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## Committed and Engaged: The Contribution of Positive Experienced Teachers

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### To cite this article:

Gibson, E.B. (2025). Committed and engaged: The contribution of positive experienced teachers. *International Journal on Studies in Education (IJonSE)*, 7(2), 350-372. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonse.346>

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# Committed and Engaged: The Contribution of Positive Experienced Teachers

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## Article Info

### Article History

Received:

10 December 2024

Accepted:

12 March 2025

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### Keywords

Positive

Experienced

Teacher

Committed

Engaged

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## Abstract

This hermeneutical phenomenological study examines the contributions in the lived experiences of positive experienced teachers with more than five years of teaching experience. This study's research question was: What contributions increase the autonomy, competence, and connection in the school communities in the lived experiences of positive experienced teachers who remain committed and engaged? Data were collected from 15 teachers from four continents who have remained committed and effective in their teaching practice. Key themes emerged, including promoting communication, developing community, fostering a growth mindset, and providing support. The study concluded that positive experienced teachers: know and connect to their students, prioritize creating a learning environment, bring willing teachers alongside, and benefit their whole school community. Notably, these educators placed a unique emphasis on building positive classroom community and communication while supporting growth-oriented teachers practically and emotionally and seeking increased connectivity and growth for their whole school communities.

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## Introduction

Teachers are valued in schools for their experience (Ingersoll et al., 2021). However, simply accumulating time in the profession does not indicate proficiency or disposition. Positive teachers who are committed and engaged influence their school settings differently than those who are disaffected and embittered (Gray, 2021). The problem is that the differentiation between the specific contributions of positive teachers in their schools is often tied to their experience rather than their disposition. This study's research question was: What contributions increase the autonomy, competence, and connection in the school communities in the lived experiences of positive experienced teachers who remain committed and engaged? This hermeneutical phenomenological study examines the specific contributions in the lived experiences of positive experienced teachers with more than five years of teaching experience. This study has potential ramifications for administrators, school communities, and students.

## Theoretical Framework

Self-determination theory (SDT) contends that humans require the fulfillment of three psychological needs:

autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). People who recognize these psychological needs are met develop a rationale for purposefully accomplishing their aims (Deci et al., 1991, 1996). Those who perceive an environment that allows self-fulfillment move further towards acting out their desires and interests (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020). Settings that allow for expression of autonomy, competence, and relatedness result in increased internal motivation allowing people to grow and contribute (Chiu, 2022; Jiang et al., 2019b).

A psychological need is a requirement for mental health and personal development (Deci & Ryan, 1985). There is a direct correlation between people's motivation, interpersonal development, and overall health with their discernment of how their fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Ebersold et al., 2019). Autonomy is the self-direction of an individual's behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The need for autonomy is satisfied when people primarily choose their actions and have the ability and volition to pursue what they value (Jiang et al., 2019a; Shim et al., 2022). Competence is perceived when individuals can demonstrate their abilities and meet external or internal targets (Allen & Sims, 2018). Competence is satisfied when people feel confident in their ability to perform well and use their talents fully in their environment (Lee et al., 2020). Relatedness is the need for connection, acceptance, and belonging in valued contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020). Relatedness, or connection, is satisfied when people feel supported and secure in their surroundings (Collie & Perry, 2019).

SDT encapsulates interactions leading to contributions in educational settings (Deci et al., 2017; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020). When psychological needs are perceived to be fulfilled in school leaders, teachers, and students, this impacts their reasons for acting and the outcomes involved (Chiu, 2022). SDT forecasts classroom and school engagement based on the recognized satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and connection (Bureau et al., 2022; Smith & Firth, 2018). School environments that allow teachers and students to act according to their desires and beliefs lead to greater involvement and growth (Patall et al., 2018). This study examines teachers who promote autonomy, connection, and competence in their school settings to determine their contributions and impact.

## **Literature Review**

Experienced teachers have been a valuable resource for schools, contributing by raising the level of teaching expertise and insight in most cases (Carillo & Flores, 2018, Ingersoll et al., 2021). Many experienced teachers describe themselves as learners drawn toward opportunities for growth and improvement (Gore & Rickards, 2021). Experienced teachers' previous encounters allowed for the growth and refinement of their teaching practice (Lofthouse, 2018). Teachers with more experience developed processes and thought patterns to make quicker and more effective classroom decisions, and relied upon direct student feedback, while prioritizing their well-being (Lloyd, 2019). Teachers with several years in the profession can often pinpoint strengths and needed growth areas (Boogren, 2021). They display a robust interpretation of student learning outcomes in complex instructional concepts (Pouta et al., 2021). Experienced teachers also prioritized student well-being in their decision-making processes, showing greater flexibility and understanding of potential obstacles in their lesson planning (Koni & Krull, 2018; Mullen et al., 2021). Time, resources, student response, and the learning environment influenced

practiced teachers' lesson planning (Seidel et al., 2021; Wolff et al., 2021). Experienced teachers' approach to their professions seems to bring helpful outcomes to their students and professional development.

