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Abstract

Defining teacher vitality as the vigor, energy, passion, and joy teachers bring to their classroom, students and colleagues; this article describes an international, comparative, qualitative, phenomenological study of teachers' lived experiences to determine the elements influencing teacher vitality. This is a two-country, multiple-case study of twenty-one middle and high school teachers who had taught ten to twenty years. In order to serve as a confirmation of the universality of the elements of teacher vitality, the study was not only conducted in two different schools in Idaho, but also was replicated in two different schools in Austria. In each of the four participating schools, both high and low-vitality teachers were matched for similarities, then investigated to determine why—in the same school, with the same administration and colleagues, and with the same struggles and challenges—some teachers maintain their vitality while other teachers lose their vitality and may even want to leave the profession. Data in the form of field notes, interview transcripts, categorized relevant information, composite comparisons, and anecdotal stories are analyzed to isolate patterns in teachers' perceptions of their vitality in the classroom. The goal of this analysis is to identify common themes and to develop principles to help teachers receive life, vigor, and enjoyment from their work.

"If I could make the same amount of money doing something else, I would leave teaching," said the teacher sitting next to me on the last day of a high-energy, informative teachers' conference. Nicole and I visited for several minutes and her statement continued to bother me, particularly as she described dragging herself throughout each day. I thought about her students who are missing that special passion and vitality in the classroom. Based on my conviction that students need teachers who are passionate about helping students learn, I probed further, only to discover that the only thing that kept this teacher in the profession year after year in her deflated condition was retirement benefits. As I reflected on our discussion, I was saddened to think that she had been at a three-day conference and had experienced no personal renewal, no spark of encouragement, or new connections to reenergize her for her role in the classroom. If I could have taken Nicole's vital signs that day, what would I have measured? Using the analogy of physical vital signs that doctors and nurses take to analyze health, I began a search to determine the elements of teacher vitality

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Introduction

Through this two-country, cross-case analysis of both high- and low-vitality teachers and through research of their lived experience, I discovered seven differences, actually seven choices high-vitality teachers make that are different from what low-vitality teachers choose. Moreover, these choices are actually biblical principles consistent with a Christian worldview and include both personal choices (e.g. staying refreshed, aligning convictions with actions, and caring about student needs) and relational choices (e.g. serving colleagues, cooperating and showing deference, communicating with respect, and forgiving). These will be discussed more fully in the results of this article.

Studying these choices may be helpful in analyzing the vital signs of a teacher and in encouraging teachers either to guard their vitality or to be revitalized. These seven elements began with two simple questions: What are elements of teacher vitality and how have these elements been shaped through school culture, personal, and historical variables? This is an applied research study designed to define teacher vitality, isolate essential themes associated with vitality, and develop implications for professional support of teachers.

This article reviews educational literature relating to teacher vitality and the methodology of the research, illuminates the themes of vitality by highlighting the vital signs of two composite

teachers, and discusses implications of the findings. The purpose of this research is three-fold. First, being actively involved in teacher preparation, I want my students to enjoy teaching and have the discernment to guard their vitality, to isolate and address challenges to their vitality, and to know how to draw vitality directly from their teaching experience. Second, as a staff developer for schools particularly outside the United States as well as professor of graduate education courses, I hope to provide insight into the challenges that teachers perceive robbing them of their personal and classroom vitality and smothering their desire to stay in the teaching profession. I believe that the vital signs illuminated by this study will provide professional development and graduate education of teachers with a resource to address these challenges. Third, I encourage administrators to grasp these principles in order to more wisely support and encourage their teaching faculty. My overall goal is that teachers find enjoyment in teaching and replenish their vitality through their work.

Literature Review: Exploring Teacher Vitality

Vitality, a term not widely used in K-12 educational literature, is included in several studies, helping me to analyze the construct of vitality and to formulate a definition for teacher vitality. Sederberg and Clark (1990) conducted research on high-vitality teachers by studying eighteen Minnesota teachers of the year. The cross-case analysis revealed that monetary reward is not the primary reason for remaining in the teaching occupation. Although these high-vitality teachers expected appropriate professional compensations, they spoke about motivation in terms of “an inner driving force” that they found difficult to articulate. “They used words like dedication, missionary zeal, obsession, and workaholic to describe their predisposition to excel in teaching” (Sederberg & Clark, 1990, p. 8). The most recurring theme was to “play a significant and enriching role in students’ lives by imparting knowledge, developing skills, increasing understanding, and helping resolve life-adjustment problems” (Sederberg & Clark, 1990, p. 8). Sederberg and Clark (1990) concluded that these high-vitality teachers demonstrate the importance of not losing sight of the value of human interaction in the teaching-learning process.

More recently, an Australian study (Metcalf & Game, 2003) defined vitality as the energy ignited

between teachers and students. Metcalfe and Game (2003) stressed the importance of the energy teachers impart to students based on relational forces, but researchers can also see that if energy is ignited by this relationship, it can also replenish energy that is lost due to work-environment factors. Making note of another source of vigor, Kwo (2005) emphasized the creative energy inside teachers that can build up vitality or, as she explained it, “reclaim inner power” (p. 292). Interestingly, in the context of this creative energy, Kwo (2005) mentioned the magnitude and necessity of the personal choice of teachers. Although Kwo (2005) did not call this creative energy vitality, the concept of being true to personal values is consistent with teacher vitality, one of the seven choices high-vitality teachers make that are different from low-vitality teachers. These choices positively or negatively impact teacher vitality. An ethnographic study of veteran teachers found that similarities between veteran teachers include vitality in their teaching approach, in that they energetically pursue creative lessons to interest their students (Cohen, 1990). Furthermore, Graves (2001), in his study of what gives teachers energy, suggested ways to avoid frustrating and exhausting days by purposefully balancing the energy-sapping incidences with experiences known to be reenergizing. After reviewing these studies, I defined vitality as a holistic vigor that gives support to not only survive, but to enjoy life in an ongoing manner by having that energy steadily replenished.

