

LEVERAGING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY WITHIN A SCHOOL DISTRICT

DAVID SPERLING

2020

ProQuest Number:27956680

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent on the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 27956680

Published by ProQuest LLC (2020). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All Rights Reserved.

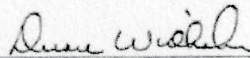
This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

The undersigned, approved by the Department Chair of Graduate Studies in Education, have examined a dissertation entitled:

LEVERAGING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY WITHIN A SCHOOL DISTRICT

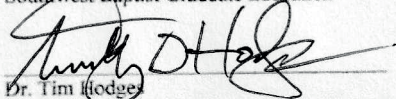
Presented by David Sperling, a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education and hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.



Dr. Duane Widhalm, Advisor/Chair  
Southwest Baptist Graduate Education



Dr. Kevin Schriver  
Southwest Baptist Graduate Education



Dr. Tim Hodges  
UNL Clifton Strengths Institute Executive Director, Gallup Senior Consultant

LEVERAGING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY WITHIN A SCHOOL DISTRICT

---

A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Graduate Education Department  
Southwest Baptist University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

---

By

David Sperling, B.S., M.S., Ed Spec.

Dr. Duane Widhalm, Dissertation Advisor

April 2020

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey has been exactly how it was laid out in the orientation in that classroom at SBU in May 2017. As I have been reminded constantly through these past three years, the journey of pursuing a doctorate is supposed to be hard; it is the hard that makes it great. I am thankful to a God who sent His son to die for me, and to be a constant source of hope for me. My wife Ashley has proven, yet again, to be my number one fan with her affirmative words of, “Get that thing done, I got the rest!” My kids Avery, Blaine, and Will have been a constant reminder that this busy time is only a season, and Daddy will be able to bake, shoot hoops, and play Legos way more very soon. Lastly, I am indebted to my parents who showed me the components of positive psychology, even before this dissertation journey began, with their examples of selflessness and servanthood.

My advisor Dr. Duane Widhalm has been a source of steady encouragement to be able to push my thinking throughout this process. Thank you to my other committee members Dr. Kevin Schriver, for believing that my content was worth pursuing and giving tangible feedback, and Dr. Tim Hodges, for seeing who I was very early on in the process and investing hard truth into me. I am grateful to Dr. Tammy Condren for sticking with me and offering her genuine support through next steps and multiple reads of my work. I am thankful to my colleagues that were with me in the van on the way to Omaha last June who spoke truth to me about where I was at and what I needed to do to proceed. Finally, I will cherish the friendship and constant encouragement from my classmates and colleagues, Dr. Andria Hodge and Dr. Brad Yoder. Our trips to Bolivar

over the past three years are a reminder that accomplishments are made by the people we have around us.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</i> .....	<i>i</i>
<i>LIST OF TABLES</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>ABSTRACT</i> .....	<i>viii</i>
<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	<i>1</i>
Problem Statement .....	3
Purpose for the Study .....	3
Theoretical Framework.....	6
Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions.....	8
Definition of Key Terms .....	12
Summary .....	12
<i>REVIEW OF LITERATURE</i> .....	<i>15</i>
Introduction.....	15
Positive Emotions .....	17
Engagement.....	21
Meaning .....	31
Accomplishment .....	36
Current Positive Psychology Practices .....	39
Examples of Identifying Strengths.....	40

Summary .....	41
<i>METHODOLOGY</i> .....	43
Introduction.....	43
Participants.....	44
Selection/Sampling .....	46
Research Setting.....	46
Data Collection .....	47
Research Design.....	49
Data Analysis .....	56
Summary .....	59
<i>ANALYSIS OF DATA</i> .....	60
Introduction.....	60
Pilot Study.....	61
Participants.....	62
Assuring Trustworthiness .....	64
Research Setting.....	65
Analysis of the Data.....	66
Research Question 1 .....	71
Positive Emotion.....	71
Engagement.....	72



Relationships.....	74
Meaning .....	75
Accomplishments.....	77
Research Question 2 .....	79
Sub Question 1 .....	81
Sub Question 2.....	83
Sub Question 3.....	85
Sub Question 4.....	87
Summary.....	89
<i>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</i> .....	91
Introduction.....	91
Limitations of the Study.....	92
Conclusions.....	93
Research Question 1 Conclusions.....	95
Research Question 2 Conclusions.....	101
Implications for Practice.....	105
Recommendations for Future Research.....	107
Summary.....	108
<i>References</i> .....	111
<i>Appendix A</i> .....	124

<i>Appendix B</i> .....	126
<i>Appendix C</i> .....	127
<i>Appendix D</i> .....	128
<i>Appendix E</i> .....	129
<i>Appendix F</i> .....	130

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Top 21 Key Terms/Phrases Organized by Rank.....	68
Table 2: Top 21 Key Terms/Phrases Organized by PERMA Theme.....	69

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative narrative case study was to describe the components of positive psychology within a Mid-Missouri school district. There is an insufficient amount of research that is focused on positive psychology in schools that link strengths-based methods to reach maximum achievement levels set by state standards. This study took a closer look at the developmental nature of positive psychology, and the impact it can have on outcomes that matter most to educators. It will add to the educational knowledge base by investigating the strengths of our educators and how that has an impact on workforce engagement. This study encompassed the advantages of investing in human capital through a strengths-based approach which leverages motivation found in positive psychology. This framework leads to the following components of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments. Through interviews, the researcher was able to discover themes aligning with positive psychology. The findings exposed the implementation of all five of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model, with an emphasis on relationships and engagement, in order to invest in human capital to leverage strengths-based approaches to maximize teaching and learning.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Successful schools are gauged by specific metrics. According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and their implementation of the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP 6), the state's public education governance is responsible for offering accountability and accreditation to public schools in the state of Missouri. Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2019) states:

A primary purpose for MSIP is to provide accountability for school district accreditation...[and promote that the] next generation will continue to emphasize standards for student performance but will also emphasize leading indicators - inputs in economic terms - that will ensure healthy school systems and the continuous improvement process. (par. 1)

To reach these rigorous academic standards, teachers need to believe when they are at their best, students will, in return, yield higher levels of achievement (Cinches, Russell, Chavez, & Ortiz, 2017). According to Hattie (2012), when teachers are working together toward a common outcome, engaged and disengaged students alike will benefit. This collaborative effort of shared success, known as Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE), drives the best parts of an educator to perform at the highest levels. Most recent updates of factors that influence student achievement and their effect size ranks CTE number one (Hattie, 2016). Great teachers positively affect students' test scores, the likelihood of going to college, and probability of earning higher wages (Reckmeyer & Robison, 2016).

In order to be in control of what is taught and learned in schools, the school must be looked to as a positive institution promoting positive psychology (Kristjansson, 2012).

The ultimate goal is leveraging the motivational components of positive psychology to enhance the achievement of state expectations from state departments, as measured by Missouri's Top 10 by 20 Plan. The infusion of positive psychology into the education system points to what is best in the complex behavior of human beings (Seligman, 2002). Success in schools through the vehicle of positive psychology, as measured by state achievement metrics, means instead of dwelling on what is wrong with people, one can focus on what is right about them, and makes them succeed (Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal, Plowman, & Blue, 2016). At this stage of the research, components of positive psychology will be generally defined as enhancing well-being to promote flourishing at the highest level (Baker, Green, & Falecki, 2017).

This research will focus on the investment in human capital through positive psychology to attain the rising state expectations. These positive psychology practices include positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2011). School district success using academic metrics is tied to accreditation as the primary driver of success measurement. As stated by Kristjansson (2012), the founding fathers of positive psychology recognized a deficiency of empirical evidence in the school setting. A review of current literature, along with interviews of one district's current employees were administered to capture perceptions on a whole-district scale. Descriptive data were analyzed and correlated with the current literature, as well as recommendations given for current and future educational professionals.

## **Problem Statement**

With Missouri's focus on high stakes academic standards due to the Top 10 by 20 Plan, educators are asked to produce more while feeling the pressure of achievement for all students. There is a lack of prior research on the use of positive psychology in schools to drive academic success through enhancing school culture. Building upon a framework that promotes individuals, communities, and entire populations to flourish is imperative (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The problem is that the focus is not on what schools do best, the development of human capital, which leads to engagement at the highest level and increased productivity (Lopez & Louis, 2009). Instead the focus is on academic success as shown on one shot state assessments. Positive psychology has the potential to permeate any size organization, along with other fields including education, to enhance well-being and promote flourishing at the highest level (Baker et al., 2017). The focus of this study was to fill a gap in the research in order to expose the evidence of negative vs. positive concentration within the educational environment. This study addressed the problem of focusing solely on academic metrics, such as assessments gauging student achievement, instead of leveraging the motivational components of positive psychology that when utilized effectively, lead to achievement of state expectations. The literature review that follows will provide further detail into the components that invest in human capital.

## **Purpose for the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative case study was to describe the components of positive psychology within a Mid-Missouri school district. In a report on deficit-based development models where the focus is on what is wrong with something or

someone, Petrosino, Buehler, and Turpin-Petrosino (2013) found programs designed to lift at-risk adolescents out of their current track of being jail-bound by organizing visits to prisons, actually saw the opposite as an outcome. It was found that not doing anything at all would have produced better results. The study of focusing on positive psychology aims to combat passive approaches like these. There is an insufficient amount of research that is focused on positive psychology in schools that link strengths-based methods, including positive psychology, and the impact they have on the development and attainment of rigorous state expectations (Kristjansson, 2012). This study took a closer look at the developmental nature of positive psychology, and the impact it can have on outcomes that matter most to educators. It will add to the educational knowledge base by investigating the strengths of our educators and how that has an impact on workforce engagement. In building strengths, educators see themselves as highly efficacious, and thus more likely to use differentiated instructional methods, employ emotionally supportive behaviors that increase students' confidence, and adopt proactive approaches to managing student-teacher conflict (Zee, de Jong, & Koomen, 2016).

The state of Missouri is not unfamiliar with initiatives that promote transformational practices that raise expectations. Missouri's accountability for public schools took on new guidelines in 2009 as the Top 10 by 20 Initiative attempted to quantify academic achievement enhancements in Missouri. As the name suggests, these efforts aimed for Missouri to rank in the top 10 states by 2020. In a 2014 update, this initiative stated:

The success of Missouri students depends on both a solid foundation of skills and the ability of students to apply their knowledge and skills to the kinds of problems



and decisions they will likely encounter after they graduate. The challenge to excel is ongoing. The work we need to do is transformational, not incremental (para. 1).

Human capital matters and is highlighted by the capitalization of strengths that lead students in doing what they do best (Gallup Case Study, 2017; Lopez & Louis, 2009). Bolman and Deal (2008) contend that it is through social skills, such as awareness of self and others and the ability to handle emotions that leaders use to build effective relationships. This urgency of narrowed focus on human capital is demonstrated by the attraction, development, and retention of the best teachers (Gallup's Perspective, 2019). With research being on the rise with positive psychology, educational methods are in a constant cycle of improvement, although they are currently functioning separately (Baker et al., 2017). This study is important because people matter, and the way that education promotes the vehicle to success is critical.