Teachers exist on a dispositional continuum ranging from negative to positive (Jefferson et al., 2022; Kantor & Proekt, 2024, Xu et al., 2022). Teachers with negative dispositions engender distressed classroom settings and outcomes (Nalipay et al., 2024; Steenberghs et al., 2023). Their stressors bleed over into their responses to students causing negative learning environments (McTighe & Willis; 2019, Philibert et al., 2019; Zou et al., 2023). Such teachers experience dissatisfaction in their teaching environments often leading to burnout and exit from the field (Beymer et al., 2022; Genoud & Waroux, 2021; Madigan & Kim, 2021). However, some disaffected teachers may remain due to their perceived lack of options or proximity to retirement (Gray et al., 2021; Shields & Mullen, 2020). Other teachers harbor neutral dispositions that favor maintaining a status quo rather than seeking growth and development for themselves, their students, or the school environment (Eshchar-Netz et al., 2023; Kern et al., 2023; Pan & Wiens, 2024). These teachers faithfully perform their job duties but do not seek improvement (Reisman & Enumah, 2020). Teachers in this middle area of the spectrum may experience fatigue from constant initiatives from their district or school supervisors (Badal, 2024; Gore & Rickards, 2021). Teachers with a positive disposition have an encompassing view of the educational process and commit to their roles (Lowe et al., 2019a, 2019b, Towers et al., 2022).

The literature requires clarity to determine whether all experienced teachers display positive teaching characteristics. Teachers may receive the label experienced due to their professional experience, mastery of their subject matter, or teaching ability (Sebald et al., 2022; Shields & Mullen, 2020). However, lengthier service does not ensure teacher competence, insight, or skill (Chiong et al., 2017). Not all experienced teachers maintain positive teaching attributes (Gore & Rickards, 2021; Hasselquist & Graves, 2020). There is a dichotomy among experienced teachers: some stay positive and sustain their dedication while others lose their joy and professional commitment (Admiraal et al., 2019). Ergo, experienced and dedicated teachers are not synonymous. Having experience as an educator does not necessarily equate to positive teaching practice.

Four characteristics described positive teachers: willingness to try new things, challenge themselves, display confidence and competence, and act as leaders (Lowe et al., 2019b; Towers et al., 2022). Positive teachers contrasted with disaffected and embittered teachers: those simply waiting to retire or for a better opportunity to emerge (Gray et al., 2021). However, many teachers can remain positive and effective through adversity in the profession (Van der Want et al., 2018). Growth in teaching involved humility by inviting other teachers to provide feedback bringing self-awareness and growth (Boogren, 2021; Goodwin et al., 2021; Gore & Rickards, 2021). Positive teachers remained focused, encouraging, resilient, and composed despite the negative aspects of teaching (Jefferson et al., 2022). These teachers incorporated student responses from formative assessments and contemplated their teaching practice, outcomes, and unit directions (Dini et al., 2020). The ability to remain engaged, intrinsically motivated, and dedicated to positive teaching practices may be present in any teacher regardless of experience.

Positive experienced teachers combine the characteristics of both. Their motivation came from their dedication

and how they saw themselves as teachers (Lowe et al., 2019a). Few studies exist on the attributes of positive experienced teachers (Gray et al., 2021; Jefferson et al., 2022). The literature identified three ways veteran teachers with positive dispositions contribute to their school environment: mentoring and coaching, leading, and positively affecting student outcomes (Lowe et al., 2019b; Prout et al., 2019). Experienced teachers' hard-won understanding is valuable to teachers entering the profession (Beck et al., 2020; Holloweck, 2019; Hong & Matsko, 2019; Sebald et al., 2022). Educator-identified characteristics of quality teachers were self-motivated excitement, positive relationships with students, encouraging student growth, and proficiency in maintaining relationships with fellow teachers and school leadership (Carmel & Badash, 2021; Mullen et al., 2021). Positive experienced teachers find ways to stay engaged and retain their resourceful and inventive composure as they develop a welcoming, inclusive, and engaging atmosphere and demonstrate learning practices in classrooms and throughout the school under challenging circumstances (Leite et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2019). So, the presence of positive teachers with experience benefits the classroom and school environment. Yet, the specific ways they do so are underdeveloped in the literature. Clarification of their impact would benefit school leaders, school communities, and students.

## **Method**

This hermeneutical phenomenological study examines the contribution in the lived experiences of positive experienced teachers with more than five years of teaching experience. Specifically, what contributions increase the autonomy, competence, and connection in the school communities in the lived experiences of positive experienced teachers who remain committed and engaged? The contribution of positive experienced teachers will be defined as committed and engaged teachers who positively impact their school community. At least five years' experience was the requirement to be considered an experienced member of the teaching profession for this study as the literature indicates that up to half of all teachers leave the profession before the five-year mark (Guthery & Bailes, 2022; Towers et al., 2022; Wiggan et al., 2020). Positive describes teachers' disposition and approach to the profession, while experienced designates their depth of personal knowledge in teaching.

