to assume that any worker in any industry would, over time, continue to submit to policies disconnected from the reality of their work (Bandura, 1993; Herman et al., 2018; Maddux & Stanley, 1986). In the complex work of public schooling, it seems foolish and potentially violent to assume teachers should do that. Not only do connected policies seem to validate teachers' sense of professional credibility, but to also have the benefit of breeding the positive outcomes teachers desire. This quality, often described in the data as what teachers "should be doing" may vary by location, age level, and content area, but the unifying nature of connection to practical daily work remains strong. Whether or not decentralization (a traditionally conservative political concept) aligns with the belief system of

teachers (a traditionally progressive position of social support) seems immaterial. The refrain from the data is that policies must be relevant to earn teachers' respect and create motivation to implement it, and that their well-being may hinge on that quality.

Principals' Work May or May Not be Enough

The role of principal seems to operationalize this localized quality in the data. In terms of authoritative human capital described by teachers as positively affecting their well-being, supportive principals were the most important. Teachers communicated a desire to connect with students and colleagues in their buildings as a positive element in the support of well-being, but spoke of principal support similarly, which aligns to previous literature on teacher satisfaction suggesting principals have extremely important roles in supporting teachers' well-being (Castro, 2023; Ford et al., 2019; Torres, 2016).

Teachers in this study routinely spoke about principals using terms like "love," "support," and "has our back" to describe the importance of the relationship. In instances where that support was nonexistent or troubled, teachers spoke about how the building-level policy environment was damaging. The teachers who seemed to be the least well in terms of how they experienced their work were those who, either currently or in the past, suffered from an unsupportive principal. It was clear in teachers' descriptions that a principal who "has our back" contributed to a nurturing environment, where one who seemed to align to controlling policy actions from higher levels, or to outward pressures like parent or student whims, interacted negatively with their well-being. The affection teachers communicated with respect to supporting local leadership seems to arise particularly because of that local quality.

The cascade of teachers' affection for policies based on its proximity to their work is clear in the data. On these grounds, it makes sense that the principal is seen as a more relevant

and related leadership dimension, and district and state-level leaders are seen as more "out of touch" and less likely to contribute positively to teachers' well-being. In the "relatedness" dimension of SDT, it seems the localized context of the principal's role helps teachers feel connected to them, know them well, and be in genuine daily relationship with them. Participants spoke about the proximity of a policy agent as an important predictor of how they experience their leadership as positive or negative. Descriptions about principals who "know" them personally based on longitudinal relationships were the most connected to higher well-being.

The data, while confirming that supportive leadership can compensate for controlling policies from higher levels, also affirm the reality that the "trickle-down" down effect of a policy environment is often strong enough to overpower principals' efforts. The trickle-down effect was echoed by many participants explicitly, often exonerating building-level leadership saying "that is what they have to do" in the policy environment they are faced with. The "hands tied" quality teachers observed is important as it shows a helplessness pervasive in the data and potentially predictive of teachers having low well-being. In this kind of environment, often the best a teacher can hope to do is ignore or avoid the effects of policies with their work in a way that allows them some dimension of protection from the policies but can also breed feelings of disillusionment thereby harming their well-being.

Generally, it seems teachers prefer to be fully cognizant in their work, but having daily tasks dictated by policies they are trying to ignore or avoid thinking about, seems to challenge that preference, and could be disruptive to the development of high well-being. The data suggest that teachers, by and large, are able to persist in an environment they describe as being broken, and accelerating in its deterioration. The frequent claim that things are getting worse in recent years begs the question about whether that will continue, and data on teacher turnover in

Oklahoma (Farber, 2023; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Raymond, 2024) seem to hint at a reckoning on the horizon if policy, and its cascading effect, cannot better align itself to the relevant work of teachers. The work of principals in this environment seems to be particularly important, but may be insufficient next to decades of controlling state-level policy.

Student Connection as the Primary Goal

When speaking about what they enjoy and find meaningful in their work, nearly every participant described some level of student connection and support as primarily important. It is clear in the data that teacher well-being is affected positively by the extent to which they are allowed to "just teach" which they seem to define as spending time connecting with and meeting the needs of students. It seems their well-being is most effected by policy in the ways it either supports positive teacher-student relationship or inhibits it. Some of the warmest interview moments were when teachers described specific moments of joy found in small, personal moments of connection with students. In terms of academic achievement, teachers did not mention meeting broad metric improvements or seeing things like college acceptance go up. Instead, they discussed "light bulb" or "getting it" moments with students, particularly with those who previously struggled, as being meaningful for their well-being. Many of them shared specific stories going back decades where students struggled, then succeeded, and came back as adults to tell them how important being in their class had been to them. Participants described students telling them of college success based on things they taught, or life skills and disciplines made easier by some concept they learned as deeply important to their well-being and sense of self. Others spoke of personal connections such as one teacher who spoke of "leg wrestling" their students and those students coming back years later to speak about how that strange component of a day made a lasting connective impact on how they viewed school.

It seems policymakers would do well to realize that student connection is a primary lever in protecting teacher well-being by engaging their will to do their work from a place of intrinsic motivation and draft policies to support that. Participants described the feeling that recent years have seen external pressures from the policy environment, particularly disconnected policies demands and lack of support from parents, as harming their well-being as it forces them to focus on things other than student connection and development. This phenomenon is easy to predict within the theoretical framework of SDT and SIT. Clearly, we see work that is, at the same time and in equal measures, deeply personal and highly controlled. It is no surprise that given the practical truths in those the theory and the risk associated with their interaction, teachers seem unwell, and the profession may be suffering in the policy environment.

