Preserving the educator’s morale in the workplace: Three Ontario principals’ and two Ontario teachers’ perspectives

By

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Abstract

This qualitative study presents data from five interviews to offer an understanding of workplace realities that impact the Ontario educator’s morale by asking the following research question:  

*From the perspectives of three Ontario principals and two Ontario teachers, what are the contributors to the demoralization of Ontario educators?* Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer’s work *The Progress principle: Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work* (2011) is the lens through which the teacher’s “inner work life,” or morale as it is named in this study, is examined in relation to the teacher’s perception that his or her work is meaningful. Five veteran educators identified the following constructs as demoralizing to the Ontario educator: the current hiring processes for school boards; the “us versus them” stance perpetuated by educator unions; the frequency of Ministry and school board initiatives; and the perceived erosion of the teacher’s professional identity. The discussion and analysis that follows demonstrates that morale is often an under-valued and “imperceptible” phenomenon with strength to cripple any enterprise not attuned to its value.

*Key words: demoralization, meaningful work, professional identity*
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classrooms and why their morale matters to the students in their care. Scott, you have been my loving partner in all of life, through thick and thin. Thank you for clearing the way for me to complete this degree. You have set the bar for me for what it means to live life with integrity and robust faith. *Soli Deo Gloria.*
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Why are we bothering?” The teacher seated in front of me had summarized the central concern for my interest in the significance of the educator’s morale as the primary impetus for progress in education. Why do we bother to teach? It is a good question; a question that elicits answers that morph with endless variations depending on the educator’s perceptions at different points in his or her career. It is a question of purpose and motivation. When all is well, the rewards and reasons are readily retrieved. When purpose and motivation are threatened, even lacking, it becomes a difficult and sometimes painful question to answer. However, it is worthwhile and necessary to wade into the murky waters of our collective teaching purpose to where the answers to that question might be found.

Santoro (2011) has stated, “Difficult times in a profession provide an opportunity to articulate what is fundamental to the work” (p. 3). Those times when purpose and motivation to teach are questioned provide important space to re-examine why we as educators bother to teach, especially if the organizational climate challenges our collective will to do good work.

Leithwood and McAdie (2007) identified that while every stakeholder in education, from parents to administrators to the public, has a “shared responsibility” to ensure the successful learning of all our students, “what teachers do mediates the effects of almost all such contributions” (p. 42). What teachers do counts the most for the overall impact on the student, and this impact relies on the teacher’s “motivations, capacities, and the conditions under which they work” (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007, p. 42). This study offers insight into the Ontario educator’s motivation to teach in relation to the inner capacity to engage in workplace realities that affect his or her morale by asking the following question: From the perspectives of three Ontario principals and two Ontario teachers, what are the contributors to the demoralization of Ontario educators?
The recent revelation of the “culture of fear” that resides within Canada’s largest school board, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), has revealed an organizational climate that has many educators shaking their heads in dismay and asking, “Why are we bothering?” Liz Sandals, Ontario’s Minister of Education, has said that the “dysfunction at Canada’s largest school board is getting ‘dangerously close’ to the classroom, threatening to hurt teacher morale and undermine student achievement” (Howlett, 2015). Certainly, these difficult times for the TDSB have publicly placed the issue of the educator’s “morale” front and centre to the concern for progress in education in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

Why am I concerned about the demoralization of educators? It has always been important to me to know why I do what I do. It matters to me that what I do makes a difference for others. Without the big picture—the “why”—in place, the effort required to achieve progress in the day to day seems almost pointless. As a result, it affects me to see teachers disillusioned, cynical, and resigned to go through the motions because the “why” they started off with in teacher’s college is no longer sufficient to carry them through the trenches of full time teaching. I understand how these disillusioned teachers have reached that place, and this study is not intended to belittle or simplify the struggles and disappointments good teachers will experience in their careers. Teaching is a costly human endeavour that takes a toll on teachers, publicly and privately. I bring to this study sensitivity to the reality that some excellent, committed, engaged teachers have indeed given their all and have not gotten back what they deserved.

What allows me to understand the challenges of the teaching environment is the benefit of having taught for seven years at a British and an American school. This experience has given me helpful understanding of the complexities of the school context and the demands placed on teachers. I have experienced ideal support structures in a school as well as difficult and tense
structures that were destructive. I have collaborated well with teachers, and I have been surprised by my own resistance to collaboration. I have been an inspired teacher, and I have been a de-motivated teacher. The struggle for robust morale as a teacher has been a personal struggle for me, too. However, I do know what it feels like to work in a teaching environment where creativity, collaboration, and a strong sense of collective purpose has shaped the school climate and culture. Once this kind of “team” collegiality has been experienced, anything less is truly disheartening. I also believe it is the teachers’ collective morale, whether positive or negative, that has direct impact on what happens in the classroom.

Peter Senge, Senior Lecturer in Leadership and Sustainability at the MIT Sloan School of Management, developed the concept of the learning organization. He wrote:

When you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative. It becomes quite clear that, for many, their experiences as part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit. (*The Fifth Discipline*, 1990, p. 13-14)

I have experienced wonderful teaching teams that fostered a collective belief that our work as teachers was meaningful and worth the effort in spite of outside stressors. These teams established a standard for how I understand what happens when good teachers work together to do “good” teaching for the good of their students. Santoro (2011) has called the teacher’s perception of doing good work as yielding the “moral rewards of teaching” which happens when the teacher believes “they are doing what is right in terms of one’s students, the teaching profession, and themselves” (p. 2). I have also experienced challenging administration that cauterized the lifeblood of collegial teacher teams because of toxic, inhibiting practices and decisions made at the leadership level. My research on what contributes to the demoralization of
the Ontario educator comes from a personal conviction that the key to positive outcomes for our students’ futures—academically, socially, and emotionally—lies in the quality of the interpersonal relationships daily at play in the educator’s workplace.

Amabile and Kramer (2011) stated: “As inner work life goes, so goes the company” (p. 3). In my research, I consider the concept of “inner work life” to be synonymous with “morale.” I believe that morale, whether positive or negative, is like the rudder on the monstrous ship called Education. A small, physical rudder sets in motion the direction of the mighty ship—submerged, unnoticed, and often taken for granted to be doing what it’s meant to do. Morale is much like the ship’s rudder. The educator’s morale is also submerged, mostly unnoticed, and presumed to be functioning as well as it needs to be to get the job done. Make no mistake: the educator’s morale drives and guides his or her everyday working life, engagement with students and colleagues, and commitment to his or her growth and development as teachers. No matter where in the school board’s organizational structure the educator is working, that educator’s morale is subject to policies that often rate the business of school more important than the people in the schools. The quality of the teacher’s morale determines the certainty of the progress sought after and achieved at all levels of the education world.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perspectives of three Ontario principals and two Ontario teachers as to the identifiable contributors to teacher demoralization in the current context of education in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Particular attention was given to how the school’s contextual elements shape the teacher’s understanding of meaningful work and how these perceptions impact their morale. The purpose for examining the educator’s perception of meaningful work as related to morale was to understand if the educator’s belief
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that their work was meaningful or worthwhile actually preserved their morale in spite of negative organizational cultures identified within the local school or wider education climate.

The Challenge for Teachers

Job satisfaction amongst teachers in the US has fallen from 65% to 38% from 2008 to 2012 (Fullan and Langworthy, 2013). In their book, On Common Ground, DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) defined the “resignation” that characterizes many educators as the “intellectual and emotional state in which educators believe that their individual and collective actions cannot improve teaching and learning, particularly given the large and serious problems that affect the lives of far too many students and their families” (p. 163). Amabile and Kramer (2011) observed that “repeated insults to inner work life, even small ones, can jeopardize the entire enterprise” in any workplace (p. 65). A 2013 “State of the Global Workplace Report” conducted by Gallup described three types of employees: engaged, not engaged, and actively disengaged (p. 17). The “not engaged” employee is putting in time and “essentially checked out” (p. 17). The “actively disengaged” employee is purposefully inhibiting the progress of his or her workplace. According to Gallup’s research in Canada, 70% of Canadian employees are unengaged at their work and 14% are actively disengaged (2013).

A 2006 COMPAS Report to the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) stated that “the majority of teachers report being really stressed at work on a frequent basis” with “13% really stressed all the time” and “45% feel really stressed a few times a week” (p. 10). These statistics become all the more concerning when compared to stress levels experienced by the general public which range from “7% all the time” and “29% for a few times a week” (COMPAS, 2006). Canadian teachers are, unquestionably, more stressed than the average Canadian employee. According to the Alberta Teacher’s Association (2013) which compared 2,500 Alberta teachers
to 25,000 working Canadians, the Alberta teachers “exhibit high work overload, high work-family conflict and are significantly less likely to have any forms of workplace flexibility” (as cited in Froese-Germain, 2014, p. 4). Given that we spend most of our adult life at work, it is not hard to imagine the significance job satisfaction is to the wellbeing of the individual employee, like the teacher, in relation to the success of the organization. Given the overwhelming economic, social and political challenges of our employment world today, it is not surprising that “resignation” is a viable option for teachers who grow frustrated trying to make a difference, no matter how small, in their workplaces. And given that small, repeated insults are frequent at any workplace, it is not far-fetched that the “entire enterprise” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p.65) of education is regularly jeopardized.

Teaching is a demanding profession with a significantly “emotional” component that comes from the teacher’s degree of personal investment in their everyday work (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009 in Schutz & Lee, 2014; Chang, 2009). Statistics tell us that about 50% of new teachers will leave the profession within their first five years of teaching (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). Researchers have decried the serious loss of emerging expertise and the waste of human capital this attrition rate creates (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). The temptation could be to blame “the system.” Not enough resources available. Too much paperwork. How can we “reach every student” when they are cutting back on educational assistants? These are but a sampling of candid statements I heard from teachers at my practicums over two years in the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). Certainly there are problems with “the system,” and this study has highlighted some of these problems. However, as Michael Fullan stated in the collaborative work of DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005), “Each of us is the system; there is no chicken and
Understanding what demoralization looks like for the educator is a critical part of understanding what it takes to keep good teachers in “the system.” If each teacher “is” the system, then each of us bears a responsibility to seek out a clearer understanding of how teachers answer the question, “Why are we bothering?”

**Definitions**

In the three sections that follow, I discuss how I chose to use the terms “morale,” “demoralization,” and “meaningful work” in this study.

**Morale**

Amabile and Kramer (2011) addressed the powerful concept of the inner work life in their book, *The Progress Principle: Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work*. Their definition of “inner work life” is that it is “the confluence of perceptions, emotions, and motivations that individuals experience as they react to and make sense of the events of their workday” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 20). Teachers work an average of 50 to 55 hours per week (Froese-Germain, 2014, p. 2). Teachers also work about 10 to 20 extra hours “outside of regular school hours” resulting in “stress and exhaustion” which leads to “high rates of absenteeism and burnout” (Naylor & White, 2010, in Froese-Germain, 2014, p. 2). The many hours teachers spend doing their work amounts to significant personal investment that strongly connects the teacher’s experience of inner work life to their “day-to-day sense of [themselves] at work” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 22). For the purpose of this study, I have considered morale to mean the inner work life of the teacher. Morale is, therefore, the teacher’s perception that their work is worthwhile and they are effective at that work; it is the teacher’s experience of positive and fulfilling emotions from their work; and morale is the teacher’s motivation to engage consistently and willingly in his or her daily work in the classroom.
Demoralization

Santoro (2011) offered a helpful understanding of demoralization and distinguished this experience from burnout. According to Santoro (2011), “burnout” occurs when a teacher does not have the “personal resources” to “meet the challenge of the difficulties presented by the work” (p. 3). What distinguishes burnout from demoralization is that the experience of the latter is less about the individual teacher’s attributes and more about the fact that because of “consistent and persistent frustrations,” the teacher feels that he or she can “no longer…do good work or teach ‘right’” (Santoro, 2011, p. 3). The degree to which the teacher feels that she cannot do good work determines the degree to which she feels demoralized in her work. For the purpose of this study, I have used Santoro’s (2011) definition of demoralization: Demoralization is the “process of continually being frustrated in one’s pursuit of good teaching” (p. 17).

Meaningful work

Amabile and Kramer (2011) made important statements about the impact of meaningful work on inner work life, or morale, of any employee working in any organization. They stated “the single most powerful” factor that shapes the inner work life of any employee is “progress in meaningful work” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 77). When discussing the importance of motivation at work, Amabile and Kramer (2011) have written, “as long as the work is meaningful, managers do not have to spend time coming up with ways to motivate people to do that work” (p. 35). The possible correlation between “progress in meaningful work” and the state of the teacher’s morale surfaced an important consideration for my research: how does the teacher’s conceptualization of his/her work as meaningful or worthwhile affect his/her commitment to teach in the midst of demoralizing realities in his/her workplace? For the purpose of this study, the term “meaningful work” was understood as that part of the work that produces
an identifiable, satisfying sense for the teacher in big and small ways and contributes to what they believe is “progress” in education.

**Research Question and Methodology**

The central question this study addressed is the following:

*From the perspectives of three Ontario principals and two Ontario teachers, what are the contributors to the demoralization of Ontario educators?*

The exploration of the above question required an understanding of the following components:

1. What makes teaching meaningful work?
2. What supports, strengthens and protects the “inner work life” of Ontario educators?

Using qualitative research methodology, I analysed data collected from interviews with three principals and two teachers to address these research questions.

**Theoretical Framework**

I have chosen to use the theoretical framework of Amabile & Kramer’s work (2011) which they called the “progress principle.” These researchers defined the “progress principle” as “of all the positive events that influence inner work life [morale], the single most powerful is progress in meaningful work” (2011, p. 76-7). Their study looked at 12,000 diary entries of 238 employees at seven real companies over a four month period. From their research they extracted this singularly important finding about the connection between progress and meaningful work and the effect this has on job satisfaction and “organizational commitment” (Leithwood, 2006, p. 30) of an employee. I have intentionally chosen a non-education focused paradigm to evaluate my data, to better understand what researchers in the business community have identified as critical for successful organizations and how this criteria applies to the education sector. I explain my theoretical framework in more detail in Chapter Two.
Background of the Researcher

I have described my teaching experience and how this experience sensitizes me to nuances of the teacher’s workplace difficult to understand as a novice. I have also referenced positive and negative teaching experiences that influence my deep interest in the significance of the educator’s morale to achieving progress in education, especially as it relates to student learning. However, it is important to also discuss why this concept of “meaningful work” resonates with me as the researcher.

Doing meaningful work matters to me. I have had many opportunities to participate in meaningful work as well as to work with others to carry out meaningful work. I have also watched others benefit individually and corporately from the opportunity to engage in meaningful work. Because of these experiences, the construct of meaningful work and its impact on the teacher’s resilience in the workplace has become important to me.

One such example is the privilege I have had leading and co-leading a team of 25-30 youth and adults for three summers to run a day camp on a First Nations reserve. Each summer as the team came together to prepare, we began as a collection of individuals motivated by a variety of different “why’s,” equipped with various strengths and weaknesses, and exhibiting a spectrum of interpretations of the ultimate goal for running a successful day camp. At the first team meeting, my first thought was always, “How on earth will we come together to make this day camp happen for the good of the community of children on the reserve?” Yes, we had our conflicts, differences of opinion, and different styles of leadership. But the impact was there. We became exhausted, working 18 hour days with almost no time to rest. It was worth it. Each summer I have been surprised by the team members’ reflections as we head home. They say they have never experienced community like they had during the previous ten days. They have
never experienced the capacity to love and to receive love from people they have just met (both on the team and on the reserve) like they had the previous ten days. They say they are tired, but they would do it all over again; and they want to go back every year. Most importantly, the First Nation community has wanted us back every year. What I observed was that when a group of people comes together to commit themselves to meaningful work, they can overcome barriers (and in this case, deep and painful historical barriers) that would be impossible in other circumstances. The impact was visible—on the people engaged in the meaningful work and on the recipients of that meaningful work.

I relate this ten-day trip to the teacher interactions I observed at one of my practicum schools. The school had a “reputation” as a challenging place to work. There had been scandals; teachers regularly burnt out; and students were difficult to manage. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) abounded and the behaviour teaching assistant was run off her feet. However, the teachers at this school had a collegiality that surprised me. They looked out for each other, worked with each other, stepped in for each other, and respected each other. It struck me that they had to be committed to the survival of the whole teaching team because the context required it. They worked with numerous at-risk students, students for whom “jail” was not a far-fetched possibility down the road. Thankfully, these teachers were not willing to give up. I started to ask questions like, what was it about the kind of work that these teachers were doing that made them work together the way they did? What was their sense of “meaningful work,” and was this the “why” that helped these teachers endure the day-to-day challenge of teaching a difficult student population? How did these teachers rate their “inner work life” (morale) and how did the school context shape this “inner work life” experience?
One day I made the connection between what I was observing in the school with the experiences of the team that went to the reserve every year. Was it hard work in both places? Yes. Challenging circumstances in both places? Yes. Wearying conditions in both places? Yes. But in both scenarios I witnessed a strong sense of camaraderie, of satisfaction with a job well done, and belief that a difference was being made. What was the connection? Could it be the belief that one was engaged in “meaningful work” that served as the catalyst for perseverance in both scenarios? Once I made this connection I began to wonder what it meant for teachers to engage in “meaningful work,” and how this meaning affected the long term commitment of the teacher. This study on the educator’s morale began to take shape.

An important aspect to my background as a researcher is that my entire life has been steeped in what I would deem meaningful work. I grew up in Laos, Thailand, Viet Nam, Malaysia, Philippines and Guatemala, all because my own parents were engaged with meaningful work. I worked in Ethiopia during the 1984-5 famine and in Malawi from 1997 to 2009. The many opportunities I have had to serve others in Canada and other countries are too many to name in this study, but these opportunities provide the framework for my understanding of why being engaged in meaningful work matters.

However, it was a serious caution to me as a researcher of other teachers that I have a personal and strong sense of what *I think* meaningful work should look like. There was potential for me to bias my participants or the results of my study. Because of the subjective nature of my research question, I had to be more than just conscious, I had to be vigilant in resisting opportunities I might have had to “fill in the blanks” for my participants. Their definitions for “meaningful work” would look different from mine. Consequently, while I highly valued the opportunity to research a topic that mattered deeply to me, this possibility to shape the results of
my study to fit within my own personal grid was the most serious challenge to me as the researcher.

Overview

In this first chapter, I have outlined the purpose for this research project and described the relevance the question of the teacher’s morale has to the progress desired in the current education context in Ontario. I have also described why morale is a significant topic to me as the researcher. An analysis of relevant literature is presented in Chapter Two followed by a description of the methodology I used for data collection and analysis in Chapter Three. The findings from the interviews are discussed in Chapter Four, and the most salient learnings and recommendations for further research are outlined in Chapter Five. References and appendices, including the visual framework for this entire study, are included in the last pages of this research project.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines existing scholarly discussions concerning the educator’s morale in the workplace. The topics discussed herein aim to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the complex issues related to my research question: From the perspectives of three Ontario principals and two Ontario teachers, what are the main contributors to the demoralization of Ontario educators?

Theoretical Framework

After my first teaching practicum with the Master of Teaching (MT) program, I knew I wanted to examine the motivation to teach because I could see motivation was lacking for several veteran teachers I observed. As the first year of the program progressed, I continued to winnow through my thoughts and “notes to self,” and it became clearer to me that I didn’t want to only understand what motivates a teacher to teach; I wanted to understand what made them lose the heart to teach in the first place. I was sure that these same disheartened teachers had embarked on their teaching careers hopeful and intentional about doing good work for and with their students. What caused these teachers to become despondent, even cynical, about their work now? Contrasted with the hopefulness and optimism of my teacher colleagues in the MT program, the veteran teachers’ loss of purpose and passion concerned me. I also lamented the unstimulated learning experiences many students in our schools daily experienced because of this professional lethargy I observed. These same disheartened teachers also lamented their own loss of heart for their work but could only shrug their shoulders as if to say, “It is what it is; what more can I do about it?”