The study's design, data collection, and analysis procedures followed those for hermeneutic phenomenological studies as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Van Manen (2016). This study attempted to ascertain the collective essence in people's lived experiences of a specific occurrence or defined circumstance germane to researchers' backgrounds and interests. Van Manen (2016) defines hermeneutical as a qualitative research approach that explores meaning in people's lives, with the researcher having personal experience with the topic. As I consider myself a positive experienced teacher, the phenomenon of how such teachers contributed to the increase of autonomy, relatedness, and competence in their school communities based on their commitment and engagement applies. My experience and understanding allowed me to clearly define this phenomenon, interact with others, and process their encounters. I collected without contributing data to the study. I distilled others' descriptions of the phenomenon into a coherent explanation of its fundamental nature.

The methodology and nature of the study impacted its approach. The setting for this study was anywhere experienced teachers with positive dispositions existed. Selective recruitment of participants sought to include a

wide distribution of teaching disciplines, school types, and locations. This recruitment method restricted teachers' locations to the United States or international schools worldwide. A triangulation of journal prompts, individual interviews, and focus groups to encounter 15 teachers' lived experiences produced data representing the impact the contributions of positive experienced teachers had in their school communities (see Appendix for the specific questions). All 15 participants completed journal prompts, interviews, and participated in a focus group providing sufficient data saturation of the phenomenon. I prepared the data collection tools for the study through a comprehensive literature review identifying positive teachers' qualities and my experience with the phenomenon. Participants received transcripts of the data they provided to check for accuracy.

The study's data was refined to identify themes. The text from these data collection methods was uploaded to Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software where coding and analysis occurred. According to Saldaña (2021), a code encapsulates the meaning of data in a word or concise phrase. A second level of coding occurred to organize the diverse codes into similar, connected words or phrases that best represented the data. As code patterns emerged across participant responses, code groupings were placed together. Out of these groups of codes, patterns developed meaningful themes. I compared the themes generated from the journal prompts, individual interviews, and focus groups to generate findings.

## Participants

The participants of this study were 15 current primary or secondary teachers with at least five years of teaching experience from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America and 12 subject areas who met the requirements of a positive teacher (Lowe et al. 2019b; See Table 1). Developed by Lowe et al. (2019a), the inventory measures participants' responses on a seven-point Likert scale in innovation, growth focus, expertise, and leadership. This inventory served as the benchmark of the candidates' positive approach. Those currently teaching at the primary or secondary level with at least five complete years of teaching experience who met all four criteria of a positive experienced teacher were eligible to participate in the study. All participants are addressed by a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

| Participant | Education  | School Area   | School Location | Experience (years) | Subject Area(s)                |
|-------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Alice       | Bachelor's | Elementary    | United States   | 44                 | All                            |
| Alina       | Master's   | Elementary    | United States   | 15                 | Gifted, Math                   |
| Bryan       | Master's   | High School   | International   | 13                 | Science                        |
| David       | Bachelor's | High School   | International   | 22                 | Math, Science, Technology      |
| Grace       | Master's   | Middle School | International   | 14                 | Social Studies, World Language |
| Hannah      | Master's   | High School   | International   | 30                 | English                        |
| Isabella    | Master's   | High School   | International   | 26                 | English                        |

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| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Education</b> | <b>School Area</b>  | <b>School Location</b> | <b>Experience (years)</b> | <b>Subject Area(s)</b> |
|--------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Jerome             | Master's         | Middle/ High School | International          | 22                        | Performing Arts        |
| Karl               | Master's         | Middle School       | International          | 12                        | English                |
| Kristin            | Master's         | High School         | United States          | 29                        | Intervention           |
| Luke               | Master's         | High School         | International          | 10                        | Visual Arts            |
| Mila               | Master's         | High School         | United States          | 22                        | English                |
| Phoebe             | Master's         | High School         | International          | 20                        | Social Studies         |
| Sophia             | Bachelor's       | High School         | International          | 8                         | World Language         |
| Stephen            | Bachelor's       | High School         | International          | 5                         | Bible, Science         |

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### **Trustworthiness**

The fundamental aspects of credibility, transferability, and confirmability for the trustworthiness of a qualitative study come from Lincoln and Guba (1985). Van Manen (2016) used the words reliability, evidence, and generalizability to convey that a study carries applicability to the broader world beyond the study through recognized scholarship approaches that grant security and confidence in the findings. The satisfaction of these criteria is essential to the validity of the study's results.