### **Research Questions**

The following central research questions and sub questions guided the study:

1. How do educators from a Mid-Missouri school district describe positive psychology practices?
2. What positive psychology practices have been put in place in one Mid-Missouri school district since 2015?
  - a. How would a Mid-Missouri school district employee describe workforce engagement before and after 2015?
  - b. What examples exist between identifying strengths and workforce engagement?

- c. How do school employees discover and develop their strengths into motivators to engagement?
- d. What is the most effective measurement of success in school?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in humanistic psychology beginning in the 1950s. At the core of this research is the demand for in-field examples of how positive psychology is applied in concordance with the literature. With importance placed on positive self-fulfillment, self-actualization, the fully-functioning individual, and human development, the concept of flourishing became the focus rather than languishing (Fredrickson 2001; Kristjansson, 2012; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951). Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff (2002) supported these themes in their empirical study on the two traditions of psychological and subjective well-being. Through this mind shift, from remedying mental illness and weakness identification known as traditional psychology, positive psychology was born with a priority on promoting happiness and well-being in order to live a prosperous life (Baker et al., 2017; Seligman, 2011).

In their official proclamation of positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) communicated actions that lead to well-being that transcend the individual and affect healthy communities. At the heart of their theory is the following:

Positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is

about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. (p. 5)

Positive psychologists claim reformative results through making life worth living by exploring more about human happiness, positive traits, emotions, and institutions (Kristjansson, 2012; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Fredrickson (2001) argues that it is the cultivation of such positive emotions that lead to psychological growth and enhanced well-being. Previous research to guide a broader understanding on the positive component of well-being included human flourishing approaches, scales of psychological well-being, social well-being, and self-determination (Lopez, Pedrotti, & Synder, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff, 1989). Through these psychological lenses come reflection at multiple levels. Leaders look at situations through different frames or lenses, namely the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. Successful managers hire the right people, keep and invest in their employees, empower their employees, and promote diversity (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Bolman and Deal (2008) contend that the human resource frame exposes what organizations require and what its people need. The quality of their relationships figures prominently in how satisfied and how effective leaders are at their work (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 1993).

Knowing an individual on a personal level pushes beyond seeing students as numbers. The Top 10 by 20 Plan identified four goals in order to focus Missouri education on quality over quantity. Categories from “Top 10,” (2014) included “leadership, collaborative culture and climate, teaching/learning practices, assessments to inform teaching and learning, effective use of data, and parental and/or community

engagement” (p. 1). The goals of the plan call for all Missouri’s outgoing students to be college and career ready and all incoming students to be kindergarten ready. The other goals include development and support systems for educators as well as DESE’s overall stewardship toward effective operations practices (Top 10, 2014).

The theoretical framework for this study encompassed the advantages of investing in human capital through a strengths-based approach which leverages motivation found in positive psychology. This framework leads to the following components of Seligman (2011)’s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments. It is through these five pillars of well-being that drive the exploration of the research questions. The researcher will explore the research questions, incorporating positive psychology and the academic metrics laid out by the Top 10 by 20 Plan into the methodology of capturing perceptions. These five pillars of PERMA create the core of the interview design and offer the format for discovering how positive psychology has the potential to be transformational in driving educational success.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions**

The following limitations, delimitations and assumptions of this study have been identified:

Limitations:

1. The researcher is an employee in the district in which he is interviewing.
2. Researcher and participant bias was always a possibility in a qualitative study, including the honesty of each participant.

3. The researcher attempted to add reliability by triangulating data through member checking, review of the interview session recordings, and concept mapping.
4. Given the research design of interviews, there is a limitation on the scope of information that could be gathered from an anonymous survey.
5. Participants had varying degrees of recognition and comfortability with positive psychology components. If this study were to be replicated, results may differ as experiences vary with different work environments.
6. Only participants who accepted the request to participate were included.

#### Delimitations:

1. This study was confined to the problem, participants, methodology used, and the setting of this study.
2. The study targeted the use of in-depth interviews with certified district employees, broken into two defined groups describing positive psychology practices and what systems have been put in place since 2015.
3. One school district in Missouri will be used due to their implementation of mission-minded initiatives in the past four years.
4. This study is bound by the five pillars of positive psychology: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments.
5. This study focused on only one school district in Missouri.

#### Assumptions:

1. It was assumed that participants gave honest and open responses and were able to accurately represent their grade level/department perspective.

2. It was assumed that member checking, review of the interview session recordings, and concept mapping would offer a clear narrative and a whole-district perspective.
3. It was assumed that participants would participate throughout the entirety of the study and offer valid responses directly related to their specific position in the school district.
4. Transferability of this study applies to any organization who views people as their most valuable resource. This acknowledgement of human capital reaches outside the educational realm to surrounding social and cultural contexts to explore perceptions of positive psychology as a driver to organizational engagement. The description of data collection through interviews assumes participants are alert and engaged to provide an accurate depiction of the research setting.

### **Design Controls**

A qualitative narrative case study approach was utilized in this study using interviews of one Mid-Missouri school districts' employees to address the research questions. Due to lack of prior research on how positive psychology looks in a school, research questions guided the study providing the rationale for an in-depth examination, awareness, and understanding that are at the core of qualitative research. The researcher also found a gap in prior research regarding the qualitative narrative case study approach of structuring the study. Participants in this study were separated into two groups: certified district employees who have worked in the district prior to 2015 and certified district employees who have been hired since 2015. One of the district buildings was left out of the interviews due to the researcher holding a leadership position in that building

as to diminish bias. This building was utilized in the pilot study to ensure interview protocol reliability.

The study will focus on one Mid-Missouri school district to identify and build on employees' perceptions on positive psychology throughout the district. It is this experience that was captured through open-ended questions capturing the respondent's experiences in the district. In order to control the limitations and delimitations, the researcher interpreted participants' responses to open-ended questions about their on-the-job interactions implementing positive psychology by triangulating data through member checking, review of the interview session recordings, and concept mapping. Due to the threats to internal validity of studying the district in which the researcher was employed, it was limiting to ensure an accurate portrayal of the entire district. These limitations are innate to the nature of a narrative case study as generalization to another population will not be automatic. The focus on one Mid-Missouri school district, through the use of in-depth interviews with certified district employees describing positive psychology practices was a delimit that the researcher deemed necessary.

These responses were reported anonymously so to not link responses back to the participants. The researcher conducted interviews with staff members and requested they participate in focus groups in order to gather data. In the event the researcher's questions seem to be driving a belief or bias, there will be a continuous cycle of reevaluation of responses. The researcher will also avoid summarizing participants' answers to ensure accuracy in the current perceptual realities of the school district. Researcher bias was addressed through the use of audio recording and peer checking. It will be a priority for the researcher to ask well-timed, quality questions.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Accomplishments.** Attainment of accomplishment and success (Seligman, 2011).

**Collective teacher efficacy (CTE).** A collective belief that a staff's collaborative efforts can positively affect every students' learning, disengaged and disadvantaged alike (Hattie, 2016).

**Engagement.** Being completely focused in activities (Seligman, 2011).

**Flourishing.** Dynamic optimal state of psychosocial functioning that arises from functioning well across multiple psychosocial domains (Butler & Kern, 2016).

**Meaning.** Purpose that is larger than one's self (Seligman, 2011).

**Positive Emotion.** Feeling good (Seligman, 2011).

**Positive Psychology.** A scientific approach to studying human thoughts, feelings, and behavior, with a focus on strengths instead of weaknesses, building the good in life instead of repairing the bad (Ackerman, 2019).

**Relationships.** Being genuinely connected to others (Seligman, 2011).

**Strengths.** Identified talents and investment to grow them (Reckmeyer & Robison, 2016).

**Strengths-based.** The belief that a combination of a supportive environment and the innate desire to grow and develop to their full potential will result in optimal growth (Linley, Woolston, & Biswas-Diener, 2009).

## Summary

Strengths-based approaches, through positive psychology, are necessary in optimizing the culture of teaching and learning. With the rising pressure to increase



student achievement as shown in Top 10 by 20, educators must ensure they are promoting what is great about the individuals around them. This study will describe the components of positive psychology within the stories that are told by workforce representatives. The research questions will capture responses of how educators describe positive psychology practices at a Mid-Missouri school district as well as give a timeline of what structures have been put in place since 2015. This narrative will fill a gap of the application of positive psychology in the educational setting not addressed previously in the publication of peer-reviewed literature. The study will utilize qualitative methodology by performing in-depth interviews to gather perceptual data from strategically chosen participant groups. Descriptive data collected through the interviews addressed how educators described positive psychology in their district as well as giving specific examples of systems that have been initiated. These results were matched with the literature, and future recommendations were made to enhance educational practices.

Chapter Two will provide current research to support the components of positive psychology to meet and exceed state expectations. The review is organized thematically and will follow the five components of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model to define well-being; positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Chapter Three will discuss the methodology used in this study, including the participants, and data analysis. The chapter also outlines the instrument that was used for data collection and as well as ensuring validity and reliability were ensured with the instrument. Chapter Four will present the analysis of the data and findings that subsequently resulted from the research questions. Chapter Five will present a summary

of the process, breakdown of the research questions, findings of the data, implications on the educational field, and the significance of these findings for future studies.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Introduction

In 1998, Martin Seligman, the American Psychological Association President, got up to give his Presidential Address and introduce a focus-shift for traditional psychology. Seligman (1999) proceeded to introduce pillars such as well-being, contentment, flow, happiness, optimism, hope, human strengths, savoring, and resilience. The majority of psychologists were delving into dysfunction and causes for the deadliest diseases, while a shift was being made toward strengths-based psychology and what it meant to truly flourish (Harter et al., 2016). Seligman (2002) contended that it was through the understanding of strengths that led to the flourishing and contribution to mental health, and ultimately lead to optimal human functioning:

The message of the positive psychology movement is to remind our field that it has been deformed. Psychology is not just the study of disease, weakness, and damage; it also is the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is wrong; it also is building what is right. Psychology is not just about illness or health; it also is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. And in this quest for what is best, positive psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, self-deception, or hand waving; instead, it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents in all its complexity. (p. 4)

Kun, Balogh, and Gerakne Krasz (2017) contend it is not natural to focus on positivity. With this analysis of negative events come a reduction of comfort and an increased risk of burnout. Conversely, the benefits of well-being lead to better production, resilience to

change, increased self-efficacy, motivation, and devotion to work (Kun et al., 2017).

Although the measurement of a good life is subjective, positive psychology is intended to be a description rather than a prescription in order to lead a flourishing life that has alignment to an individual's values and interests (Positive Psychology Center, 2019).