As I consulted studies that might help me understand the demoralization of the educator, I happened upon the work of Amabile and Kramer and specifically their book called The
Progress principle: *Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work* (2011). A line from the introduction jumped off the page during my first reading: “the secret to amazing performance is empowering talented people to succeed at meaningful work” (2011, p. 2). That was it, I thought. These talented teachers must have lost their sense of empowerment to succeed at meaningful work! In fact, Amabile and Kramer’s research concluded that “of all the positive events that influence inner work life (morale), the single most powerful is progress in meaningful work” (p. 7). They called this finding the “progress principle” (p. 7). I knew I needed to see if there was a link between what I read in Amabile and Kramer’s research and what I observed at my practicum schools. Consequently, I decided to use these authors’ research as my theoretical framework to study the contributing factors to the demoralization of the Ontario educator from the perspective of five educators.

Amabile and Kramer looked at the daily responses to everyday work events from 12,000 diary entries of approximately 238 people over four months. Through a case study approach, they discussed the findings they gleaned from these employees working in seven real companies renamed for anonymity. It was thought-provoking for me as the researcher to employ a theoretical framework applicable to understanding organizational success in the business sector and relate it to the organizational realities in educational settings.

Amabile and Kramer demonstrated clearly how much inner work life (or morale) matters to a company’s employees and to the progress of that company. They showed how everyday work events, big and small, are the biggest determinants for whether or not employee morale is ripe for progress. They proved that “negative events,” no matter how small and seemingly insignificant, “are more powerful than positive events” (p. 7) for shaping morale. Finally, they described three “potent forces” that most support inner work life: “progress in meaningful
work”; “catalysts” which make the work succeed; and “nourishers” which are the positive interpersonal “events that uplift the people doing the work” (p. 7). They also described “setbacks,” “inhibitors,” and “toxins” as negative factors that “undermine inner work life” (p. 7).

In the discussions that follow, specific components to Amabile and Kramer’s research are described as applicable to the aim of my research question. I have chosen to use the terms “catalysts and nourishers” and “inhibitors and toxins” to describe the principals’ data discussed in Chapter Four. For the purpose of this study on what demoralizes the Ontario educator, the concepts of “inner work life” and “meaningful work” will provide the primary frame for my analysis and discussions.

“Inner Work Life” and Morale

Morale is certainly not a new concept to be studied in education. Leithwood (2006) in his work for the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (EFTO), defined morale as “an optimistic view toward one’s colleagues, and enthusiasm for one’s work” (p. 38) and low morale was connected to “cynicism, feelings of despair, and a lack of enthusiasm” (p. 38). Amabile and Kramer (2011) introduced the concept of “inner work life” as “what happens to people’s thoughts, feelings, and drives as they try to solve complex problems inside companies” (p. 4). They described the inner work life as a “rich, complex world” that “fluctuates as events at work change” and “influences performance every day” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 4). I have chosen to equate these authors’ construct of “inner work life” with my understanding of “morale” as it provides a fuller understanding of the content of morale as well as the consequences of healthy or unhealthy morale. I have used the two terms interchangeably.

The researchers demonstrated that inner work life is “profoundly influenced by events occurring every day at work” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 6). The quality of that inner work
life shapes a person’s performance “on four dimensions: creativity, productivity, work commitment, and collegiality” (p.6). One of their conclusions was that “inner work life matters deeply to employees” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 6) and “even seemingly mundane events—such as small wins and minor setbacks—can exert potent influence on inner work life” (p. 7).

There is a plethora of new pedagogical ideas that regularly bombard K-12 learning institutions and their practitioners. In fact, Leithwood (2006) identified this obsession with reform and innovation as “change overload,” reflecting the belief that the change required to bring about reform is inevitable and unstoppable (p. 80). With budget constraints putting more demands on the teacher and new ministry initiatives introduced regularly, it is understandable that teachers feel regularly overwhelmed. Added to this external pressure is the fact that teachers should aim to teach for what John Hattie (2012) described as “visible learning”—concrete, evidence-based learning in students. Hattie cited a key conclusion from his research: “Teachers need to be directive, influential, caring, and actively and passionately engaged in the process of teaching and learning” (p. 18). It was this aspect of “passionately engaged” that, to me, summoned the need to more clearly understand the impact of the teacher’s healthy inner work life on his/her learning community.

Hattie identified that teaching is more than “content knowledge, acts of skilled teaching, or engaged students” (2012, p. 16). He used words like “passion,” “thrill,” and “love for” as he described the intrinsic motivation required to teach well. Ironically, Hattie concluded, “we rarely talk about passion in education” (2012, p. 16). A powerful statement credited to Hattie’s friend, Doug Reeves concluded: “In the current economic climate of many countries, property values have plummeted, leading to fewer resources available for the education budget…passion may be the only natural renewable resource that we have” (Hattie, 2012, p. 17). It is my contention that
the need to focus on the health of the inner work life of our teachers is the only way to ensure
that this renewable resource called “passion” is accessible and regularly mined for the long term
benefit of the teacher, the health of our schools, and the maximized learning benefit to our
students. It is indeed time to talk about passion in the education system. Examining the
contributing factors to the Ontario educator’s demoralization is a necessary part of that
conversation.

Amabile and Kramer (2011) emphasized the obvious yet important point that the inner
work life is “inner” (p. 21). They stated, “Although it is central to the person’s experience of the
workday, it is usually imperceptible to others [and] can go unexamined even by the individual
experiencing it” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, pp. 21-2). This study intended to shine a spot light
on the critical value of paying attention to the inner work life or morale of the teacher and to
understand more clearly what that healthy inner work life should look like.

**Teaching as “Meaningful Work”**

Clearly, what defines teaching as meaningful work for one teacher is likely different to
how another teacher might define meaningful work. Ongoing studies to examine the work-life
balance of teachers (Canadian Teacher’s Federation, 2014) indicate how much of our work we
carry home with us each night. Both the amount of work and the “complexity” of that work are
serious concerns to Ontario teachers (Leithwood, 2006). We invest so much of our identity, our
creative waking hours, and our energy into our work. Our work gives us certain status, whether
explicitly sought or implicitly ascribed. Amabile and Kramer (2011) described work as
“personal” and that work is “simply part of being human” (p. 90) Work means something to us,
and the work of teaching which involves shaping young lives for the future, is undeniably
meaningful work.
Parker Palmer (2007) hinted at our collective sense that the educators’ work is meaningful by describing the negative impact that losing touch with motivation to teach has both on our internal well-being and on the work we do as teachers (Kindle DX version). Danetta’s research (2002) has shown that the teacher’s “organizational commitment” is “strongly influenced by the teacher’s perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work” (in Leithwood, 2006, p. 30). Two researchers who studied the resiliency required to teach at inner-city schools concluded, “For us, authenticity has become a common, central focus for acknowledging that ‘knowing who you are’ and understanding ‘why you do what you do’ are at the heart and mind of a meaningful teaching vocation” (Finch & Reid, 2003, p. 169).

I believe that part of the reason educators become demoralized in the “business” of education is because the “systems of school” try to make teaching just a “job”. Teaching is a human act that requires ongoing relational negotiation that results in positive or negative impact on human lives. The bottom line is not monetary profit. The bottom line is transformed thinkers and practitioners of all ages committed to the social good of society, collectively and individually. Teaching is meaningful work.

In order to understand what “meaningful work” might look like, I also turned to Amabile and Kramer (2011). They identified “the key to leveraging the progress principle” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 89) to best motivate people at work was by facilitating progress (p.3), and helping people succeed at accomplishing “meaningful work” (p. 89). According to Amabile and Kramer (2011), meaningful work “doesn’t have to have profound importance to society—organizing all of the world’s information, caring for the sick, alleviating poverty, or helping to cure cancer” (p. 95). Rather, “what matters is whether you perceive your work as contributing value to something or someone who matters” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, pp. 95-6). The more
our individual and collective sense affirms that what we do as teachers matters and is meaningful, the more we are potentially willing to work hard toward the desired end goal.

Related to the concept that engaging in meaningful work promotes progress in the workplace, is what it takes for an employee to remain committed to a meaningful task for the long haul. Progress in student learning or our own growth in pedagogical competence as teachers does not happen overnight. Perseverance is required. The concept of “grit” has been studied in depth for over eleven years by teacher-turned-psychologist Angela Lee Duckworth from the University of Pennsylvania. In a recent interview in *Educational Leadership* the concepts of grit and resilience were discussed in relation to the teacher’s perseverance in education.

Interestingly, Duckworth’s research on “grit” does not just focus on “responding resiliently to situations of failure and adversity or being a hard worker” (Perkins-Gough, 2013, p. 14). Rather, over half of the questions on Duckworth’s research questionnaire developed for measuring grit asked questions related to “having consistent interests—focused passions—over a long time” (Perkins-Gough, 2013, p. 14). Duckworth concluded: “So grit is not just having resilience in the face of failure, but also having deep commitments that you remain loyal to over many years” (Perkins-Gough, 2013, p. 15).

There is an important merging of concepts which Hattie (2012), Amabile and Kramer (2011) and Duckworth (Perkins-Gough, 2013) have suggested for this study on how the teacher perceives meaningful work and how the school context impacts the teacher’s inner work life (morale). Hattie’s (2012) work noted that passion may be the one renewable resource available to teachers and makes a teacher effective for the long haul. Amabile and Kramer (2011) stated that the way to encourage progress at work is to engage employees with meaningful work that matters. Duckworth’s (Perkins-Gough, 2013) research discovered that the most important
personal ingredient to an individual’s achievement in any area is grit. Grit requires “focused passions” which a person can “remain loyal to over many years” (Perkins-Gough, 2013, p. 14). The research suggests that exploring a teacher’s perception of meaningful work as the key to promoting progress in the workplace will not only help us understand what fuels the teacher’s passion for her work, but what enables the teacher to exercise grit, for her own sense of professional achievement and for the benefit of the education system as a whole.

**The School Climate and Culture**

It is critically important to understand the teacher’s inner work life and perception of meaningful work by situating both constructs within the school context. For the purposes of this study, the school context was identified as the following: “the physical environment, the social system, relationships between principals, teacher and students, a sense of community, teacher and student morale, norms among peers, and safety” (OECD, 2009, p. 110). Research has established that school context affects the teacher and “influences their well-being and motivation” (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012, p. 9). I have chosen to use the terms “climate” and “culture” to define the overall school context effect on the morale of the teachers and principals I interviewed.

Climate, as understood in this study, is indicative of what it “feels” like to be an employee in a particular school environment (Hancock & Scherff, 2010). For example, if the teacher feels valued and appreciated in his/her school, they are more likely to respond positively to school administration, students, parents and other colleagues (Hancock & Scherff, 2010). The climate is positive. Culture, on the other hand, refers to the common practices or the “way we do it around here” constructs of the school staff as a whole (Hancock & Scherff, 2010). Climate sets the tone for culture and culture validates the climate. I have used these terms to describe the
interplay between “feeling” and “doing” which shapes the educator’s workplace morale on a daily basis.

Canadian researchers Parker, Grenville and Flessa (2011) found that at the “heart of an excellent school is a school climate that is defined by excellent teaching, high quality leadership, motivated staff and students and a sense of community” (p. 130). They described the “complex forces” of “places, people and things in the context of schools” that work to make success (or progress as Amabile and Kramer would call it) visible (Parker et al., 2011, p. 133). Teachers in what these researchers called “successful school climates” not only cared about the students, but “they cared about themselves as a community of colleagues” (Parker et al., 2011, p. 137). In these school contexts, these teachers’ work mattered to them and to their collective success as a community of teachers.

In another study which analysed the teacher’s work satisfaction in relation to the context of a high need school found that schools with “a positive work context” made teachers “more satisfied” and more likely to “stay longer” (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012, p. 4). This conclusion was even more important when the study demonstrated that the willingness of these teachers to stay in their job and their level of job satisfaction was “independent of the school’s student demographic characteristics” (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 4). Johnson et al., (2012) highlighted the “social conditions” of the school as how the teachers primarily identified their experience of positive working conditions (p. 5). In other words, it was the working relationships on all levels that impacted these teachers’ satisfaction with their work more than anything else. These researchers challenged decision-makers in the education system to consider that if the goal is to keep good teachers and to better student academic outcomes, more effort
must be made to “pay close attention to the school context as teachers experience it” (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 5).

**Systemic Contributors to Morale**

According to Margaret Wilson’s (2015) report to Ontario’s Minister of Education, Liz Sandals, of the systemic dysfunction evident in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the TDSB “does not have a strong sense of identity as a unified board” (2015, p. 5). This same report used terms such as “trustee fiefdoms” to describe the kingdom-building mentality of publicly elected trustees who represent the public’s interest in public education in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) (p. 5). The report described the school board as led by “unstable professional leadership” (p. 5). While Ms. Wilson’s review applauded the school board’s gains in student achievement, it described the education leaders within this school board as “under severe stress as a result of infighting at the board level and ever-increasing intrusiveness of some, but not all, trustees” (p. 6). This report confirmed the real existence of systemic contributors to the demoralization of the Ontario educator at all levels of the education infrastructure in the largest school board in the GTA.

Retired Deputy Minister of Alberta Education, Keray Henke, challenged leaders in education to exemplify the “values and behaviours” that are expected of our students (2010, p. 5). He exhorted these same leaders to commit to removing any “systemic roadblocks” that prevented the kind of progressive change required to move education in the right direction (Henke, 2010, p. 5). Clearly, the systemic roadblocks embedded within our largest school board in the GTA do not model the exemplary behaviour educators expected from students. In fact, Leithwood (2006) drew a direct correlation between the teachers’ “working conditions” in the school and classroom as “a product of policies, practices, and other initiatives arising outside the
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school” (p. 11). Parker Palmer cautioned educational reformers to consider the “simple truth” that transformational change will never occur if “we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called the teacher” who is the main actor in this transformational change reaching the classroom (2007, p. 3). At the board level in the TDSB, Ms. Wilson’s report stated, “As a whole, staff do not feel trusted to do their jobs, whether by trustees or, in some cases, their own colleagues or superiors” (2015, p. 18).

Michael Fullan (2012) did not excuse the classroom teacher from his or her role in making the system of education what it is today. Amabile and Kramer (2011) concluded that it is the everyday events, not the big pushes for reform, that create the kind of “organizational climate” that creates positive inner work life for employees (p. 181). Foundational to these everyday work events, according to Amabile and Kramer, was how the individual employee works with other colleagues because every employee “bear[s] some responsibility for the inner work lives” of other employees (p. 181). Parker Palmer (2007) has agreed that “institutions are also ‘us’” (Kindle DX version). If the individual teacher based his/her will to teach well and to live up to his/her professional ethics of doing what was best for the student’s learning on whether or not the institution of education was “reformed” in time, then teachers would “merely postpone reform and continue the slow slide into cynicism that characterizes too many teaching careers” (Palmer, 2007, Kindle DX version). In the midst of discouraging systemic realities in education in the GTA specifically, we educators must not lose sight of the “mission” of our “profession” (Palmer, 2007, Kindle DX version).

**Workplace Contributors to Morale**

Studies identified the primary workplace contributors to the “exodus” of teachers in the U.S. to be any of the following eight factors: standardized testing, working conditions in the
schools particularly related to safety concerns, high expectations, bureaucracy, lack of respect and sufficient remuneration, parents, school leadership and school boards (Farber, 2010). Canadian principals noted that reduced budgets on social supports within the community have resulted in teachers acting as “first responders” for circumstances that these teachers often feel ill-equipped to address (Alberta Teacher’s Association, 2014, p. 11). Even arranging field trips, something obviously beneficial to student learning, has become a “nightmare of paper” that creates a barrier between the learning opportunity and the willingness of the educator to take on the administrative burden required to make those opportunities possible (Wilson, 2015, p. 13). Overall, administrative support was “key to teacher retention” (Hancock & Scherff, 2010, p. 335).

Teacher efficacy, especially in the area of managing student behaviour, has been described as “central to their experiences at work” (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012, p. 10). Klassen (2010) has shown that when teachers believe in the “school staff’s collective efficacy” to address issues related to student behaviour, the effect is to reduce the stress teachers experience (p. 343). A further benefit from this “collective efficacy” as described by Klassen (2010) was to improve the teacher’s experience of “job satisfaction” (p. 349). A key component to strengthening the collective efficacy of teachers was the improved job satisfaction teachers experienced when they worked collaboratively in teams (Leithwood, 2006, p. 25). According to Leithwood (2006) these “school-level working conditions are especially powerful sources of satisfaction” for the teacher (p. 26-7) and almost cancel out the effect of “personal and demographic variables” such as the teacher’s age, gender, experience or work satisfaction (p. 14).
While some research has demonstrated that teachers can work positively in schools with a challenging school population (Johnson, et al., 2012), Day (2008) cited results from a large five-year study in England called the VITAE project that indicated teachers working in lower socio-economic districts referred most often to issues related to “demoralization, failing energy, and ill health (p. 253). As Johnson’s research has indicated, it is the working relationships within the school staff that made the teaching experience positive and effective in spite of the contextual challenges. However, Day’s results emphasized that without effective leadership committed to looking out for its teachers, the contextual elements often became the demise of the teacher’s well-being and effectiveness.

**The role of the principal**

School administration that wants to foster positive morale for their teachers must facilitate the teacher’s sense of “belonging” to the learning community (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, p. 1036) or “affiliation” as defined by Amabile and Kramer (2011, p. 132). Furthermore, school administration must pay attention to the teacher’s degree of emotional exhaustion especially as it relates to student discipline and the level of job satisfaction the teachers can concretely identify (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). “Developing people” has been identified as a key “leadership practice” as principals seek to lead their teaching staff (Leithwood, 2006, p. 63). The principal who is committed to developing his/her teachers must be “considerate, supportive, listening to teacher’s ideas” as well as “collegial” and concerned for their teacher’s well-being (Leithwood, 2006, p. 63). Research has linked “excessive” teacher stress to the principal’s unreliable leadership as well as poor management of “student behaviour” (Leithwood, 2006, p. 64 & 59). However, principals have their own challenges to preserve their own morale let alone positively influence the morale of their teaching staff.
According to the report to the Ontario Minister of Education concerning the state of the TDSB, “The principals are in terrible shape. They are overwhelmed with data, badgered and bullied. They are assailed from all sides with no support” (Wilson, 2015, p. 13). Principals in the TDSB told Ms. Wilson that “the in-school administrator’s job had become totally unmanageable, particularly given the Board’s top-heavy leadership structure” (p. 13). Furthermore, a 2014 study on Canadian principals described the “isolation” principals experienced within their staff and the hesitancy to seek support from their teachers “in the educational mission” (Alberta Teacher’s Association, p. 45). Certainly, principals have their own personal battle for healthy morale that is waged within larger systemic constructs as well as local school contexts and a separate study of the principal’s morale is warranted. However, if some principals in the GTA have identified that their work has become “totally unmanageable,” it is logical that these sentiments reflect a disheartened school administration that understandably finds it challenging to foster positive morale in their schools. For the purposes of my research, I did not specifically examine the principal’s morale; rather, I examined the principals’ perspective on what demoralizes the educators in the schools they oversee and what these principals believed was necessary to support healthy morale for their teaching staff.