Credibility relies on the authentic presentation of the findings based on the participants' meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study relied upon triangulation, member checking, and referential adequacy to ensure credibility. The triangulation methods used in this study (journal prompts, individual interviews, and focus groups) allowed me to confirm data and analysis through multiple means to ensure its reliability. Obtaining comprehensive participant explanations of the phenomenon transpired by asking unique but overlapping questions in the journal prompts, interviews, and focus groups. Member checking allowed me to repeat influential statements back to participants in individual interviews and focus groups to confirm the meaning of their replies (Schoeller, 2023). Referential adequacy was the third method of ensuring credibility used in this study. Separate data analysis occurred for the individual interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts to compare the findings for agreement (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). This intersection of data collected produced credibility by using an isolated analysis process for each data collection form (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability describes the degree of validity the research findings in this study possess in describing the phenomenon in other corresponding populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The sampling population was any teacher with more than five years of teaching experience who met the qualifications of a positive experienced teacher. Teachers from various contexts, subject areas, school types and areas, and geographic regions contributed data to the study. The population and sampling design produced the diversity needed for transferability (Van Manen, 2016). The data descriptions aimed at an in-depth portrayal of the phenomenon by limiting the number of participants to give the themes a vivid fullness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020).

Confirmability measures the comparative objectivity of the study's results (Miles et al., 2020). Triangulation of data collection, an audit trail, and reflexivity were three techniques chosen to produce confirmability in this study. Journal prompts, individual interviews, and focus groups were the data collection methods to ensure the data collected determined the derived themes rather than my views (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Van Manen, 2016). A digital audit trail exists to verify the collection of documents and appropriate procedures for review in an external inquiry audit.

## Results

This study examines the contribution of positive experienced teachers that increase the autonomy, competence, and connection in their school community. Four themes emerge from data provided by participants in the study: promoting communication, developing community, fostering a growth mindset, and providing support (see Table 2). The lived experiences of positive experienced teachers are embodied in these themes and the implications that follow. Representative participant quotes accompany these outcomes.

Table 2. Themes and Sub-themes

| Theme                             | Sub-themes                       |                    |                      |           |               |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-----------|---------------|
| <b>Promoting Communication</b>    | Learning Expectations            | Meaningful         | Greater School       |           |               |
|                                   |                                  | Feedback           | Unity                |           |               |
| <b>Developing Community</b>       | Classroom Community              | Whole School       |                      |           |               |
|                                   |                                  | Community          |                      |           |               |
| <b>Fostering A Growth Mindset</b> | Challenging Learning Environment | Student Reflection | Cultivating          | Students' | Entire School |
|                                   |                                  |                    | Intrinsic Motivation |           |               |
| <b>Providing Support</b>          | Student Support                  | Practical Teacher  | Empathic Teacher     |           |               |
|                                   |                                  | Support            | Support              |           |               |

### Promoting Communication

Promoting communication between participants and students, teachers, and the greater school community emerged as a prominent theme across all collected data forms in this study. Participants emphasized the need to communicate learning expectations and provide meaningful feedback to students. They also indicated that teachers and the rest of the school community experienced greater unity through healthy communication. Karl highlighted "timely and transparent communication with students, parents, and faculty" as one of the five most important things he did to help students grow. David invites teachers in his department, "Please come talk to me because I want to frame an approach. I want to help give you language for interacting with families or students so that we hear a consistent message." All the participants indicated that communication within the school community was vital. The sub-themes of learning expectations, meaningful feedback, and greater school unity further expound the theme of promoting communication.



The sub-theme of communicating learning expectations developed as one aspect of promoting communication. Teachers in the study relied on using multiple forms of communication to present anticipated learning results. Study participants highlighted the importance of teachers articulating learning outcomes. They linked content to assessments so that students distinctly comprehended what was required of them. In speaking of this, Phoebe commented, “I find that students who follow through on noting what the daily objectives are, which I communicate with them on Google Classroom, have on my board, and then remind of those daily objectives, perform better.” Bryan also noted, “I have every objective listed for students. I tell them multiple times ‘This quiz will be over these objectives.’ I write them as ‘I can’ statements.” Repetition of learning outcomes and connecting them to specific content or assessments exemplifies this sub-theme.

Study participants communicated that learning continues after students complete assessments through the sub-theme of meaningful feedback. Valuable teacher communication comes from comments that genuinely guide students’ growth. Hannah said one of the five most important things she does as a teacher is “providing thorough and timely feedback that includes praise as well as constructive criticism.” Physically giving students meaningful feedback came from Stephen:

I’ve always given Google comments, but I’ve just started printing out their assignments and writing on it with my green and red pens. I give it back to them in class. They look through it more, I think, because it’s a physical thing that they’re being handed. They see my handwriting. They see red and green colors as something that [indicates] “I really need to grow in that.”

Tangible color-coded meaningful feedback frames one method teachers in this study provided meaningful feedback.

Teachers in the study indicated that clear communication across all school levels was necessary for people to understand and participate in the school’s direction. Participants stated the need to involve themselves in critical but challenging matters with all stakeholders to promote greater school unity. The development of school unity involved connecting two parties from distinct parts of the school community by engaging challenging circumstances to bring clarity and understanding. Kristin encourages this with her students. In her interview, Kristin told her students, “You know if we have a difficult interaction or conflict, we have to work out our communication issues. I’m committed to working through that with you in a calm way and want to go through it.” Alina spoke about being a bridge between teachers and parents, “I also will come in the evenings to parent nights when they have questions about advanced learning. So, I connect with the with the community.” Promoting communication among various stakeholders crystallizes this sub-theme.