The term vital is the essence of an existence—the essence of what gives life, energy, and vigor. Thus, teacher vitality refers to the vigor teachers bring to the classrooms and to their profession—the essence of what keeps teachers energized. High-vitality teachers are energized and highly motivated to do their best in their profession and receive deep personal satisfaction and fulfillment through what they do (Sederberg & Clark, 1990). Since research on teacher vitality is limited, I also reviewed a broader body of research related to job satisfaction, burnout, and international studies on teachers’ perceptions of their work life. These studies either contributed to my understanding of teacher vitality or illuminated what vitality is not.

Providing clarity to the topic of vitality was my extensive study of the literature on job satisfaction. Based on Stanley’s (2001) work, job satisfaction is

a totally different construct from vitality, contributing to my understanding of what teacher vitality is NOT and clarifying that job satisfaction cannot be used synonymously with teacher vitality. Comparing satisfied teachers, content in current circumstances of work, with teachers who enjoy their work and have vitality in the classroom confirmed for me that not all satisfied teachers enjoy their work and not all vital teachers, who enjoy their work, are satisfied. An international team conducted a study of professional satisfaction with over 12,000 teachers in New Zealand, Australia, United States, and Great Britain (Adams, 1970; Adams & Biddle, 1970). The questionnaire offered 131 dependent variables on professional satisfaction of teachers. In reading the results, not one of the elements described teacher vitality. However, the study did clarify that teachers' perceptions of conflicting demands to fulfill their role as teacher were similar in all countries. This confirmed the universality of the challenges of being a teacher as well as further confirmed that a true analysis of the elements of teacher vitality is much more than job satisfaction. Nicole, the teacher I introduced at the beginning of the article, was satisfied with her grade level, position, income, and retirement. But something was missing. She was not energized by her work to sustain her vitality in the classroom. This study on teacher vitality encourages educators to look beyond job satisfaction to teacher vitality as a way to help teachers enjoy their profession. Although the elements of teacher vitality are sometimes drained away and lost in challenges of day-to-day school demands, teachers can replenish this energy, have sustained enjoyment of their profession, and find deep personal satisfaction in their work (Collinson, 1994).

International studies of teachers' perceptions of their work reveal that most teachers have no illusions about the difficulty of teaching, but still strongly maintain their commitment to their students (Broadfoot & Osborn, 1992). Findings from the Bristaix study—a study which triangulated research of French and English primary teachers—revealed a cross-national commonality of perceptions in commitment to children's happiness as well as learning (Broadfoot, 1987; Broadfoot, 1990). Also similar between the two countries are feelings that teaching is extremely challenging, but rewarding. Another international study on teacher satisfaction involving a large number of

participating countries revealed that cross-cultural research clarifies universal principles (Menlo & Poppleton, 1990). Although the Menlo and Poppleton (1990) study focused on the professional satisfaction of teachers rather than teacher vitality, two findings were applicable to teacher vitality: Teachers are more satisfied if they (1) are able to focus on the well-being of students more than professional issues and responsibilities and (2) experience supportive colleague relationships. A different international comparative study of teacher satisfaction, motivation, and health in Australia, England, and New Zealand examined teachers' feelings about teaching (Dinham & Scott, 1998). Findings from the survey revealed that teachers and administrators experience a high degree of satisfaction in facilitating learning and experiencing professional self-growth. Again, the significance of this study on teacher vitality is the universal commonality in sources that produce teacher satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Broadfoot (1990) indicated that this commonality is seen in classrooms around the world, regardless of culture and social differences, and is verified by apparently predictable teacher behavior despite significant contextual differences.

Reviewing studies on teacher burnout further confirmed that the answer to understanding long-term vitality was not to study burned-out teachers and what caused them to burnout. Byrne (1999), Dworkin (1985), and Farber (1991) each focused on several themes of burnout seen in low-vitality teachers such as role conflict, low-decision-making power, role ambiguity, and work overload, implying what administrators or teachers can do to prevent burnout. However, many high-vitality teachers I met continued to have replenished vitality in the same environment as teachers who perceived their vitality to be low. This demonstrates the importance of analyzing high-vitality teachers and contrasting them with low-vitality teachers to determine how these teachers deal with the same issues but with sustained vigor. Using this contrast in my research revealed specific ways high-vitality teachers replenish their energy. Furthermore, in studying literature on teacher emotions, Sutton and Wheatly (2003) confirmed that the same external events may result in opposite emotional responses. Accordingly, researchers should study what responses teachers make that enhance or impair the

life-giving energy to support long-term teacher passion in the classroom.

This review of literature helped me define and recognize the elements of teacher vitality as well as how to approach my research. By contrasting high-vitality teachers with low-vitality teachers in the same environment, the elements of teacher vitality reveal specific ways high-vitality teachers refuel their vigor to sustain passion in their work. In the results of this article, I will explain in detail the clearly revealed, seven, specific choices high-vitality teachers make that are different from what low-vitality teachers make—these are the vital signs of a teacher. This review of literature also helped me in designing my methodology as a qualitative, two-country study that would highlight the commonalities rather than the differences of teachers' perceptions of their work life between the countries being compared, confirming the themes and implications of teacher vitality (Menlo & Poppleton, 1999).

Methodology

Recognizing vitality as a holistic vigor that gives support to endure, survive, live, and go on living, this study defines teacher vitality as the vigor, energy, passion, and joy teachers bring to their work. Teacher vitality is the fundamental vital force that not only helps teachers endure teaching, but is also what keeps teachers energized to excel in the teaching and learning process, to enjoy their work, and to maintain their inner drive to help children. In developing this international comparative study, the goal was to elucidate specific elements influencing the vitality of teachers in their classroom. Initially pilot-testing the research design, I made changes to definitions and to the focus of interview questions. The questions I asked teachers are:

- What do you enjoy about your work?
- What do you dislike most about your work?
- How do you perceive your vitality (now and throughout your teaching career)? On a scale of 1-5 (with one being low and 5 being high) where is your vitality now? Based on how many years you have been teaching, draw a line graph representing your vitality throughout your teaching career.
- What factors influence your vitality now and throughout your teaching career?
- What changes do you feel would increase your vitality in the classroom?