The kind of principal who can create a community of committed teachers will be worthy of their teachers’ trust (Hanford & Leithwood, 2012). They will also be leaders who meet “resistance” from their staff by not avoiding conflict or “circumventing” it (Scherz, 2004, p. 52-53). The result of not dealing constructively with various forms of “resistance” that inevitably arise amongst a community of educators perpetuates a “guardedness” and a tendency to “self-protection”; the result is that teachers “invest less energy into their work; they detach themselves from issues that matter. The school just drifts along” (Scherz, 2004, p. 52).
Research on effective school leadership for Ontario high schools identified successful principals included teachers in decision-making, connected teachers to the right resources, empowered teachers to act, and recognized teachers for a job well done (Bouchamma, 2012, p. 13). Effective school leaders also ensured that rules for student behaviour were clearly established and supported (Bouchamma, 2012). Furthermore, these principals supported their staff and were aware of ongoing dynamics, positive or negative, within their staff (Bouchamma, 2012, p. 14).

Other research affirmed the importance of principals seeking strong community partnerships in order to meet the increasing social and emotional needs of their students (Leithwood & Rielh, 2003). A national study conducted by the Alberta Teacher’s Association (2014) in cooperation with the Canadian Association of Principals confirmed that accessing community resources with specialists in mental health and other social concerns, was “most urgently needed” (p. 13).

Amabile and Kramer (2011) described what they called “catalysts” and “inhibitors” that either promote or prevent everyday progress at work (p. 108). These catalysts include: establishing clear direction for the team; giving staff voice to determine how the work will get done; ensuring resources are in place to complete the work; knowing how to apply the right amount of pressure to make progress; assisting where needed with the work; learning from the positive and negative outcomes; and finally, welcoming the input and creativity of employees to how good work can be achieved (2011, p. 104-108). The “inhibitors” are the exact opposite of each of these catalysts. Amabile and Kramer (2011) also identified what they called “nourishers” which are key to “infusing the work with greater meaning” (p. 131) and providing what “everyone craves at work: human connection” (p. 130). The four key nourishers Amabile
and Kramer identified are “respect, encouragement, emotional support, and affiliation” (p. 131-2). While the catalysts and nourishers identified here were not surprising, these leadership practices create a work climate that becomes the “organization’s ‘signature’ to the people inside and outside the organization” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 108). The effect this “signature” has on the inner work life of the organization’s employees, namely teachers in this study, determines the quality of the morale that has a direct and inevitable effect on the progress and product of that organization—student learning and development as whole people.

**Parents**

A 2006 COMPAS Report to the Ontario College of Teachers identified the negotiation of relationships with and expectations of parents as one of three significant areas of stress for the Ontario teacher. Teachers experienced significant stress when parents blamed them for “their child’s underperformance” (COMPAS, 2006, p. 16). Canadian principals also identified the shift in relationship between parents and schools from being one of healthy mutual support to either no involvement at all or interference that makes the relationships “difficult to negotiate” (Alberta Teacher’s Association, 2014, p. 10). Leithwood’s research (2006) demonstrated that “public opinion” which includes the opinion of parents, “has an influence on teacher morale” and he cited statistics that identified 40% of elementary school teachers and about the same percentage of female teachers had been “bullied by parents or students” (p. 71). Furthermore, there was a positive correlation between the teacher’s “job satisfaction” and the positive reputation of the school in the “local community” and “when there is a considerable support by parents and the wider community for the efforts and directions of the school” (Leithwood, 2006, p. 62).
Personal Contributors to Morale

Karpinski (2012) linked the state of the teacher’s morale to how well students learn and whether or not other teachers want to stay in the profession. According to statistics from a 2004 Ontario Ministry of Education publication, depression rates for teachers were one third higher than the rates in other professions (*Teacher Excellence*, p. 2). Similarly, a 2006 study found that the second highest reason for relatively new teachers to leave the profession was because the working environment was too stressful (McIntyre, 2006). According to a 2007 report in *Professionally Speaking*, approximately one in four teachers were not satisfied with his or her work as a teacher, his or her school context or the “profession as a whole” (Browne, p. 55). Research has indicated a correlation between years of experience as an educator and job satisfaction--the more years of experience the higher the satisfaction the teacher experiences (Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Ferguson, Frost & Hall, 2012). However, other research has also demonstrated that “motivation may decline” for veteran teachers because of “constant top-down dictates and intense public criticism” (Beck & Kosnick, 2014, p. 108; Day 2008; Leithwood, 2006).

The previously cited research on “grit” provided an important additional insight into which teachers are more likely to be “gritty” enough to withstand the pressure of education (Perkins-Gough, 2013, p. 14). Duckworth defined “grit” as the capacity for a person to work diligently for a sustained period of time because they were motivated by long-term goals and passions (Perkins-Gough, 2013, p. 14). While resiliency or the ability to “bounce back” helped to preserve the teacher’s morale in the workplace, it was also the ability to “hang in there” for the long haul in spite of opposition and stressful times. The most interesting learning from Duckworth’s research was that grit and talent are “inversely related” (Perkins-Gough, 2013, pp
According to Duckworth, often the most talented people were the least able to “stick to it.” This was an important finding when it related to teachers. Duckworth stated: “Being gifted is no guarantee of being hardworking or passionate about something” (p. 16-17). Duckworth’s research challenges an elitist mindset when it comes to teachers in our schools; the most talented and gifted teacher may or may not be the hardest working or most committed.

Scherz (2004) described the resistance that arose within an educator when he/she “perceives change as a risk” and chose to respond to change by trying to control their responses as well as the circumstances (p. 25). The result was “frustration and tension” (2004, p. 25). Scherz also demonstrated that veteran teachers often perceived themselves as “guardians of tradition” and responded to new initiatives instituted by administration by choosing to “defend the status quo” (2004, p. 27). Mei-lin Chang (2009) identified that “teachers may have ‘feelings’ of burnout in which they feel emotionally exhausted, fatigue, or wearing out but they may still feel satisfied or efficacious about teaching tasks” (Chang, 2009, p. 197). A demoralized teacher can still feel that he/she is effective in the classroom, but there are enough reasons supported by negative everyday work events beyond that classroom that cause the individual teacher to lose the heart to teach. Interestingly, Chang (2009) noted that 20 years of studies on teacher burnout identified that “disruptive behaviour” of students was the number one reason for this burnout (p. 202).

Palmer (2007) described the “daily exercise in vulnerability” that teachers experience to be a significant factor in their demoralization (Kindle DX version). He stated that the “identity and integrity” of the teacher was what made a good teacher continue to teach (Kindle DX version). Gu & Day (2007) have also determined that the “resilient” teacher demonstrated
“strength and determination to fulfill their original call to teach” and for this reason, was able to overcome the challenging circumstances they faced in education (p. 1314).

**Professional Identity of the Teacher**

Research has established the critical role of the teacher’s perception of their professional identity on the teacher’s sense of efficacy (Beck & Kosnick, 2014). The significance of a positive professional identity on the resiliency of the teacher has also been clearly identified (Gu & Day, 2007). A study of Ontario teachers said the focus on standards-based testing such as the EQAO had “seriously undermined the status of the profession in the public’s mind” (Leithwood, 2006, p. 11).

Beck and Kosnick (2014) envisioned the following six components to be significant to the teacher’s professional identity: having a broader understanding of their role in the classroom; accepting the reality of a demanding yet fulfilling profession; balancing work and life; growing in knowledge, judgment, and skill; a life-long learner, and having career options within education (pp. 105-114). Teachers needed to give up the “ideal of the ‘super-teacher’” if their “morale and satisfaction” as teachers was to be sustained (Beck & Kosnick p.109).

Day (2008) identified development of the teacher’s professional identity to be most dominantly related to the teacher’s “professional life phase” and secondly, shaped by the “emotional context of their work” (p. 247, 249). The six “professional life phases” were determined by the number of years as a teacher. For example, the teacher with 0-3 years of experience was characterized by “high commitment” and looked for support in developing his/her professional identity and growing sense of effectiveness in the classroom (p. 247). Teachers with 16-23 years of teaching experience battled “work-life tensions” and experienced a sense of “career stagnation,” along with a lack of support at the school level and increased
frustration with student behaviour (p. 248). Day’s research is important for interpreting the
seasonal challenges teachers experience in the phases of their career and how these challenges
determine the issues most likely to demoralize the educator with that particular level of
experience. Interestingly, it was the teachers in the 24-30 years of experience phase who were
struggling to stay motivated to teach and found “external policies and initiatives” to be a
negative reality to contend with in education (Day, 2008, p. 249).

A five-year study which Day (2008) and colleagues conducted, called the VITAE project
(2006), identified three components that worked together to shape the teacher’s professional
identity. These were “professional, situated, and personal dimensions” (Day, 2008, p. 250). The
professional dimension was shaped by the view of “what a good teacher is” based on how the
education profession determined it as well as the “ideals” the teacher had about education (p.
250). The situated dimension related to the context of the local school such as student
demographics, leadership styles, collegial relationships and how these shaped the teacher’s sense
of his or her professional identity (Day, 2008, p. 250). The last dimension was the personal
aspect shaped by what was happening outside of school and in the personal life of the teacher (p.
250). While the majority of teachers in this study had a “positive sense of identity” linked to
“self-efficacy and agency,” one-third of the teachers did not (p. 250). A key finding from Day’s
research (2008) underscored the significant link between the teacher’s conceptualization of their
professional identity and their morale and stated, “positive professional identity is associated
with well-being and job satisfaction and is a key factor in their [the teacher’s] effectiveness” (p.
257).
Summary

To understand the systemic, workplace and personal contributors to the morale of the educator in Ontario, I undertook this qualitative study and explain my methodology and approaches to my research question in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The goal for this qualitative study was to gain better understanding of the Ontario educator’s morale as influenced by systemic, workplace and personal realities. The following was my guiding research question: From the perspectives of three Ontario principals and two Ontario teachers, what are the contributors to the demoralization of Ontario educators? The five interviews were invaluable to my growing understanding of this under-valued phenomenon for the educator. I also gained helpful insight from those who talked with me through my research question, provided feedback on my developing understanding and research framework, and connected me with interview participants. This chapter describes the data collection and analysis methods employed to address my research question.

Procedure

The primary method for data collection was face-to-face interviews with three principals and two teachers. I digitally recorded each interview and transcribed the interviews using near-verbatim standards. Although I do not regret interviewing five educators, I did end up with significant data that needed to be analysed. I experimented with coding my data using the QDA Miner 4 Lite program; however, I did not find this method to be helpful and changed to a more laborious but far more visual method that suited my analytical style. I coded the interview data by hand using a large paper surface to group the data in emerging categories. From those groupings I determined the most common themes evident in my participants’ responses. Based on these themes I crafted my findings and analysis evident in Chapters Four and Five.
Research framework

I developed a research framework that visualized my primary concerns in my research (see Appendix A) to use as a tool to conceptualize the interconnectedness of systemic, workplace and personal contributors to the demoralization of the educator. Using this research framework was extremely helpful to my growing understanding of the problem of preserving morale for the educator in Ontario. Having a visual structure to diagram my initial thinking and to provide overall direction to my research helped me as a researcher define the parameters for my research and gave my participants a visual representation to speak to. I chose not to share my visual framework until the end of each interview in order to not influence my participants’ responses to the interview questions.

Data Collection

In this section I discuss how I used pilot interviews to prepare for the formal interviews. As well, I indicate how I transitioned from interviewing only three principals to including two teachers for a total of five interviews.

Pilot Interviews

In order to more finely tune my interview questions and to determine the conditions that would ensure the best possible results, I conducted two informal and voluntary pilot interviews, each lasting approximately two hours in length. I used my developing interview questions and a working copy of my visual framework (see Appendix A) and together with these experienced educators, I strengthened the formal interview questions (see Appendix B). One of my pilot interviewees had school board and curriculum development experience and was a current teacher educator. The other interviewee was a teacher who worked as a guidance counsellor at a public high school. These educator friends connected me with two principals who participated in my
formal interviews. The time spent with these educator friends allowed me to “practice”
describing my research question, and as a result, I was better able to express the purpose for my
interest in the educator’s morale. One interview took place at the teacher’s school, and the other
interview took place at that educator’s home. I did not record these pilot interviews; however, I
took notes to keep track of issues raised, areas to further explore in my research, and advice they
gave for getting the most from my future interviews.

Participants

I am indebted to my five excellent interviewees for the time they gave to my research
question, the work they did ahead of time to prepare for the interviews, and the freedom they
gave me to ask any question so that they could “tell it like it is.” It is important to note that the
data collected from these five interviews extended far beyond what I could have adequately
analysed and reflected upon within the scope of this study.

My initial research intention was to focus on three principals only. This restriction was
because I assumed these principals negotiated a place within the education structures that made
them feel “sandwiched” between the expectations of their boards and the Ministry of Education
pressing down from “above” and the expectations of their teaching staff pressing “up” from
below. At the conclusion of my three principal interviews I realized that this “sandwich affect”
was not the case for these three interviewees. As a result, I felt that my data reflected the
perceptions of those who had the “power” to affect the morale of Ontario educators rather than
the perceptions of those who struggle to maintain a positive morale in the school context. I felt it
was imperative to hear from two teachers so as to include the perspective of those whose morale
is most vulnerable to all the determinants in the educator’s workplace.
The principals. Two of the principals were female and currently working as principals; one principal was male and retired a few years ago. Two of the principals had received leadership awards and all three were known for positively affecting change in their learning communities. All three principals had been active in education for between 25 and 40 years and principals for between 10 to 25 years. Two of the schools had attracted media attention due to noticeable educational achievements and “turnaround” stories. All three schools were located in priority neighbourhoods serving more vulnerable student populations. Two of the principals elected to come to my home for their interviews. Because of the relaxed atmosphere, each of these interviews was approximately 90 minutes in length. I met the other principal at her school office during a busy school morning. Her interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was interrupted two times because of ongoing disciplinary issues with a student.

The teachers. The two teachers were also veteran educators, each with nearly 20 years of teaching experience. I asked them to participate in my research after I had already interviewed the principals. I identified these participants from past knowledge of their commitment to their profession, high standards held for their students and their “above and beyond” approach to their own engagement within their schools. The interviews with the two teachers took place in their classrooms and lasted for approximately 60 minutes each.

Instruments of Data Collection

I used a Sony Digital Voice Recorder to record each interview. As previously mentioned, I used the research framework that I had developed as an instrument of data collection and verification at the end of each interview. I produced near verbatim transcripts and compared the recorded data to the script two times through for each interview to ensure accuracy. I also scrutinized each school’s website to understand the working context of each of my interviewees.
In the case of the two principals, I also read media reports that detailed successes achieved under their leadership.

**Data Analysis**

For this part of the research methodology, I relied heavily on Creswell’s Chapter 8, “Data Analysis and Representation” (2013). I explored meanings and interpretations and looked for themes, metaphors and an “essence” (Creswell, p. 191) to my participants’ meanings to address my research question. Creswell’s (2013) diagram of the “Data Analysis Spiral” (p. 183) was a helpful reminder of the “process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (p. 182). In my field journal I made use of “memoing” key concepts, words, and ideas in the margins, in order to keep track of emerging patterns. I was also cognizant of what was not said during those interviews as Creswell (2013) recommended.

**Validity and Reliability of Data**

I established validity to my research by interviewing three principals and two teachers. By interviewing these two “levels” of education, it was possible to verify perceptions one level had of the other in terms of how each level navigated demoralizing realities in education. I was reflexive in my analysis because of my possible bias toward what meaningful work should look like as detailed in Chapter One. This bias could have been a challenge to reliable analysis of what my participants said. The reliability of my data was maintained by using good equipment, being diligent with the transcribing processes, and ensuring accuracy with all my documentation.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

The ethical implications of the data collection process had been approved by the University of Toronto’s Research Ethics Board. Each of my participants read and signed a letter of consent (see Appendix C). I ensured confidentiality by never using my research participants’
first names on the digital recordings and all transcripts only used initials to indicate the participant’s identity. I was careful not to refer to any other participant during my interviews.

**Risks and Benefits to this Study**

One risk I kept in mind during each of my interviews was the potential to trigger negative memories and emotions for the interviewees as I asked them to evaluate their morale and their perception of what constitutes meaningful work. I was cognizant that our discussions could make them unhappier by asking them to examine their inner work life. It was not my intention to create strife or to promote a non-collegial atmosphere between my interviewees and their colleagues. Consequently, I endeavoured to carry out my interviews with deep respect for the opinions and experiences shared by my participants.

The benefit to this study was primarily for me, both because it fulfilled a graduation requirement and because it answered a bigger, overarching question that mattered to me as a teacher. I also hoped that the findings of my study would offer helpful insight to colleagues in the Master of Teaching program. An unexpected benefit was expressed by one of my participants who indicated how helpful the interview was to her. As she put it, “It was a gift to me because I got to talk about me—undivided attention for two hours. Like when do I get that?” There were also moments when participants identified new insights they were gaining from our discussion which was gratifying for me as the researcher. The clear benefit for me was also the fact that I was challenged by the quality of each of these educators, and especially the commitment these educators demonstrated, first and foremost, to their students. What more could the system ask for?
Limitations

This study was not intended to generate one definitive answer to reasons why Ontario educators experience demoralization. Neither was this study intended to derive one single definition for the term “meaningful work” as perceived by the research participants.

A second limitation was that the insights gained from my research participants may or may not apply to new teachers. Since the lowest number of teaching years amongst my participants was 17 years, the findings represent what five veteran educators defined as demoralizing factors for the educator.

Consequently, while I have strongly attempted to “make sense of (interpret) the meanings other [teachers] have about the [teaching] world” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25), no attempt has been made to generate a new theory of “demoralization” or “meaningful work” that was applicable to all teachers in every school everywhere in Ontario. Finally, as already expressed, the scope of this research project could not in any way do justice to the wealth of data shared by my participants. The findings I chose to single out and analyse in this research study are a limited list reflective of those insights I believed were most helpful for and applicable to the current climate of education in Ontario.

Summary

Based on the methodology for data collection and analysis already described, the next chapter details the findings of the five interviews beginning first with the teachers’ data and then the principals’ data.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

After conducting interviews with three Ontario principals and two Ontario secondary school teachers, it was understandable that the data would be substantive for this chapter’s analysis of identified contributors to the demoralization of the educator in the Ontario education system. I chose to structure the data in the following way. The first section is named “The Teachers’ Perspectives” and focuses on the insights gained from the two teacher interviews. The second section, “The Principals’ Perspectives,” focuses on the perspectives of the three principals interviewed. In Chapter Five a comparative analysis will look at the relationship between the teachers’ perspectives and the principals’ perspectives and extract findings related to the contributing factors to demoralization amongst educators in Ontario.

The data for this first section which discusses the teachers’ perspectives has been divided into four broad themes: systemic contributors, contextual contributors, conceptual contributors, and finally, strategies for preserving morale in the workplace. Within these four broad themes, structures and relationships which the teacher negotiates within her workplace and how these impact the educator’s morale are discussed as identified by the two teachers in this study, Shelley and Shauna.

The Teachers’ Perspectives

The first theme to be discussed is the systemic contributors to the demoralization of the educator. The systemic contributors are divided into three broad categories: “the system,” the school board, and the union.

Systemic Contributors: “The System”

It is important to begin with the broad perspective of how “the system,” as it is often referred to by those inside and outside the education realm, generally impacts the morale of
educators who make up that system. Michael Fullan has stated, “Each of us *is* the system” (in DuFour, Eaker and DuFour, 2005 p. 221). Consequently, while “the system” might be blamed in general terms in the educator’s everyday conversations, we who make up the system cannot escape our own culpability in making the system what it is today. Both teacher interviewees commented in general terms about “the system” and how they wore the effect of the system’s pluses and minuses on a daily basis.