### **Developing Community**

Closely tied to communication, developing community materialized as the most referenced theme among participants in the study. Promoting appropriate and helpful relationships to further common ideals and growth captures how participants described this theme in journal prompts, interviews, and focus groups. In her interview, Isabella highlighted, “In my classroom, we practice connectedness. We talk about how to listen to each other and how to respectfully talk about subjects that are difficult. I teach them, but we practice interaction.” Community

also impacts students' sense of belonging in the school environment. Sophia emphasized "that community piece where my kids feel this is somewhere that they belong and where they're like seen and where they're known, and they're celebrated for their successes and a space for self-correction or feedback from peers." The sub-themes of classroom community and whole school community encompass developing community.

Classroom community comes in creating a safe environment where students feel valued and able to connect and learn. Classroom community involves intentional teacher efforts to teach students how to communicate and treat others well while building a positive setting. Mila mentioned she endeavors to "build community. Each period is a separate 'family'. I'm always trying to build a safe community so that learning can happen, and growth is modeled and encouraged." Grace agreed in her interview that building community requires effort when she said, "At the start of the year, there's a lot of setting up, 'How do we listen to one another? How do we pay attention? How do we ask good questions?'" Participants noted they devoted class time and instruction to creating classroom community.

Positive experienced teachers contribute to the whole school community when they make efforts outside the classroom to connect with students or help students connect to the larger school populace. Luke spoke about connecting students to the larger school community, "It's about what the students are doing and what they can add to the community of the school. If the students can see that what they're doing is not just inside the classroom, it helps build the school community." Jerome highlighted his extracurricular involvement, "I am a small group leader. This entails guiding 6-10 students in deepening their Christian faith. I also help with school musicals. I am a mentor to one or two students a year." Teachers in the study who showed involvement outside their classroom role encouraged the whole school community.

### **Fostering a Growth Mindset**

Fostering a growth mindset as a teacher, within the classroom, and for the school was mentioned by every participant throughout their journal prompts, interviews, and focus groups. Sophia emphasized, "Make it clear that struggle is okay. I need my students to understand that it is okay to make mistakes, it is okay to struggle, it is okay to fail (if you are truly giving your best effort)." Fostering a growth mindset developed from the sub-themes of challenging learning environment, student reflection, cultivating students' intrinsic motivation, and the entire school developing a growth mindset.

Developing a challenging learning environment encompasses presenting reachable expectations for student growth and giving them strategies and opportunities to reach them. Participants indicated that an appropriate level of challenge brought a focused learning environment. Stephen commented, "Teaching is not giving students treasure, it is giving them shovels. The joy of learning comes not when you bring students what you've found, but when you help them find it themselves." Alina agreed, "You let them wrestle with it first. That's been a big difference in their being engaged in the learning and not just sitting there listening, getting bored." Creating attainable learning situations that cause students to progress in their academic growth and increase their competence defines the challenging learning environment sub-theme.

Student reflection on their learning brings fruit in future goals and improvement. Teachers in the study encouraged students to continue learning after assessments. Helping students recognize opportunities and develop plans for their growth are crucial components for effective student reflection. David said he prioritizes growth through reflection in his classroom, “I try to encourage a growth mentality in my students - helping them to think about how they might grow in their problem solving or communication of ideas.” Kristin indicated that she uses goals that are strategic, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART), “I do a lot of graphing and reflecting upon their SMART goals or on their grades. They’re comparing these every five weeks. They’re comparing their progress reports, ‘Did your grades go up, down, or stay the same, and why?’” Teachers in the study emphasized that creating space for students to process their growth is vital to a mindset conducive to deeper learning.

Intrinsically motivated teachers assist students in fostering their motivation and autonomy. This highest independent operating level infers students have moved beyond extrinsic motivators such as rewards, praise, or grades (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). All study participants emphasized this sub-theme throughout all three modes of data collected. Helping students internalize the relevance of learning outcomes and activities is critical to connecting students to learn for their reasons making it the most mentioned sub-theme in this study. Giving students opportunities to explore and connect the relevance of their learning to their lives and future illuminates how to link learners to intended learning outcomes. Grace advocated for “allowing opportunities for [students] to engage with the material personally (journal prompts, debates on historical topics with modern-day implications, telling stories about language practice, et cetera).” Sophia agreed, “It increases intrinsic motivation when [students] see a reason why it’s meaningful or relates to something they’ve already experienced.” Providing space for students to find meaning and personal connection in the classroom allows them to develop intrinsic motivation.

Positive experienced teachers benefit the entire school through partnership and leadership, bringing a growth mindset. Karl discussed in his interview having to challenge the status quo sometimes, “There have been awkward moments where you must approach someone and say, “You know this isn’t working. You know what I think would be great is if we went this direction or what if we went this direction?” Luke discussed how his role as head of his department led to a growth mindset for the school, “I’m the go-to-person for anybody in the department. Then being able to give perspective in meetings where there’s decisions being made about the school but also promote the department and what they can do within the larger school community.” Study participants pointed to willing teachers challenging the entire school to a growth mindset as a force for improvement that increases competence.