Seligman (2011) introduced well-being using the framework PERMA: a five pillar construct highlighting Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. The PERMA-Profiler, created by Butler and Kern (2016), is a measurement for the five components of well-being in order to quantify and record discrepancies at individual, community, and national levels. This tool was designed to refine theories and continue deeper understanding behind well-being. The tool was developed and validated using the following three parts: (a) theoretically relevant bank of items that align with the five PERMA pillars, (b) correlations with other structures gauged against two other samples, and (c) implementation of psychometric and norm information cross-referenced with another eight sample groups. Compared to other professional fields, teachers show greater levels of well-being (purpose, social, financial, physical, and community) due to their mission-minded belief that they can connect to kids (Gallup's Perspective, 2019). In response to a claim that PERMA is redundant with subjective well-being, Seligman (2018) reiterates his claim that PERMA exposes the elements of well-being, not the claim for a completely new kind of well-being. The independence of each pillar leads to the correlation and cross-referenced confirmation among each of the pillars.

Public education is widely agreed upon as the foundation of a prospering community, yet a mission-minded passion alone is not sufficient to compensate for

financial and psychological needs (Gallup's Perspective, 2019). This literature review is thematically organized and provides research focused on the primary building blocks of positive psychology. The term 'positive psychology' serves as an umbrella for the many theories and research that support the beliefs that make life worth living to the fullest (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The purpose of this literature review is to solidify the groundwork for the identification and implementation of positive psychology. Positive psychologists are not attempting to replace other theories or to discredit environmental constants, rather their focus is on shining light on potential alternatives to enhance well-being (Niemi, Shogren, & Wehmeyer, 2017). Through this review of literature and successive analysis of research data, the themes of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment will be explored. Although research exists in the science of psychology for these themes individually, Seligman (2011) suggests that the five themes can be measured and studied as connected entities.

### **Positive Emotions**

Emotions are generally brief and tied to circumstances with personal meaning, with conceptualization into distinct categories such as fear, anger, joy, and interest (Fredrickson, 2001). It is this categorization in the work of Moyer (2015) supporting the research that higher levels of planning and organization are the outcomes from teachers who feel a strong efficacy toward the organization. In a study of teachers including 93 grade level teams and 15 schools, it was discovered that engaging in the use of effective practice instead of a single model proved to be more beneficial (Prelli, 2016). As efficacy has come under attack amidst ever-moving achievement standards, the

connection remains that efforts toward growing teacher performance ultimately raises efficacy and student achievement (Hattie, 2012; Prelli, 2016).

Using a strengths-based method to explore teacher well-being, Paterson and Grantham (2016) used the Glasgow Motivational and Well-being Profile at five primary schools to determine a comprehensive well-being profile for each of the participating schools. The study then focused on one school with the most positive well-being profile, and identified six teachers to participate in a focus group about the factors leading to teacher well-being. In a study with head teachers it was found that managing a healthy level of well-being led to positive attributes such as leadership distribution throughout the school, prioritization of both personal and professional lives, assertive approaches to negative interactions among staff, parents, and students, a healthy lifestyle outside of school, and a supportive structure for collaboration (Cooper & Woods, 2017). It is this effect of experiencing positive emotions that increases one's well-being through reflection on emotional balance that leads to greater personal development over time (Cooper & Woods, 2017; Fredrickson, 2001; Seligman, 2011).

Building on traditional psychology theories based on positive experiences, there are questions as to the best regulation strategies for controlling and expanding the adaptive benefits of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001; Ng, 2017; Seligman, 2002). These emotions, stated by Ng (2017), are recognized as adaptations to psychological structures that orient us to powerful threats and opportunities in the environment. More recent perspectives point to the improvement of well-being through suffering and unhappy experiences, pushing human experience to a new level of functioning (Lomas & Ivztan, 2015). This alternative thinking, Lomas and Ivztan (2015) contend, spins positive

emotions as being powerful enough to stating excessive enjoyment may lead others to not act, or even lead to even riskier conduct. Krishnakumar, Hopkins, and Robinson (2017) add that correct inferences about daily emotion-related interactions, they feel and act poorly at work, contributing to a toxic culture. The adaptive benefits of these experiences broaden the resources that are available and serve as a reserve for possible future threats (Fredrickson, 2001; Paterson & Grantham, 2016). Butler and Kern (2016) add that their PERMA-Profilier does not invalidate the relevance of negative emotions, but rather validates the consideration of both positive and negative components on the spectrum of mental health.

Ng (2017) claimed that emotions are regulated through comparisons with one's surroundings. A wealthy person in a prosperous county has a different conceptualization of positive emotions than a wealthy person in an impoverished country due to desirable societal conditions. These comparative feelings relative with surroundings unite these social comparisons. In her conceptual analyses of the following positive emotions, Fredrickson (2001) argues with her broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions that the following supports broaden people's collection of resources for regulating thoughts and actions. Joy expands by creating the urge to play and be creative. Interest calls for exploration and the desire to acquire new information. Contentment requires that current situations be savored and appreciated. Pride, after a personal accomplishment, calls us to share new ideas and bring others along to create even greater successes. And finally, love pushes toward safety in intimate relationships (Fredrickson, 2001). Santos, Gould, Strachan, Pereira, and Machado (2019) point to experiential learning like this as vital to the improvement of one's capacity to control emotions. People who understand and can

control their emotions are more likely to lessen the ambiguous influences on those emotions, and may even lead to psychological resilience (Fredrickson, 2001; Krishnakumar et al., 2017; Seligman, 2002).

A focus on strengths-based development was researched by Pressler (2011) as he tracked teachers who developed a specific professional development plan centered on their students. As a by-product of this work, teachers were engaged in shared decision making focused on student data along with a collective understanding of improvement. Because of a developed plan that gave them autonomy to work smarter, teachers had a newfound sense of teacher leadership (Pressler, 2011). Similarly, in the work of Baum, Schader, and Hebert (2014), with twice exceptional learners in a strengths-based private school, true professional development occurs on a school wide and individual level through regular follow through. Additionally, in their study, the use of another consultant was implemented to deliver teacher training and curriculum support multiple weeks throughout the year. Through this systematic, strengths-based approach, faculty were supported with on-going feedback based on their submitted plans. This implementation of strengths by positive institutions that lead to better communities is one of Seligman's (2002) primary concerns surrounding positive psychology.

Drucker (1967) predates this approach by stating, "to achieve results, one has to use all the available strengths—the strengths of associates, the strengths of the superior, and one's own strengths. These strengths are the true opportunities" (p. 71). Cooper and Woods (2017) link development opportunities to strengths awareness in leading to reflective proactive and overall climate. This reflection was found in Carrillo, Martinez-Sanchis, Etchemendy, and Baños (2019) work with participants writing about seeing



themselves in the past and focusing on friendships, which led to improved positivity in their writing and an increased positive condition. Similarly, when participants projected their focus to the future, their positive features and familial relationships resulted in their writing products to be longer and abundantly filled with greater amounts of positive emotions. This reflection coincides with educators' positive psychology practices and the connection to the past, present, and future.

### **Engagement**

In their work connecting early childhood to the components of positive psychology, Baker et al. (2017) link the creative and dynamic Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of successful social development to the success experienced through optimal engaged play-based delivery (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Bolman and Deal (2008) find that leadership is not tangible and exists solely in relationships and in the perception of the engaged parties. In a study completed in New Zealand to increase teacher engagement in the area of evaluation, researchers found that evaluation systems that fall below what is expected are damaging to the engagement of the educator. They concluded that best results were exhibited through practical changes. The top tier of talented teachers are 2.8 times more likely to be engaged in their classroom ("Gallup Case Study," 2017). It is these simple shifts in evaluation that are making the biggest differences with how teachers are seeing their actions in connection to the learning going on in their classrooms (Moskal, Stein, & Golding, 2016). The National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance conducted a study to observe student and teacher outlooks about growth mindset. It was discovered that teachers were far more critical on their academic efforts than their students (Snipes & Loan, 2017).

Growth matters to teachers, as 60% state leaving their last position to pursue a career growth opportunity, in alignment and support of their advancement (Gallup's Perspectives, 2019). It is through the journey of professional and personal growth that fights the mainstream of success being synonymous with attaining a higher position (Kun et al., 2017).

The quality of the teacher has a direct correlation to student engagement, as determined by the effectiveness and engagement of the teacher (Cinches et al., 2017; "Gallup Case Study," 2017). In an attempt to make effectiveness more clear, an increasing number of principals have a clearer picture of effective instruction in the classroom through implementation of current models and specific rubrics (Young, Range, Hvidston, & Mette, 2015). Gallup's Perspectives (2019) stated the engagement of teachers has a direct correlation to the engagement of students, which has positive effects on subject matter performance, graduation rates, and college readiness. In their experimentation with classroom design, Imms and Byers (2016) claimed any future investment should be directly tied to teacher pedagogy leading to student learning through engagement. Aiming to engage learners at the deepest levels, Gush and Greeff (2018) based their creation of a textbook from Maslow's self-actualization, Hettler's wellness approaches, Seligman's PERMA, and Peterson and Seligman's 24 character strengths. In the past 20 years, the recognition of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) have caused psychologists to examine the delivery approach to allow the most positive impact (Gush & Greeff, 2018). Leadership Perspectives (2018) reported the opportunities for students to enhance their preparation for careers may be restricted due to state and federal mandates. Ninety-one percent of superintendents agree that these

requirements are keeping students from the real-life learning opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, and job shadowing, and would like to see the requirements be less intrusive.

In their evaluation of past frameworks of positive psychology, Rusk and Waters (2015) defined “psycho-social functioning as the moment-by-moment psychological and social processes, states and events that contribute to well-being” (p. 141). This understanding pioneered a new ideology to well-being that identified five domains: Attention and Awareness, Comprehension and Coping, Emotions, Goals and Habits, and Virtues and Relationships. Although other frameworks have conceptualized optimal functioning of an individual, there is a void, Rusk and Waters (2015) contend, on the psycho-social functioning piece. These advancements continued the trajectory away from a deficiency mindset model which have proven damaging and less successful, and pushed to the engagement in the belief that all students have unrealized potential (Gush & Greeff, 2018).

In line with the shift from deficiency to positivity, Carrillo et al. (2019) performed a qualitative analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the efficacy of positive psychology interventions that lead to engagement. This research focus was on the intervention known as the Best Possible Self. The intervention required participants to project into the future and see themselves attaining everything they could imagine through dedication and hard work. It has been confirmed that through this positive projection, positive effects on well-being are shown, as the focus is away from traumatic writing, and now focuses on positive writing (Carrillo et al., 2019). Two variations of this intervention were implemented with similar instructions to participants. The Best

Past Self condition asked participants to think about a time in their past when they had been the best forms of themselves. Similarly, the Best Present Self condition asked that participants paint a picture of themselves as the most productive to the world in the present.