Deteriorating Elements of Public Education

The extent to which deteriorating well-being cut through a spectrum of diametrically opposed personal beliefs, socio-political worldviews, ages of participants, and certification types and is an important finding. One universal theme in the data is that "something is different," "things are getting worse," "it doesn't feel the same," or "the is the first time in my career that I have..." Some participants have already walked away in the last year or two, while others have concrete plans to exit at the end of this year or very soon. Others are "going down with a sinking ship" in their mind or are employing highly adaptive skills of personal strength and avoidance to cope with the status quo. Regardless of the place they are in, that negative interaction with well-being was common in responses, particularly when the quality of that work is connected to their sense of belonging to the broader professional group and the sense of duty that comes with it.

Implications for Practice

With potentially dark days ahead, implications for how these data may be used are important. School leaders, trustees, board chairs, policymakers, executives, parents, corporate partners, faith leaders, and nonprofit philanthropists must look to empirical research to figure out ways to stave off the reality of oblivion that seems to be waiting for schools in Oklahoma (Castro, 2023; Farber, 2023; García-Álvarez et al., 2021). This study does not propose to be that in and of itself but holds the weight of qualitative data from which knowledge of what is happening to teaching as a profession can be constructed. These implications come with the asterisk that all desires to enact sweeping changes to teachers' work in schools must be a careful, painstaking process of trial and error, regardless of ways in which the policy environment and marketplace impose themselves on the work of true, humanizing school improvement.

Make Policy Locally Relevant

One of the clearest trends in the data is that policies that teachers see as top-down, irrelevant, and irrespective of their work are likely to interact negatively with their well-being and should be interrogated in such terms. As such, attempts at policy should be made by people who have immediate, practical knowledge of the context and work experience it intends to impose its will upon, and do so with a reverence for that local context. Anything that seems to contradict that relevance may harm well-being, falter, and ultimately work against the outcomes it seeks.

Leverage Teachers' Humanity in Building Policies

The best way for a policymaker to ensure that quality of local relevance is present in the policy is to ensure that it is developed to some degree by teachers doing the work in that context. If possible, policies should emerge from those teachers' authentic concerns and expertise in an

earnest attempt to fix problems as they see them. If the 30 teachers who participated in this study are any generalizable sample, teachers in the United States care about students, and other than an extreme minority of outliers, always have students' best interest at the top of their minds. It seems policies should begin with trust in and collaboration with real teachers, the humanity they bring to their work, the concerns that humanity raises, and honest attempts to enact change via the support of teachers' well-being.

If You Are Going to Fight, Fight for Relationship

A close friend, colleague, and mentor of mine of over a decade told me that, with her own children, a rule she has is to only fight for connection – all other fights will injure and work against the goal of both parties. From a policy standpoint, the data here show that the biggest concern of teachers is a lack of time and resources to do this with their students and colleagues. Knowing what we know about what theoretically grows mastery and intrinsic motivation in humans of all ages and types (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Power & Goodnough, 2019; Roth et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2021), relational connection is an essential prerequisite to closing achievement gaps, building collective efficacy, and moving the needles that need to be moved in schools.

Give It Time

In David Tyack's and Larry Hansot's 1995 book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia* they unpack a century of school reform as one in which schools have never had the chance to just "be." Written before the NCLB era, their work was found to be precisely prophetic as the following two decades would confirm many of their predictions and see the complexity of the issues they raised intensify. The neoliberal marketplace norms of modern American society demand school reform efforts work quickly, cost little, and produce uniformly one-dimensional results (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Labaree, 2007; J. M. Smith & Kovacs, 2011; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The

human-centric work of schools is often at odds with these demands as teachers languish with initiative fatigue and experience friction with new policies, programs, mandates, gadgets, personnel upheaval, and disequilibrium. If the data here are any guide, policy in modern U.S. schools need to be given time to work, including capacity for human, diverse metrics of success. The concept of success should include intersectional criteria and be given long swathes of time for implementation with support for the people implementing the policy to build capacity, grow bandwidth, and have confidence the resources needed to see the policy through will be there.

Future Study

The "start" this study claims is nothing without continued work in this area as there are many things left unclear or incomplete. Future study will be crucial to understand how teachers experience their work with respect to policy. To fully grasp an understanding of those goals, it will be important to incorporate every conceivable theory, methodology, and design to make that happen. To that end, it is important here to outline some logical places for the literature to go as the implications listed above will need more data to solidify their importance as relevant in the context outlined.

Teacher Well-Being and Student Achievement

It is unclear how many states with laws designed to control teachers' curricular decisions along political lines experience low student achievement. It is even more unclear what relationship, if any, may exist between such policies and teachers' wellness, burnout, and feelings of professional fulfillment. Quantitative work on how teacher well-being corresponds to student outcomes will be relevant to this work. For better or worse, the cultural currency of school policy is the extent to which a policy breeds quantitative student achievement improvement. In a desire to imagine another way, it is important to galvanize that movement by

showing legitimate connections between these "softer" policies and the "hard" data of school improvement.