Shelley has taught in the public school system for around 20 years. She spoke of the impact of the political era of the late 1990’s during the leadership of Mike Harris and his ‘Common Sense Revolution’ and the ensuing teacher strikes. She described the workplace at that time as “everybody was very, very negative.” Other teachers advised her to “quit this job” and that “this is the worst job to be in.” Shelley also observed that, in her opinion, the current system is generally “very disruptive,” and she spoke to the constant shifting and moving around especially of administration and teaching staff within all of the structures that make up the system. Shelley stated clearly that this constant movement was “not good for the school or the kids.”

Shauna has taught in public schools for about 20 years and talked about the broader economic and demographic realities that affect teacher morale. Insecurity surrounding school closures related to declining enrolment and the general fear of “the unexpected” affected morale in the workplace, according to Shauna. As a result of this pervasive systemic insecurity, teaching had become, according to Shauna, “all about kissing everyone’s ass.” To Shauna, the “everyone” referred primarily to the decision-makers at the administrative levels. Shauna highlighted that the problem with the education system as a whole was its hierarchical authority structure which she described as “from top to bottom, bottom to top.”
Neither teacher made many explicit statements about “the system” as a whole; however, their implicit comments offered a general understanding that teaching in Ontario, from the perspectives of these two teachers, was embedded within a fragile political and economic framework greatly affected by changing demographics in the school districts. Certainly, the current media references to the “culture of fear” highlighted by the recent review of systemic challenges within the largest school board in Toronto, the TDSB, confirmed this fragility and insecurity that the teachers identified at the classroom level (Wilson, 2015). From Shelley’s and Shauna’s perspectives, there was limited evidence in “the system” of the stability and consistency teachers needed to thrive within the bigger picture of education in Ontario.

**Systemic Contributors: the School Board**

The two components which Shelley and Shauna identified as demoralizing factors stemming from school board practices were the hiring protocol related to Ontario Regulation 274/12 and teacher professional development.

**Hiring Protocol:** A teacher I spoke to who was not formally interviewed had worked many LTO positions over eight years before finally offered a permanent position at a public school. This teacher faced sustained uncertainty surrounding his employment prospects. He spoke of the personal cost this uncertainty was to him and his family and his real consideration to leave teaching altogether because the hiring process was too arduous and, seemingly, arbitrary. The perspectives of my teacher interviewees demonstrated that while the teacher unions may be in favour of the “law of seniority,” not only did it diminish teacher morale before they were hired, but the lack of voice for the veteran teachers affected their morale in unexpected ways.

Both teachers discussed the negative impact current hiring practices as stipulated by Ontario Regulation 274/12 had on the morale of educators. From Shelley’s point of view, the
seniority process that “bumps” long-term/occasional (LTO) teachers out of a school and replaces them with teachers who have been on the payroll for a longer period of time meant that schools like hers lost teachers with “that fire, that desire” to teach. She said, “It’s irksome when the whole motto of the board is that we want to do what’s in the best interest of the students, but often it’s not in the interest of the students.” According to Shelley, the ideals espoused by school boards to put students first really “just look[ed] good on paper and on websites.” The fact that her school lost an excellent LTO teacher after just one semester of teaching because another teacher with more seniority replaced her, did not in Shelley’s mind, serve the school’s students well.

Shauna was explicit about her frustration with the board’s hiring processes. Shauna believed that nepotistic hiring practices within the school boards in the past had ruined the opportunity to be able to recommend a promising candidate “because their number is 899.” She continued: “You have to take number 439 who is awful, but they are in the queue.” She lamented that new teachers cannot be selected based on competency first. Rather, the “next in line” mentality prevents good teachers from getting into the system at all. For Shelley and Shauna, this hiring strategy concerned them and, from their perspective, created low morale amongst teachers. This focus on the impact of the hiring process on the morale of teachers was a surprising outcome for my research.

**Professional development:** While not exclusively connected to school board decisions, Shauna questioned her school’s choice to emphasize teacher wellness in the workplace disproportionately to what she called “real” professional development. Logically, these initiatives should foster more positive morale and communicate the kind of emotional support teachers need to thrive in their workplace. Amabile and Kramer (2011) would argue that an
emphasis on wellness fulfills the “nourishment” factor necessary for good management.

However, for Shauna it was more what was not happening that made the school’s offer of a wellness program, specifically yoga, less appealing or vital to her as an educator. Shauna stated in colourful language:

I want them to shut the f--- up with wellness, please. I don’t want to play checkers; I don’t want to do yoga. I want to be able to come to work and do my job, and if I want yoga, I will have yoga time outside of my workplace....F--- the yoga, I don’t give a s--- about yoga, like f--- off with yoga. What would be kind of cool is maybe something related to our job. Like real professional development.

While wellness should be a concern for school boards in a profession with high rates of stress and mental strain (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004), the professional status of teachers was of equal concern to teachers and must be supported by “real” pedagogical development. For Shauna, her school’s priority on teacher wellness was indirectly a reflection of the school board’s failure to provide professional development that “related to her job.”

At Shelley’s school the teachers were undergoing intensive training for a new board initiative called blended learning. This professional development took place on professional activity (PA) days and often took up the entire day. Teachers were unhappy that the structure of these non-instructional days was prescribed by the administration. Several teachers believed it was more helpful to be given time to catch up with planning and marking or to work with subject departments on other initiatives. Many teachers expressed concern about the implementation of this new initiative (blended learning) in a school where technology was not consistently available and the internet was slow. The effort it would take to implement the new initiative seemed too demanding to the teachers, and they were not convinced that this new initiative would yield the promised results in their students’ learning that the board espoused. Consequently, the
professional development taking place at Shelley’s school did not meet the teachers’ perceived needs and came across as a board dictum that administration was required to implement.

Neither Shelley nor Shauna was satisfied with the professional development opportunities taking place at their schools. At Shauna’s school there was a lack of “real” professional development that improved the teacher’s pedagogical skills, and the focus was, instead, solely on teacher wellness. At Shelley’s school the teachers felt their needs were not served by the amount of professional development required for a board initiative that teachers were not convinced would work. Leithwood (2006) has said the “most influential district-level working condition for teachers is access to meaningful professional development” (p. 64-5). In fact, his research has shown that relevant professional development was connected directly to “teacher morale, organizational commitment,” and “engagement in the school and the profession” (Leithwood, 2006, p. 75). My teacher interviewees experienced a strong disconnect between what they perceived to be their real needs as teachers for meaningful professional development and what their school or school board was actually providing. This disconnect had a negative effect on their inner work life or morale because it did not address the real classroom needs that they might identify.

**Systemic Contributors: The Union**

Shelley and Shauna had different perspectives on the impact of the union on the teacher’s morale. Shelley spoke of the importance of unions and referenced a past school-wide complaint that the union had really helped to “get the paperwork going” to address how student discipline was handled by her administration. Shauna, on the other hand, described her school as a “very militant union school” with a branch executive run more like a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”
Shauna questioned who “would get involved with [her] union on site” because according to Shauna, “that is the group that is toxic.”

Shelley believed that the decision made in 1998 to create separate unions for the teachers and the principals and vice principals was the “biggest mistake we ever made.” Shelley voiced her view that this decision was strategic and was done intentionally to create an “us versus them mentality.” She could not fathom how people working in the same building and for the same purposes, to teach and support all learners, should end up often working against one another. Shelley believed that if educators were “getting pressured, we should be getting pressured from the same places, not from different places.” She used terms like “weird” and “divisive” to describe the separate meetings principals and teachers held and described rumours circulating that a “spy” was passing on information from the teacher’s meetings to the administration. Shelley recalled “the old days” when principals and teachers were in the same union and “all sat together” and “talked together” and fought together for the same purposes. Shelley stated, “You can’t divide us up like that and then expect things to work properly.”

Whether the union is the toxic and divisive element in the school as it was in Shauna’s school, or the union perpetuates an “us versus them” mentality as Shelley perceived, it was clear that the union was a systemic force that reinforced divisiveness and suspicion within the workplace that was not conducive to fostering positive morale amongst educators.

The discussion with two teachers about the systemic contributors to the demoralization of Ontario educators yielded interesting results, yet it did not meet my expectations of being a significant cause for the demoralization of educators. What the teacher interviews revealed was that it was the everyday workplace and the contextual and conceptual realities that were bred in
the workplace that caused the most difficulty to maintain positive morale for these two teachers. The next theme to be discussed is the contextual contributors to demoralization.

**Contextual Contributors**

The term “contextual” was used here to indicate those relational components within the teacher’s workplace identified as most impactful on teacher morale and surfaced through the teacher interviews. It was clear that the school climate and culture for the educator were primarily created and sustained by the quality of the teachers’ working relationships with the school administration, parents, and other teachers. Interestingly, while neither teacher identified students as a demoralizing force in their working worlds, they did identify that challenges with the student population can affect the quality of the collegial relationships among teachers at their schools. In fact, both teachers identified that in schools where the student population was more challenging, there was often more collegiality amongst teachers because as Shauna stated, the teachers were “in the trenches together.” However, a challenging student population did not necessarily determine the quality of relationship between the teachers and administration. A teacher could be in a difficult school with a “tough student population” and have excellent working relationships and morale with teacher colleagues but horrible interactions and morale with administration. Conversely, teachers could be placed in a relatively “easy” school determined by a less challenging student population, and the inter-teacher morale and collegiality was factious and “toxic” both amongst teachers and administration.

I begin with a brief discussion on how school climate and culture impacts morale followed by data from the teachers’ interviews on the impact of administration, parents, and inter-teacher relationships on morale. A comment about the impact of students on morale concludes this discussion of the contextual elements identified by these two teachers.
Contextual Contributors: School Culture or Climate

This research project used the OECD (2009) definition for school context: “the physical environment, the social system, relationships between principals, teacher and students, a sense of community, teacher and student morale, norms among peers, and safety” (p. 110). It is impossible to consider the school climate and culture independent of any of these contextual elements. The terms “culture” and “climate” are used to describe the operative norms within the school and what it “feels” like for teachers to work within those norms (Hancock & Scherff, 2010). School culture is created by the habitual choices made by all stakeholders in a school that create a set of defined norms accepted by the people who work, learn, and participate in the school environment. The school culture is the out-working of all relationships within the school. The school climate reflects how it feels to work and learn within the established culture of the school. The school culture and climate cannot exist separate from one another; the culture determines the climate and the climate feeds the culture. Based on the two teacher interviews, the systemic contributors to teacher morale—“the system,” the school board, and the union—were less impactful on their day-to-day morale than their relationships with administration, parents, and other teachers. However, all of these elements along with the student populations and the interviewees’ perception of the erosion of their professional identity made up what these teachers understood as the school culture or climate. For the purposes of this study, the broad use of culture and climate as understood by the teachers interviewed was used here to indicate how the blend of all the individual parts of what constitutes “school” have a combined effect on the teacher’s morale.

For Shelley, her current school presented great discipline challenges with the student population. The lack of support she and other teachers received from their administration in this
area eroded their morale because teachers found the administration ineffective at dealing with these discipline issues. The administration, in turn, questioned the teachers’ professional judgement. Teacher collegiality was, therefore, the survival strategy that enabled the teachers to continue working in a toxic environment.

At Shauna’s school the student population did not present a strong positive or negative influence on the school climate and culture as it related to teacher morale. However, Shauna identified past experience with school leadership that created an atmosphere where there was “buy in within the teaching body.” Shauna acknowledged that from her experience, a “tough environment” characterized by a more challenging student population, often brought “teachers together.” Shauna described her move to her current school several years prior: “So when I came here I was really surprised that the morale of the teachers was low when they had no behavioural problems. I was surprised that the morale was more sectarian. There were these factions and there wasn’t this sense that this is who we are as a school.” For Shauna, the absence of clear school vision and purpose at her current school was a strong factor in how she identified the demoralization of Ontario educators. In both Shelley’s and Shauna’s interviews, it was clear that the morale of the school climate and culture, regardless of how challenging the school population might be, was mostly determined by the quality of administrative leadership and “inter-teacher” relationships.

**Contextual Contributors: Administration**

Of all of the possible contributors to the demoralization of the two teachers interviewed, issues related to the administration at both schools were the most problematic. Shelley spoke about the disruption experienced every time new administration came into the school. She acknowledged that every principal or vice principal had distinct leadership styles that informed
their decision-making on many levels. Shelley wished administration would be more “sensitive” to teachers by conferring with teachers to learn about what had “happened in the past,” to find out what had worked and what had not. Thus far, Shelley’s experience with her administration insulted her as an educator.

According to Shelley, there was a lack of respect and support as well as a questioning of teaching practice that was offensive to the teachers in her school. She cited two questions she heard from administration which she found patronizing and demeaning to her years of teaching practice and experience: “What could you have done better?” and “How could you have solved that problem?” For Shelley, these questions were “insulting for somebody who’s been doing this for 20 years.” Shelley was told she did not have good classroom management practices. As a result, Shelley explained she did not feel she was a “good” teacher and that her “professional judgment was not respected.” Shelley also talked about the impact of administration not respecting the teacher’s time and that they expected teachers to give “210% to this job.” For Shelley, she likened this treatment to emphasizing the servant element of the term “civil servant,” creating “almost that servant mentality.” Shelley’s experience with the administration was not unique to her within that school. Shelley told of five or six teachers who “refused to do extra because ‘you’re telling me I’m no good anyways, so I’m going to show you I’m no good.’” In short, Shelley said that the teachers in her school did not always feel like they “matter.”

Shauna did not seem to face the same level of day-to-day insult from her administration, but the administrative situation in her school was not necessarily better. When asked what it was like to transition to new administration, Shauna responded, “It doesn’t feel like a transition to a new administration because there is never an administrator here, so there’s nothing to transition to.” The regular administrative turnover within her school created a sense that nothing changed
which led to Shauna’s conclusion that most administrators were essentially ineffective. From Shauna’s perspective, the administrators were “all nice enough people, but no one’s doing anything.” To Shauna, “principals [had] simply been a conduit for information from the board” and were powerless. She continued her description by saying “there isn’t a vision that is unique…there isn’t a direction they are going to take the school…there isn’t a lot of autonomy…they are technocrats.” Her sense of the administrator was that “they’re so out of touch,” she no longer saw them as “educators.”

While Shelley’s working relationship with her administration diminished her sense of efficacy as a teacher, Shauna concluded that administrators were board puppets with no efficacy as leaders in the school environment. However, Shelley and Shauna identified experiences with positive administration that informed their sense of what a good experience could look like where individual and corporate morale was palpable.

The most telling impact of positive leadership was in the use of language that Shelley, in particular, used to describe those positive experiences. Shelley remembered that her past administrator “let us run amazing leadership programs” and “let us explore all kinds of new opportunities, so we got to do amazing things.” She used phrases like “they let us,” and “so we got to do,” to underscore the administrator’s commitment to empower teachers to act on initiatives teachers found meaningful and purposeful within the learning environment.

Shauna described her experience at another school where there was “opportunity to participate meaningfully in new initiatives” and the whole school was “committed to the mission/vision statement” and “school success goals.” Shauna identified ownership and the “buy in” within that teaching body. She told of freedom to try new approaches to “delivering
curriculum” and “real acknowledgement and appreciation” and celebration of group achievements.

Empowered by past administration to act, initiate, explore, and experiment established for Shelley and Shauna a reference point to identify administration who had valued the teacher’s sense of ownership, efficacy, and competency as an educator. This positive standard stood in stark contrast to negative experiences with administration which, according to Shelley, “shut us down” and “didn’t let us do anything that entire year.”

School administration is the primary authoritative support structure for the teacher within the school. They establish the organizational climate that will either help or hinder morale by the culture of “consideration,” “coordination,” and “communication” they foster (Amabile & Kramer, 2011, p. 109). At Shelley’s school, her administration’s impact on the morale of the teaching staff resulted in a general lack of engagement amongst the teachers. In fact, it could be argued that the teachers at Shelley’s school were “actively disengaging” as a global Gallup Poll cites is the case for 14% of employees in Canada (2013). At Shauna’s school, the administrative turnover in the past nine years had proven to Shauna that administrators did not have any positive or negative impact on the school because they were essentially “weak” and powerless. Shauna even described one principal as “unable to perform his duties because he was drinking on the job.” From Shelley’s perspective, the most important quality for a principal was his/her “ability to relate to teachers” and her current administration had not succeeded at this all-important task. From Shauna’s perspective, if her school did not get new administration again within the next year and a half, teachers at her school would wonder, “What’s going on? Why’s he staying?”
Contextual Contributors: Parents

Shelley and Shauna had strong perspectives on the roles of parents in the education of their children and the impact these parents’ engagement, or lack of it, had on the morale of the educator. One of the first things Shauna said with emphasis at the start of the interview was, “Parents need to be accountable every single step of the way.” According to Shauna, “parents need to be here” and they “need to be part of the process of learning,” but parents are more likely to not meet that need. From Shauna’s perspective, these same parents really had “no understanding” of what their children do at school every day, even though, as far as Shauna was concerned, parents were “the only real partners teachers have.”

Shelley, on the other hand, believed that parents expected teachers to be “miracle workers.” Shelley perceived the attitude of parents to imply an impossible request: “Can you fix my child now?” From Shelley’s experience, parents “feel we fall short” and she felt that they “point the finger.” In Shelley’s case, “some have literally.” In one situation, a parent said to Shelley, “I pay your salary,” which added to Shelley’s sense that at her school, parents doubted the teachers’ collective “ability to teach.” Shelley described her feelings this way:

I’ve had parents even say, ‘I pay your salary.’ That’s insulting. Well, that may very well be true, because it is taxpayers’ dollars, but I also pay taxes and I contribute to society. Just because you contribute to society doesn’t mean that now you get to go and point the finger.

The guilt parents laid on Shelley about how she earned her teacher salary greatly insulted her and she concluded that teachers often “don’t feel like we matter.” For Shelley, the increased questioning of her professional competence she had experienced from some parents at her school reinforced her sense that teachers were “ultimately…blamed for a lot of society’s problems.” Shelley believed that this blame came from what she called “a very basic misconception which is
that everybody who has been in a classroom thinks they can teach.” From Shelley’s perspective, nothing could be further from the truth. She concluded: “You can’t be a teacher just because you’ve had a teacher.”

**Contextual Contributors: “Inter-teacher morale”**

In our interview, Shelley coined the phrase “inter-teacher morale” to describe the third most important contextual factor influencing teacher morale. Shelley was clear that her relationships with teachers were her “saving grace.” She stated often that because teachers may not get the support they need from their administration, teachers must seek out key relationships with other teachers in the school. Shelley described her colleagues: “I don’t know what I would do without them. They boost my morale up. They remind me that I am a good teacher.” Of course, there were a few teachers Shelley did not know well or did not look to for moral support. However, Shelley was most positive about her sense of well-being in the school environment when she talked about her relationships with other teachers.

Shauna, on the other hand, experienced a school environment where staff alignment and teacher factions were predominantly the norm. Shauna had experienced meaningful collegiality with teachers and the administration at other schools where she worked. She compared past experiences of collegiality with the staff room situation at her current school:

> My experience here was that it was very cliquish, which I didn’t find in the north because people were too busy doing stuff. We really didn’t sit in the staff room in the north….people would congregate in other people’s offices, like in the science office, or in your office or in a classroom, or you were doing sports, so there was less time to be around the water cooler. Because people were engaged in their day—doing. And when I came here there was an awful lot of time spent in the staff room where they had table cloths--this was shocking to me--they had table cloths and some people had table cloths and other people did not. And where the table cloth was, no one was allowed to sit except the people who had their china that they ate off of…
Shauna was repulsed by the symbolic use of the “table cloth” to indicate who was in and who was out in the teacher community at her school. As a result, she never ate in the staff room. Shauna also pointed to a sense of “class” that developed amongst teachers where certain subject areas considered themselves “more important than other subject areas.” For Shauna, morale was “mutual respect” and this respect was absent in her context. Where Shauna experienced positive relationships with teachers was in her own department who she had daily contact with. Otherwise, as she reflected on the general population of teachers at her school and the absence of a school-wide mission or vision that all of the teachers could buy into, she concluded, “It is hard to be collegial if there’s nothing to be collegial about.”