The accountability measures put in place by the standards-based reform initiative No Child Left Behind (NCLB) established important benchmarks in order to ensure educational parity. Laursen (2015) argues that although this accountability shed light on the achievement levels that needed to be raised, the implementation fell short in the expansion of these expectations throughout the nation. If grit and perseverance are attributes that educators are trying to instill in their students, then the learning must be supported by adults who are focused on strengths rather than deficiencies (Laursen, 2015; Reckmeyer & Robison, 2016). The Meta-Analysis conducted by the Gallup Organization continued their journey to connect employee engagement, performance, and strengths (Harter et al., 2016). This educational philosophy was explained by Lopez and Louis (2009) as a reset of thinking to educational principles highlighting the best of the effort and achievement of students.

In their work highlighting relationships between engagement and outcomes, Harter et al. (2016) stated engagement and performance are generalizable across multiple institutions. This meta-analysis went on to give background on the foundational beginnings of the Gallup Organization. George Gallup was committed to the study of human needs and satisfaction in the 1930s. In his landmark research on well-being, Gallup initiated the work of addressing multiple components of someone's life. Dr. Gallup came to the realization that less than half of North American workers felt highly

satisfied in what they did at work. In the earliest stages of these developments, researchers concluded that the measurement of employee satisfaction alone was inadequate to sustain change. There became a need for this data to be accessible by those who could initiate action, offer accountability, and be the creators of change. These findings led to the employee engagement instrument known as Gallup's Q<sup>12</sup> (Harter et al., 2016). Gallup's Perspective (2019) found only 34% of teachers were engaged at work, while half of teachers are pursuing a search for a new job. Due to these barriers to success, the teacher life cycle was created to engage teachers toward maximizing outcomes. The stages included five constants that have influence in the teacher's experience including their relationship with the principal, clarity of roles, team expectations, workspace, and well-being.

Chen (2012) states that teaching goes beyond the mere pedagogical knowledge and expands to reaching all learners, including competencies in technological advances. She further contends the focus should not be on outward knowledge, but rather inwardly driven through personal development. This development was shown in the Fostering Student Connections program where the focus was exclusively driven within the four walls of the school. In their study on capturing student engagement, Cinches et al. (2017) captured students' testimonials with the guiding question, "What encourages you to participate in class...finish projects?" Their responses included the teacher making lessons easier to understand, being approachable, open-minded, having a passion for the lesson, being highly knowledgeable about the topic, bringing positive energy, showing professionalism, having a good attitude, and encouraging students in their interactions. Harter et al. (2016) points to evidence that link employee's attitudes with multiple

outcomes of the organization. Growing student's perseverance takes consciousness to work ethic when being asked to take on new knowledge, motivation to earn good grades, and innovation in critical thinking and problem solving (Imms & Byers, 2016). Gallup Case Study (2017) found this engagement in developing strengths enhanced teacher quality while decreasing number of days absent and attrition.

### **Relationships**

Deal and Peterson (2016) convey the importance of values as the conscious voice of what an organization represents. If a school claims to value relationships with parents but does not allow parents to volunteer in the school, the behavior does not match the principle the school claims to value. This absence of conviction will lead to an organization that will end up being mediocre at best due to its failure to match strengths with roles (Drucker, 1967). In an attempt to develop an accurate picture of their clients, counselors engage in strengths-based interviewing in order to gain a comprehensive look at the child's problems. This investment into the child makes the assumption that strengths are present and can overcome and attach to the most pressing difficulties in the child's past (Hass, 2018).

Successful leaders focus on developing people as their most appreciable asset. These leaders build effective relationships using social skills, awareness of self and others, and the ability to handle emotions (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Cinches et al. (2017) recognizes teachers building relationships with colleagues, but the core of relationship-building needs to happen with their students. Developing trusting relationships, effective communication, and promotion of self-reflection have been established as effective coaching tenets. Effective two-way communication is supported through trusting

relationships between the coach and mentee (Mette et al., 2017; Walkowiak, 2016). Paterson and Grantham (2016) echo this belief in their exploration of teacher well-being with the themes of valuing relationships, collaboration, and the demand for practical perceptions of teaching. Teachers must foster these positive interpersonal relationships with students to maximize academic mastery (Cinches et al., 2017).

Personal relationships are a fundamental component of life, making emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills imperative (Bolman & Deal, 2008). In the strengths-focused conversation script, Hass (2018) forgoes the diagnostic focus of ADHD and depression in the troubled child, and instead pushed beyond relational limits to unveil aspirations and positive relationships. Paterson and Grantham (2016) point collaborative discussions like these to the positive relationships fostered by groups of teachers who acquire a premiere balance between work and life. Strengths-spotting is an intentional observation of an individual's possible strengths that are caught through interactions and repeated behaviors (Niemic et al., 2017; Reckmeyer & Robison, 2016).

In the athletic arena, a team captain's promotion of positive life-skills development leads to attributes of confidence, communication, and teamwork that permeate to life outside of sports. This refinement of psychosocial and social skills enhances this as a strengths-based approach that stretches teammates to persevere and flourish (Santos et al., 2019). It is through the leadership in promoting relationships that ultimately determine the success and effectiveness of policies, procedures, and objectives (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The Personal Assets Framework suggested by Côté, Turnnidge, and Vierimaa (2016) listed participation in an activity, relationship building, and having a defined setting as the three positive elements for sports involvement. This participation

leads to a life-long trajectory of developing the 4 Cs: competence, confidence, connection, and character. Paterson and Grantham (2016) agree that the positive communication that comes from positive relationships is a lead promoter of positive ethos.

Langford (2015) agrees that the evaluation system can be enhanced when there is cohesion with the overall vision of professional development. This idea is expounded by calling strengths-based evaluation a vehicle that taps into the authentic and energizing level of development (Cooper & Woods, 2017). Many districts are re-evaluating their evaluation methods like the example in this qualitative study in which the pillars of feedback, quality of relationships, the evaluation rubric, modeling, personal integrity, and self-reflection are transforming their views on effectiveness (Donahue & Vogel, 2018). It is through these proactive approaches that professional development becomes an important part of the evaluation system to encourage reflection and challenge staff to examine assumptions about their work and rethink how it might be performed (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Okhremtchouk et al., 2015; Young et al., 2015). The results also validate formative feedback and coaching as a support for professional development and changes in instructional practices (Mette et al., 2017). It is through this formative feedback, along with other measures of teacher effectiveness that inform the development of professional growth with specific goals for growth (Mette et al., 2017; Walkowiak, 2016).

This ideology based on growth is echoed by researchers who shared findings on the positive psychology side of evaluation to describe feedback as a gap-closing approach between current functioning and the ultimate goal. The methods they used were based on reviews of research on feedback taken from the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI).



Taking into account the compilation of effective and ineffective feedback in relation to positive psychology, they saw great success with the use of feedback targeted around character strengths (Laursen 2015; Voerman, Korthagen, Meijer, & Simmons, 2014). Specific feedback provided by the evaluator is critically important in improving practice (Gallup's Perspective, 2019; Reinking, 2015). In their study on principal's beliefs on newly-adopted teacher evaluation systems, Young et al. (2015) found that the primary purpose of evaluation of teachers was the inclusion of formative feedback. It is this desire for feedback from their supervisors that was highlighted in the second phase of the teacher well-being study using teacher perceptions through focus groups (Paterson & Grantham, 2016). Gallup's Perspective (2019) stated the way that school leaders enlist, engage, and train teachers can counteract the threats of new teachers leaving education, showing a resistance to leadership, and moving to more to a district that offers more support. Gallup reported 18% of teachers claimed they strongly agree that they are being effectively motivated to strive for excellence by their supervisor.

Teacher attrition is an ongoing issue that has teachers leaving the field at a higher degree than entering, with between 30-50% of new teachers leaving education in their first five years (Dassa & Derose, 2017). In their studies of beginning teacher's experiences from pre-service to their first years in the classroom, Okhremtchouk et al. (2015) sought to capture perceptions of the most valuable experiences in preparation programs. Following the journey of 19 teachers, all having between one and three years' experience, the purpose was to gather what they wished they knew earlier, and what suggestions they had for future support of new teachers. The feedback that the teachers received following in-class observations ranked among the most vital components. The

more investment that principals make to offer coaching, including listening, offering feedback, and calling out exceptional performance, the better teachers will perform (Gallup's Perspective, 2019). Regarding support needed, this group expressed a need for veteran teachers to offer accountability. Using formative processes to promote teacher growth has been documented as a key factor in distinguishing coaching from summative evaluation (Mette et al., 2017). The conversations that drive growth often come inadvertently by ways of both informal and formal communication (Santos et al., 2019). This positive approach highlights a belief that the individual has abilities that they cannot see on their own, instead of focusing on correction or fundamental deficiencies (Gush & Greeff, 2018).

Dassa and Derose (2017) in their perceptual study on teacher identity with preservice teachers, sought to identify the internalization of the external experiences that solidified their perception as an educator. These formative times in the teacher's development of their identity is an endless continuum that is shaped by positive and negative experiences. Building upon the work of Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, came a parallel theory tied to teacher candidates. Warford (2011) created four categories for his Zone of Proximal Teacher Development (ZPTD) including stages I and II (self-and teacher assistance), stage III (internalization), and stage IV (recurrence). The ZPTD was adapted to incorporate the capabilities of the aspiring teacher in proportion to a reachable level realistically achievable through personalized strategies from a mentor (Warford, 2011). There is a need for masters in the field to serve as mentor teachers for beginning teachers in order to provide quality collaboration (Okhremtchouk et al., 2015). Bolman and Deal (2008) described empowerment as a

leadership characteristic and coaching as a mechanism for increasing the competence of individuals with high commitment.

### **Meaning**

Successful managers hire the right people, keep and invest in their employees, empower their employees, and promote diversity (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Harter et al., 2016). Harter et al. (2016) expands stating the quality of human resources within an organization is an essential barometer of growth and sustainability. The most talented employees are attracted to a culture that attracts talent, improves performance, and creates alignment on what is the most important (Gallup's Perspective, 2019). Using a PERMA-based diagnosis, Kun et al. (2017) echoes the belief of employees as their strongest resources through the identification and activation of fundamental strengths. In order to allow people to capitalize on their individualized talents, the concepts of strengths over weaknesses drove the study of strengths to dig deeper on attitudes (Harter et al., 2016). Drucker (1967) believes that an effective executive builds capacity most productively on the basis of what someone can do instead of what they cannot. This belief of developing by maximizing strengths rather than minimizing weaknesses is told through the following retelling of President Lincoln's interaction of choosing a general during the Civil War:

President Lincoln when told that General Grant, his new commander-in-chief, was fond of the bottle said: "If I knew his brand, I'd send a barrel or so to some other generals." After a childhood on the Kentucky and Illinois frontier, Lincoln assuredly knew all about the bottle and its dangers. But of all the Union generals, Grant alone had proven consistently capable of planning and leading winning

campaigns. Grant's appointment was the turning point of the Civil War. It was an effective appointment because Lincoln chose his general for his tested ability to win battles and not for his sobriety, that is, for the absence of a weakness. (pp. 71-72)

Mazzola (2016) communicated that mentors had the power to alter the viewpoint of their own situations by selflessly being available to mentoring younger students. This pay it forward approach led to a culture shift of connecting to positive relationships. With only 18% of teachers strongly agreeing that their performance is cultivated in a motivating way to drive them to outstanding work, a gap is needed to be filled (Gallup's Perspective, 2019). A commitment to mentorship was supported by Okhremtchouk et al. (2015) finding at times, it was difficult for new teachers to recall the purpose for entering the field of education. A South Australian primary school took on this mindset as well as in a case study supporting the relationships between students, teachers, and leadership. This school made the commitment to give all school community members the space needed to improve. Staff reported the support offered by the school was parallel to the support they offered to their students. Growth is a shared commitment by staff at this South Australian primary school as it is a shared value to promote individual and organizational growth (Giles & Bills, 2017). It is this connection of mind, body, and spirit that combats the compartmentalization of succeeding on an island (Paterson & Grantham, 2016). Mosoge, Challens, and Xaba (2018) points this success to the deeper level of analysis reached through the entire teaching staff pulling together as opposed to any one individual.