Rigidly positivist work on connecting well-being to student test scores, attendance improvement, and high school graduation rates could legitimize the research in a way that propels the work forward. Similar work on more elusive concepts like happiness (Carlsen, 2018; Zapata-Lamana et al., 2021), trust (Adams, 2013; Forsyth et al., 2011; Gray & Summers, 2016; Torres, 2016), and social capital (Beyer, 2022; Leana & Pil, 2006) have been instrumental in carving out human qualities in less human areas of research. For this work to be seen as more solid in the future, its connection to a more positivist paradigm will be important.

Long-Tenured Teachers' Habits of Resilience

A 2020 ESPN expose on a 60-year veteran teacher and coach in Barnsdall, Oklahoma made national waves in the dialogue of teaching, coaching, and workplace resilience in general (Miller, 2020). Joe Gilbert began his work at Barnsdall in 1954 and never left until his death later in 2020 at the age of 87. When asked how he was able to continue getting up in the morning to do the work after so many years, he simply said "I've always liked it." This simple statement holds important knowledge on the concept of teacher well-being. I was at a conference recently speaking with a researcher from Columbia Teachers College and told her Coach Gilbert's story. She was dazzled and intrigued by the "I've always liked it" concept as a thing to study empirically.

The average career tenure of teachers in this study was over 13 years. In a state hemorrhaging teachers to the extent Oklahoma is (Beaman et al., 2023; Farber, 2023; Raymond, 2024) that is an important thing to look at. As I spoke to teacher after teacher of 15, 20, 25, and 30 years or more, it became clear that they possess qualities with respect to having, growing,

maintaining, and protecting well-being potentially different than more novice teachers. While Coach Gilbert is an extreme outlier with so much changing in the education landscape since he started in 1954, the teachers I spoke with in this study illuminated some important dimensions of mental, emotional, and professional resilience that could be important for a qualitative or mixed-methods methodology to unpack.

How Policy Environments Emerge Over Time

One concept in this study apt to cause confusion, questions, and dialogue is the definition of a "policy environment" as different from specific policy eras or singular policies themselves. A type of study that could clarify this concept would be to examine how a policy environment develops over time and how the various levels of policy and its effects within an environment interact with one another, and with other variables. This study looks at that by examining the interaction between the environment and teacher well-being. The gestation of a policy environment, the primary drivers of the creation of one, and the complex thicket of issues within and around one could be important to investigate.

Teacher Humanization Theory

I originally, noticing a gap in theory, set out to work on a new theory specifically focusing on something called "teacher humanization." Incorporating SDT, Neo-Marxism, Ethical Humanism, and Critical Theory, the idea was to create a new explanation for the phenomenon of how a teacher's being interacts with their work. This project was abandoned at 45,000 words as there seemed to be no end in sight. The literature review alone was hard to nail down as it kept growing tentacles and reaching into other areas of research. The goal to exhaustively synthesize the research on teacher history, efficacy, professional habits, results, burnout, turnover/retention, school typology, foundational ideals, and other topics is important work from which this study

grew. This study was originally a small part of that larger work, but the larger work is still a goal. While the theories mentioned above, as well as others on work motivation, human relationships, and workplace characteristics in a variety of sectors, provide robust explanations of how teachers may experience their work, due to the complexity of teaching, the depth of issues affecting the work, and the urgency with which answers and explanations are needed, it is important to explore new explanations germane to those issues. It is in that spirit that this theory, as well as subsequent empirical studies, should be prioritized moving forward.

Contributions

Chapter III reviewed the literature on how policies have interacted with teachers' work in different policy eras. It reviewed studies on attempts to control teachers' work in the name of curricular alignment and quality (Shelton, 1978; T. M. Smith & Rowley, 2005); the Common Core era and the interactions policies had with teachers work during that time (Matlock et al., 2016; Saeki et al., 2015; Swars & Chestnutt, 2016); No Child Left Behind (NCLB) movement and the profound impact made on the work of teachers for two decades (Borkowski & Sneed, 2006; Selwyn, 2007; Sun et al., 2017); policy modalities that have attempted to shift pedagogical methods at various times in history (Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Seller & Woody, 1989; Zúñiga et al., 2011); sociocultural controls (Goldstein, 2015; Kozlowski, 2015; Rowan, 1990; Zúñiga et al., 2011); and the scant work done on teacher-well being and policy being (Acton & Glasgow, 2020; Chan et al., 2021; Farley & Chamberlain, 2021; García-Álvarez et al., 2021).

That review points to a particular gap this study hopes to fill. Furthermore, this study hopes to add to existing literature on teacher satisfaction, burnout, retention, and identity in a way that moves the dialogue closer to a full picture of who teachers are, what they do daily, and how where that work is happening interacts with how they are experiencing that work. A primary

contribution of this work is the theoretical framework through which it views teacher well-being and policy.

Literature Gap

There is enough existing research on the interplay between the environment teachers work in and student achievement (Chetty et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006) to demand new literature on those concepts. Also, educational research with a conceptual understanding of self-determination and the relationship between the nurturing of humans' psychological needs and their levels of intrinsic motivation in their work (Deci & Ryan, 2014) is growing generating important explanations. There have been studies conducted on teachers as professionals (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rury, 2006; Tyack & Hansot, 1982), how that translates to student achievement (Chetty et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ford & Forsyth, 2021), how self-determination (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Roth et al., 2007) infuses a work environment with importantly supportive elements, and there is a bit of research on how policy patterns interact with the work of teachers (Burkholder, 2015; Krebs, 2022; Zimmerman, 2022). What is missing is a specific, empirical look at the well-being of teachers in the controlling post-COVID policy environment, and how that environment is interacting with their well-being via their self-determination and social identities as teachers.