- And, how does teaching enhance your overall enjoyment of life?

Using the questions above, I studied teachers' self-identified criteria based on my definition of vitality. Case studies of teachers, regardless of their level of vitality, were conducted with twenty-one, experienced, teachers in four schools, who teach sixth through twelfth grade.

Grounded in the work of Broadford (1990) and Menlo and Poppleton (1999), I believe that teachers' lived experiences are common and not cultural. I have personally experienced these common experiences and similar challenges as I have conducted professional development seminars in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia. Therefore, to confirm the universality of the elements of vitality that would arise from the data through inductive as well as comparative analysis, I felt that it was imperative to conduct a two-country study. Designing this research as a two-country, multiple-case study of teachers, I purposely selected two schools in a small urban center in Idaho of approximately 150,000 in population. Next, because I am fluent in German and accustomed to the culture, I analyzed and selected a similar-sized urban center in a German-speaking country in Western Europe—thus minimizing misinterpretation of data in a cross-cultural environment. A city in Austria was chosen because it offered the most similar international, German-speaking population in a comparable-sized urban center to the schools in Idaho. Finally, two Austrian schools were selected based on similar size and urbanicity, where the study was replicated. Thus, I purposely selected four schools based on similar-sized population of cities and school enrollment, where I requested to interview experienced teachers and to watch them teach.

By replicating the study in Austria, I was able to further confirm and expand findings through cross-cultural research methodology, which exposed common perspectives on central issues influencing teacher vitality. Menlo and Poppleton (1999) suggested that international comparative studies—particularly qualitative studies—serve as a constant for the universality of research findings to assist in discovering what is intrinsically true about teaching and schooling, regardless of culture. They suggest that it is the similarities—the constants—as well as the contrasts that make comparative education so

useful. Furthermore, Broadfoot (1990) indicated that making comparisons across cultures is helpful in creating the needed distance to view what is familiar from the context of a different environment. For this study, the international component confirmed and elucidated the elements of teacher vitality—these same seven elements being apparent in both countries.

Additionally, because case studies provide empirical research in a contextualized environment, the teachers' perceptions of their teaching vitality were exposed in greater depth (Yin, 1994). By using a multiple-case study design, cross-case analysis clarified the similarities and differences of high- and low-vitality teachers, enhancing the construct of teacher vitality. After interviewing at each school, I matched one high-vitality teacher with a low-vitality teacher who had taught a similar length of time and similar subjects at that school. Matching the teachers in this way revealed many similarities and only a few—but very distinct—differences. In fact, the similarities illuminated the differences.

In addition to the traditional multiple-case study approach, this research also applied Max van Manen's (1990) approach to researching lived experiences. His work in phenomenology guided my analysis of teachers' stories. So, in addition to field notes, interview transcripts, categorizing of relevant information, and color-coding of the transcripts, I also wrote the teachers' stories, then developed a composite description for each country—complete with anecdotal stories to isolate patterns and contrast experiences in teachers' perceptions of their vitality in the classroom. This process clearly revealed that I could develop a single narrative for both countries in which storytelling emerged as the final method of inquiry

and a way of representing the research. So, I concluded my research by developing two composite characters and wrote a story illuminating the vital signs of a high-vitality teacher contrasted with a low-vitality teacher. The sharp contrasts of high- and low-vitality teachers provided a clearer understanding of how, even within the same school, some teachers remained vital in their classrooms. Finally, the distinction between teachers experiencing high vitality with those who are not experiencing sustained vitality heightened the clarity of implications. The research was clearly informative and met my goal of illuminating the factors influencing teacher vitality and developing themes for measuring and maintaining vitality. The research design was very effective in revealing seven themes. These themes are principles that can help teachers maintain vitality and enjoy what they do—principles that can help teachers receive life, vigor, and enjoyment from their work.

Results: Vital Signs of Teachers

The results of the case studies of teachers indicate seven differences between high-vitality and low-vitality teachers. These differences make up the central components of teacher vitality and are essentially the vital signs of teachers. The first three themes have to do with teachers' personal commitment to themselves by staying refreshed, focused on students, and uncompromising with what they perceived as personal inner values. The next four themes have to do with teachers' relationships with others by staying connected, encouraging, cooperative but vocal, and forgiving. Interestingly, each of the seven themes of teacher vitality emerged from both the Idaho schools as they were contrasted and from both of the Austrian schools as they were contrasted. Table 1 presents the themes representing teacher vitality.

Table 1: Themes of Teacher Vitality:

	Thematic Conclusions for Understanding Vitality	Recommendations for Low-vitality Teachers
<p>Personal:</p> <p>The first three themes have to do with teachers' personal commitment to themselves by staying: refreshed, focused, and true to themselves.</p>	<p>Maintain personal energy by staying refreshed and giving attention to self care.</p> <p>Maintain priorities by staying focused on students.</p> <p>Maintain hope by staying true to inner, personal values.</p>	<p>Avoid work overload by balancing activities.</p> <p>Avoid role conflict by focusing on students.</p> <p>Deal with dilemma of compromise or goal incongruence by knowing when to say no and when to make changes.</p>
<p>Relational:</p> <p>The next four themes have to do with teachers' relationships with colleagues by staying connected, cooperative, vocal, and forgiving.</p>	<p>Maintain relationships by staying connected through helping and giving of self to others.</p> <p>Maintain support by staying cooperative of administration and others in leadership.</p> <p>Maintain communication by staying vocal.</p> <p>Maintain openness through forgiveness.</p>	<p>Make connections, avoid isolation by helping others.</p> <p>Deal positively with unwelcome changes or loss of control, build school community, avoid unnecessary conflicts.</p> <p>Cultivate a positive relationship with the principal and making your voice heard.</p> <p>Avoid bitterness and tension by forgiving and forgetting.</p>