Through the lens of transformational leadership, leaders, just as all of the best classroom teachers, must motivate those around them to ensure they see how they fit into the overall good of the group (Prelli, 2016). Bolman and Deal (2008) agree that leadership is often seen as a solution for essentially any social problem. Cohesion through these efforts leads to clarity and efficiency in schools. Hattie (2012) reiterates this logic in his studies on visible learning to encourage a lifelong cycle by imploring students to become their own teachers. He continues in his promotion that, when calibrated and pointed in the correct direction, learning goals will be met through accountability and clear learning targets (Hattie, 2012; Prelli, 2016). It is this collective commitment that unifies schools with high efficacy to exude the characteristics of perseverance (Mosoge et al., 2018). In the Positive Psychology Intervention analysis by Carrillo et al. (2019) participants were pushed to the deepest levels of finding meaning as social relationships with friends, sensory details, positive features, and their family relationships were expressed as their best possible self.

There's an old sports analogy stating that the team is only as strong as its weakest link. This logic has common threads to the relationship between self-efficacy and collective self-efficacy. Arslan (2017) supports this in exploring the effects of preschool teachers' collective self-efficacy, the focus was on the weight of the individual parts in relation to the overall productivity. The student/teacher relationships are valuable at every level of education, but at the precipice is the foundational entry level known as preschool. Because of this correlation, as professional perceptions rise, so do the collective levels of the whole. Clarity from the ground up supports what Rutherford (2013) offers in his work on artisan teaching. In the section about setting clear learning

goals, he defines this clarity as the identification and precision that students will see as their end target (Covey, 1989; Rutherford, 2013). When the focus shifts to the positive results attained by employees rather than the time spent on deficiencies it allows for personal development that aligns to the clearly set goals of the organization (Kun et al., 2017). Research points to the ability of the teacher to have an identified and progressively-growing ability to enhance the current state of teaching and learning (Cinches et al., 2017; Dassa & Derose, 2017; Mosoge et al., 2018). In their studies, Okhremtchouk et al. (2015) supported the mind shift from being students themselves to the metamorphosis of owning the authority of being teachers of students.

Ceremonies communicate values and a convicting sense of meaning, as they are intentionally designed to stabilize, reassure, socialize, and convey a certain message, which builds a sense of community (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Deal & Peterson, 2016). Compiling the works of past researchers, Deal and Peterson (2016) list the components of a meaningful celebration:

a special and value-linked purpose; symbolic dress and adornments; symbols, signs, banners, or flags; stories of history, accomplishments, or special effort; a distinctive manner of speaking or presentation; an invocation of deeper purpose and values; attention to who is invited and where they sit; recognition of those who have shown exemplary commitment; photographing, recording, and sharing the event with others; appropriately chosen and varied music; a carefully selected, attractive setting; special food or drink that represents tradition; the effective use of media, film, or visual displays; value-laden language and commentary;

meaningful symbols and artifacts of past and present; ritual and ongoing traditions carefully enacted; and the recounting of core legends or stories. (p. 120-121)

Bolman and Deal (2008) also listed rituals and language as important tenants of culture in their work with organizations and the symbolic frame. Within this frame, traditions are replicated and become symbols. The culture of the organization is uncovered and communicated through its symbols or traditions regardless of the form symbols take within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Deal and Peterson (2016) credited a school's mission as the bedrock to its culture. An important part of having a positive school culture is when a mission is created and shared by stakeholders. Requiring a staff to reflect on the school's mission and vision while sharing actions or behaviors that demonstrate the mission and vision is one way to reinforce the importance of the school mission and vision as formal philosophies contributing to the culture of the school. Gallup's Perspective (2019) found 62% of teachers who were highly engaged showed a tight alignment with the vision that the leader had cast for the intended culture. It is through this respect and pride that contributes to daily choices that affect the advancement of the organization and point to something greater than oneself (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Harter et al., 2016).

A specific identity is needed in order to foster support for school culture that allows teachers to own a shared purpose (Gallup's Perspective, 2019). Teachers usually choose the education profession due to their deep beliefs in the missional work of educating the next generation. When there is a connection to that mission, they flourish due to their enhanced levels of purpose well-being, as compared to other professions.

## **Accomplishment**

Gallup's Leadership Perspectives (2018) found in their Survey of K-12 School District Superintendents that 86% of U.S. public school superintendents remained positive about the upcoming school year for their specific district. Conversely, the same group's outlook for K-12 public education throughout the whole country showed a confidence rating of only 42%. To promote effectiveness and success to the community, superintendents view graduation rates, engagement of students, and hope outlook as the most important metrics. At the other end of the spectrum, in opposition to rising state stipulations, only nine percent express a strong gauge of school success on standardized test scores. This percentage has dropped from the 2016 survey by five percent. Gallup Case Study (2017) stated that talent-focused teacher selection led to continued engagement and the continued promotion of district achievement.

Research points to the importance of effective teachers' being the leading factor in maximizing student learning (Gallup's Perspective, 2019; Jennings et al., 2017; Jimerson & Haddock, 2015; Zee et al., 2016). Research by Jennings et al. (2017) extended this claim in their study of teachers' social and emotional competence in order to improve the classroom interactions. Similarly stated, the success of high-quality teachers powerfully contributes to establishing a student on a positive academic growth trajectory, though the converse is also true (Jimerson & Haddock, 2015). There is a fine line between the success and potential burnout of the top tier of teachers, as school districts must identify how to entice, retain, and grow while striving to increase student achievement (Gallup's Perspective, 2019). The teacher's strengths being brought to light and developed only enhances the experience of the students within the class. In building



on the identified strengths, this causes teachers to see themselves as highly efficacious, [which causes them to be] more likely to use differentiated instructional methods, employ emotionally supportive behaviors that increase students' confidence, and adopt proactive approaches to managing student-teacher conflict (Zee et al., 2016). There is a growing concern over assessment quality tied to the responsibility teachers have to calibrate instruction and the learning of their students. It is through the teacher's progression of understanding with assessments and the implementation of timely feedback of evaluation results that lead to students recognizing their strengths and weaknesses in order to accurately plan individualized lessons (Cinches et al., 2017). There is emerging evidence that teacher well-being is at the core of positive student outcomes (Paterson & Grantham, 2016).

*A Nation at Risk* was a slap in the educational system's face as Gardner (1983) relayed the following:

We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. (p. 5)

Speaking to the accountability era in the U.S., Cochran-Smith et al. (2017) reflect on the state of mediocrity that linked public educators to sub-standard student performance and ultimately slow-moving global performance. This declaration of war on the education system threatened not only public schools, but our workforce, and ultimately the global economy. Paterson and Grantham (2016) claim there should be a clearer focus on

celebrating success of teaching, as well as a priority put in place from top management. Two-thirds of superintendents polled believed instructing on skills such as conflict resolution, interpersonal communication, and perseverance were more in line with student's preparation for college rather than only one in five viewing college exam preparation as essential for college readiness. Similarly, when asked about preparation for the workforce, the same emphasis was placed on social and life skills, but slightly more important was experiences to job shadow and participate in internships (Leadership Perspectives, 2018).

In their single-subject project, Imms and Byers (2016) reformed thinking in an independent all-boys K-12 school with a learning environment overhaul. This shift required constant flexibility and redefinition from traditional methods of effectiveness in the classroom. Success is shown by engaged teachers who are 2.1 times more likely to be scored in the top level of their teacher performance metrics (Gallup Case Study, 2017). Through the focus on positive events and risk-taking, it is productivity that accelerates the attainment of personal goals for the growth of each individual (Kun et al., 2017). Harter et al. (2016) point to the theory of talent maximization, stating per-person productivity is equal to talent times the combination of relationships, the right expectations, and recognition and rewards. As laid out by Top 10 (2014), the achievement up until 2009, as deemed by DESE, was not acceptable in relation to the rest of the country's academic scores. This initiative indicated the state of Missouri's stance on the most effective measurement of success in school. Top 10 by 20 Plan set out to put Missouri in the top 10 in the nation in student achievement measurements by the year 2020.

## **Current Positive Psychology Practices**

Even with minimal awareness of strengths and talents, happiness increases and anger decreases (Simon, 2019). Most organizations apply an engagement strategy among employees, which leads to early gains in engagement, followed by a flat-lining, and ending in decline (Building a High-Development Culture, 2019). There is a need for psychological theory to be the foundation for fighting against the stressors in the teaching profession (Paterson & Grantham, 2016). Educational institutions in the Southern Philippines found teachers were the designers of the environment in which students were invited to participate in their learning (Cinches et al., 2017).

Described in Building a High-Development Culture (2019), the Gallup Organization implemented an engagement approach to link engagement with experience that permeated into every element of an organization. This connection includes the employee experience which encompasses every communication point that employees has within the organization beforehand, throughout, and following their employment. The life cycle of the employee capitalizes the moments that are most influential to the employee. Employee engagement involves the complete psychological requirements needed for maximum performance and growth.

Soots (2015)'s qualitative, multiple case study attempted to connect the application of positive psychology to the school setting. Case study interviews were deemed appropriate in the study as eight educators were interviewed to determine their perceptions of how their student's learning was affected by positive psychology practices. Soots (2015) found value in the advancement of assessment and a continued list of descriptive terminology in the psychological field specifically with adults. Soots (2015)

gathered perceptual data through experiences that educators shared about their students, while this study sought to interview the experts themselves to give personal account of their own positive psychology practices.