**Contextual Contributors: Students**

In spite of research that identifies student behaviour as a strong factor in the exhaustion teachers experience or even the potential for burnout (Buchanan, 2010; Chang, 2009), neither of the teachers interviewed identified the students as a strong determinant for low morale. Shelley frequently referred to discipline issues as a source of stress, but she did not blame the students. Rather, she viewed it as a problem for the administration to follow through on what was needed to address student behaviour.

**Conceptual Contributors**

Thus far, the interviews with the two teachers have given insight into the systemic and contextual realities that impact teacher morale. However, these structures and relationships are all shaped by and embedded within what all stakeholders in education believe to be true about those who are “on the front lines”—the classroom teacher. In other words, the concept of “teacher” and why they teach is a powerful influence on the positive or negative relationships at work within the context of school. The concepts of the teacher’s professional identity, the
expectations of teachers, and what constitutes the teachers concept of meaningful work—these “concepts” shape the educator’s morale.

Shelley and Shauna provided insight into what they saw as problematic for them as teachers in the conceptualization of their professional identity. The two teachers also discussed the impact of unreasonable or inaccurate expectations on them as teachers and how these expectations demoralized them in their work. Finally, based on how Shelley and Shauna defined their work as meaningful, this definition indicated just how much progress they thought they made on a day-to-day basis to succeed in their work, and especially, why they would keep bothering to teach in spite of the other realities that made that task difficult.

**Conceptual Contributors: The Erosion of Professional Identity**

For both teachers, the experience with various stakeholders in education who did not uphold the teacher’s professionalism impacted their morale greatly. A significant insight from both teacher interviews which precipitated a declining sense of professional identity was their perception of what motivates new teacher candidates to become teachers. Both teachers lamented the lack of “passion” or “commitment” in the new teachers they see hired by the board. It has already been discussed how the board’s hiring policies demoralized these teachers because the best teachers are not necessarily hired due to the “queue” mentality. However, Shauna and Shelley seemed especially to resent the fact that many people choose to go into teaching as what Shelley described, a “fall-back career.” Shauna stated categorically, “Stop treating this as your default profession…if you want to teach because you want to relive the glory days of your high school, then don’t do it. We need to stop hiring people like this.” Shauna continued to define the dangers of treating the teaching profession as a default career choice to being “like a bad marriage” which would inevitably “make you bitter.”
For Shelley, the fact that people choose to become teachers because “they want summers off” or they think their first career was “just too much work” or they did not get “enough holidays,” was perpetuating the old expression, “If you can’t do, teach.” Shelley’s response to this motivation for becoming an educator was, “That’s so insulting.” For both Shelley and Shauna, teaching was a profession that demanded a high level of commitment and the required passion to sustain that commitment. Shelley and Shauna doubted the commitment of many new teachers, especially those who were coming into teaching as a second or third career choice.

A second significant insight into how the erosion of professional identity affected teacher morale was the lack of empowerment and agency that these two teachers experienced in their day-to-day work. For Shelley, her administration reinforced this lack of empowerment by not supporting her professional judgment especially as it related to student discipline. Her administration threatened her professional identity by questioning her competency making her feel like she was “not a good teacher.” She described this cause-effect relationship as follows:

A student acts out in your class. You send them to the office; the office doesn’t handle it well. And you are blamed instead of the student being blamed and taking responsibility for their action…How do we shift it from blaming the teacher, to actually, I’m not saying blaming the student, I’m saying, listen, the student did this, this, and this, so the consequence will be this, this, and this.

Shelley was not empowered to make decisions regarding student behaviour that she considered inappropriate because she knew that administration would not uphold her judgments or at least provide a good reason for Shelley to reconsider her decision. When Shelley was asked what would help sustain her sense of professional competency she described her need from the administration to communicate, “You’ve got my back; you’re going to support me when I send a student down to the office. That’s the only thing I really need from you. Well, I guess, and not insulting me as a teacher. Please don’t tell me I don’t know how to do my job.”
For Shauna, this lack of empowerment and agency took a different shape. Shauna described the priorities of her administration to reflect a sense that educators “behave like we are on an assembly line.” From Shauna’s point of view, all administration cared about was “to make sure you have done your attendance, make sure you are here 15 minutes before or else,” and sadly, “no one cares what you do in between.” To Shauna, this perspective “trivializes the important things” and reduced everything else to “check in,” “do this,” or “do that,” and it is all “about the check marks.” Shauna also described the process to initiate extra-curricular events as now faced with responses from administration that favour, “I’m sorry, there’s legal liability. You can’t go on this particular trip.” The focus on legal liability restricted Shauna’s sense of agency as an educator who could initiate excellent learning experiences if administration was not so fearful.

**Conceptual Contributors: Expectations**

A second significant conceptual contributor to low morale amongst educators was the unreasonable expectations placed on these teachers. Shelley described her sense that as an educator she was not doing anything she was “supposed to be doing because…we’re expected to raise these kids.” Shelley expanded on these expectations to “raise these kids” and said, “We are expected to pick up the slack when parents haven’t done the kind of job they should.”

Shauna described the expectation that a teacher would make sure all menial requirements were completed but the quality of the instruction happening in her classroom was less important than ensuring attendance was taken. In response to how teachers were expected to relate to students Shauna stated, “I’m not here to parent and too many of our female colleagues, because we are in a feminized profession, are mothering these kids. They don’t need a mother.”
positive side, Shauna identified the “greater expectation” that teachers were to “model the behaviour they want to see in their students.”

Both teachers made almost identical statements about what should not be expected of the educator. Shauna stated, “We’re not social workers, we’re not psychiatrists, we’re not health care nurses…we’re not doing anything we’re supposed to be doing because…we’re expected to raise these kids.” Shelley described the pressure to be a psychologist, buddy, parent, and teacher, to “wear all these hats” when “technically, we’re just educators.” For both Shelley and Shauna, the sense of unreasonable expectations or to be, as Shelley described, “a miracle worker,” affected the level of frustration these teachers experienced on a daily basis.

**Conceptual Contributors: Meaningful Work**

The purpose for asking these teachers to describe what they identified as meaningful work was to better understand the discrepancy between what made these teachers feel satisfaction about their work and how they really felt most days at their work. For both Shelley and Shauna it was their work with students that defined their experience of meaningfulness in their work. Leithwood (2006) corroborated what these two teachers expressed when he stated the “intrinsic satisfactions” the teacher experienced when students learn actually “dominate(d)” all other “factors influencing teacher’s job satisfaction” (p. 27).

Shelley described the feeling when she saw students “get something” or when she saw them “turn around,” that this was what made her work “worth it.” It was the “one-on-one classroom experience” and “not the day-to-day drudgery, or the day-to-day paperwork, or the day-to-day dealing with administration” that made her work meaningful. Shelley also identified the value of extra-curricular activities that increased her job satisfaction because she believed it allowed for a “bigger bond socially” with the students and allowed for students to see her as a
“human being.” Shelley valued the opportunity to be a role model particularly as a lifelong “reader and learner.”

Shauna defined her understanding of her work as meaningful work when she said that it gave her the “opportunity to participate in helping young people see the possibilities for themselves.” Shauna saw that being “part of this process” of identifying possibilities for her students actually facilitated a “reciprocal” process where students also “shape you, and they help you see the world differently.” Shauna described her motivation to teach as part of the “engagement with students.” She described the surprise when a student “changed the way you saw your job” because they exceeded her expectations by “their drive, their motivation.” She concluded, “What is going on in your classroom--that is what’s meaningful.”

Strategies for Preserving Morale

Shelley and Shauna had different ways to preserve their own morale. Shelley chose to do the “four over five” option which her board offers. The “four over five” option involves accepting a salary equal to four years paid over five years where the fifth year is taken as a sabbatical. Shelley described her experience with her first “four over five,” saying she felt “like a brand new teacher”; her “optimism was back”; her desire to be helpful, her energy and her health were also improved. Shelley experienced a “new perspective” and said she wished “more teachers would do it.” She would continue to practice the “four over five” program so she would never get to the point of anger and bitterness she had witnessed in other teacher colleagues.

Shelley also identified the role of her personal beliefs in sustaining her sense of purpose as a teacher and to help her value students, “even the tough students.” Shelley described other teachers who protected their morale by putting up a “barrier” or a “wall” and she described those teachers to be “there but they were not there.” Shelley exhorted teachers to take care of their
mental health and to compartmentalize their work and home lives. She also said that teachers needed to learn to say “no” and to take time off when they needed to. Shelley concluded that many teachers by the end of their career are “really worn out and worn down…they almost resent the profession.” With so many factors to negotiate that contribute to the demoralization of the educator, strategies such as the four-over-five program would be sensible for all educators to consider at some point in their career.

Shauna had a different response to the idea of doing the “four-over-five.” She worried that she might never “come back, to be honest.” Instead, Shauna described her strategy as a decision to “compartmentalize” and when she was at school, it was a “physical compartmentalization.” Shauna had decided to “stay in [her] classroom” and “minimize what contact I have with the negative elements.” She chose not to be in the staff room and not to have discussions with “people who are going to be constantly bringing me down during the day.” This compartmentalization meant that when Shauna left the building for the day, her “job here is done.” Shauna also said that she had become “very comfortable” saying “no” even to students. Shauna exhibited a business-like approach to her teaching career that allowed for her to continue teaching in spite of a school context characterized by factious teacher relationships and weak administrative leadership.

The Principals’ Perspectives

The availability of data from three principals’ interviews to consider alongside two teachers’ interviews gave valuable opportunity to me, the researcher, to understand the demoralization of the Ontario educator from the perspective of those who play a significant role in shaping that morale in the workplace (Leithwood, 2006). As the chief administrator in a school, the principal establishes the workplace climate and culture in which the morale of the
educator is shaped and sustained. According to Amabile and Kramer (2011), what contributes to progress in the workplace is not “free food or athletic facilities” (p. 1) for the employees:

The secret is creating the conditions for great inner work life—the conditions that foster positive emotions, strong internal motivation, and favourable perceptions of colleagues and the work itself. Great inner work life is about the work, not the accoutrements. It starts with giving people something meaningful to accomplish. It requires giving clear goals, autonomy, help, and resources—what people need to make real progress in their daily work. And it depends on showing respect for ideas and the people who create them. (p. 1-2)

Creating the conditions for great inner work life or morale, as it is called in this research project, is the principal’s task if progress in the “business” of school is to be realized. For this reason, the data from the principals’ interviews was organized around the three “potent forces” (p. 6) identified by Amabile and Kramer as supporting “inner work life” or the morale of the educator: catalysts and nourishers; their respective opposites, inhibitors and toxins; and progress in meaningful work. These concepts are explained more fully after the principals who were interviewed are introduced.

The three Ontario principals interviewed for this research project were Laura, with about 35 years in education and 20 years as an elementary and middle school principal; Jan, with 25 years in education and about 15 years as an elementary and middle school principal; and Leo, around 35 years education and 20 years as a vice principal and principal at the secondary level. Two of these principals had received leadership awards; all three principals had led schools that served a high-risk population.

Jan founded a school before being strategically moved by her board to help “turn around” a school that had seen eight administrators in two years and served a challenging student population in a high-density, low income area. Leo’s school addressed the needs of its student
population so successfully that suspension rates in that school dropped by more than 100% over a four-year period. Passing rates of the EQAO literacy exam went from 50% to 80% in the same time period, and by the end of Leo’s tenure as principal at that school, they would “go two or three days where [they] wouldn’t see a kid out of a classroom.” Laura’s school was regularly visited by education experts who sought to understand the non-traditional practices employed to raise learning outcomes in a community where under-performance was more often the norm. Each principal could be a study on his or her own, but for the purposes of this research project, the most salient discussions related to teacher morale were included here for analysis.

In order to understand the principals’ perspectives on what demoralized the educator, I organized their data into three major themes. First, I discuss the negative contributors to morale which are called inhibitors and toxins. Second, I discuss positive contributors to morale which are called catalysts and nourishers which the principal specifically facilitates in the workplace. Third, I discuss what these principals described as meaningful work. These terms were borrowed from my theoretical framework created by Amabile and Kramer (2011).

Amabile and Kramer defined catalysts for progress to be the following seven components: setting clear goals, allowing autonomy, providing resources, giving enough time to complete a project, providing help with the work, learning from problems and successes, and allowing ideas to flow (p. 104-108). The exact opposite of these catalysts are what Amabile and Kramer called “inhibitors” which demoralize employees and prevent progress in meaningful work. Nourishers are those inter-personal components which Amabile and Kramer said would “infuse work with greater meaning” and foster the kind of “human connection” that “can inspire people to ‘go the extra mile for the team’” (p. 131). These nourishers are respect, encouragement, emotional support and affiliation (or a sense of belonging) and the opposite of
these nourishers is what the authors call toxins: “disrespect, discouragement, emotional neglect, and antagonism” (Amabile & Kramer, p. 133). A third component to my theoretical framework which shaped my research was how teachers and principals identify their work as meaningful (or not). Amabile and Kramer added that “the secret to amazing performance is empowering talented people to succeed at meaningful work” (p. 2). In fact, the authors identified the “progress principle” to be the following: “of all the positive events that influence inner work life (morale), the single most powerful is progress in meaningful work” (p. 76-77). Consequently, the perspectives of the principals regarding the systemic, contextual, and conceptual contributors to the demoralization of the educator will be discussed under three appropriate headings: inhibitors and toxins, catalysts and nourishers, and meaningful work.

**Inhibitors and Toxins**

As already described, inhibitors are those practices which demoralize employees and prevent progress in meaningful work. Toxins are what make the human connections at work nearly impossible. The principals shared their perspectives on what they viewed as the specific inhibitors and toxins that affected the educators in their care.

**Systemic Contributors: “The System”**

Not unlike the teachers, the principals did not view “the system” as significant to the morale of teachers as initially expected by my research question. In fact, Leo made this insignificance even clearer by saying, “I think that there has been so much nonsense from governments and ministry and stuff like that over so many years, most teachers simply tune it out.” Laura believed that while teachers did “get bad press in the press,” she cautioned “blaming the system” for a teacher’s demoralization because as an educator, “you are what you are when you come to work.” For Laura, the personal responsibility an educator bears for establishing their
own morale meant that the kind of person they were and what they brought into their workplace was far more impactful on the teacher’s morale than any factors far removed from the day-to-day workings of the educator’s life.

Leo provided important insight into the connection between what the Ministry of Education prioritizes from afar and the impact those priorities had on the effectiveness and morale of classroom teachers. Leo explained there had been as many as 25 ministry-related initiatives in the last eight or nine years of his principal-ship that had significant impact on classroom teaching. He believed these initiatives functioned as inhibitors for the teachers’ sense of efficacy because before they could feel competent at one initiative, another was already introduced. Leo reasoned:

"Teachers never get a chance to feel good about what they’re doing, and part of feeling valued is feeling competent…you have to feel that you have a level of competency….I think what we did is we got teachers really ticked off and we got teachers walking around feeling like ‘holy crap’ like I can’t do any of this stuff right. I’m doing a bit of this; I’m doing a bit of that; and it’s like I’m a whirling dervish and I never settle to really do.

Leo called these edicts from afar, the “ominous Thou shalt” from the Ministry. Leo drew an important causal relationship between the boundless initiatives that come from the Ministry, several layers removed from the everyday classroom, and the impact these initiatives and their mandated expectations had on the classroom teacher. Leo’s insight is supported by Leithwood (2006) who found that the “teacher’s job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and continuing engagement in the school or profession are seriously eroded when the pace of externally initiated changes seems too rapid” (p. 66). This erosion was especially possible when the amount of time to learn and “implement” these initiatives seemed too laborious (Leithwood, 2008, p. 66). The classroom teacher never had the opportunity to fully develop a sense of
competency with a current initiative before another one was mandated and then another and then another. The teacher’s efficacy and competency was at stake, and demoralization was precipitated by the system’s distant and frequent edicts.

**Systemic Contributors: The School Board**

One assumption I made in my initial research question was that the principals felt undue pressure from their individual school boards and that the school boards would be a demoralizing factor at least for the principal, if not for the classroom teacher. I anticipated learning that school boards were a primary inhibitor to progress for the educator. However, each of the principals did not perceive the school board as a factor in their own demoralization or even, directly, that of their teachers. From Leo’s perspective, “Most teachers don’t have a particularly high opinion of their board and sort of see them over there. They’ve been out of the classroom so long, what would they know? They don’t know much anyway.” When asked what pressures she felt from her school board, Laura replied emphatically, “I don’t feel any pressure. I don’t feel any pressure...I don’t feel ANY.PRESSURE.AT.ALL” (her emphasis).

Both Laura and Jan viewed themselves as agents of the board. Laura took her board “agency” in the school to literally mean that if a teacher said, “I feel I need to go to the board of education,” Laura told them, “I am the board of education.” When asked to clarify her meaning of this last statement, Laura assured me that she did not mean this in a sarcastic sense but in the truest sense, that she literally represented the school board in her school.

Leo never described himself as an agent of the board. Rather, he used the analogy of a funnel to describe his role of being that mediator between the board and his teachers. Leo’s description was in contrast to what Shauna described as her perception of the principal as a
conduit for the board where if the board says A, B, C, and D, the principal does A, B, C, and D.

Instead, Leo gave this important analogy to describe his role as the principal:

And what happens is there’s all these people sitting around at the board and ministry level and they are all throwing things into that funnel. The problem is that they’re not communicating with each other and so they don’t know how much is going into the funnel and they don’t know how repetitive it is, and yet it’s all coming down to the school. And I think that’s wrong. I think part of the job of the principal has become, if you’re a good principal and care about your staff, is that funnel is over your desk. And before it goes anywhere else, you go, “Yep, nope, nope, nope” and that’s how you protect your staff and say I value your time and I value you as people.

Leo considered the value of each initiative; however, he first looked for evidence that it was already happening in his school even though it might look different to the board’s description. Leo refused to be a puppet of the board or the ministry, or a “conduit” as Shauna described her experience with most principals; instead, he chose to act in favour of what was best for his staff and students first.

Perhaps the most profound link between the school board and the morale of the educator was evident when Leo talked about what he considered to be the basic flawed assumption that school boards and the ministry make about the resiliency of good teachers. Leo pointed out that “even in the most difficult circumstances, good teachers continue to be good teachers.” Good teachers “continue to do the right things and they continue to do what is best for the kids.” According to Leo, the board, the ministry, and even the union assumed “that no matter how much crap we [the board and the ministry] give you [the good teacher], we know you’re a good teacher, therefore, you’re going to keep chugging right along. No matter how few resources we give you, you’re going to find a way to work with it.” Leo concluded with the powerful statement, “and good teachers do” because the union and the school board know “ultimately
they’re not going to walk out the door…good teachers are not going to stop doing a good job for
the kids because the kids are their priority.” Leo asked the question, “But in treating them
[teachers] that way, do we demoralize them? Absolutely, because do you want to be taken
advantage of just because you are a generous person?” From Leo’s perspective, this
presumptuous attitude on the part of the board, the ministry, and the union made light of the
teacher’s good will and took for granted their ongoing commitment to teach well even though the
cost might be great for that individual teacher. Not only did this presumption of the teacher’s
good will become an inhibitor to progress, it also became toxic fodder for the demoralization of
the educator.