High-vitality teachers are teachers who rebuild energy faster than they lose energy in the above seven areas. High-vitality teachers are teachers who guard their commitment to themselves and their school in the above areas, causing them to be resilient even in difficult circumstances as well as vibrant in the classroom and passionate in what they do. They are the teachers who can work with extremely impoverished or difficult children and still draw vital energy from their work. These teachers are careful to balance their schedules, to be true to inner personal values, and to stay focused on their students. They also develop positive relationships of respect and openness by serving others, communicating, and forgiving.

Conversely, low-vitality teachers are teachers who lose energy faster than they can regain energy in one or more of seven areas. The first three areas have to do with teachers' personal lives: work overload (whether at home or at school), role conflict (whether at home or at school), and compromise of inner values or goal incongruence. The other four areas have to do with teachers' relationships with others: isolation, reluctance for change, reluctance to speak up, and bitterness.

These seven areas are checkpoints teachers may use to evaluate, improve, or guard their vitality. They also provide a richer, more in-depth understanding of the difficulties teachers experience to sustain energy, revealing that regardless of school challenges or confining policy restrictions, there are

positive actions teachers can take to guard their vitality.

Discussion of Each of the Seven Vital Signs

To better understand and represent the differences between high- and low-vitality in teachers beyond characteristic case study analysis, I also wrote the teachers' stories using their actual words. Next, to isolate the vital signs and to contrast perceptions of vitality, I developed a composite story for each country. Max van Manen's (1990) phenomenology guided my analysis of the teachers' experiences and the writing of the teachers' stories. Writing a story for each country clearly revealed that I could develop a single narrative. I wove together the stories and events told by the twenty-one teacher-participants into one narrative. Below are excerpts from the final narrative of two composite characters, Mark and Marilyn. The excerpts include actual quotes from the case studies and comments about each element of vitality. I have used these quotes and excerpts extensively with both preservice and experienced teachers and have found them to be effective in developing productive discussions on how to improve personal vital signs.

In the story, Mark, a low-vitality teacher, is seeking answers to the dilemmas and struggles he faces, while Marilyn, a high-vitality teacher, is trying to help him. These excerpts differentiate the key differences between high and low-vitality teachers and portray the challenges and dilemmas that drain energy from low-vitality teachers. It provides the means to analyze the similarities and differences of high and low-vitality teachers, to communicate the essence of the interviews, and to allow trends and themes to be more clearly illuminated.

Mark and Marilyn have a lot in common. They both have taught for fifteen years. They like the age of their students and began teaching for similar reasons. Marilyn teaches seventh grade English and Mark teaches eighth grade geography. Despite their similarities however, Marilyn loves her work and Mark is frustrated and has thoughts of leaving the profession. In the excerpts below, I will report how each teacher begins the day and will present a discussion between them as Mark asks Marilyn for help.

Mark openly acknowledges that his vitality is low. He describes his sinking vitality with the analogy of driving a car that has had holes shot in the gas tank.

The gas is draining out faster than he can pump it in, and each year the holes are becoming more numerous. He does not think he can continue much longer. Conversely, Marilyn recognizes when her vitality is low, knows what robs her of energy, and makes the appropriate change to guard her vitality.

1. Maintain personal energy and avoid work overload

Marilyn: The alarm went off and Marilyn glanced at the bright red outline of 5:30 on the face of her digital clock. A shimmer of anticipation ran through her as she threw back the covers and swung her feet over the side of the bed. She said out loud, "I have twenty-one absolutely phenomenal girls who haul themselves out of bed and are at school for dance team by 6 o'clock three times a week. And I love it!" While Marilyn exercised with her students that morning, an alarm rang elsewhere in the city.

Mark: Mark groaned as he grimaced at the hands of the clock pointing at 6:15. "Another day." Mark sighed and rolled over, wishing he had not stayed up so late grading papers. Mark had been teaching eighth-grade geography for fifteen years. Gradually he had become weary of the same assignments. He found himself struggling to finish grading at night and get up the next morning. He did not feel like exercising anymore, either. It was all he could do to drag himself to school each day. Lately he had been thinking more and more about leaving the profession. "Shame on me! I should have picked another career! There is bound to be a career out there that doesn't take as much time and energy," he muttered to himself.

Staying refreshed requires careful guarding of the totality of one's vitality in all aspects of life whether at home or at school. Knowing yourself and your limitations is the first step. It also takes accepting your own physical, intellectual, and emotional boundaries. For teachers who have grading and preparation to complete at home, it becomes critical to balance activities that enhance rather than drain energy. Likewise, maintaining vitality at school is equally important.

Marilyn guards her vitality and maintains balance in her life. She is careful to relax at home and to renew herself, if possible on a daily basis. She believes that as she grows older, the time to unwind is even more important and that it actually takes longer for her to recover from a day of teaching than it did

when she was younger. Marilyn feels fortunate that her husband understands her need to recover from a day at school and often prepares supper for the family.

Mark, on the other hand, often works late at school, not feeling like he has the time to stop for a break or exercise. Working straight through after school, he still struggles to finish grading at night and get up in the morning. Positive self-talk is evident in this theme, but is only part of simply maintaining personal energy by staying refreshed, with balancing activities, and through avoiding work overload.

2. Maintain hope and avoid stagnation or compromise of inner values

Mark: “Hi, Marilyn! Do you have time to talk?”

Marilyn: “Sure, what’s on your mind?”

Mark: “I’m thinking of finding a different job. Don’t you get tired teaching seventh-grade English?”