### **Examples of Identifying Strengths**

Hass (2018) stated that there must be a system in place to recognize and name strengths in order for them to be taken seriously. Individuals with a comprehensive understanding of strengths development are able to confidently connect strengths-based approaches to optimal performance (Simon, 2019). This revelation is also shown in current workers stating less significance to job satisfaction and more to the opportunity to grow personally (Building a High-Development Culture, 2019). Simon (2019) described the current status of personality instruments on the market today as being void of scientific backing, as opposed to the empirical research backing Clifton Strengths and Gallup's strength-based approaches. Though not meant to be over-complicated, the most direct strengths-based strategy is for an individual to complete the Gallup Strengths Finder assessment and gain an awareness of their innate talents (Simon, 2019).

In their work with evaluating strengths-based development tools to influence lead teachers, Cooper and Woods (2017) found a need to elaborate and extend their study into other educational settings. Principals seek to develop identified strengths in order to create optimal experiences for teachers (Gallup's Perspective, 2019). Identification and development of these strengths leads to the collective teacher efficacy that improves the overall academic performance of students (Mosoge et al., 2018).

McCullough (2015) conducted an investigation on the efficacy of a strengths-based intervention called, "Utilizing Signature Strengths in New Ways." The participants

were elementary teachers and the results showed positive gains in well-being, a reduction of emotional distress, and an overall life and work satisfaction increase. The study found that the power of combining strengths-based interventions with positive psychology interventions was worth exploring, as this was unknown territory (McCullough, 2015). In an attempt to combine the authority of positive psychology and strengths coaching, Grant and Palmer (2015) proposed the power of adaptability as an alternative to result in maximum potential.

### **Summary**

Through the lens of positive psychology, we have seen that the well-being of teachers has the potential to be impactful of the well-being on student academic achievement (Paterson & Grantham, 2016). The objective was to fill a gap in the research to address the problem of focusing solely on academic metrics, such as assessments gauging student achievement, instead of leveraging the motivational components of positive psychology that when utilized effectively, lead to achievement of state expectations. Current positive psychology practices as well as examples of strengths identification were given to provide evidence to support the research questions. The researcher sought to highlight where the gap in the research lead to the justification of a narrative case study. Between 1980 and 2016, Diener, Oishi, and Tay (2018) found that published literature on positive psychology expanded a hundredfold. The literature revealed that although some educational institutions have incorporated parts of positive psychology, the researcher sought a holistic account to develop a more comprehensive view of the issue (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) stated deficiencies in past literature may be due to a certain group or population not being fully represented. The researcher

found that insufficient literature existed addressing the breadth and depth of the research questions. This literature review provided current research to support the components of positive psychology to offer leverage for school success. The review followed the five components of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model to define well-being; positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

Chapter Three will discuss the methodology used in this study, including the participants, and data analysis. The chapter also outlines the instrument that was used for data collection as well as ensuring validity and reliability of the instrument. Chapter Four will present the data and information that resulted from the research questions. Chapter Five will present a summary of the process, breakdown of the research questions, findings of the data, implications on the educational field, and the significance of these findings for future studies.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

This qualitative narrative case study was conducted to provide descriptive narrative data to inform educators about the problem of focusing solely on academic metrics, such as assessments gauging student achievement, instead of leveraging the motivational components of positive psychology to enhance the achievement of state expectations. Stratified purposeful sampling was utilized to achieve a more holistic account to attempt to ensure equal representation of subgroups. This included certified district employees who met certain criteria, such as teachers, directors, coordinators, and administrators in a Mid-Missouri school district that was known to utilize strengths-based approaches. Creswell (2014) stated the assumptions made in qualitative research differ drastically from those of quantitative research, as human behavior and events are best captured in their natural settings. Stratifying the participants was established in the study to ensure quality participants. In order to capture the perspectives about how the components of positive psychology were implemented throughout the district, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were implemented. The interview guide was developed from the review of literature surrounding the PERMA Model of positive psychology. Data collected from the interviews was interpreted through constant comparative analysis. The intended outcome of using a narrative case study approach was to create a comprehensive record of perceptions related to district initiated programs.

This chapter describes the method that data was collected and a description of participants as well as how participants were selected. The research setting and design

and the creation of the instrument is also discussed. Finally, the conduction of interviews and a description of the data analysis is given.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were selected using stratified purposeful sampling in a Mid-Missouri school district in conjunction with the partnership the district has as the only known district in the state to deploy strengths-based approaches through Gallup's focus on engagement through strengths. As explained by Creswell (2014), the participant's perspective about the problem or issue should be the researcher's focus on learning. District employees were subjects for this study because of their authenticity and accuracy related to positive psychology and the components that are tied with school practices. These participants were unique in comparison with other districts in the state due to the whole-district implementation of strengths identification. Permission was granted to use district employees through the consent of the superintendent of schools.

The location chosen to select the participants was limited to one specific Mid-Missouri school district due to their partnership with Gallup. This district was not the only K-12 school using strengths-based approaches in Missouri, yet they were identified as the only school that had a formal program in partnership with Gallup's consulting at a whole district level. The number of participants for this study was determined by the researcher based on the criteria of certified district employees before and after implementation of strengths-based approaches which was initially implemented in 2015. It was the intention of the researcher that data saturation was ensured, as these participant predictions are essential in qualitative research when determining sample sizes (Mason, 2010). Attention was given to data saturation as themes emerged and proceeded to the



redundancy stage (Mason, 2010; Stake, 2006). Those being interviewed totaled sixteen participants. This number of participants met the purposive sampling guidelines outlined by Creswell (2007). The researcher had at least one representative from the following district employee categories in each interview group: classroom teachers, directors, coordinators, and building/district leadership. The list of participants meeting all criteria were separated into two groups. Group one comprised of eight certified employees who were hired by the district prior to 2015, and group two included eight certified employees who had been hired by the district since 2015. Out of the district's 172 certified staff members, sixteen were chosen using purposeful sampling (Stake, 1995) in order to carefully include participants to speak directly to the research questions. The number of participants falls in the standard range for this type of research, as sample size for case study should be purposeful, but does not need to be large (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995; Tellis, 1997). Within each identified certified employee group, a request to participate was given, and from there participants were placed into the two participant categories. Four group interview sessions were conducted, as the researcher deemed the quality of responses would be maximized with group responses as opposed to individual responses. A complete picture of the problem was developed by reporting multiple perspectives and portraying the central phenomenon on a larger scale (Creswell, 2014).

Approval to conduct semi-structured interviews in the spring semester of 2020 was granted by the Research Review Board (RRB). Although anonymity could not be ensured due to the researcher's employment in the district, confidentiality was protected by results being shared as group results, using no individual names. Participants completed an informed consent form to opt in to the study. At any point throughout the

study, participants had the right to back out. Data collected from interviews was kept secure on a password-protected device.

### **Selection/Sampling**

Stratified purposeful sampling was implemented in this qualitative study to provide “samples within samples where each stratum is fairly homogeneous” (Patton, 2002, p.240). The purpose for stratified purposeful sampling was due to the sampling of two distinct groups who represented various district positions and experiences, while accurately representing the organization. This criterion was set to identify certified district employees who could speak to their experiences who were hired prior to 2015, and those who have been hired after 2015. These employees represented one of the following categories: classroom teachers, directors, coordinators, and building/district leadership. The researcher identified participants based on equal representation from educators in three of the four buildings in the district. The purpose for leaving out one of the district buildings was due to the researcher holding a leadership position in that building and wanting to diminish bias. This building did participate in the pilot study to ensure interview protocol reliability.

The researcher made contact with the participants via email to inform them of the background of the study and to confirm their participation. Each group was given a specific date and location for the interview. Recordings of the entire interview were offered to each of the participants along with copies of the interview guide.

### **Research Setting**

The research setting for this study is a Mid-Missouri school district. This district is located at the heart of the Lake of the Ozarks and has an enrollment of approximately

1,900 students, including an early childhood center (age 3-5), K-2 elementary school, upper elementary (3-5), middle school (6-8), and high school. The research setting was restricted to this particular district due to the qualitative nature of the study. Due to the qualitative research norm of physically going to the participants in their setting as described by Merriam (1998), interviews were conducted in one of four of the district's media centers or conference rooms. The duration of data collection process lasted over three months, and was comprised of four separate interview sessions. Each session was at a different location in the district to capture the perspectives of employees in order to see how the pillars of positive psychology are done. The scope of this study was designed to provide an accurate representation of perspectives throughout the school district. The geographic location of participants determined the face-to-face interview method as all participants were easily accessible.

The researcher's position as assistant principal at the K-2 elementary school made this building exempt from the study due to potential researcher bias. Employees from the K-2 elementary were included in the comprehensive narrative process within the construct of a pilot group in order to calibrate the validity and usability of the interview questions. The addition allowed for full implementation in all employee groups being represented within the research setting.

### **Data Collection**

Approval was obtained through the Research Review Board (RRB) to begin the process of data collection. Due to the scope of the study in using human subjects in a defined setting, permission was also granted from the central office of the district. This study collected perceptual data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Notes were

collected giving meaning to the interviews with a focus on the research questions (Stake, 1995). The identification of reoccurring themes throughout the interviews led to data saturation and offered a stopping point in data collection. Quality questions were strategically chosen due to the belief that the questions are at the heart of interviewing (Merriam, 1998). These interviews were conducted at different sites in the district in order to allow participants to participate in the most convenient location for them. Clarifying researcher bias was completed by the researcher stating assumptions made at the beginning of the case study. The researcher's initial assumptions included overall employee satisfaction as well as positive initiatives since 2015. This process is included so that the reader will understand the researcher's position and any biases or assumptions that might affect the research to provide credibility and usability to the research (Stake, 1995, 2006).

Narrative data collected from the interviews was interpreted through continuous analysis. The tools used were the interview sessions that were enhanced through the pilot study. Data were collected through field notes and audio recordings during each interview session. Data were collected systematically using the recording of responses from the research question interview protocol during the approximately 90 minute interview session that each participant chose to attend.

The interview sessions were set up according to the needs of the participants in the specific buildings. Once participants gave consent, email confirmation was used to secure a time that was convenient for all involved. Interview sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes, although some times were adjusted due to follow-up questions and clarifications. Each interview session was followed by an electronic version of

responses to allow participants to clarify their responses. Interview sessions were recorded using an audio feature on a district approved iPad. Additionally, participants were allowed to review the transcribed copy to check for accuracy in transcribing their responses.

Due to the continuous analysis utilized in the study, the collection of similar themes led to coding and similarities to be grouped into categories of common meaning. The researcher captured each specific response from the interviews, through the use of field notes and audio recording to connect with a previously stated response, or to begin an entirely new theme. The constant comparisons that were being made led to a comprehensive analysis of patterns and relationships that fit into current and new sets of data.