Theoretical Intersection

This work fills that gap in multiple ways. First, a theoretical framework positioning SDT and SIT as equally important explanatory vehicles for how teacher well-being may be shaped in the post-COVID era may be an important addition to the literature. While some research exists on teaching and self-determination theory, less exists that is based on descriptions of teachers' work and that holds in equal importance the identities of teachers as they pertain to their

belonging to the profession. The current era needs explanations that meet the challenges of the post-COVID society. It may be that existing conceptual frameworks are superficial to fully understand the profound importance of teaching as a labor sector, the crucial nature of the intrinsic motivation extant in SDT, and the necessary inclusion of teacher identity in the study of their work. The dimension of who teachers are as evidenced by how their well-being is faring amid their work in the current policy environment is largely unstudied and will be unpacked below.

Study of What Teachers Do

For the body of educational research on the post-pandemic environment, this study may contribute by providing important descriptive evidence on the complex work of teachers and its potential relationship with their well-being in the current policy environment. As an empirical rationale for an expansive, responsive political posture in the leadership of social support systems, this work could prove useful. The evidence in this study supports that teachers' work is complex and highly personal. Research exists on teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993; Barni et al., 2019; Goddard et al., 2004; Herman et al., 2018), satisfaction (Ingersoll, 2001; Ma & MacMillan, 1999; Monahan et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2021), retention/turnover (Ingersoll, 2001, 2003; Torres, 2016; Wronowski & Urick, 2019), quality (Borman & Kimball, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Johnson et al., 2020), and preparation (Chetty et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). These studies tangentially apply to this work but are not sufficiently specific to how policy interacts with teachers' well-being. While these topics focus on the conceptualization of well-being, they are often studied in isolation and take a superficial posture toward teacher identity. They tend to theoretically focus on the work as less driven by

the human dimensions of their experience but as data points to correlate or not correlate with hard school improvement data.

Concepts of burnout and well-being are growing more popular but are often quantitative and explained more in terms of student outcomes than as teachers as complex human beings themselves. Studies on how teachers fare across lines of difference (Bećirović & Bešlija, 2021; Delpit, 2006, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006), in different types of schools (Davis & Heller, 2019; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Torres, 2016), and as products of different preparation approaches (Dover, 2022; Kraft, Matthew A. & Lyon, Melissa Arnold, n.d.; Partelow, Lisette, 2019), all help show teaching to be important field of study, but the composite of teachers' work as complex in relationship with their identities is absent from the literature.

Study of Who Teachers Are

Literature on the complexity of diverse student populations and what is needed from teachers, parents, and society to help them, particularly those from historically disenfranchised groups, succeed in 21st-century schools is extensive (Delpit, 2011; Lareau, 2011; S. M. Lawrence & Tatum, 1997). Less clear in the literature is any picture of who teachers are, why they make the decisions they make, and how the decisions made and forced upon them by a policy environment guide those decisions. It is foolish to continue beating the bushes for data to explain new ways to approach school improvement without focusing more squarely on the teacher's role. To do that, it seems important to not just discuss how to get them to be intrinsically motivated, or even the relationships they have and how they interact with their work, but the ways in which teachers belong and are motivated with respect to the biomes of rules, regulations, mandates, and debates attempting to have a say their work. This study moves research forward by providing explanations, straight from the stories of real teachers, of how

generalizable data about teachers' authentic experiences can guide policies. Without a view to understand the identity of "this is who I am," it is possible that conventional wisdom about how to motivate teachers will be superficial.

Study of Where Teachers Work

Expanding the scholarly definition of the policy environment in which schools exist to include informal, localized dimensions as well as formal, state-level policy may be important in future research to incorporate an expansive posture toward the complex ideological space in which schools exist. The incorporation of multiple dimensions in the definition of social phenomena may prove useful in working toward a stronger explanation of how their different components interact. Study has been done on how a single policy or even an era of policy has interacted with student outcomes (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Simmons, 2014; Wronowski & Urick, 2019) and data on teachers leaving the profession (Ingersoll, 2001, 2003; Sun et al., 2017). Some qualitative data have been compiled to explain any connections that emerge, but scholarship—using qualitative methods—to unpack the vastly diverse ways in which teachers experience not just a single policy, but a kind of unique environment that emerges from various dimensions of a policy in society, is important to the literature.

It is possible that existing definitions of the conditions in which teachers work are not as multi-dimensional as they need to be to fully understand teachers' well-being because of them. This study may not "prove" or "solidify" any sociological or anthropological laws with respect to people and their work, but it is a start. The stories of these teachers, once captured, if built upon as a genre of study that holds their work as complex as well as the environments in which they work as equally so, there may be a germ of importance with respect to stemming the tide of teachers experiencing trauma and leaving the work.