Systemic Contributors: The Union

Of the three systemic contributors to the demoralization of Ontario educators, the “union”
(most often in reference to the teachers’ union) seemed to be the most toxic systemic reality
which both the principal and the teacher had to negotiate. All three principals had strong words
for the role of the teacher’s union, especially, in demoralizing educators on all levels. Laura
described the union as having “more power,” although Leo described the teacher’s union, in
particular, as “de-fanged.” With more decisions for funding coming from the provincial
government, the unions have less to say about the use of money in education. However, from
Leo’s perspective, the unions more than made up for this monetary powerlessness by wielding
clout in the area of grievances. Leo recalled an experience where he questioned a union official
on why they would choose to grieve what Leo described as a “silly grievance.” He quoted the
union official saying, “We grieve everything, no matter what it is.” Leo told the story of a
teacher who made an unauthorized personal purchase on the school credit card, and when Leo
examined the credit card statements, he found this wrongful purchase. Leo put a disciplinary
letter in the teacher’s file; the union grieved it and won. From Leo’s perspective, when teachers see the union grieving wrong actions on the part of teachers, he did not think teachers see the union as “serving them well any longer.”

Jan described the union as “far more militant than it once was.” She lamented the change in union focus from what she deemed as more important issues pertaining to working conditions, student needs, or even leadership conflicts to now “it’s become about minutes of duty.” Jan was quick to state she understood the validity of the concerns for minutes of duty and she upheld the teacher’s contract faithfully, but she felt the focus of the union was no longer on the most important details of education.

Laura believed unions were good “because you do have principals and you do have situations where teachers are taken advantage of.” However, while Laura worked to treat the union stewards at her school with “lots of respect,” in a telephone conversation to clarify points in the initial interview, Laura disclosed that in her opinion, “the people involved in unions are usually your worst teachers.” She described one of her union stewards as “very pushy” and “she runs around looking for business.” Laura explained she read the collective agreement and her own union stewards did not. In fact, she said, “I know their collective agreement better than they do.” For this principal, the ongoing negotiation of relationship with the union representatives of her school required her to be “very direct…and very polite.”

From Leo’s perspective, “unions are part of that animosity that exists between teachers and administration.” Similar to Shelley, the teacher, Leo diagnosed the rift that has “grown and grown” between teachers and administration to be the fault of the union. He concluded: “The unions very much, the federations very much, wants teachers to see their principals and vice principals as on the other side of any issue.” While Leo was uncertain that there could be a
different way to address the different needs of teachers and administration, he believed that this divide perpetuated an “us and them” mentality and was demoralizing and detrimental to the progress desired in education, and specifically at the local school level.

**Conceptual Contributors: Teacher’s Professional Identity**

Laura believed that teaching “is a calling” and not simply “a job” or a “profession.” She explained that if a teacher “wants summers off and that, this is not the profession, because we are looking for competence, and passion, and care and commitment to growth, and if [the teacher] is prepared for those, then [the teacher] is welcome to try; otherwise [that teacher] can find something else to do.” She described a teacher in her workplace who “desperately wants out of teaching,” and Laura diagnosed that teacher’s problem as “they’re lazy; they won’t do what they are asked,” which was a specific reference to the expectation that the teacher should be on time at work. The teacher’s response was that the school “starts too early.” In a follow-up telephone interview, Laura stated that she strongly disliked teachers who were “whiners.” This strong dislike matched Laura’s expectation of her teachers to “give their best” and she would, in turn, “grow them.” Laura also believed that some teachers had a “perfectionist trait within” and some teachers “want to get promoted, so they think they need to do twenty things which they don’t need to do.” These teachers tended to “get on every committee” and Laura’s response to them was “less is more.” Laura had high expectations of her teachers and of herself. It would seem logical to conclude that Laura distilled her understanding of the professional identity of a teacher in her “look for” in new teacher hires: competency, passion, care and commitment to growth.

Like the teachers, Jan also believed that some people choose the teaching profession because “it is safe.” These teachers think, “I’ve been in the system 12 or 13 years; I know it.” However, Jan observed that these teachers thought they were getting into an easy and safe
profession but found out that “it’s not as simple as what it looked like from the student’s seat.” Jan described the teacher’s professional identity as positively affected when all stakeholders “acknowledge teacher judgement,” and hold high expectations for professional behaviour by not expecting teachers to sign in at the office in the morning. She believed that this act of “signing in,” which was an expectation in place at her current school, “eliminates their professionalism and treats them like children.”

Leo’s concept of the teacher’s professional identity lay in his belief that teachers needed to value what they did as educators because “what [teachers] do is one of the most important things anybody does.” He made the point that “all other professions are a result of good teaching.” He fundamentally believed that the “majority of people going into teaching do it for the right reasons and their right motivations and bring the right things to the job.” For those who deemed teaching a profession that did not require much effort, Leo said, “I’m surprised everybody doesn’t go into teaching if it’s such an easy piece of work.” While Leo had no difficulty acknowledging that “the people who go into teaching…really care about kids and really want to help them,” he believed that this commitment and motivation was “getting beaten down at an earlier and earlier stage in the teaching career.” Supporting the teacher’s professional identity made it “so crucial to value and empower teachers to take ownership for their school, to take ownership for the kids in their school, to take ownership for everybody in the school.” For Leo, the teacher’s professional identity was only upheld when teachers were valued as educators.

How Principals Define and Address Morale

During the interviews with the principals, it was clear that they viewed the morale of their teaching staff as correlated with their own morale. As Leo put it, “happy teachers, happy kids” and that meant a happy principal. In this section, the principals’ understandings of the barriers
that exist for creating a positive workplace in the school are examined as well as how the
principals worked to foster positive morale in their schools.

**Barriers to a positive workplace:** Laura described the barriers to a positive workplace
to be more internal for the teacher. “You are what you are when you come to work,” said Laura.
For example, Laura talked about a teacher’s sense of entitlement as a barrier and said, “Some of
the barriers for teachers are assumptions they make that we [administration] should give them
everything; that they don’t have to do anything.” Laura talked about “inner barriers” such as the
desire for promotion as well as a perfectionist trait in many teachers. Laura also said that some
teachers “bring demoralization with them” and that it was “the burdens they bring” and the
“expectations they bring.” Laura stated, “demoralization is a co-constructed thing. It may be the
way your principal treat you; it may be the expectations of your board; but it may be what you
bring to the profession.” As noted earlier in this chapter, Laura described one of her staff who
“desperately wants out of teaching” and Laura pointed to this teacher’s laziness and
unwillingness to “do what they’re asked to do.” Laura shared that she had “a couple of people
here who are demoralized because they can’t get what they want.” It is important to note that
Laura did not identify demoralization amongst educators in Ontario as an issue she was
confronted with in her experience. Her conclusion was that if teachers were “motivated,”
“productive,” and “being supported,” there was no reason for them to be demoralized.
Consequently, for Laura, the barriers to a positive workplace were constructed by the inner
barriers that teachers brought with them and the morale of the teacher was primarily the
responsibility of the teacher to maintain by his/her commitment to excellence in their work as
educators.
Jan confirmed some of what Laura said when she described the biggest barriers to a positive workplace in a school as what is “happening personally, because you bring whatever happens at home with you, and if you don’t feel your needs are being heard, then it can affect your work.” Another internal barrier to positive morale for the educator, according to Jan, was how a teacher defined success. If a teacher was not living up to his or her own expectations, their sense of being “ineffectual” caused that educator to “lose heart.”

However, Jan did not focus as much on the personal responsibility a teacher has to be that positive force in the workplace. Rather, Jan knew that staff often “become aligned” and that all it takes is “one person, regardless of who they are” to poison the workplace. Jan described the effect of that one divisive person as “cancerous with their actions and words.” Jan also saw that when teachers feel isolated and alone because of the “structure of the school,” these were also barriers to a positive workplace.

For Leo, the number one barrier to a positive workplace was if any of the stakeholders within the school, the support staff, the teachers, the students, the facilities staff, did not feel that they were valued as people and valued for their particular contribution to the well-being of the school community. Leo discussed the way the role of the principal was viewed in education. He stated that principals were no longer the “master teacher in the building” but were “now managers who have to come in under budget at the end of the year.” He described the external priorities imposed on the principal as “manage your budget,” “manage your plan,” “manage your community,” “manage your staff” and do all of this “just like the guy at IBM does.” From Leo’s perspective the “one-on-one relationships, that caring, that concern, that humanity” was now relegated to “if you got time later, that’s okay.” He also believed that “too many principals have really lost touch themselves with teaching and because they are so managerially bent…as long as
there is no problem in the classroom and the test scores are reasonable, who cares what else is going on.”

From the perspectives of these three principals, the constant introduction of the next new initiative, the presumption on the part of administration upon the goodwill of the teacher to keep teaching no matter what demands were made of them, and the pettiness and divisiveness of the union were all inhibitors to progress, introducing toxic elements to the working environment at their schools. However, apart from the union, the three principals did not identify “the system” or the “school board” as primary sources of demoralization for the teacher. The principals’ data confirmed that it was the everyday work events that most impacted the educator’s morale. Consequently, the discussion now turns to the principals understanding of their own contribution to positive (or negative) morale in the workplace and what teachers bring to this reality as well.

**Catalysts and Nourishers**

According to Amabile and Kramer, there were three significant “climate forces” that determined whether an event in the workplace would be a catalyst or an inhibitor. These were: consideration for people and their ideas; coordination or collaboration; and clear, honest, respective, and free-flowing communication based on trust that indicates that “people and their ideas have value to the organization” (p. 109). Amabile and Kramer defined the organization’s climate as “the prevailing set of norms that shape the behavior and expectations of the people who work there” (p. 108). Based on the interviews with the three principals and the two teachers, it was clear that the vitality of the school context, while influenced greatly by the needs and challenges of the student population, was primarily determined by the leadership ethos and practices of the principal. Consequently, although a principal may espouse lofty goals for achieving positive and supportive impact on the school’s context, these ideals may, in fact, fall
short of his/her own perception of his/her effectiveness. How far these goals fall short of the principal’s own intentions may only be obvious to the teachers who worked under him/her and who view the gap between the principal’s ideals and actual realization of those ideals from a different lens.

**Contextual Contributors: School Culture or Climate**

Leo described his goal for his school was to foster a “climate of respect and dignity at all times.” What he desired was that “no matter what the encounter was, everybody walked away feeling respected and feeling their dignity was not being insulted, and that’s what we worked on.” From Leo’s perspective, “valued people tend to get along with each other because they don’t feel threatened. They don’t feel that they have to prove anything because they are all valued and they are all valued the same, whether you are the math teacher, the English teacher, whoever you are.” He continued by saying, “when staff feels valued, they want everybody to feel valued.” In fact, Leo asked the all-important question, “Why are we teaching people if we don’t value them?” Leo concluded his evaluation of his school context under his leadership and said, “People cared about what they did and the staff, I think, felt tremendously valued by the kids and the community.”

Clearly, Leo had a strong sense of nourishers such as respect, encouragement and emotional support that were required to create the kind of human connection that fostered positive inner work life or morale for his teaching staff and the school community. Past teachers spoke positively of their working relationship with Leo and their experience of positive morale under Leo’s leadership. It was not surprising that Leo concluded his description of the kind of working environment he fostered by stating, “by the time we were finished, we had very clearly demonstrated…there is a different way to do this thing we call education; there is a way which
reaches kids, gives people value, gives teachers a sense of empowerment and value; there’s a way to go about doing that. It doesn’t just happen.”

Jan described the school context she inherited a year prior to this interview as one that “did not have a positive reputation,” where “they had eight administrators in two years” which did not “build trust.” In fact, Jan believed that when she first showed up at the school, the staff and students thought, “Another principal? She’ll be gone in ten minutes.” She described the teachers at her school as choosing to “cocoon” during her first year there. Jan described these “excellent teachers” who “didn’t go beyond their own door very often” as “sympathetic but not necessarily empathetic or reaching beyond.” One year later, these same teachers were “all over each other’s classes all the time; they’re picking up the pieces; they are just seeing the greater need and going into it.” Consequently, when she saw “staff pulling together, seeing them happy and comfortable and eager to learn as a group,” Jan knew that her values of interdependence were being realized in spite of the initial odds that were not in her favour. The staff now worked as a team, learning to value one another and expressed that value for one another at staff meetings. For Jan, she believed that the teachers in her school were “ripe for that culture,” and stability as well as positive, supportive leadership made that transformation in the school culture possible. Jan provided the right catalysts and nourishers to encourage a shift in morale in a tough working environment where teachers had not known stability and support for several years.

Laura had an interesting perspective on her school context. She stated that, “as an administrator, you have a larger class of ‘children’; so I have 58 children, right—58 adult children.” This was an interesting way to envision one’s school and particularly one’s relationships to her staff. Laura explained she hoped that when her teachers “get up in the morning,” they were able to “say that this is the best place to come to work…that this is the best
place to deal with any problem,” and “I have the best support and I’m empowered.” Laura also stated, “we create the school culture by our expectations and the sort of people we hire and the sort of relationships we have with our clients, parents, and teachers.” Laura described the necessary “positive atmosphere” and the need to “treat people professionally,” “to give teachers opportunity,” being “transparent about the money,” and that all of these contextual factors would ensure that “the teachers feel empowered.” This empowerment is what Laura considered to be a significant catalyst for positive teacher morale in the workplace.

**Contextual Contributor: Administration**

Each of the principals had clear perceptions and interpretations of their roles as leaders in their schools. For the purpose of this study, only the connection between the principal’s role and the morale of the teachers they led was examined.

Laura believed that her job was “to clear the way so they [teachers] can teach.” She described her “number one job” to be “to help them be better instructional leaders in the classroom.” Laura added that it was her “job” and her “pleasure” to “provide professional growth opportunities.” However, Laura believed that teachers “also have responsibility to grow themselves” and she directed her teachers to the Ontario College of Teachers expectations to emphasize the teacher’s responsibility to grow as an educator. To Laura, this commitment to personal growth was not only a sure sign of positive morale in a teacher but a nourisher of that morale as well. She told her teachers, “Once you start to show initiative, I’ll be there.” What was interesting in Laura’s understanding of her role was the transactional nature of her relationship to her teachers. She stated, “So, it’s not just like, what are we doing, it’s what are they doing and how are we working together?” When asked about concrete ways she bolstered the morale of her staff, Laura responded, “I am here. I am visible. I open my school at 6
o’clock…normally my doors are open.” She endeavoured to respond to teachers as soon as possible when they came to her. She described her “turnaround time” as “good” and that she got “back to people.” Again, a reference to this transactional nature of her relationship with her teachers was clear when she stated, “No one can say in this building that I didn’t get back to them.” After describing herself as a model teacher for her teachers, she said, “So I do what I can to help them grow, and if they don’t want to, I move them on.”

Jan believed that one of her roles was to protect her teachers from “outside stressors.” She viewed the classroom as the place “where the real work happens.” Jan used the term “gatekeeper” to describe her role to negotiate the weight of expectations of the Ministry and school board on its teachers, as well as demands and expectations of parents and students. Jan recognized her “biggest impact” was on her staff and that “will impact the kids.” She believed in being “on call all the time” and “walking through classrooms and trouble-shooting all the time.” Jan concluded that “encouragement, acknowledgement and appreciation are what drive teachers” and it was her responsibility to make sure this support happened. Jan believed when people felt appreciated, “they will go to the nth degree.” She considered it her “job” to assure her teachers that she had “their back,” when dealing with a “difficult kid” or a “difficult parent.”

Leo described his role as the “priority has to be kids, staff, parents, community and then the paperwork and computer work…that got done when I had time to do it.” He described his task with the teachers in his school to be to, “guide them, empower them like crazy, encourage them, support them, listen to them, laugh with them, cry with them.” Again, like Jan, he believed that what he did as a principal was “never nearly as significant or as valuable” as the teachers who were “in the classroom with kids all the time.” Leo endeavoured to respect the teacher’s time to make the most of the school day and avoid keeping teachers to five o’clock. He
sought ideas from teachers and expected initiative, engagement, and action from them. Leo described the role of the effective principal as “you’re on call” and “you’re available.”

Leo looked for “ways to value teachers” and one of the most significant ways he did this was through fostering strong community partnerships. At the start of his leadership at his school, there were only one or two community agencies in partnership with the school. Within the first four years his school had increased community partnerships to “20 agencies working in the school, servicing kids and families.” For Leo, the significance of bringing in agencies that could deal effectively with the myriad of issues the teachers would identify in students or that students identified for themselves was that it gave the teachers a course of action to take. Leo saw these community partnerships as “helping teachers because you take that burden of being all things to each kid away from the teacher.” Leo took this community partnership to heart personally as he also described how he and the vice principal would take turns going to the local plaza at lunch time, hanging out with the students, talking to store owners to check up on the behaviour of the students. Without a doubt, healthy community was a high value for Leo and it showed concretely in his actions in and around school.

**Conceptual Contributors: Meaningful work**

Laura described her understanding of what made teaching meaningful as co-constructed within the workplace. She explained, “There are two roles here…it is what they [teachers] do to make it meaningful and it is what I do.” Laura described this co-construction as the “support and optimism I bring as a leader” and the “motivation that they have to improve themselves.” She continued, “So it’s not just like what are we doing, it’s what are they doing, and how are we working together.” Laura connected her commitment to “kids’ growth” and working hard to
“motivate your staff to work together for a common purpose” as two of her most important indicators of meaningfulness in her profession.

When Jan was asked what makes the teaching meaningful, she replied, “I know it’s so cliché, but you’re able to make the difference in the life of a child.” From Jan’s perspective, “you know it’s meaningful when you feel the successes of the kids, when you feel the failures of the kids.” For Jan, she knew her work was meaningful “through the emotion” because she knew she felt the highs and lows because she cared. Jan also described the corporate sense of what made teaching meaningful work as a “two-way street.” All educators “give meaning” to the work, and as a result, if that sense of meaningfulness was worthy enough, all educators “gain meaning” from their work.

Leo described his understanding of what made teaching meaningful work as a symbiotic relationship with his teachers. He described it this way: “If my staff is happy and my kids are happy, what more do I want? I’m on Cloud Nine.” Leo described a staff meeting after about six months as the new principal at his high school where he asked his staff a question:

"When you got out of bed this morning and you decided you were coming here to work today, how did that make you feel? Did you start feeling different about it or did you say, aw crap, another day at the nut house? Because, you know what, that’s really important. That’s really, really important and it should be really important to you because it’s really important to me."

One of his teachers admitted that they “didn’t feel that great about it.” Leo did not expect that he and his staff would “solve the problems of the world in a day.” But from Leo’s perspective, “we have to at least feel that we’re doing something. We have to start.” He invited the teachers to bring ideas to him, sit with him and talk with him, bring him into their teaching worlds and the positive and negative components of those worlds. Leo concluded with, “And so we did, and it was amazing, when you give people the power to bring forward thought and ideas they have.”
According to Leo, what made teaching meaningful work was when administration understood that “teachers are not the enemy.” Continuing along the lines of the metaphor of symbiosis, Leo stated, “And even if that’s only from a purely selfish view, as a principal, you’re never going to look good unless your staff makes you look good. I mean, my staff made me look so good it was sad [laughs].”

Summary

In these findings the teachers’ perspectives have been presented on the systemic, workplace, and personal contributors to their demoralization as Ontario educators. The teachers’ conceptualization of meaningful work and their strategies for preserving their morale were also discussed. Furthermore, the principals’ perspectives have been detailed in terms of the inhibitors and toxins or catalysts and nourishers they identified and practiced as leaders within Ontario’s education context. As with the teachers, the principals’ conceptualization of teaching as meaningful work was also examined. In Chapter Five, using these multiple findings from my interview participants, I synthesize the most important learnings I believe offer fresh insight into what should be considered significant to the demoralization of the educator in Ontario.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Comparing factors for low morale the teachers identified to the factors the principals identified gives me welcome insight into what should encourage positive morale in the educator’s workplace. I first discuss select findings I consider most relevant to the discussion, first focusing on the teachers’ data and then the principals’ data. I then present strategies for preserving morale as described explicitly by the teachers and inferred by the principals. Finally, I conclude the study with a discussion of the seven most important findings that respond to my research question: From the perspectives of three Ontario principals and two Ontario teachers, what are the contributors to the demoralization of Ontario educators?