There was no need to observe any live settings within the school setting as the intent of the narrative case study was to capture perceptual data from employees to give their perspective of positive psychology initiatives in the school district. Attending additional meetings was not necessary to reach this goal of the research. All observations about the school setting were captured in the research setting section and did not require any additional information to conduct interviews. The researcher was able to track the collection of thoughts and speculations through audio recording which allowed movement among emerging analysis and raw data within the interviews (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

### **Research Design**

The researcher attempted to ensure validity and reliability throughout the process through the design of the study, collection and analysis of data, and the presentation of

data (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) described the use of an audit trail that the researcher used to provide details as to how the data was collected and how categories were formed. Credibility was attained through Gallup's confirmation of this district being one of a kind for entire-district implementation of strengths-based consultation. Anney (2014) stated the importance of a study having transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher's descriptions of enquiry, as well as the purposeful practice of selecting participants, led to dependability ensured through the evaluation and interpretation provided by the participants.

The research procedure is a qualitative narrative case study. This design was chosen to give a holistic account by reporting various perspectives along with multiple factors that contribute to the clarity of the problem (Creswell, 2014). In a basic qualitative study, as stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), interviews are one of the methods of data collection in qualitative research design. Throughout the research, themes surfaced as a result of the inductive and comparative nature of the study, as the researcher compared participant responses gathered in each interview session. It was the responsibility of the researcher to determine the way people made sense of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The two groups of participants were contacted via email after meeting the criteria for selection. After consent was given to participate, a letter was attached in a subsequent email that included the purpose of the study, selection of participant summary, and an interview structure protocol. Also included in the email was an informed consent form as well as an interview guide. Formats followed the same protocol for both groups of

participants. All participants will be given the opportunity to have full access to qualitative data results.

**Triangulation.** Creswell (2014) discussed the triangulation of multiple data sources as a method to ensure accuracy in order to verify logical themes. Miles and Huberman (1994) determined triangulation by method as one of five appropriate approaches to qualitative research. The documentation of each step as a procedural standard ensures transparency and replicability (Smaling, 1987). This study focused on this method of triangulation by implementing three instruments to gather the data. Kopinak (1999) called the approach multi-method triangulation as relating to the same phenomenon by finding similarities that lead to findings with enhanced validity. Gliner (1994) described this practice as essential in qualitative research when ensuring internal validity. Creswell (2007) supported this practice of utilizing multiple strategies of data collection to gain confirmation of data and themes. Triangulation is a way of solidifying the report through the interpretation of differing perspectives, and not just a three-way pursuit of supporting artifacts (Stake, 2006; Tellis, 1997). This study implemented triangulation through member checking, review of the interview session recordings, and concept mapping.

Review of the interview sessions were conducted by the researcher. One way this was achieved was by reviewing the audio of each session. Additionally, the researcher reviewed the notes of participants' answers to the questions from the interview question protocol. The researcher was able to become increasingly familiar with the data through this repetition of review.

Member checking allows participants to confirm accuracy of responses. Stake (1995) called member checking a natural interaction between the researcher and participants to offer clarification. Participants were given the opportunity to view a transcript of each interview session and allowed to edit or delete any of their responses. Transcripts were accessible for review as a part of the confirmation of results through the interpretations of the member checks (Merriam, 1998). Accurate descriptions allow the reader to feel like they are taking part in the same experiences as the participants. Self-reflection clarifies researcher bias. Counterintuitive information to identified themes ensures credibility to participant responses. The amount of time spent in the field points to the credibility of the narrative.

Concept-mapping required participants to communicate their past experiences using a visual instrument in a way that would not be possible with a traditional approach to data collection (Conceição, Samuel, & Biniecki, 2017). Participants were asked to compose their own concept map (Appendix F) prior to giving their oral responses to the interview questions. This visual organizer has been used in teaching and research to make meaning throughout differing setting (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). Meijer, Verloop, and Beijaard (2002) saw the combination of semi-structured interviews paired with concept-mapping as an effective method to capture participants' understanding and viewpoints. These concept maps were limited to experiences tied to the five pillars of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model. The researcher modeled the concept-mapping method from Meijer et al. (2002)'s study on teachers' practical knowledge in order to cross-check beliefs shared through interviews with the thoughts communicated through written expression. The researcher followed selected steps from Trochim (1989)'s cluster



approach by allowing participants to produce responses to the researcher-generated prompt as well as lead to discussion to inform future planning and evaluation.

**Pilot study.** A pilot group of district employees who were employed in the researcher's building were identified using the same stratified purposeful sampling in order to calibrate validity of interview questions. The pilot group was given the same interview questions for the purpose of aligning the research questions to the intent of the study. This process guided the instrument development. The researcher accepted suggestions from the pilot group to create a tighter alignment to the interview format. This process was a critical step to rehearse the questions and provided the researcher with validation of the narrative that was at the core of the study (Merriam, 1998). Each of the interviews provided triangulation with member checking, reviewing of the recordings, and concept mapping to provide accuracy and validity. The researcher analyzed the suggestions from the pilot group to distinguish the quality of the instrument measurement. This process aided in the handling of data for future analysis. The feedback received allowed the researcher to evaluate and modify the questions in order to achieve optimal understanding, accuracy, and clarity. The building that the researcher served as an administrator in was used as the site for the pilot group, which minimized disruption to the educational setting in the actual study.

### **Instrumentation**

The study was designed to focus on the perceptions of certified staff members about the implementation of positive psychology practices. This rationale followed the assumption from Stake (2010) "that knowledge is constructed rather than just discovered" (p. 99). Interviews were the primary source to tell the story by district

employees about the implementation of positive psychology. An instrumental case study, as described by Stake (2010), was applied that “provides information and insight into specific issues for understanding” (p.3). The research question interview protocol was developed by the researcher based on the themes of Seligman’s pillars of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011). The specific questions were created to give a holistic picture of the comprehensive implementation of how district initiatives that have been in place since 2015 are connected to the pillars of positive psychology. Connections from the questions were calculated to look for emerging themes.

**Interviews.** Interviews were conducted in group settings to promote participant willingness to respond to core issues. To ensure a quiet setting, each interview session was conducted either in the conference room or media center in each building that was used. The intent was to give participants the opportunity to feed off one another to create a larger bank of responses in order to build a holistic picture that would not be accomplished in a one-on-one interview setting. Interview questions were consistent throughout each session, including an open-ended format to allow participants to expand and disclose information that the researcher did not ask specifically with the interview question protocol. The semi-structured format allowed participants to expand their responses based on other participants’ responses. Due to this structure, divergent thinking was encouraged as each topic was broken down and participants fed off of each other’s responses. Various times were presented to participants to offer the most convenient location and time for their busy schedules. Interviews took place over a three-month period and consisted of a combination of field notes as well as audio recordings. Member checks were provided to participants after the interview to allow

any needed amendments or additions. Due to multiple interview sessions, the research question protocol (Appendix A) offered consistency throughout all sessions. Interview questions were derived from the research questions and the review of literature. After each interview session was complete, a coding process took place to reference words and phrases throughout the interviews.

The following research questions provided the guide for the study:

- 1) How do one Mid-Missouri school districts' educators describe positive psychology practices?
- 2) What positive psychology practices have been put in place in one Mid-Missouri school district since 2015?
  - a) How would a Mid-Missouri school district employee describe workforce engagement before and after 2015?
  - b) What examples exist between identifying strengths and workforce engagement?
  - c) How do school employees discover and develop their strengths into motivators to engagement?
  - d) What is the most effective measurement of success in school?

Permission was granted through the Research Review Board (RRB) for approval to conduct semi-structured interviews in the spring of 2019. After approval was granted, the researcher was able to begin the process of recruiting, using sampling and stratified purposeful sampling to solidify the selection of participants. Interviews were conducted through face-to-face interactions as no potential risks were present. Confidentiality was ensured throughout the interviews, though permission was granted by participants to

access the results. Participants were contacted to schedule their interview session, including date, time, and location. As all participants were employed by the school district, there were no travel expenses involved, or financial incentives provided for participation.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collected in this study was analyzed by the researcher using memos as well as interview transcripts. Within each research question, themes were revealed in alignment with the pillars of positive psychology. This process included the identification of key phrases, patterns, and similar words through the use of coding. The use of content and thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The researcher ensured trustworthiness by using cross-question analysis across the entire question bank.

The researcher carefully analyzed the data gathered from the triangulated sources of member checking, audio recordings, and concept mapping. Content and thematic analysis were both used in the qualitative data analysis in order to identify connections to themes laid out by the research questions and review of literature. The data was analyzed through the lens of capturing how positive psychology looks at a Mid-Missouri school district. Throughout the interview process, extensive notes were taken, coded, and later organized for further analysis. Each interview was transcribed and recorded by the researcher to ensure accuracy and reliability. Each of the participants were given the opportunity to amend and/or expand on their responses. All adjustments were made by the researcher in the interview transcription and field notes. Member checking confirmation was ensured by the researcher through the systematic approach to offering

written transcripts and audio recordings of the interview sessions. Concept-mapping was used to determine participants' understanding of Positive Psychology and the PERMA model through cross-checking the ideas from the concept maps to the interview responses. This approach offered a safeguard to completely capture how the themes from the literature review impacted the educational environment.

Creswell (2014) stated the practice of collecting data simultaneously with analyzing new information is common. As new information comes through interviews, the researcher collects memos to add to the narrative. The use of audio recording allowed the researcher to listen to interview sessions multiple times to ensure accurate portrayal of the testimonies. Each participant was given a copy of the session to give them the opportunity to clarify or add to their comments. The data was disseminated into readable data before being coded into categories. Descriptions were then formed, and developed into themes.

After collection, and full transcription of the data, analysis began through the organization of responses. Coding was used to organize data into tables for further discussion. Throughout the analysis, the researcher found the words of Merriam (1998) to be applicable:

At the outset of a qualitative study, the investigator knows what the problem is and has selected a sample to collect data in order to address the problem. But the researcher does not know what will be discovered, what or whom to concentrate on, or what the final analysis will be like. The final product is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the entire process. Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the

sheer volume of material that needs to be processed. Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating. (p. 162)

The researcher determined that due to the nature of this narrative case study, the three levels of constant comparative analysis as laid out by Creswell (2007) and Merriam (1998) applied to the study. Providing a descriptive account is the first level, which requires decisions to be made as to what is included and what is left out. Level two includes this basic description and adds the construction of categories or themes that the researcher used to create patterns. Coding was used to develop categories through the constant comparative method by following a system in alignment with the purpose of the study. The researcher sought to compare multiple pieces of information through cross analysis in order to search for patterns. Level three of the analysis brings the researcher to the realization that the categories do not provide the entire narrative, pushing exploration for further work to be done around the phenomenon. Making inferences, the development of models, and theories are generated through this final stage.

The researcher followed the structure laid out in the review of literature for the five components of well-being from Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments. The researcher incorporated the theoretical framework around positive psychology into capturing perceptions about the presence of these components throughout the school district. These five pillars created the interview design and the format for the interview guide. The researcher analyzed the interview material by identifying certain words and themes that re-occur in the participants' responses. These categories made up the support

under each of the five pillars of positive psychology, which led to the evidence to address the research questions.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this narrative case study was to expose perceptions about implementation of positive psychology practices throughout a school district. With the overarching demands of state regulations, this study aimed to combat the thinking that maximum school success could only be achieved through academic measures. These holistic accounts were constructed to develop an elaborate picture of the phenomenon being studied by reporting various perspectives along with multiple factors that contribute to the clarity of the problem (Creswell, 2014). Triangulation was achieved through member checking, reviewing of the recordings, and concept mapping.