Marilyn: “When I first started teaching, I taught kindergarten. I told my principal, ‘Get me out of here! I’m going stir-crazy.’ I couldn’t take it. Then I tried high school, but that was a mistake as well. Eventually, I got a job here. I walked in the door and absolutely loved it. I was so surprised! I think it’s the age group of kids, at least for me—I love seventh-graders. I can’t imagine being in a job and being miserable. I think you’ve got to do what makes you happy. Then, several years ago, after teaching advanced English for so long, I knew I needed a change. I had talked to the principal about it several times. Finally, I told him I was desperate and he worked out a way for it to happen. Now I teach regular English classes plus several computer classes. It’s been a great change for me! What about you?”

Mark: “Geography can be fun to teach, but I need more choice in what I plan. I love the relationships with my students and their curiosity. But with geography, I only have them one semester—150 students for only one semester. It’s enough to make your head spin! I am so tired of having new students all the time. It is starting to wear on me. Maybe I could teach something different—like a course where I have students for longer. Another frustration I have is that I’m not able to teach the way I feel I should be teaching. Requiring teachers

to give two solid grades a week keeps me from teaching from a student-centered approach. If you want me to use concept-based instruction, and then expect two big grades a week—the two contradict each other! I’ve got to change something. It’s like a downward spiral.”

For teachers to maintain their vitality, there may come a point when they must stay true to themselves—their inner values and the factors that motivate them. This is goal or value congruence. When teachers continually compromise personal convictions and what they know is right, they lose hope and their sense of self-efficacy—the feeling of accomplishment associated with achievement.

Teacher efficacy and motivation are interrelated; without motivation it is hard for teachers to have a strong sense of accomplishment, and without a sense of professional effectiveness, teachers are unlikely to stay motivated (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Beerens, 2000). Teachers, who have a strong sense of purpose in both their professional and personal lives and stay true to that purpose, actually are staying true to themselves and are better able to sustain their vitality because it is replenished by power from within themselves (Kwo, 2004; Kwo & Intrator, 2004).

There was a time that Marilyn struggled with teaching and kept looking for the school and grade level that was best suited for her. After teaching kindergarten and high school, Marilyn began teaching seventh grade, thinking it would not be a good fit either. She discovered, to her surprise, that she loves it. She especially enjoys the relationships she develops with her students. However, there was a time when Marilyn realized that her vitality was sinking—she had been teaching advanced placement English for years. She made arrangements with the principal to teach regular English classes. The other teachers on Marilyn’s team pleaded with her to continue teaching advanced English because it lowered the level of student achievement for the entire team. The whole teaching team lost their higher achieving students and the teachers felt that they had more student behavior problems because of this. Even though Marilyn was sorry it was a problem for the others, she felt that she had to make the change for her own personal survival. She felt her vitality for teaching and her vitality for her students being drained away. However, she did look for other ways to resolve the

student imbalance and found a way that pleased the other teachers yet still make the change she needed. Marilyn has done other things, as well, to be true to her inner self. She explained that she has made an effort to keep her family as her first priority while her children are young and yet not compromise her vitality in the classroom or hurt her relationships with colleagues and staff.

3. Focus on students as highest priority and avoid role conflict

Mark: [Mark decides to talk to Marilyn, to see if she has some answers for his low vitality.]

“Marilyn, don’t you ever get run down and tired of teaching?”

Marilyn: “I have my days. A good day is when there’s no paperwork and no interruptions from the office, when there’s no administrative trivia. Where I get to work just with my kids. But, sometimes I do—I do get to a lower point. Then I’ll look at myself and say, ‘Why? What’s going on? What can I change? Because the kids don’t like crabby. I don’t like crabby!’ But sometimes it is just stressful. [Pause] But I’ve decided that if I get stressed over administrative distractions it’s my own fault, because I’m not dealing with it very well. It’s something that has to be done, and so I deal with it quickly and then I get back to my kids. I’m here for my kids—that’s what keeps me going! What really keeps you going, Mark?”

Mark: “I’ve been asking myself that. [thoughtfully] I’d have to say it’s the good day. It’s the time in the classroom with the students. What keeps me here? I see it as a mission—I probably see this as missionaries would see their objective. But, you know, Marilyn, my vitality is like trying to drive a car that has holes shot in the gas tank. The gas is draining out faster than I can pump it in and each year the holes are becoming more numerous and bigger. I don’t think I can keep this up.” [sigh]

Even high-vitality teachers interviewed expressed their desire to teach better, but were prevented from doing so because of conflicting demands. Role conflict is trying to do two conflicting things at the same time and is caused by the simultaneous occurrence of two or more sets of pressures such that compliance with one makes fulfillment of the other more challenging (Byrne, 1999). Role conflict is a challenge among busy teachers. With increasing demands on teachers’ time for paperwork such as

reports and evaluations, or for committee planning for the latest change, it is easy for teachers to either become overwhelmed or to lose perspective for their most important priority. Other factors causing role conflict include relationship problems that cause resentment, and political issues that cause frustration. Anything that inhibits teachers from staying focused on their primary purpose (meeting students’ needs) causes role conflict. High-vitality teachers in the study made decisions based on their highest priority—the students.

Marilyn recalled a time when she became overwhelmed with all the changes. She was becoming very weary of increasing expectations and administrative demands. She thought through her purpose for teaching and realized that she just needed to focus on her students and make that her first priority. Of course, the demands did not change, but her perspective did. With a renewed perspective, Marilyn was able to be a better teacher and maintain her vitality. Unlike Marilyn, Mark unfortunately allowed himself to become embroiled with each new administrative or government change. He allowed the changes to cause a disturbance in his life, robbing him of energy he needed to devote to his students. With increasing expectations, teachers can easily lose perspective, or may change their focus from their students to themselves. Mark, as well as the other low-vitality teachers interviewed, talked little about their students. They felt so trapped in their own personal challenges that it was hard to maintain focus on their students, a situation that is detrimental not only for students but also for teacher efficacy and ultimately sustaining teacher vitality.