Limitations and Delimitations

While this study may be important in the literature of teacher well-being, policy implications for teachers' work, and a more detailed understanding of how these phenomena interact with their identity, it may be limited by its middling sample size (n = 30) and localized Oklahoma context. It may also struggle to achieve broad generalizable authority to some extent because of the highly individualized quality of teacher identity and how it may interact with their self-determination and well-being. Furthermore, it very well could fail to establish any concrete causal definition between variables because of its narrow focus on purely how teachers describe their self-determination and identity. The qualitative design, while empirically sound in its methodology, may be criticized from quantitative purists for being interpretivist and transgressive against the positivist research posture (Alpert, 1939; Comte et al., 2009; Comte & Lenzer, 1998).

By failing to explore the research question in any sort of correlational, quantitative way, criticism that any findings are potentially tainted by a host of subjective factors, not least of which, the post-positivist position that my own identity, habits, and mindsets as the interviewer and author may skew the data. Lastly, this study may also be seen as inconclusive in a singular direction or implication for practice. The idea that a teacher's well-being will be eroded in a controlling state policy could be up for debate based on the data. Any desire to glean a clear read vis a vis any tacit hypothesis may prove impossible and quixotic in implementation.

The sample size, while modest, is common with respect to qualitative research. Though a mere 30 people were interviewed, they generated many hours and hundreds of pages of descriptive data that are invaluable to the literature. Oklahoma, though a narrow, localized setting, is an important state to study with respect to how policies interact with teachers' well-

being. One participant, on their way out of the state at year's end, mentioned that Oklahoma could be a case study in how a government can destroy public schools. This assertion is important as Oklahoma is part of a cadre of states with a similar political posture to schools. It is possible that results here will be generalizable to those states and others who jump on board in the coming years. While positivists could argue against the qualitative methodology, the nature of the research still holds the potential to contribute to the literature (Blakely, 2013; Geertz, 1983; Habermas, 1983; Jessop, 1996). Its design probed profoundly personal, subjective phenomena, and while future quantitative study may be possible and necessary, this early work, to tease out a discussion of how a policy environment interacts with a teacher's psychology and orientation to their working identity is a kind of work best suited for qualitative inquiry (Aurini et al., 2016; Reeves et al., 2008; Thunberg & Arnell, 2022).

Closing

In the summer of 2023, I sat for a virtual interview for a national study on how school leaders were approaching teacher wellness in the post-pandemic era. The interview was an hour, and the researcher was scholarly and thorough with questions formed around theory on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993). I am unsure what became of that study, though the researcher said it was part of a growing part of literature with significant grant funding behind it. One participant in this study, a new teacher at a large urban magnet middle school, mused that mine was the fifth study they had participated in on "teacher well-being" in the last year, though they were encouraged that mine included an interview instead of just asking participants to respond to surveys emailed to them. Another participant, a rural veteran high school English teacher, sent me a study they had participated in about the effect of a virtual, COVID lockdown-era teacher "poetry community" on those teacher's well-being and practice (Donovan et al., 2024). In

January of this year, I attended the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition (DCSC) annual convening in Los Angeles and concepts of teacher "well-being", "wellness", "care", and "sustainability" were thick in breakout session titles, materials, and the general dialogue among school leaders from across the country. As part of the conference, I visited a middle school site within a larger charter network in north L.A. An executive with the charter network was our tour guide, but the dialogue with the school's assistant principal was the most meaningful. With the executive and majority of attendees clamoring for ideas on data-driven practices that raise MAP scores, and quantitative evidence that their methodology leads to 4-year college matriculation, the AP wanted to talk more about his relationships with teachers, how he sees his role in caring for their well-being, and the ways in which removing control of their work wherever possible may translate to gains for students in the classroom. When speaking with a panel of the school's veteran teachers (many over 10 years with advanced degrees), they wanted to speak less about the systems and processes of a day, and more about what their school and network does to ensure they "have what they need" and are "seen as professionals" who have worth and deserve dignity.

My job managing teachers over the last eight years has confirmed that the only way to do this work is with an acute view of the humanity of teachers and that it must be preserved at all cost. I have found it disturbing that this seems to be a foreign and revolutionary idea in professional circles. The view that, for student achievement gaps to close, teachers must be controlled, managed, and paved over, is one insidious to any ethic of care and damaging to any goal for student achievement and self-actualization. It is often demoralizing to sit in professional settings and hear school leaders and policy agents talk about teaching as a profession. Often the descriptions are reminiscent of petulant line cooks with little ability or agency in their work. Conversations are usually about how to streamline greater control, operationalize stricter

sanctions, and further homogenize practice toward the tenets of any number of expensive frameworks of the school reform industry.

A sociological study in 1963 suggested that parents' experiences of dominance and subservience in their work may predict how they raise their children (Kohn, 1963). This finding seems valuable for its implications regarding the teacher-student dynamic in schools. More than 60 years later we, as the management class of the western world, still attempt to use workers like teachers as expendable material in the greater efficiency of industry. Decades of only small, superficial attempts at humanizing teachers in their work had the public school movement in dire shape before the pandemic with it now teetering on the brink of oblivion (Castro, 2023; Farber, 2023; Sun et al., 2017; Wiggan et al., 2021). That oblivion will not be staved off by meek, symptomatic remedies within the broader malignant system. Something new and radical is needed and the scholarly trend outlined above, to which this study aims to contribute, brings hope. To this end may we look to the bicentennial-era wisdom of authoritative educational socialists who, many decades ago, realized and articulated the need for drastic change for the salvation of the teacher workforce to be realized:

> *We cannot move forward through the band-aid remedies of liberal educational reform. The people of the United States do not need a doctor for the moribund capitalist order: we need an undertaker.*
>
> —Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*

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Appendix A: Interview Questions and Prompts

Foundational

1. What do you teach, how long have you been teaching, and what has that career looked like? Why did you get into this work in the first place?
2. What gets you up in the morning to keep doing it?
3. What is the purpose of a public school in your opinion?
4. Do you feel like the people making school policies share that definition or have a different one?