The Teachers

The two teachers interviewed for this study identified from their experience the following ten factors to be true about their demoralization as an Ontario educator:

1. The board and ministry levels within the broader education system are too far removed from the everyday life of the classroom teacher to have a dominant impact on her morale. It is the everyday work events at the local school level that most shape the inner work life of the educator (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

2. The current uncertainty that surrounds school closures and possible job loss even for veteran teachers has created significant insecurity within the profession.

3. The current application of Ontario Regulation 274/12 is a significant demoralizing factor because it does not ensure the most competent, passionate teachers are hired. Experienced teachers also have no voice in determining the professional quality of the teaching staff at their school because their recommendations are not required.
4. The professional development these teachers receive is either not applicable to their instructional development or considered impractical when paired with board-level initiatives not predicted by classroom teachers to succeed.

5. The unionized workplace creates an “us versus them” mentality that hampers the cohesive and collegial approach required to make education work, especially for the well-being of the students.

6. The most significant workplace contributor to the morale of the classroom teacher is the relationship with administration, specifically the principal.

7. Parents expect teachers to be “miracle workers” and to “fix” all their child’s woes—academically, socially and emotionally. As a result, teachers get blamed for the ongoing challenges of these “problem” students.

8. Inter-teacher relationships have potential to be the primary stabilizing factor within a toxic work environment. However, these same relationships can be exclusive and aligned, forcing teachers to resort to physical compartmentalization away from negative staff in order to protect morale.

9. A key source of demoralization is the perceived erosion of the teacher’s professional identity. This erosion is especially connected to the prevalence of second and third career teachers who, from the perspectives of my interviewees, do not become teachers because of the nobility of the work but because of the perceived “perks”—summers off, good retirement package, home by 3:30 p.m., and so forth.

10. Unrealistic expectations placed on teachers to be social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, health care nurses, a “buddy” or parent are demoralizing.
For the purposes of more in-depth analysis, only the most significant findings from these ten factors will be discussed in detail.

**Hiring Protocol – Ontario Regulation 274/12**

Both teachers identified their board’s hiring process for new teachers as a source of demoralization for them. Shauna’s description of the “take a number” and “next in line” mentality meant that she could not lend her voice to recommend a teacher she thought would be excellent in the classroom. The hierarchical decision-making structures that govern hiring did not give Shauna the personal investment she would value into what the future of education would look like at her school. Shelley felt that the frequent shifting of a Long Term Occasional (LTO) teacher created instability, not only for the new teacher, but especially for the students who could have one LTO for a few months and then another teacher to finish off the semester. Both Shelley and Shauna saw the disengagement of the local teacher from the process of recommending a new teacher for hire as often preventing schools from procuring the best teachers for the job.

**Professional Development**

The teachers interviewed described the kind of professional development offered at their schools as a trigger for frustration and exasperation. For Shelley, no choice for the teachers in terms of what they might do on their professional development days made her and other teachers more resistant to the learning they were forced to do because the board was “rolling out” a new initiative. Shelley was skeptical that this new initiative would work; it seemed like one more task to do on top of the many other tasks she already had pressure to complete. For Shelley, her professional development was impractical.
The professional development at Shauna’s school was not targeted to make teachers better instructional leaders and was, in her opinion, unrelated to her job as a teacher. For both teachers, the disconnect between the priorities of those determining their professional development content and the perceived needs of the classroom teacher created a barrier to the real growth and development of the educator.

The Union

The “union” (a term used to generically refer to the teachers’ union mostly and sometimes collectively to include the principals’ union) was seen almost as a “necessary evil.” Both teachers realized there was a need for unions to reinforce with administration the rights and needs of teachers. However, from Shelley’s perspective, the decision to create two separate unions was one that now fostered an “us and them” mentality within the local school. She identified a division between two of the key stakeholders in school that should be united because they are both working with the same clientele. For Shelley, this division was demoralizing and does not encourage the kind of team mentality she valued. In Shauna’s opinion, the most toxic teachers are the union stewards in the school. They can be the most divisive and demoralizing factors in the school environment.

The Principal

More than any other factor that affected the morale of the teacher was the teacher’s perception of and working relationship with their principal. Admittedly, the teachers interviewed in this research project reflected mostly on their most recent experiences with poor principals even though each teacher knew what it was like to work with a “good” principal. The teachers identified several key demoralizing factors related to the educator’s working relationship with the principal. The most significant was the principal’s questioning of the teacher’s pedagogy and
classroom management. Experienced teachers were told they were not good classroom managers, and several teachers at one school were actively disengaging from their work. Being asked, “What could you do better next time?” was not perceived as constructive but patronizing and demeaning. Experienced teachers in Shelley’s school did not believe the principal respected their professional judgment shaped by years of experience.

Shauna described principals as essentially ineffective because there was never a principal in the position long enough to effect any change in her school. She also saw the principals as conduits for the board, not exercising their own creative initiative to respond to the unique needs of her school. Both teachers viewed their current principals as essentially out of touch with the classroom, ineffectual leaders, and weak and powerless especially when it came to acting on student discipline issues. Bouchamma (2012) corroborated this priority that principals must establish clear standards for student behaviour in order for teachers to feel supported.

It was insightful to examine the difference in language used by the teachers when they spoke positively of good principals in the past. Phrases such as “they let us” and “we got to” were used in stark contrast to “shut us down” or “didn’t let us do anything.” According to these two teachers, good principals allow teachers to participate in meaningful initiatives, to explore new curriculum ideas, to act and make decisions, and to demonstrate ownership for school-wide goals through active and willing participation. Shelley and Shauna clearly articulated their position on what a good or inadequate principal embodied. In Shelley’s case, her current principal was an active agent in her demoralization. For Shauna, the principal was not a strong factor in her demoralization because she did not expect the principal to exercise any power to effect either positive or negative change in the school.
“Inter-teacher morale”

Relationships with other teachers are significant to the healthy morale of the educator on a day-to-day basis (Parker, Grenville and Flessa, 2011). For Shelley, relationships with teacher-colleagues in her current situation helped her to persevere and to do her best for her students. For Shauna, because of initial experiences of classism and exclusivism within the teaching body at her school, she chose to stay away from most of the staff at her school and only spent time with those who she knew would support her morale. The lack of cohesive vision at her school made it difficult for her to know what there was to be unified about. It is interesting that in Shelley’s situation, positive relationships with other teachers help her survive under difficult administration; whereas in Shauna’s situation, her selective relationships with other teachers prioritizes surviving a fragmented, directionless school situation.

Erosion of Professional Identity

For both teachers, one of the most significant sources of demoralization was what they defined as the “erosion” of their professional identity as teachers. Beck and Kosnick (2014) have confirmed the correlation between professional identity and teacher efficacy. Day (2008) has also underscored the connection between “positive professional identity” and the teacher’s “job satisfaction” (p. 257). Part of this erosion is inherent in the way the administration does not support teachers in classroom decisions, especially related to student discipline issues. As well, Shauna’s view that her principal only cared about the attendance sheet demeaned her sense of professionalism.

Interestingly, both teachers talked about the quality of the new teachers coming into the system. It was insulting to both teachers that many new teacher candidates were, in their estimation, treating the teaching profession as a default profession. Shelley and Shauna felt that
their professional identity was undermined when someone decided to become a teacher as a second or third career choice. To them, it communicated that either these new teaching candidates wanted what they perceived as perks in education (summers off, retirement package) or they thought that teaching would be much easier than their first or second careers. This less noble conceptualization of the teacher’s professional identity affected both teachers’ sense of doing worthwhile and meaningful work. In other words, the noble work of being a teacher is one of the reasons why these two teachers “bother” to teach!

**Expectations**

As expected in my research, unreasonable expectations placed on teachers by administration and parents, in particular, were an ongoing source of demoralization. What was interesting was how these expectations were named similarly by both teachers. Both teachers almost mimicked one another’s answers when they said that they were not social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, health care nurses, a buddy, friend or a parent. They were educators. The expectation that these teachers should be the “first responders” (ATA, 2014, p. 11) to meet the myriad of social and emotional needs of each student and ensure the academic success of each student was a source of discouragement and frustration. These unrealistic expectations often prevented these teachers from getting involved because they either felt inadequate to the need or their school administration did not provide recourse for the teachers to connect students with the appropriate community resources. This particular finding makes the issue of community partnerships as highlighted by one of the principals a key requirement to foster morale in the teacher’s workplace.
The Principals

The three principals interviewed identified the following six contributors to the demoralization of the Ontario educator as understood from their leadership perspective within the school.

1. The number and frequency of initiatives introduced by the Ministry of Education or the school board do not support the teacher’s sense of competency, thereby demoralizing them through a diminished sense of efficacy in the classroom.

2. Related to the number of initiatives imposed upon the teacher is the systemic “presumption upon” the ongoing resiliency of the classroom teacher which presumes that “good teachers will continue to be good teachers” and will “continue to do the right things” and “do what is best for the kids” no matter what is required of them (as stated by Leo).

3. The existence of separate “teacher” unions within the same school building has perpetuated an “us versus them” mentality between the classroom teacher and the administrator.

4. The teacher’s professional identity is affected by the public’s perception of teacher efficacy. As well, professional identity is shaped both by what the teacher does to act professionally and what the administrator does to respect that professionalism. Both contributions either support or undermine the educator’s morale in significant ways.

5. What teachers bring into their work from their personal lives is a significant contributor to their own demoralization.
6. Building relationships based on respect and value for all stakeholders in a school as the primary means for achieving true progress in education has given way to a managerial mindset that makes managing the school budget and raising EQAO scores the bottom line.

Again, only the most salient contributors will be discussed in detail for this analysis.

The “Initiatives”

The principals’ views of the impact of “the system” on the teacher’s morale were the same as the teachers interviewed. These educators at the local public school level considered the Ministry of Education or the school board not significant enough to the everyday working of the school to be a direct cause for demoralization of the educator. However, one principal highlighted an important systemic impact on the classroom teacher in the number of initiatives the Ministry and school boards expect schools and teachers to implement. Leithwood (2006) described this obsession with initiatives as an infatuation with change that is not proactive but reactive to the pressure to reform quickly. Because of the frequency as well as the fact that often there are similar initiatives already going on in the school, a principal who implements these initiatives indiscriminately undermines his/her teachers’ sense of competency. Teachers need time to feel competent at one initiative before another revision or version is introduced. Often, that adjustment time is not figured into the implementation process.

The Teacher’s Resiliency

Additionally, there is a general presumption upon the resiliency of the educator that is related to the expectations the board, the ministry and the union levels have of the classroom teachers. As one principal said, the union and the school board know “ultimately they’re [teachers] not going to walk out the door…good teachers are not going to stop doing a good job
PRESERVING THE EDUCATOR’S MORALE

for the kids because the kids are their priority.” As a result, teachers end up feeling mediocre at their tasks and taken advantage of because there is no acknowledgement of the individual cost that these endless initiatives exact from the teacher. In his study of Ontario educators, Leithwood (2006) concluded that it is the dictates from board and ministry level decision-makers that primarily create the “home” culture and climate for the teacher’s actual “working conditions” (p. 11).

The Union

It is significant to me that I had difficulty finding research that discussed the impact of the union on the morale of the Ontario educator. Therefore, I could not align my findings with research in my literature review. However, it was the one contributor that was talked about by all five participants with most references indicating its negative affect on morale within the school context. It is important to recognize that the principal negotiates a unique relationship with the union steward in his/her school. Therefore, the principals’ analysis of the effect of the union on the educator’s morale must acknowledge that the principal’s morale could be more regularly affected by the union than is the morale of the regular classroom teacher. Both the teachers and principals agreed that the creation of separate unions for school administration and teachers has perpetuated an antagonistic stance between the two parties often detrimental to the progress desired in a school environment. One principal even noted that often union stewards are the “worst” teachers on staff. According to the principal interviewees, the union feeds the animosity between teachers and administration, especially when the unions grieve every small infraction, whether justified or not.
The Professional Identity of the Teacher

One principal believed that professional development was a key factor to support the teacher’s professional identity. She spoke extensively about the need for teachers to grow themselves through professional development. From this principal’s perspective, there was too frequently an expectation from teachers that administration needed to provide opportunities without the teachers, first, demonstrating initiative with what was already at their disposal. She emphasized that teachers have the responsibility to live up to the ethos of the Ontario College of Teachers which expects its teachers to demonstrate commitment to growth and lifelong learning. Consequently, while the teachers interviewed in this project lamented the kind of professional development they received and deemed it either impractical or irrelevant, this principal observed that many teachers were not always fulfilling their own professional mandate to grow themselves. Consequently, teachers were undermining their own professional identity by their lack of attention to professional growth.

The principals shared many of the teachers’ perceptions of the threat that exists to uphold a positive professional identity, both because of the teacher’s own actions or because of unrealistic expectations from the public. One principal called out the unprofessional actions of teachers who were lazy or “whiners”. She noted a tendency toward perfectionism that causes teachers, in her opinion, to question their professional competency when they have not done things perfectly or to their own personal satisfaction. Another principal addressed the common notion that people assume they can be teachers just because they have been in the student’s seat for twelve or more years. This assumption that anyone can teach diminishes the sense of professionalism necessary for teachers to feel valued in their work. Finally, treating teachers as “minions” by making them sign in when they arrive in the morning is demeaning as one
principal described and communicates a lack of trust and respect for or even an expectation of professionalism. According to these principals, while teachers do sometimes act unprofessionally, they are more likely to be treated unprofessionally leading to demoralization.

**Strategies for Preserving Morale**

In this section, the workplace strategies for supporting healthy morale shared by both the principals and the teachers interviewed will be discussed.

The teachers suggested five strategies, four proactive and one reactive:

1. Take advantage of the “four over five” strategy; here the teacher receives the equivalent of four years of salary stretched over five years so that the fifth year can be taken as a sabbatical. Not only did one teacher interviewee describe this as her best proactive strategy to fortify her morale, but a teacher at another school candidly shared with me how the one year off completely rejuvenated her purpose as a teacher and restored her morale.

2. Know that it is okay to say “no”. Both teachers emphasized the importance of establishing boundaries related to how many extra hours to volunteer for extra-curricular activities, or even the ongoing availability to students which is often according to the student’s convenience and not the teacher’s. Establishing “realistic boundaries around…volunteer hours” is also one of the strategies suggested by Leithwood (2006, p. 78).

3. Look for healthy teacher relationships to rely upon at school and out of school. Other teachers committed to positive inter-teacher morale will often be the first ones (and sometimes the only ones) to affirm the teacher’s efficacy in the classroom. Parker et
al., (2011) described the commitment to the “community of colleagues” as a promising sign of a healthy school (p. 137).

4. Prioritize the students and remember they are the “bottom line” at school. There will be plenty of school context reasons to grow discouraged as a teacher. However, if the primary focus is maintained that school exists for the good of the students, then good can be found in the act of teaching even in the most dire of school contexts.

5. There may come a time when the teacher must physically compartmentalize him or herself as a survival strategy in a toxic work environment. While this strategy is negative and more reactive to a demoralizing atmosphere, it reflects the unfortunate reality that some work contexts require so that the teacher can persist in doing good work.

The principals inferred the following strategies they practiced for preserving morale and countering the school’s tendency to “drift along” (Scherz, 2004, p. 52) when problems of morale are not addressed:

1. The principal plays a key role in supporting the morale of his/her teaching staff. Be visible and available to teachers and students alike. Value the teacher and demonstrate tangible appreciation for his/her classroom achievements and contribution to the school community. Respect the teacher’s time by scheduling meetings within working hours as much as possible. Acknowledge the personal lives of teachers, allowing them the necessary family time to meet personal needs. Actively seek out teachers’ ideas, initiative, and assessment to address needs within the school (see also Bouchamma, 2012).
2. Remember that demoralization is “co-constructed.” It is the combined effect of what people bring to the workplace and what might be negatively present within the workplace. It is what the teacher does and what the administrator does to either build or destroy morale together.

3. Be a funnel for the initiatives of the school board so as to protect teachers from unreasonable demands. In the same vein, protect teachers from as many outside stressors as possible by being that buffer between the public or the parent and the classroom teacher.

4. Recognize that teachers are multi-dimensional people with lives and interests outside of work; encourage teachers to view themselves this way as well.

5. Pursue strong community partnerships to empower teachers to respond to student need effectively. This last strategy will be explained in more detail below.

**Community partnerships**

One of the seven catalysts which Amabile and Kramer (2011) named as critical to progress in work is the provision of resources (p. 104). Arguably, resources are assumed to be necessary if work is to be accomplished, so Amabile and Kramer are stating the obvious. However, what is obvious in theory is not always reality in practice. During my practicums and in casual conversations with many teachers, the lack of resources especially related to technology was often discussed. However, the need both teachers shared in their interviews for which there seemed to be no immediate answer in their respective circumstances was the provision for the social, physical, and emotional needs of their students. One teacher stated she actually avoided “getting involved” because she would have no idea how to find the kind of help the particular student needed.
Principal Leo believed that the only way to get teachers to take ownership for what was happening in their classrooms and in the school as a whole was to give teachers a way to take action by linking students to the resources they needed. Both teachers interviewed stated they were not social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, community health nurses, and so forth. They expressed the overwhelming expectations they felt to be all things to each student. As a result, because these teachers knew their limitations and did not have any recourse for action they could take, they chose to avoid getting too involved with non-academic issues related to troubled students.

Canadian principals in a nation-wide study identified stronger community partnerships to be “urgently needed” in Canadian schools (ATA, 2014, p. 13). In Leo’s case, his school went from two community partnerships to twenty community partnerships during his tenure. Leo promoted strong relationships with community services and with the community around the school which freed up the teachers to teach but also to care, because they knew that they could get involved in a student’s problem and not have to fix that problem themselves. This “sense of community” is at the “heart of an excellent school” according to Parker, et al., (2011, p. 130). Building strong community partnerships within the public high school is a resource that cannot be underestimated in its power to meet the needs of students and foster meaningful agency for teachers (Leithwood, 2006).

**Meaningful work**

When I began this research project I was initially interested in why teachers teach and what keeps them teaching for the long haul. My presupposition was that when teachers lose a sense of their work being meaningful or worthwhile, they lose the heart to carry on. I wanted to
understand what makes teaching a meaningful enterprise for the individual teachers I would interview for my project.

As I continued to work on my theoretical framework for my research, I came across the work of Amabile and Kramer and their book *The Progress Principle* (2011). In their work they made a provocative statement which became the mooring for my research. They stated: “of all the positive events that influence inner work life, the single most powerful is progress in meaningful work” (p. 7). I decided to equate inner work life with the term morale because it was more understood by the teachers and principals I interviewed. I also did not want to make my teachers’ and principals’ data fit into a prescribed framework, and I was more interested to see if their data would corroborate what Amabile and Kramer claimed. I asked the two teachers and the three principals how they defined teaching as meaningful work.

For both teachers, it was the work they did with students that made teaching meaningful to them. Both teachers described the reward they experienced when a student would either “get something” for the first time or demonstrate capabilities beyond the teacher’s expectations. Both teachers talked about the potential for students to shape the teacher and not just the other way around. Positive student outcomes provided the all-important “moral rewards” (Santoro, 2011, p.1) vital to these teachers’ healthy morale.