In a study of teacher resilience in urban schools, Patterson, Collins, and Abbott (2004) suggested that teachers know from where they draw their strength and discuss the importance of teachers staying focused on students and their learning and teachers knowing what they should and should not do based on clear personal, inner values that help avoid frustration and support a sense of pleasure. Teacher resiliency, like vitality, reveals the importance of what teachers do within their locus of control rather than what schools can do to improve teacher resilience (Bobek, 2002). Resiliency may be similar to vitality, but is not synonymous. Resiliency focuses on innate qualities and implies that teachers are able to spring back in difficult situations based

on their personality, whereas vitality refers to the choices teachers make that energize or drain them. Vitality gives the image of filling a car up with fuel—an analogy used by one of the low vitality teachers in this study—whereas resiliency is like grass springing back after being stepped on. Vitality is an energy and enthusiasm with which teachers not only approach their work and their students, but also an energy which teachers receive from being a vital teacher in their classrooms.

Although, this study did not analyze the specific visible signs of enthusiasm as indicated by Parson (2001) such as intonation, gestures, movements, and eye contact; high-vitality teachers in this study renew their vigor and enthusiasm by receiving new energy from daily interactions as they help and give support to students. This concept is consistent with teacher enthusiasm, which suggests that the enthusiasm is a vitality that comes from energy created between teachers and students. Metcalfe and Game (2006) explained, “Good teachers are those who allow the production of an energy that is not the teachers and not the students, but shared between them” (p. 93). Teachers who daily refuel their energy through this recreation or recycling of energy will experience high-vitality. Collier (2005) stressed the importance of caring relationships between students, as the key to refuel the sense of accomplishment teachers need to sustain vitality in the classroom. Noddings (2005) stresses that caring for students goes beyond teachers caring that students succeed and meet educational goals, to stress the importance of the relational sense of caring, that a teacher freely gives beyond the curriculum.

4. Build relationships with colleagues by serving them and avoid isolation

Marilyn: “Having a close relationship with another teacher who can be a sounding board keeps me from being drained. We keep each other energized and we vent to each other where nobody else hears it but us, because you need that. Do you have someone you can vent to or share ideas with?”

Mark: “The eighth grade teachers are pretty isolated. I’ve asked some of them if they want to work together, but nobody’s interested. The only time I see other teachers is at lunchtime. But that’s also the only time I have to tutor students, so I don’t get down to the faculty lounge very often. I do try to get down every once in a while to sit and chat with

other teachers. But then sometimes I just have to leave, because of your negative Nellies. It’s like slam-students lunch.”

This study demonstrates that, although teaching is a lonely profession (Farber, 1991) and not all schools support the development of collegiality, the teachers in this study who do reach out for support or strive for a sense of community experience greater vitality than those who do not. Marilyn, in the example above, went out of her way to develop specific relationships with persons she would feel comfortable sharing her frustrations. She believed that these relationships energized her. Mark wanted that type of relationship; however, he was not able to develop it. The other low-vitality teachers in the study expressed a personal need for help in developing relationships with other teachers. Dworkin (1985) confirmed that principals who support the development of relationships decrease stress among teachers. In addition, Goodlad’s (1984) research on the problems of teacher isolation explained that the development of relationships among the teaching staff increases enjoyment of teaching.

In each of the schools participating in the study, low-vitality teachers expressed a desire for closer relationships with colleagues. Marilyn tries to maintain a positive relationship with other teachers and has several close friends at the school with whom she can share more openly. Mark realizes that he is partly responsible for the feelings of alienation he has toward the other staff because of his reaction to the politics of the school. By reacting to the changes that occur in the school, he damaged his relationships with other teachers and the administrative staff. For Mark, ongoing isolation causes an increase in frustration, robbing him of his energy.

5. Maintain respect of administration and deal positively with unwelcome changes

Mark: “Can you believe the changes the younger teachers are pushing to make in the school? They are causing a terrible rift among the faculty. And now they have the principal on their side. Can you believe it? Several of the older teachers are even planning on retiring early because of it.”

Marilyn: “Honestly, I have had thoughts of ‘this too shall pass.’ Sure, I’m more content with the way things are—you know, the same old-same old....”

But some of their ideas do have merit. In fact, when the principal asked for volunteers to pilot test a computer system, I volunteered. When it's done, parents will be able to log on to the computer system with a password and see their children's grades. That will help me immensely! Some teachers have grumbled about it, but I look at it from the positive side. I won't have to do grade checks anymore! It will be awesome! I'm helping with the pilot test and it's going to end up helping me."

One aspect of teaching with which many of the teachers in the study struggled is change. Change often causes role conflict during times of transition and the implementation of changes. It becomes clear when talking with both high- and low-vitality teachers that high-vitality teachers handle change differently than low-vitality teachers. Although both high- and low-vitality teachers may wonder if "this, too, shall pass"; high-vitality teachers have a more positive attitude towards change and, most importantly, continue to focus on their students while also maintaining positive relationships with colleagues and administrative staff.

Mark and Marilyn responded differently to changes. Several years ago a number of younger teachers began to initiate changes. While Mark reacted and tried to fight against the changes, Marilyn—although unsure about them—continued to maintain her relationship with teachers on both sides of the issue. As it became apparent that the changes were to take place, she was cooperative and supportive. Unfortunately, this was a very difficult time for the school and many older teachers just tried to escape the conflict by retiring early. Marilyn was one of a few tenured teachers who survived the rift.

6. Cultivate a positive relationship with the principal and make your voice heard

Marilyn: "What I did was to build a positive relationship with the principal. I also kept mentioning how I really needed a change. He eventually heard me. Teachers need to talk with their principals. Don't be afraid to go in there and share and say, 'You know what, I'm not doing something right.' But a lot of teachers are afraid—they think people will look down on them for asking for help."