### **Providing Support**

Providing classroom support for students and practical and emotional support for teachers arose as three crucial pieces that study participants universally found important throughout their journal prompts, interviews, and focus groups. Healthy, internally motivated teachers position themselves to buoy students and other teachers through their school journey. Alice shed light on this, “I think it is important that teachers show a genuine interest in their

students and what they want to learn. We need to understand the learning styles of our students and try to teach our lessons to their strengths.” Bryan clarified giving practical teacher support, “Teachers ask me how I run different parts of my classroom, anyone from experienced teachers to new teachers ask me. I’m a very tech guy, so it’s Google Classroom or Google Drive. I love helping teachers in that way.” The sub-themes of student support, practical teacher support, and empathic teacher support comprise the theme of providing support.

Focusing on student needs, helping them learn, and believing learning is possible distinguishes the student support sub-theme. Seeing each student as an individual and adjusting their approach accordingly fosters students feeling supported in their learning. Knowing students and proactively assisting their learning shows support for students. Jerome identified “keeping a constant eye on student engagement and adjusting instruction accordingly” as one of the five most impactful things he does to encourage student learning. Luke stated that continued learning and opportunities to try again supported struggling students, “Giving them the revision or repeat options if they want can be a way to make it so that students will not feel like they have the pressure of they did it once and that’s it.” In the challenging world of diverse student needs, a flexible teacher who engages students as individuals supports their learning needs and increases competence.

Being seen as competent and having enough experience to assist teachers in their everyday teaching needs encapsulates the sub-theme of practical teacher support. Maintaining an openness to bolstering other teachers without coercing them saw emphasis from study participants. Isabella expressed her strategy for providing insight to other teachers, “My approach is just to listen, offer advice, come watch the ones who let me. You can see so much in 15 minutes, especially if it’s the first 15 minutes or the last 15 minutes of someone’s class.” Stephen emphasized helping those teachers who request assistance, “For the most part, I allow adults to be adults and ask for help if they need it, but I don’t force my help on them.” Teachers with a welcoming disposition in the study invited questions and patiently came alongside teachers seeking improvement.

Teaching can be emotionally challenging as well as technically complex. Teachers in the study showed an openness to providing solace through the difficult days of the school year. Active reassurance and availability to provide comfort through the struggles of teaching make up empathic teacher support. Emotionally healthy teachers in this study indicated a willingness to listen and be there for teachers in emotional distress. Alina explained her approach: “I think trying to be empathetic when teachers have problems or issues. You know a lot of times; that’s like adult problems.” Mila realized that sometimes teachers just want to talk and have someone acknowledge their troubles, “Just listen and encourage. I don’t think suggestions are going to be heard right now. They are having a bad day, so we’ll just support them in that.” Recognizing that all teachers have difficult classes and days sometimes, desiring to support teachers through their upsetting circumstances increased relatedness and marked participants in this study.

## **Discussion**

What contributions increase the autonomy, competence, and connection in the school communities in the lived experiences of positive experienced teachers who remain committed and engaged? Committed and engaged

teachers remain in the teaching profession, allowing a consistent presence that encourages all aspects of the school community with their experience. They understand students and can challenge and support them while making them feel comfortable in the classroom and connecting them to the content's relevance. Study participants specifically mentioned this in the themes of promoting communication, developing community, fostering a growth mindset, and providing support. Jerome clarified how a committed and engaged teacher interacting with students as people first affects students, "I'm doing my job well, taking true care of students and their well-being. Not being afraid to step outside the teacher role a bit and just care for them as a human. Those are the times where students respond."

Experienced teachers with positive dispositions impact students, teachers, and their greater school community through augmenting autonomy, competence, and connection. They enhance student autonomy by helping students comprehend what they are learning and why, as demonstrated by the themes promoting communication and fostering a growth mindset. Student and teacher competence grows when positive experienced teachers provide practical and emotional support. The school community becomes more connected when experienced, positive teachers intentionally build classroom communities and foster connections among students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the larger community by creating a welcoming environment and addressing broader issues, as exemplified in the promoting community and developing community themes. Kristin fleshed this out by explaining, "I think community participant is a big one that I talk about in our class because we really get to practice it. Then asking, 'How does that look out in the world?'" Strategic input by positive experienced teachers increases the autonomy, competence, and connection in all aspects of their school community according to study participants. Several key interpretations of the study's data created a clear picture of positive experienced teachers' contributions to their school communities.

### **Positive Experienced Teachers Know and Connect to Their Students**

Positive experienced teachers demonstrate their commitment to teaching by dedicating effort to understanding their students, which helps them develop strong rapport and relevance with students. Study participants indicated they spend time in and outside of class getting to know their students and their interests. The insight that comes from teachers putting in effort allows them to help connect students to content by establishing relevance and connections to students' lived experiences and futures. Creating space for connection increases students' relatedness. Isabella cited "working to get to know each of the students" as a priority. Jerome tried to "meet the students where they're at." Phoebe advised, "Try to understand the context in which your students live and the struggles that they face." Mila noted, "We're always circling back to real-life application." Stephen found importance in "being able to connect students with the world around them." Positive experienced teachers in the study put effort into building relationships and getting to know their students to better connect with them and connect them to their learning promoting connection, competence, and autonomy.