The principals’ concept of teaching as meaningful work was not restricted to the classroom which reflected their leadership roles within the school. One principal believed that teaching as meaningful work is co-constructed by the teachers who do their job well in the classroom and the principal who supports the teachers and works with them for the common purpose of educating the learner. Similarly, another principal said that meaningfulness in teaching is a two-way street: the teacher makes the work meaningful by what he/she invests in
the job, and the teacher gains a sense of meaningfulness from their work when they see results that confirm their investment was worthwhile. The third principal believed teachers derive meaning from their work if their level of satisfaction reflects their sense of value as autonomous educators allowed to participate creatively as change agents in their local school.

Amabile and Kramer (2011) stated that the “inner work life effect” or the effect of positive morale meant that “people do better work when they are happy, have positive views of their organization and its people, and are motivated primarily by the work itself” (p. 47). Teachers will not be motivated to work to their best potential if they do not believe the work they are doing is worthwhile. Good teachers will continue to work hard for their students because, ultimately, they draw their sense of meaningfulness as teachers from their work with students. Duckworth would call this “grit” (Perkins-Gough, 2013), and Gu and Day (2007) would call this the teacher’s commitment to “fulfill their original call to teach” (p. 1314). However, even good teachers lose the heart to teach (Palmer, 2007, Kindle DX version). The principal, Leo, believed that the heart of sustaining and even re-creating meaningfulness in the teaching profession was found in the value that is communicated to each participant within the local learning community—from the secretaries and caretakers to the students and teachers to the vice principals and principals. Progress in education will not be accomplished if teachers are viewed as the “enemy” to administration or to students, nor will progress be made if teachers do not believe that what they are doing is worth the extensive effort required to teach well. As Leo put it, “valuing people is what education is all about.”

**Meaning of Findings**

There are seven findings from my research which I believe to be the most salient to a fresh discussion on what demoralizes the Ontario educator from the perspectives of the two
teachers and three principals I interviewed. It is not surprising that administration-teacher relationships are difficult or that inter-teacher collegiality can support or destroy the teacher’s morale depending on the toxicity of those relationships. It is also not surprising that teachers face unreasonable expectations placed upon them by school boards, the administration, parents and the public. Perhaps it is not even surprising to principals that teachers resent the type of professional development they receive and, conversely, teachers would not be surprised to learn that principals think teachers should do more to “grow themselves.” It is my hope that by singling out the seven significant learnings from my research, these findings will be thought-provoking for the concerned educator, no matter what place he/she finds themselves on the organizational chart at their school.

Hiring process: The current structure to the hiring process for new teachers is demoralizing for the teachers I interviewed because they do not have a voice to recommend new teachers they know would be good in the classroom. The fact that new teachers are selected on a first come, first served basis, gives the hiring protocol a “deli counter” feel which, in the long run, makes veteran teachers believe that the best possible candidates never make it into their schools. While the rationale behind Bill 274/12 is to make the hiring process fairer, teachers are not allowed to participate in getting new members “on their team.” I believe this lack of involvement in determining “who is on the team” short circuits the camaraderie and the “buy-in” or “organizational commitment” (Leithwood 2006, p. 30) that is fostered when every team member (the teachers) is involved in the process of giving shape to that team (the school). As well, the length of time it takes to get good, effective teachers permanently settled into a school is not only detrimental to student learning, it is demoralizing for all teachers as passion and purpose is worn away over time.
It should concern human resources at the board level that public school students are paying a higher cost than they should because staffing protocol prioritizes ways to systematize the hiring process rather than how to vet the good teachers from the not so good teachers, no matter what stage of teaching they may be at, novice or experienced. While it is quite clear that there is a surplus of teachers in the GTA (OCT 2014), this surplus cannot be an excuse for a hiring system that is operated more from a “next in line” strategy and does not ensure that the best practitioners reach the classrooms.

**Meaningful work:** It is surprising and encouraging that neither the teachers nor the principals interviewed believed students were a source of demoralization for them as educators. It is important to note that four out of the five interviewees worked at schools with identified at-risk student populations. The commitment to the noble task of educating students reaped the necessary “moral rewards” (Santoro, 2011, p. 1) that most strongly supported the morale of the educators interviewed in this project. Amabile and Kramer (2011) have said that the key to progress is to give people opportunity to succeed at “meaningful work” (p. 6). What is clear from my research is that it is not difficult to identify what makes teaching a meaningful profession; it is not even questioned by the educators in my study. However, the day-to-day working conditions for these educators, the inhibitors and toxins (Amabile & Kramer, 2011), are what make it difficult to experience the progress required to fully support the educators morale.

**The Union:** Throughout this research project, the interviewees used the term “the union” to generically refer to both the teachers’ union and the administrators’ union with most references being specifically to the teachers’ union. For the principals, the relationships with their local union stewards were the most challenging to navigate. For one teacher, it was the union that was the most toxic factor in her school. However, what was consistent with three of
the interviewees was that they agreed the decision to remove the principals from the teachers union, finalized by the creation of the Ontario Principals’ Council in 1998, was the beginning of an “us versus them” mentality that often pits the one side against the other. The decision to ask the two primary decision-makers within the school to work more often in opposition than in concert with the other hurts and demoralizes all parties when relationships are toxic. There is no one more affected by this “us and them” mentality than the one stakeholder for whom schools exist: the student.

**Frequency of initiatives from Ministry or board levels:** Innovation is a valued skill at any company that wishes to foster progress and achieve results. In education, there is the constant push to implement innovative ideas to produce the desired learning outcomes in our students. However, with innovative ideas come initiatives that must be implemented if those results are to be realized. One principal cited over 25 significant initiatives coming from the Ministry of Education or school board introduced into his school in the nine years he was principal. He concluded that the teacher’s sense of competency at implementing those initiatives and achieving noticeable results was seriously undermined because the teacher never had the opportunity to feel competent at one initiative before another was to be implemented. Amabile and Kramer (2011) concluded that “Only in a psychologically safe climate can people take the risks necessary to produce truly innovative work” (p. 107). Teachers need a strong sense of efficacy and agency in order to feel psychologically safe in the workplace. Systemic entities must consider the impact their demands from afar have on the psyche of the teacher. Otherwise, there is no real need to blame the classroom teacher for responding hesitantly to innovation.

**Presumption upon the teacher’s resiliency:** I believe this to be an insightful comment that came from one of my principal interviewees who seemed to have a very strong sense of the
nourishers required to sustain his teachers’ well-being in the workplace. Connected to the issue of frequent initiatives introduced to the teachers’ task list and the canyon-like gap between rhetoric on the upper management level and reality on the ground, teachers are asked to withstand unreasonable demands and pressure to produce measureable results. From this principal’s perspective, the generosity and good intentions of teachers to always do what is best for the students first are often presumed upon by management who thinks that no matter what they ask of their teachers, good teachers will continue to teach because they could not possibly walk out the door. Feeling taken for granted and taken advantage of creates demoralization. The bank account empties eventually, as this principal quipped.

**Community partnerships:** Teachers and students spend a large proportion of their waking hours together. The legal term to describe the teacher’s relationship to a student is *in loco parentis* which literally means “in place of the parent.” If students are coming to school with unaddressed social and emotional issues, there is a moral obligation for teachers to seek for solutions. However, a teacher must have a strategy for action. Principals cannot overestimate the power of building strong community relationships, not only to address student challenges effectively, but to empower the teacher to get involved at the early stages of a crisis. When teachers know the avenue for action to care for a struggling student, teachers are given license to care without feeling that it is up to them to solve the problem on their own. Teachers are empowered to act *in loco parentis*, fulfilling their mandated responsibility as a professional.

**Erosion of professional identity:** In this seventh finding, I have found the most surprising and personally challenging evidence for demoralization in the teachers I interviewed. Each of the principals identified that many people outside of teaching do not fully understand what it takes to teach. The teachers I interviewed were united in their concern about the new teacher’s
motivation to teach and noted that, to them, many seem to consider teaching a default profession. The fact that some people become teachers as a second or third career choice was actually insulting to the teachers I interviewed. I believe this insult reveals how significant the concept of “teacher” and what it means to teach well is to veteran teachers. The assumption that expertise can be achieved without years of hard work and dedication, or that anyone can teach because they have at one time been a student themselves, these are two attitudes that diminish the veteran teacher’s sense of teaching being a noble profession. As I have considered this finding more deeply, I have realized that while it is logical to look for reasons for the educator’s demoralization within the work itself or even within the individual teacher, I had not considered the possibility that new teachers coming into the profession also affect the morale of veteran teachers by their potentially naive perceptions of what it means to be a good teacher.

Recommendations

A significant voice missing from this research project was identified by each of my research participants as one of the most contentious factors in the everyday school context. That voice is that of the union representative or steward at the school level. The union steward must often negotiate a “go-between” role between teacher complaints and principal frustration. Their view of what affects the morale of the educator is a valid position to consider in this conversation on the educator’s morale in the workplace. I believe it is a reflection of this missing voice in general in the conversation when I looked for research that could tell me what had already been learned about the impact of teacher unions on morale in the workplace and I could not find anything. Interestingly, most of the work I found that examined teacher working conditions or morale or job satisfaction in the Ontario education context was commissioned by the teacher federations (unions). They are certainly concerned about the issue but, perhaps, fail to see their
own culpability in the problem of morale within the larger school context. I recommend more concerted study into the impact of the “us versus them” mentality in our schools created by the presence of two educator unions in the local school context.

**Qualifications and Limitations of the Study**

The focus and structure to this research project evolved over the two years of study in the Master of Teaching program. I initially set out to interview three Ontario principals because I assumed they had unique insight into what demoralization looked like for the Ontario educator because they felt pressure from above and below as leaders in their schools and “agents of the board” as some of my interviewees identified. However, what I discovered was these principals did not feel any pressure from those above them, so they were not “sandwiched” as I had imagined. Perhaps this speaks to the strength of their leadership because they were able to do what they determined was best for their schools with little interference from the school board level. However, what became apparent was that the real voice for the demoralization of the educator was the classroom teacher. Consequently, my participants went from three to five in a two week period.

There are several positive outcomes to interviewing two teachers and three principals. First, I was able to understand demoralization from both sides of the table within the local school. What became apparent from my data was the principal was primarily responsible for establishing the school climate and the teacher’s morale was negotiated, successfully or not, within that climate. I also had excellent participants who provided thoughtful insights into the problem of demoralization from angles I would never have considered without the breadth of experience in education represented by my participants.
However, the greatest limitation to my research study is that I had too much information to distill and prioritize to do justice to the wealth of insight shared by each participant. I am fully cognizant that I have only begun to understand this deep issue of the educator’s morale in a superficial sense and have not, in any way, exhausted the possibilities for what shapes the demoralization of the Ontario educator. One of my participants expressed surprise that I was investigating this issue of demoralization because, in her experience, it was not a phenomenon that she observed. She felt that my question assumed that Ontario educators are demoralized. However, I believe with the recent exposure of the “culture of fear” that defines the organizational climate of the Toronto District School Board, even she might now conclude that demoralization is a living reality for more than just a few select educators with a tendency to whine.

Consequently, my research study highlights some findings that are only generalizable to the participants who agreed to engage with my research topic. I have had to be selective of the findings I think are most significant to a more comprehensive view of the factors that cause demoralization so that our collective understanding broadens beyond simplistic, personality-driven rationale or a matter of teacher attitude alone.

**Implications**

This research study has been married to my core values as a teacher throughout the entire research process. There is a profound responsibility embedded within the act of teaching that requires me, as a teacher, to strive to do good work for the good of the students I am influencing year after year. Education is a powerful means whereby vulnerable and sometimes “unsuspecting” students are shaped either positively or negatively for the future. If I am to effect positive influence on my students, then my motivation to pursue pedagogical effectiveness
and to be expectant of their learning success must hold fast. My sustained motivation to teach will come from external actions such as my pursuit of healthy working relationships, my investment in ongoing professional growth, and my jealous pursuit of my students’ success because I believe they are worth my effort. That motivation will not be maintained by external supports alone, although those are important.

My sustained motivation to teach will often only be fostered by the way I cultivate my belief that my work as a teacher is meaningful. There will be seasons in teaching when the only way to access that “meaningful” identity will be to remember I am there for the students and that they make the job worthwhile in spite of external working realities. My own view that morale is a fragile entity, under-appreciated and often taken advantage of, has been confirmed by the academic research I have read and the conversations I have had with five experienced educators in the GTA. As a teacher who has held leadership positions in the past, I am again reminded to respect the morale of those who work with me, recognizing that this “imperceptible” phenomenon packs gale-force winds that can topple any enterprise not attuned to its value.

Questions Raised by the Study

I interviewed two high school teachers and three principals, two active and one retired. One of the issues raised by these interviewees related to initiatives developed at the school board or Ministry of Education levels. As well, one principal highlighted the sense that those in upper management, including the teachers’ union, seem to believe they can keep expecting teachers to do their jobs well no matter what is expected of them because they will never want to underserve the students. What do educators working at board or ministry level positions believe about demoralization in education and their own complicity in this demoralization?
Possible Next Steps for Further Research

Three suggestions for further research are:

- While there is rationale for Bill 247/12 that explains why the hiring process “must” be the way it is, more study is warranted to understand the implications for how hiring is done and how this fosters (or does not foster) positive morale amongst the existing permanent teacher population. In what ways could the experience and knowledge of veteran teachers be acknowledged by allowing them to participate in the process of shaping their teaching teams?

- The correlation between the erosion of professional identity and the demoralization of the educator warrants its own separate research study.

- A study on the correlation between strong community service partnerships and the teacher’s sense of agency to actively engage in the social and emotional care of students and how this affects school community morale is also warranted.

Conclusion

This research project began with the question “Why are we bothering?” The five educators in this study said we bother to withstand the realities and complexities involved in education because of the students. They are our bottom line. Of course, that is not a surprising answer. However, it is one thing to give the right answer; to actually teach like we believe it is another battle all together. The battle we wage is for the kind of inner work life that fosters healthy working relationships with staff and students in our schools. The battle we wage is for the authenticity we derive from diligently pursuing progress in meaningful work that makes us believable to our students and paves the way for them to authentically engage in meaningful work, too. Preserving the educator’s morale is the moral obligation of all those who profess a
desire to promote lasting outcomes for our students’ academic, social, emotional and physical well-being.
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APPENDIX A: Visual framework of the study for use in interviews

From the perspectives of three Ontario principals and two Ontario teachers, what are the contributors to the demoralization of Ontario educators?

- Systemic contributors
- Workplace contributors
- Personal contributors

What supports, strengthens, protects the “inner work life” satisfaction of educators?
What is inner work life? “The perceptions, emotions, and motivations that people experience as they react to and make sense of events in the workplace” (Amabile & Kramer, 2012, p. 17)

How does the school context and culture affect the inner work life of an educator?

What makes the teaching profession meaningful?

How do educators answer the question, “Why are we bothering”?

If each of us “is” the system (Fullan in Dufour, 2005), what is our individual, corporate and societal responsibility to foster/protect the meaningfulness of our vocation for the sake of our students?
Is there a moral obligation to do so?
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Introduction:

1. How long have you been an educator?

2. Had you always aspired to be an administrator?

3. What was the transition like moving from a classroom teacher to an administrator?

4. What would you say are the greatest differences to being in administration as compared to being in the classroom?

5. How has the world of education changed (or not changed) since you first started?

Teaching as meaningful work:

6. What makes the teaching profession meaningful?
   a. Another way to look at it would be, how would you answer this question: Why are we bothering?

7. How do you determine if your work as an educator is meaningful?

8. What are the markers you look for to determine if your work is meaningful?

9. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high, how would you rate your overall satisfaction with your work as an educator?
   a. Why do you rate it this way?
   b. What most affects your rating at any given time?

10. If you were to think about the factors that have most shaped you as an educator, what would those be?

Inner work life of the educator:

11. When I use the term inner work life, what does that mean to you?

12. What supports, strengthens, protects the “inner work life” satisfaction of educators?
13. Can you share a moment in your career that you will never forget? Why is that moment so significant to you?

14. What do you find to be the most rewarding aspects of your work as an administrator?

15. It has been said, “We teach who we are.” What do you think of this statement?

16. What makes you “lose the heart to teach”?

17. What keeps you going in the low moments in your profession?

18. What insults your work as an educator? As an administrator? As a leader of teachers? What insults the work of the teachers who work under you?

19. If you could make any change to your work environment, what would that be and why?

Personal contributors to teacher morale and significance:

20. What are the most significant personal factors that impact the morale of the teacher?

21. What are the personal barriers to the teacher perceiving their vocation as significant or not?

School context:

22. How does the context of your school impact the commitment of your teachers?

23. How does the school context affect the inner work life of an educator?

24. What are the workplace contributors that most affect the morale of your teachers?

Systemic contributors:

25. How can educational institutions support the teacher’s inner life, and should they be expected to do so?

26. Because teaching is such a human act, an interaction between humans that can either infuse life or snuff it out, do you think “professionalism” gets in the way?

27. In 1962, LIFE magazine had an article called, “How we drive teachers to quit.”

I quote: “Teachers leave the profession because their satisfaction and enthusiasm have been finally suffocated by what can be called The System.”
Since there’s nothing new about the phenomenon of teachers leaving the profession with current statistics telling us that 50% of new teachers leave after the first three years, what makes teaching a harder profession to stay in than other professions? Why haven’t things changed in 50 years?

28. If each of us “is” the system (Fullan in Dufour, 2005), what is our individual, corporate and societal responsibility to foster/protect the meaningfulness of our vocation for the sake of our students? Is there a moral obligation to do so?

Closing:

29. If you were given the opportunity to speak to a room full of teacher candidates, what would you say to them?
Appendix C - Letter of Consent

Date

Dear____________________:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview with me regarding my research project at OISE at the University of Toronto. I am researching the contributing factors to teacher demoralization in Ontario from school principals' perspectives. Your insight, expertise, and experience will be invaluable to the development of this study.

I am requesting an interview with you that will last up to but not more than 60 to 90 minutes (according to your availability) at a location of your choosing. I will use a digital recorder to capture our interview, and I will also take notes during our time together.

You may decline to respond to any question I ask. I will share with you a typed, verbatim transcript following the interview so that you may review any content. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time. I will destroy the taped recordings within the next five years.

My research supervisor is Dr. Patrick Finnessy. He will be exposed to my data and some identifiers. My findings will also be shared informally with my research group, but your confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured with them as they will not be given any identifiers. I will also present my project at a formal research celebration day at the end of my final year. My project may be available for download from the OISE T-Space webpage. To reiterate: with these oral and written forums in mind, all identifiers of my interview participants and their school contexts will be kept anonymous and pseudonyms will be used where appropriate. As well, I will not use your real name in any of my rough research notes or interview transcripts.

There may be some minimal risk involved with your participation, but I am open to discuss any concerns you may anticipate and to address these to the best of my ability. The benefit to your participation in this study is deeply personal to me, because I care about what kind of teacher I will be for the long haul. What will keep me resilient in the face of demoralizing realities in the education world?! However, I do not believe this research is beneficial to me alone. With the opportunity to share my research with others, it is my hope that this study will be a source of encouragement and timely counsel to my peers who have many years as educators ahead of them and who will need to wrestle with why they teach at different junctures in their lives. Their resiliency matters to me, too.
If you agree to the interview process as detailed in this letter, please sign the attached consent form. The second copy is for your records.

Thank you for your help and participation.

Yours sincerely,

Lorilee MacLean

Researcher name: Lorilee MacLean
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Research Supervisor’s name: Dr. Patrick Finnessy
Phone number, email: 416-978-0079, pk.finnessy@utoronto.ca

**Consent Form**

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions I have asked concerning the interview and observation process have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time.

I have read the letter provided to me by Lorilee MacLean and agree to participate in interviews and observation days for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: ________________________________