Mark: "What really gets to me is when school is run like big brother—when administration runs it

like big brother and they're trying to catch you doing something wrong. [He imitated with a whine]. 'You're not on hall duty every period. You're not serving on a committee. You were late to the faculty meeting. You didn't fill this out.' I'm sorry, I really do want answers and I don't want to complain. But it's hard for me to have a relationship with the principal like you described when there is such a competitive atmosphere among the teachers."

Maintaining communication with administrative staff is another quality apparent in high-vitality teachers. This study demonstrates that it is important for teachers not to withdraw from the responsibility of cultivating a positive link with their principals and lead teachers. It is necessary for teachers to respectfully and wisely appeal to administrative staff—to be vocal and open, but with an attitude of cooperation and encouragement. When teachers keep the lines of communication open with principals and are upfront with their needs in an attitude of cooperation and support, vitality is preserved.

Both high- and low-vitality teachers in the study described their schools as too big for establishing a close relationship with the principal. However, the high-vitality teachers in the study went out of their way to have a positive open relationship with their administrators. The low-vitality teachers in the study did not have open relationships with the principal. Mark is especially disappointed in the current principal and does not sense a positive relationship with him; yet, has high expectations for the principal. He would like to see the principal come to his room and show more of an interest in him as a teacher. Nevertheless, high-vitality teachers reported that they could go to their principals if they had a problem, suggestion, or personal request. Marilyn, for example, feels the need to periodically discuss problems with the principal and remarked that a lot of teachers do that.

7. Maintain openness and avoid bitterness and tension through forgiveness

Marilyn: "I wish everything hadn't caused so much hurt, but I am really trying to maintain a good relationship even if I disagree with what is happening or how it is being handled."

Mark: [to himself] "How did Marilyn make it through all the difficulties, all the tension? She has

been here as long as I have. How could she just forgive, forget, and go on?”

Carrying a long-term grudge is another hindrance to vitality. Several teachers who were interviewed described situations in which they were misunderstood. High-vitality teachers chose to overlook the situation whereas low-vitality teachers continued to carry the offenses. For example, Marilyn was marked off on her evaluation for something that the principal had misinterpreted. The principal had been unable to observe Marilyn at an appointed time, so he just dropped by. This was fine with Marilyn especially since she had the students involved in an interesting activity. Unfortunately, the principal was in a hurry and they did not have time to discuss the observation. As a result, the principal had misunderstood something that was happening in the classroom and had marked Marilyn down on her evaluation. Marilyn said that it was really “no big deal.” She explained that overlooking a misunderstanding goes a long way in maintaining her vitality for teaching.

Earlier in Mark’s teaching career he had a better relationship with his principal. Several years ago, Mark thought the principal agreed with him on some changes the younger teachers were trying to initiate in the school, only to discover that the principal and some of his friends were not supportive of the changes. At this point, Mark reacted and alienated himself from them. He was offended that the principal did not agree with his perspective. Mark explained that during the year he struggled with feelings of alienation, he learned a valuable lesson—to know when to keep his mouth shut and when to share frustration. He said, “I often hold things in and then I explode, and that is what I did, and it took a couple of years for things to smooth back out with how I reacted and what I said.” It was at this point that his vitality decreased and he began to lose interest in teaching. Mark was shocked, upset, and unable to accept the changes. Even after several years he is unable to overlook and forgive the principal and the other teachers. By not overlooking the perceived offense and forgetting about it, Mark is perpetuating bitterness and tension, and has lost his ability to be open with his principal.

Mark was also offended when the principal did not have time to come visit his room to see projects the students had prepared. He took it personally,

whereas Marilyn seemed more understanding of the limitations of the administration in such large schools.

Tension between teachers, between teacher and principal, or between teacher and students drains teachers of their energy and vitality for teaching. Taking offense and continuing to carry a grudge can cause a relational rift to become an all-consuming central focus, draining teachers of the energy that they need to put into their teaching. Mark became so consumed with how the younger teachers were making changes and not listening to the more seasoned teachers, that he eventually became depressed, losing all vitality for teaching. Looking back now, Mark realizes that he overreacted and, as a result, hurt only himself. In the same incident Marilyn made a personal effort to overlook the offense and then managed to maintain her vitality throughout a difficult situation that affected the whole school. Bruce and Stellern (2005) emphasize the importance forgiveness and overlooking an offense. They encourage establishing and building relationships with colleagues and suggest training for conflict resolution and encouragement to have an attitude of forgiveness.

During a staff development seminar following this study, I visited with a teacher who remarkably had maintained high vitality for twenty years. Unfortunately, the last two years have been really low-vitality years for Kerri. When I talked with Kerri, she told me she wanted to leave teaching altogether, but as we discussed each of the elements of vitality, she recognized that forgiveness was what she lacked most. After discussing how she resented the new principal, several young teachers, and several insensitive parents, Kerri is now seeking to restore these relationships through forgiveness, understanding, openness, giving up perceived rights and expectations, and reaching out to serve those she felt offended her. Through this effort to heal relationships that were damaged, Kerri is now hopeful that she can regain her vitality as a teacher. Using the individual constructs of vitality with Kerri serves as a reminder of the potential of helping teachers maintain or regain vitality by reflecting on these elements as a way to analyze the vital signs of teachers.

Implications

Implications for Teachers

All the high-vitality teachers in this study viewed themselves, their schools, and their lives from a broader perspective than the low-vitality teachers. They displayed a characteristic that I call thinking big. Thinking beyond the moment and oneself can help teachers maintain or develop better personal habits, to see daily expectations from a broader perspective, to wisely balance schedules, exercise, and work demands as well as in setting priorities and remaining focused on meeting students' needs. Thinking big is to know your own self and your priorities based on inner values, which includes valuing yourself and guarding the self-talk that influences your vitality. To do this, teachers must be aware not only of what motivates, empowers, and energizes them personally, but also what diminishes motivation and personal fulfillment.