### **Positive Experienced Teachers Prioritize Creating a Learning Environment**

Developing a classroom environment and structure that intentionally connected students and provided a

relationally safe space where they felt comfortable and challenged to learn was an important practice for positive experienced teachers in this study. Deliberately spending time creating an inviting physical space that focused on teaching students how to engage with one another respectfully emerged from each teacher in the study as a vital piece in the learning process. Hannah noted that as she smiles and exhibits a friendly demeanor to students, “that hopefully helps them see me as a safe adult.” Grace said she attempts to make her classroom “a safe place, a warm place, and inviting place.” Isabella endeavored to “establish my classroom as a place of belonging.” Teachers in the study indicated they put this above learning content in importance at the beginning of the school year. Once students felt secure in a safe environment, teachers guided them toward more challenging learning opportunities. This result ties directly in with teachers knowing students and their interests. Jerome indicated that a safe space “lowers [students’] guard and helps them be a little bit more vulnerable and take risks because you have to take emotional risks to sing.” Karl arranged learning to help all students feel free to participate, “It’s a smaller group, so it’s safer, especially for the introverts.” Taking time to build relationships and getting to know students while creating an inviting space for learning allowed these teachers to understand students’ current level of learning and appropriately direct them in ways that kept them interested and engaged in learning. This approach increases students’ relatedness and autonomy.

### **Positive Experienced Teachers Bring Willing Teachers Alongside**

Constructive classroom practices created credibility for positive experienced teachers in the study to invite amenable peers into deeper growth and excellence. Demonstrating competence invited other teachers to increase their abilities. It is not that the positive experienced participants styled themselves as perfect educators; they displayed their wisdom and experience through a sincere desire to improve and do their best in their roles. As teachers see those they wish to emulate, it creates an opportunity for positive experienced teachers to speak into situations to share their purposes and practices. As David expressed, positive experienced teachers hope to “set an example to others through how I fulfill my role as a teacher.” Isabella agreed, “We want to share about what works for us in the hopes of changing other people’s classrooms. I love my classroom, and I want to help the person next door to me love their classroom and enjoy it.” The willingness of fellow teachers to learn and improve was crucial to study participants’ desire to assist them. Every teacher in the study said they “avoid negative teachers” whose attitude and effort discouraged others. Instead, educators in the study sought to bring a positive attitude and culture to those around them who are open to growth. Alice seeks to “encourage them. It’s very easy to get discouraged and look at the things that are not going well. So, to just help them to see what is going well.” Phoebe expressed her desire to bring willing teachers along when she “sponsors new staff members, helping them adjust to the school culture and practices.” Their disposition and experience established positive teachers in the study as willing to share those traits with receptive teachers to increase their competence, autonomy, and connection.

### **Positive Experienced Teachers Benefit Their Whole School Community**

Positive experienced teachers in the study actively tried to connect and bring growth to their whole school community outside their role as classroom teachers. Every teacher in this study either served in a position of

distributed leadership (such as content area leader or lead teacher), volunteered their time outside the classroom to bring together their school community, or did both. As they felt a sense of ownership and desire to connect students, parents, administrators, and the outside community, positive experienced teacher participants put extra effort into developing a vibrant school. Kristin was part of a “staff and student wellness team. We meet every other week or so and talk about what the needs are on campus for students, teachers, and school staff.” Bryan talked about connecting in an international school community, “It’s different living overseas. No one’s near their family. So, you need to be family and community to others around here.” Karl would “take groups to do community outreach.” Positive experienced teachers go beyond their classroom responsibilities to benefit their school communities and increase their relatedness.

## **Implications**

A unique study finding emerged from the willing provision of practical and emotional support to other teachers by study participants. While the literature emphasized that positive experienced teachers provide formal mentoring to beginning teachers and help bring improvement to all teachers, it did not emphasize the degree to which teachers in this study supported all teachers in a natural, comprehensive way (Boogren, 2021; Lofthouse, 2018; Luke & Gourd, 2018; Shields & Mullen, 2020). Study participants demonstrated the willingness to support any teacher who asked for assistance while simultaneously honoring their autonomy. Study participants’ openness to supporting teachers emotionally was not a characteristic previously mentioned in the literature regarding positive experienced teachers. Studies identify the benefits of teacher empathy for students (Cai et al., 2023, Vomund & Miller, 2024; Wang et al., 2022). However, the empathic support of positive experienced teachers for their peers is a unique finding of this study and requires further examination.