Working experience

1. What do you like about your work?
2. What gives you frustration or difficulty in your work?
3. What makes it harder for you to do your work as a teacher?
4. What makes it easier for you to do your work?
5. What policies over the years have made your work easier or harder?

Post-COVID years

1. How would you describe your work as a teacher over the past few years?
2. How do you feel about policies coming out about teaching and schools over the same period of time?
3. There have been a lot of policy shifts coming out of the state legislature over the last few years. Have those had any effect on your work?
4. How have you felt about the state of education in Oklahoma over the last few years?
5. Are policies emerging MEETING or COMPOUNDING COVID issues like achievement gaps, low motivation, and interrupted social/emotional development?

6. If things stay exactly the same, how do you feel about the future of your work in Oklahoma?
7. If you were in charge of education policy in Oklahoma, what would you keep and change?

Appendix B: *A Priori* Codes with Occurrence Quantity

Description of Tag	Occurrence Qty.
Description of conservative personal world view	25
Description of liberal personal world view	36
Description of centrist personal world view	24
Description of membership in social or political group influencing teaching	3
Description of membership in social or political group influencing well-being in relationship to teaching	5
Description of feelings about a political leader (president, governor, superintendent, senator, representative, school board member)	12
Description of rural school setting	5
Description of suburban school setting	6
Description of urban school setting	5
Description of feelings about policies based on geographical context	2
Description of becoming a teacher to make a difference in the world or society	42
Description of becoming a teacher to help students	67
Description of becoming a teacher to be a part of something bigger than oneself	3
Description of becoming a teacher because someone they know was/is one	12
Description of policy environment affecting what they can and cannot teach in terms of content	14
Description of policy environment affecting what they can and cannot say in response to student need or interest	13
Description of policy environment affecting the congruence of their ideals and lived experience	3
Description of policy environment affecting their motivation to go above and beyond	7
Description of policy environment affecting their ability to do their job well	33
Description of policy environment affecting their ability to help students as they feel is needed	12
Description of policy environment affecting the likelihood of them meeting mandated standards and requirements	3
Description of policy environment affecting their ability to avoid sanctions	4
Description of policy environment affecting their relationships with colleagues	3
Description of policy environment affecting their connection to their work	18
Description of policy environment affecting their connection to teaching as a profession	25

Description of policy environment affecting their relationship with non-teaching friends or relatives	2
Description of stories of other teachers in the policy environment getting into trouble affecting their well-being	5
Description of intent to stay in the profession based on the policy environment	32
Description of the state of their well-being in the policy environment	45
Description of hesitance or fear of doing interview	3
Description of the last several years in school being hard in relationship to previous years	65
Description of the last several years being different than when they were in school	23

Appendix C: Emergent Codes with Occurrence Quantity

Description of Tag	Occurrence Qty.
Any mention of school accreditation decisions stemming from policy	2
Use of the word "afraid" or any form	55
Mention of education being a sole positive force and driver in some students' lives	43
Description of their work losing meaning as it has become easier to get same job with lower qualifications	12
Accusation of policy agents attempting to attack the concept of public education	43
Description of professional development in negative terms	12
Description of their work as being characterized by fighting, battling, or struggling in some way	45
Use of the word "broken" or any form	3
Description of building-level policies and policy agents and supportive	34
Description of a sense of pressure or other negative extrinsic force	44
Description of past education policy or political eras	12
Description of a sense that things cannot continue the way they are	32
Description of the pandemic as increasing issues of chronic absenteeism in schools	13
Description of the pandemic as negatively affecting student behavior in school	28
Description of the pandemic as negatively affecting predictable systems and effective operations of schools	5
Description of the pandemic as negatively affecting student ability in school	21
Description of the pandemic as negatively affecting student mental health	13
Description of the pandemic as negatively affecting student motivation and buy in in school	15
Description of the pandemic as negatively affecting student social skills and being in a community/society	17
Description of the pandemic as increasing technological dependency amongst students	15
Description of the pandemic as making people more afraid or anxious	5
Description of the pandemic as affecting broad aspects of pedagogy as a discipline	4
Description of the pandemic as positively affecting technological availability and literacy	3
Description of the pandemic as negatively affecting student ability to fulfill their own needs	2
Use of the word "crazy" or any form	8
Use of the word "culture" or any form within the broader world	9
Use of the word "culture" or any form within the school	12