Developing relationship skills also requires thinking big. Thinking big in relationships refers to viewing situations from a broader perspective than from personal interest, gain, or pettiness. It means that teachers think beyond themselves and their classrooms and perceive circumstances from others' perspectives. A broader perspective helps teachers to better understand whole school challenges and changes, enabling them to more carefully guard their vitality as influenced by others. Seeing themselves in the "bigger picture of education," high-vitality teachers are also able to place themselves where they can be most effective in that picture. Understanding challenges from a broader perspective may assist teachers to avoid feeling alone, disturbed, and bitter by thinking of and serving others, whether it is students or colleagues. The implications of this study challenge teachers to avoid isolation, frustration, and bitterness by better understanding the source of the difficulties or more clearly empathizing with perspectives of others. Additionally, thinking big can help teachers be more understanding of administrative challenges and changes. A broader perspective helps teachers think of and serve others, whether it is the students, other teachers, or administrative staff. In sum, when teachers perceive and foresee what is best for themselves and how they can best serve as educators, they are better able to set priorities best suited for guarding personal and relational vitality.

Implications for Future Research

For future research, it would be advisable to first confirm the themes of teacher vitality with a

triangulated study combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. After the themes are confirmed or reevaluated, teacher vitality as a construct would be ready to analyze educators in non-western nations representing at least one nation in Asia, Africa, South America, and the Middle East. I plan to pursue this goal and would welcome others to join me in discovering ways to encourage teachers to stay vital in the classroom for their students.

Implications for Faculty Development

Naturally, any guidance that can help teachers develop an understanding of the themes contributing to their own vitality will be powerful training constructs for staff development. I have had opportunities to teach these vital signs in several staff development sessions in and outside of the United States. Using the composite stories of Mark and Marilyn, I encouraged staff-development participants to role-play and then discuss the things the teachers from my study said about their vitality. As I told stories and talked about the principles for maintaining vitality, I would often see nodding of heads and sheepish smiles of acknowledgement. With a neighbor or in small groups, I encourage teachers to share positive and negative experiences related to each element. Once the themes are understood and accepted as important, I encourage teachers to select one element of vitality to work on and to set a specific personal or relational goal. Teachers could be divided into small support groups based on the one vitality principle they wish to apply and to encourage one another in their specific goal for improving one vital sign.

Based on this research, I encourage administrators do what I call thinking small. Thinking small is looking to the little needs that teachers have. Administrators expect teachers to think big and be more empathetic about the government and testing demands, but it is equally important for principals to care about the little things that bother teachers. Using these vital signs as a guide, principals can establish caring open relationships with each of their faculty, much like a physician cares for a client—whether healthy or sick—and be alert to individual needs. A principal could feature one of the vital signs at regular meetings or periodically have teachers take their own vital signs much like going to the doctor for a yearly physical checkup or eye exam.

Having teachers focus on one vital sign at a time is more manageable and will yield more fruitful, long-term changes. Teachers could share stories highlighting positive and negative examples. Kwo (2004) suggested that through storytelling, teachers can come to a “better understanding of the nature of their personal encounters and an awakening of their inner values” (p. 298). Kwo and Intrator (2004) challenged teachers to consider different experiences as opportunities and as a moral commitment to reclaim inner values. This process will infuse teachers with renewed vitality.

Additionally, staff development could include an exploration of emotional intelligence as a possible way to help teachers understand what drains or replenishes them of life-giving energy and make better choices to refuel their energy. Osborn (2006) in a study of secondary teachers in England, France, and Denmark, warned that professional identity is changing because of increased accountability. Teachers in her study express that their investment of self was being undermined by pressure to perform, thus compromising their passion as teachers. Professional development that provides rich opportunities for teachers to review these challenges in light of concepts of emotional intelligence as well as maintaining their vitality would be profitable.

Although this research focuses on the importance of vitality for teachers themselves, it is equally important for administrators to analyze the repercussion of the lack of teacher vitality on students. I would encourage schools to study the influence of teacher vitality on students. Longstanding studies have demonstrated that teachers who enjoy teaching are better teachers and increase student learning (Ashton & Webb, 1986). I suggest that the seven themes of vitality illuminated by this study be analyzed as to their influence on student learning. What if low-vitality teachers continue to teach year after year—like Nicole that I met at the conference—what impact would that have on students? Moreover, beyond student learning, low-vitality teachers rob students of the vital, life-giving, energy derived from the joy of learning and a relationship with high-vitality teachers who love to help students learn.

Furthermore, a long-standing problem in the teaching profession has been the rising number of teachers who wish they had selected a different

career and who remain undecided about even staying in the teaching profession (National Education Association, 1992). Interestingly, younger and less-experienced teachers have higher levels of satisfaction with teaching than older, more experienced teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). It seems that one of the goals of staff developers would be to help the more experienced teachers maintain teaching vitality because statistics warn of increasing enrollments, attrition, and retirements accompanied by fewer new teachers entering the field (Henke & Zahn, 2001). Obviously, if the better, more experienced teachers leave their profession, they leave the instruction and mentoring of new teachers to the less experienced.

Nevertheless, from my perspective being actively involved in teacher preparation, I want my students to be happy with their choice of life work as a teacher. If teachers endure their work and can only gain life satisfaction outside of work, they are not enjoying their work. If teachers cannot draw vitality—or life—from teaching, they are not enjoying their work. Whyte (1994) reminded us that “we simply spend too much time and have too much psychic and emotional energy invested in the workplace for us to declare it a spiritual desert bereft of life-giving water” (p. 76). Whyte (1994) understood that work enjoyment leads to life enjoyment. I would hope that teachers find enjoyment in teaching and replenish their vitality through their work.

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