Another exclusive contribution of this study originated from how positive experienced teachers impacted their whole school. Support of school administrators, encouraging teacher growth, and benefitting student learning and growth were anticipated results of the study (Boogren, 2021; Chiu, 2022; Leite et al., 2022; Seidel et al., 2021; Shields & Mullen, 2020). However, the literature did not record how positive experienced teachers connected all the stakeholders of the school community through promoting communication, unity, and growth. Study participants created extracurricular opportunities that brought together students, parents, teachers, and the community while promoting positive communication even in difficult situations. The feeling of ownership and desire to see their schools improve in communication, growth, and unity was a unique empirical implication of positive experienced teachers in the study.

A significant finding of this study emerged as positive experienced teachers explained the emphasis they placed on building community and teaching positive communication methods inside the classroom. Relatedness is a primary psychological need in SDT that people need to develop intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985). As teachers in the study created classroom environments where students healthily related to one another, this psychological need was fulfilled, leading to greater opportunities for students to learn for their own reasons. Every teacher in the study designated developing or building community and healthy communication as a valuable classroom practice. Positive experienced teachers participating in this study used practices that met the

need for relatedness according to SDT (Deci et al., 2017; Endedijk et al., 2022; Leite et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020).

Some limitations affected this study, including the geographic inequality of participant locations. Only four of the 15 participants in the study were located in North America. The original intent was to seek seven or eight participants from this area. However, several potential participants from North America could not participate due to time pressure or not qualifying as positive teachers according to their responses to the instrument used. As a result, more qualified and available participants taught in an international school setting. Another limitation of this study was that all participants received their post-secondary education in the United States. This was not a qualification for the study. Participants trained as teachers in other parts of the world did not contribute to the study. This limits the participants' perspective but strengthens the findings for those seeking results based on educators trained in the United States.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to examine the contribution of positive experienced teachers with more than five years of experience. Through the lens of self-determination theory, 15 positive experienced teachers throughout elementary, middle, and high school from 12 different content areas articulated their experiences contributing to their school communities while remaining engaged and committed. The data from journal prompts, individual interviews, and focus groups, provided by study participants was coded and grouped into four themes: promoting communication, developing community, fostering a growth mindset, and providing support. The study's unique contributions to the literature on positive experienced teachers came from study participants' emphasis on positive classroom community and communication, the practical and emotional support of willing teachers, and positive communication and growth for the entire school community. Positive experienced teachers in this study provided excellent practices that created positive student outcomes and benefited their school communities at each level: connecting students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. While further research should be conducted, it seems clear that positive experienced teachers are integral to the healthy functioning of school communities.

## **Recommendations**

Several recommendations for future research emerged from this study. The first came from the length of experience required for teachers participating in the study. Other studies examining positive experienced teachers delineated 20 years of experience (Gray et al., 2021; Jefferson et al., 2022; Lowe et al., 2019a, 2019b; Prout et al., 2019). Replicating this study with teacher participants having at least 20 years of experience could bring varied results.

Varying study participants' location is another recommendation to expand the results of this study. Replicating this study in a singular country with a consistent school system or as a case study in a specific district or school setting will aid in determining the transferability of this study. Solely sampling teachers educated in the country,



district, or school chosen for study could help determine whether positive experienced teachers can be found in any location and if they vary in their contributions.

## Notes

Liberty University's Institutional Review Board approved the research methods for this study.

I have no conflicts of interest to declare. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## **Appendix. Data Collection Questions**

### **Journal Prompts**

1. From your experience, describe the five most effective things you do as a teacher to promote learning and growth in your students.
2. Describe the positive contributions you make to your school community outside of your classroom, being certain to include the context and nature of those practices.

### **Individual Interview Questions**

1. Based on your experiences, what advice would you give beginning teachers on navigating the first five years of teaching?
2. What have you done in the classroom that in your experience makes the largest difference in students' desire to learn for their own reasons and growth?
3. What have you done in the classroom that in your experience makes the largest difference in students' ability to express their capabilities in learning and growth?
4. What have you done in the classroom that in your experience makes the largest difference in students' ability to learn how to connect with other students and the world around them?
5. What kinds of people seek you out for your experience and what are the ways you respond to them?
6. Describe the ways you benefit your school community outside of the classroom.
7. What is your approach when you encounter teachers with less experience than you or who seem to struggle in some aspect of teaching?
8. Please explain the connection between how you use your experience and positive approach to teaching to make a difference in your school community?

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. What are the ways you, as teachers, continue to make positive contributions to your school environment even through difficult circumstances?
2. What enables you, as teachers, to remain positive in the profession rather than develop a cynical, dispassionate approach?
3. What has been most effective from your experiences in increasing students' desire to learn for their own reasons and growth?
4. What have you found in your experience particularly helpful in increasing students' ability to show their proficiency in learning and maturity?
5. What has made the largest difference in your experience in your students' ability to learn to connect with other students and the world around them?
6. What are the ways your experience and positive approach to teaching made a difference in your school community?

7. What advice from your experiences would you give to teachers entering the profession about overcoming the difficulties of teaching and making positive contributions?
8. This study examines experienced teachers' positive contributions to their school communities. Is there anything else we should discuss or ask about?