Description of the current era as not open, free, accommodating, or inclusive enough of student needs/identity	15
Description of the current era as too open, free, accommodating, or inclusive of student needs/identity	14
Use of the word "dangerous" or any form	13
Description of work during covid as being as good as it possibly could have been	8
Description of a resigned feeling that something has changed with difficulty naming what has changed	12
Description of district-level policies and policy agents and supportive	15
Use of the word "diversity" or any form	13
Description of purpose of education in terms of escaping at-risk dimensions of life	8
Description of purpose of education in terms of right, wrong, character, or integrity	9
Description of purpose of education in terms of society, voting, civic duty, or patriotism	15
Description of purpose of education to instill relevant, usable skills	38
Description of purpose of education in terms of helping society function	27
Description of purpose of education as a means to achieve more than thought possible or move up	21
Description of purpose of education as a means to gain academic skills	47
Use of the word "eggshells" in any way	9
Descriptions of emotions of envy at teachers in other states	8
Use of the word "equal" or any form	12
Use of the word "exhausted" or any form	19
Description of a fear of getting into trouble or suffering sanction	8
Description of any policy effect on their sense of being able to work from and within their own will	27
Description of a school environment where it seems kids are deferred to by admin and parents	17
Description of anger, rage, or other hot negative emotion	54
Description of fear, anxiety, or other cold negative emotion	65
Description of any feeling of confusion or lack of clarity on policy	32
Description of recent years of teaching being different than before covid in positive or negative terms	35
Descriptions of blanket emotions of hopelessness, disillusionment, or lack of institutional trust (hands tied)	31
Description of emotions of embarrassment, guilt, or shame at some facet of their job	4
Description of anxiety or unease about the near, middle, or far future	32
Description of emotions of fear not for themselves but for younger teachers	14
Description of any feeling of fear, danger, being scared, or anxious	55

Descriptions of fear of having legal action taken against them for lack of policy adherence	5
Description of some authentic level of trauma caused by the daily operations of teaching	7
Description of a sense of weakness, being exposed, or otherwise vulnerable in some way	9
Use of the word "fine" or any form	4
Use of the word "fired" or any form	3
Description of dynamic wherein a teacher is forced to be dishonest in order to balance student need and policy demands	3
Description of a perception that a policy is enacted purely for a school or system to save money	12
Use of the word "frustration" or any form	32
Description of resigned sentiment without qualifying what is hard	12
Affinity for helping students who are high needs in some way, title 1, urban	16
Description of the current era as not helping kids who are advanced and successful in the traditional sense	27
Use of the word "home" or any form	45
Description of necessity to avoid, ignore, or otherwise be less connected to experiences of policy	32
Use of the word "impossible" or any form	12
Description of foundational inspiration by a teacher from their own school experience	15
Description of job demands that change often and warrant ongoing adaptation	17
Description of isolation from policy interaction because of isolation from boss or other superior	12
Description of isolation from policy interaction because of the content they teach	15
Description of isolation from policy interaction because of where or what their school is	3
Description of isolation from policy interaction because of years as a teacher/age	8
Description of a tangible plan to leave the state and/or profession	4
Use of the word "invest" or any form	3
Description of teaching as work that can feel isolating or lonely	6
Description of job as being one that is fun or otherwise recreational and joyful	32
Assertion that they would like to just teach instead of worrying about various other concerns	32
Description of a perception policy agents do not have the best interests of kids in mind	26
Description of work culture with low choice to exercise freedom and discernment	15
Use of the term "lightbulb" or any form	22

Use of the word "listen" or any form	9
Description of a desire to see power taken from state and given back to local bureaus of control	15
Use of the word "love" or any form	33
Description of passion and personal meaning for subject area	12
Description of passion and personal meaning for engaging with students	33
Description of a joy derived from connecting with colleagues	23
Description of a joy derived from connecting with students	48
Description of the current era as not helping kids who are behind or need more intensive help	22
Use of the word "mad" or any form	48
Use of the word "minefield" in any way	8
Description of policy values as misaligned from authentic daily work of teachers	43
Description of policy values as misaligned from their person values and beliefs	32
Description of low trust in policy agents who are not from education as a sector	41
Description of a dread that they will get their boss, school, and/or district in trouble	5
Description of a perception that policy agents do not view them as a professional	11
Description of policy and experience around the 2018 teacher walkout for higher pay in Oklahoma	7
Use of the word "overwhelmed" or any form	25
Description of a policy quality that is negative but they have come to expect	14
Description of a belief that a policy agent is operating from a place of personal agenda	12
Description of policy as being part of a short-term interest dimension with low likelihood of longevity	13
Description of a need to engage in acts that are inauthentic and superficial in order to fulfill an arbitrary system requirement	21
Description of any policy as being perceived to be reactive or "knee jerk" in its creation	14
Description of a belief that policy agents should spend time working a school	28
Description of a policy that is meeting post covid needs of students and teachers	4
Mention of any dimension of policy around alternative or emergency certification or teacher preparation	9
Mention of any dimension of House Bill 1775 or CRT legislation	21
Mention of any dimension of policy around issues related to student gender and sexual identity	8

Mention of any dimension of policy around library media, book choices, textbooks, or curriculum	12
Mention of any dimension of policy around parental rights, mandatory reporting, or communication	17
Mention of any dimension of policy around professional development for teachers	13
Mention of any dimension of policy around special education, IEP, 504, or differentiation	15
Mention of any dimension of policy around teacher compensation, raises, or benefits	7
Mention of any dimension of policy around high-stakes, standardized testing (OCCT (Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test), OSTP, EOI, ACT, SAT, MAP)	21
Mention of any dimension of policy around school vouchers or private school tax credits	8
Description of a policy that is not meeting post covid needs of students and teachers	23
Description of frustration in political actions associated with teaching	41
Description of a belief that policy agents have low trust in teachers	21
Description of a need for policy that prioritizes building teacher quality and efficacy	12
Description of a need for policy that prioritizes teacher voice and expertise	31
Mention of work and its interaction with role as a parent of any kind	4
Use of the word "relationship" or any form	56
Use of the word "rewarding" or any form	21
Use of the word "ridiculous" or any form	17
Use of the term "role model" in any form	13
Mention of State Superintendent Ryan Walters by name or role	8
Use of the word "sad" or any form	45
Use of the word "scared" or any form	31
Description of systemic dynamic wherein schools are being asked to do more than traditional school tasks	21
Description of a need for policy that prioritizes schools as safe places for students and teachers	12
Description of their role as some form of student advocate	29
Mention of needed change happening more slowly than they would like	20
Description of building social/emotional learning as an important dimension of their work	12
Descriptions of stress related to administrator traits or activities	8
Descriptions of stress specifically related to having to do things one does not believe in or feel connection to	44
Descriptions of stress related to colleague traits or activities	23
Descriptions of stress specifically related to having too much to do at any given time	41

Descriptions of stress specifically related to having to do things above and beyond realistic job descriptors	32
Descriptions of stress related to poor communication from admin or other authority systems	21
Descriptions of stress related to having to do more or do things differently for special education students	19
Descriptions of stress specifically related to large class sizes	7
Descriptions of stress related to news coverage of political, social, and educational issues	12
Descriptions of stress related to students' parents' traits or activities	31
Descriptions of stress related to political agents' traits or activities	21
Descriptions of stress specifically related to student apathy or not caring	18
Descriptions of stress related to unideal student behavior	42
Descriptions of stress specifically related to students' disparate levels of motivation in school	21
Descriptions of stress specifically related to student phone use	12
Descriptions of stress related to colleague turnover in a school or more broadly	17
Description of a situation wherein they achieve sustainability due to having more experience	12
Description of a situation wherein they achieve sustainability due to relationships with colleagues and students	9
Description of a situation wherein they achieve sustainability due to a role change that was more amenable	3
Description of a situation wherein they achieve sustainability due to feeling like they are succeeding	4
Description of a situation wherein they achieve sustainability due to support form internal or external agents	2
Descriptions of teachers as people who were characteristically successful in school as students	8
Mention of a broad teacher shortage in Oklahoma	28
Description of policy as connected to extreme examples and not what most teachers are doing in their school	8
Descriptions of teachers as people who are characteristically rule followers	5
Description of a quality of work that seems to utilize the teacher to fulfill student needs traditional to parents	21
Assertion that teachers should not push their personal views on students	14
Descriptions of teaching as a calling from some manner of higher power	8
Description of a sense of duty and responsibility to teach	39
Descriptions of stress specifically related to the influx of greater technological dependency in education	16
Use of the word "tightrope" in any way	4

Description of any policy effect as being a waste of time or otherwise not worthwhile	31
Sees policies trickling down from state level to building and classroom level practice	26
Use of the word "trust" or any form	27
Description of their work and well-being as largely unaffected by policy dimensions	4
Use of the word "union" or any mention of a teachers' union	3
Use of the term "well-rounded" or any form	15
Description of a helplessness that they want to leave but cannot	8

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research
University of Oklahoma

You are invited to participate in research about teachers in Oklahoma and how they are experiencing the post-COVID environment and the policies that are creating that environment.

If you agree to participate, you will sit for an interview lasting between 60-90 minutes about your experiences in the classroom, your school, and Oklahoma. I will record your responses, transcribe what you say, and use the transcript, along with the responses of dozens of other teachers, to generate some explanations of how you and others are experiencing your work during this time. Your information (name or school) will not be shared with anyone other than myself.

The primary risk with this study is that with audio or video recorded data collection via tools like Zoom and Google Meet (which may be used as necessary), there is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and the statements you made could become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office. Interviews will be transcribed using an AI-based software platform called Trint. Trint does retain transcription documents to improve the operations of their AI (Artificial Intelligence) platform.

Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be confidential. While the primary research investigator will know your identity, your name and school name will be kept confidential at every level.

We might share your de-identified data with other researchers or use it in future research without obtaining additional permission from you. Even if this occurs, it will still be confidential with no names shared. Online data collection platforms may be used as video conferencing software becomes necessary.

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you agree to being quoted directly, without the use of your name? ___ Yes ___No
Do you consent to audio recording? ___ Yes___ No
Do you consent to video recording? ___ Yes___ No

Your audio or video records may be used in university research reports unless you tell me not to do this.

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? ___Yes ___ No
Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason.

If you have questions about this research, please contact:

Primary Investigator: Dan Hahn at Daniel.S.Hahn-1@ou.edu
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Dan Hamlin at daniel_hamlin@ou.edu

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

Do you agree to participate in this research? ___Yes ___No

Finally, would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed? _____ (note response)

Date of interview: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: January 05, 2024 **IRB#:** 16754

Principal Investigator: Daniel Stephen Hahn

Approval Date: 01/05/2024

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Policy environments and psychological well-being: A qualitative inquiry of English and Humanities teachers' post-COVID experiences

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board