Chapter Three presented the methodology in the collection and analysis of the interview process of this study. Employees of the Mid-Missouri school district were the participants in this study. The researcher chose participants to interview based on the criteria. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted within a three months period. All interviews were captured using field notes and audio recording which allowed the researcher to analyze the data through coding to identify patterns and form themes. Chapter Four will present the data and information that resulted from the research questions. Chapter Five will present a summary of the process, breakdown of the research questions, findings of the data, implications on the educational field, and the significance of these findings for future studies.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

#### Introduction

Chapter Four presents the results of this qualitative narrative case study. The study explored the investment in human capital through positive psychology to facilitate the attainment of rising state expectations. With a lack of prior research on the use of positive psychology in schools to drive academic success through enhancing school culture, the promotion of individuals, communities, and entire populations to flourish is imperative (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Interviews were conducted to complete the data collection for this case study. The purpose of the study was to fill the gap of looking to see if positive psychology could be researched to maximize impacts of public school personnel on student learning. The theoretical framework for this case study guided the following outline for the review of literature based on Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments.

This qualitative narrative case study used memos as well as interview transcripts to expose themes in order to align the research questions and the pillars of positive psychology. Participants were selected using the steps outlined by the researcher in the previous chapter. Analysis and interpretation was completed through a thematic approach of categorizing perceptions with the pillars of the PERMA Model. This process included the identification of key phrases, patterns, and similar words through the use of coding.

Chapter Four is structured to address the research questions for the study:



1. How do educators from a Mid-Missouri school district describe positive psychology practices?
2. What positive psychology practices have been put in place in one Mid-Missouri school district since 2015?
  - a) How would a Mid-Missouri school district employee describe workforce engagement before and after 2015?
  - b) What examples exist between identifying strengths and workforce engagement?
  - c) How do school employees discover and develop their strengths into motivators to engagement?
  - d) What is the most effective measurement of success in school?

### **Pilot Study**

The researcher used a pilot study in order to expose well-developed case study methods for data collection and to accept feedback on the structure on the interview process. The pilot group consisted of six certified employees in the researcher's building who met the established criteria: one administrator, one building-wide employee, two teachers who saw all students K-2, and two teachers who taught a specific grade level in the building. These participants were identified using the same stratified purposeful sampling in order to calibrate validity of interview questions. Participants of the pilot study were given the concept map (Appendix F) prior to the session and asked to bring the document in its completed form to the interview session. Each member was given an opportunity to share their thoughts on the usefulness and clarity of the concept map. Pilot group participants also provided feedback on how questions were asked from the

researcher, including anticipating data trends, and made suggestions to certain questions from the Research Question Interview Protocol (Appendix A). It was determined through pilot group feedback that two questions should be struck from the interview protocol due to unnecessary repetition. Two other questions were similar and would evoke more clarity if combined into one question. One question asked, “How have your interactions with colleagues been effected in the past five years?” The other question read, “How have your relationships been effected in the past five years?” These two questions were combined into one question to read, “How have your relationships with staff changed over the past five years?” The researcher learned that the remaining questions on the interview protocol were essential to provide a holistic account of positive psychology practices throughout the district.

Additional feedback was given to the structure of the concept map (Appendix F). Pilot group participants were confused about the connections to the district section. The change was made to adjust the language to read, “On a classroom, building, or district level, what connections do you see?” This adjustment in the language offered clarity for future participants. This adjustment offered clarity to participants to accomplish the goal of participants having a head start on conceptualizing positive psychology practices. The intended purpose of triangulation was accomplished through the refining of the concept map, along with pilot group participants receiving the opportunity to take part in member checking and the reviewing of the recordings.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were selected based on a stratified sampling procedure to accomplish equal representation across the school district, including an equal number

of certified employees hired prior to 2015, and since 2015. Participants included certified employees of the Mid-Missouri school district in the categories of classroom teachers, directors, coordinators, and building/district leadership. The researcher established email communication to certified employees at the three buildings in the district who would be included as participants. From those who responded favorably to being included in the study, the researcher stratified the groupings in order to achieve an equal represented participant group. Within these groups included elementary classroom teachers, middle school classroom teachers, high school classroom teachers, special education, physical education, fine arts, and foreign language teachers. The researcher deemed these selected district employees able to provide a holistic narrative of positive psychology practices throughout the district. The participants and district that was used were purposely chosen to offer understanding of the research problem in order to describe the components of positive psychology surrounded in the setting (Creswell, 2012).

Four employees were interviewed at each session at a location that was geographically convenient for the majority of the group. Session one included two directors and two administrators. Two of these participants were hired by the district prior to 2015, and two have been hired since 2015. Session two included four classroom teachers. All four of the participants in this session have been hired since 2015. Session three included three classroom teachers and one coordinator. One of the participants in this session had been hired since 2015, and the remaining three were hired by the district prior to 2015. Session four included four classroom teachers. One of the participants in this session had been hired since 2015, and the remaining three were hired by the district prior to 2015. These groupings were organized by the researcher's attempt to

accommodate to each participant's first or second choice of interview session date. In order to protect confidentiality, classroom teachers were identified as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10, and T11 in order to allow the researcher to sort the data. Directors and coordinators were identified as D1, D2, and C1. Finally, building/district leadership was sorted as A1 and A2.

Prior to each session, participants were provided with the Research Question Interview Protocol (Appendix A) and a concept map (Appendix F) with instructions to prepare for the interview session by completing the concept map. This was one instrument the researcher implemented to ensure triangulation of data. Instructions stated that the purpose of this activity was to get participants thinking about their experiences while being employed at this Mid-Missouri school district. The concept map was given as a guide to engage the participants in their thinking and provide a frame of reference for the content of their future interview session. Listed in the instructions were definitions to the components of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments.

### **Assuring Trustworthiness**

The researcher ensured trustworthiness, as stated by Creswell (2012), in this narrative case study using the following: (a) triangulation, (b) peer reviews or debriefing, (c) clarifying researcher bias, (d) member checking, and (e) rich, thick description. Validity and reliability were ensured by the researcher's attention to the design, collection, analysis, and presentation of data (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Ethics and values were upheld throughout the conduction of research to ensure the ethical practice in a qualitative study (Merriam, 1998). The researcher used the ethical practice

of communicating consistently with participants through the Request for Participation (Appendix C), Informed Consent Form (Appendix D), and Member Checking Letter (Appendix E). Protection of participant identity was accomplished through the use of alphanumeric code (ex. A1) to assign a participant to their corresponding response. Validity was addressed through the implementation of the pilot study to provide the researcher with validation of the narrative that was at the core of the study (Merriam, 1998).

Each of the interviews provided triangulation with member checking, reviewing of the recordings, and concept mapping to provide accuracy and validity. The researcher analyzed the suggestions from the pilot group to distinguish the quality of the instrument measurement. Researcher bias was addressed through the use of audio recording and peer checking. This process was included so that the reader would understand the researcher's position and any biases or assumptions that might affect the research to provide credibility and usability to the research (Stake, 1995; 2006).

### **Research Setting**

This narrative case study took place at one Mid-Missouri school district. This district is located at the heart of the Lake of the Ozarks and has an enrollment of approximately 1,900 students, including an early childhood center (age 3-5), K-2 elementary school, upper elementary (3-5), middle school (6-8), and high school. The school district joins five separate zip codes and employs 172 certified employees. The research setting was restricted to this particular district due to the qualitative nature of the study. Due to the qualitative research norm of physically going to the participants in their setting as described by Merriam (1998), interviews were conducted in one of four of the

district's media centers or conference rooms. The duration of data collection process lasted over one month, and was comprised of four separate interview sessions, each lasting for 90 minutes. Each session was at a different location in the district to capture the perspectives of employees in order to see how the pillars of positive psychology are done. The scope of this study was designed to provide an accurate representation of perspectives throughout the school district. The geographic location of participants determined the face-to-face interview method as all participants were easily accessible.

The researcher utilized coding in order to expose and group themes with the interview data. This was a cyclical process as data should be continually revisited and precisely inspected (Creswell, 2007). Data from the interviews were recorded on the researcher's district approved device and transcribed to achieve precise interpretation. The researcher followed the work of Stake (2010) to analyze the data by making meaningful considerations while analyzing and synthesizing to offer sense of the narrative. The researcher's inclusion of participants' direct quotes were representative of the group's articulation of the most important ideas (Orcher, 2016). The researcher ensured confidentiality of all participants throughout the data collection and analysis process. Each participant was assigned a letter and number to keep identity secure.

### **Analysis of the Data**

In order for the researcher to provide answers to the two research questions that guided the case study, open-ended questions were asked using the Research Question Interview Protocol. Among the twelve questions, each one served a purpose to connect to the components of positive psychology as outlined in the review of literature.

Interview questions one and nine connected to Positive Emotion (P). Interview question

two connected to Engagement (E). Interview questions three, nine, and twelve connected to Relationships (R). Interview questions four, six, and nine connected to Meaning (M). Interview questions five and ten connected to Accomplishments (A). Interview questions seven, eight, and eleven connected to all components of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model. The researcher used the knowledge gained to validate a core category in order to describe the relationships between the most commonly used key words from participants' responses (Orcher, 2016). A list of the top 21 key terms/phrases was generated and quantified (Table 1) in order to determine importance and connection to the components of positive psychology. Orcher (2016) explained the description of categories working together to point toward the inner-workings within the core category. Table 1 displays a breakdown of the top 21 key terms/phrases organized by rank included students/kids, feel/feelings, teachers/teaching, district, people, building, relationships, strengths/strengths finder, talking/talk, help, learning, positive emotions, accomplishments, engagement/engaged, success, technology/1:1, recognize, staff, conversations, opportunity, and rounding. This format clarified the wide range from 10 to 447 between the least mentioned key terms/phrases and the most mentioned. It was this format that the researcher began to notice trends within the key terms/phrases. The commonalities recognized from the ranking of the key terms/phrases led the researcher to begin grouping them into the components of positive psychology.

Table 1

*Top 21 Key Terms/Phrases Organized by Rank*

Rank	Theme	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Total
1	Students/Kids	78	148	66	155	447
2	Feel/Feelings	56	74	58	61	249
3	Teachers/Teaching	41	70	34	68	213
4	District	94	42	35	25	196
5	People	64	44	33	37	178
6	Building	63	17	43	26	149
7	Relationships	38	42	24	29	133
8	Strengths/Strengths Finder	38	28	23	40	129
9	Talking/Talk	19	52	23	34	128
10	Help	38	31	25	33	127
11	Learning	28	38	23	33	122
12	Positive Emotions	28	17	32	31	108
13	Accomplishments	17	17	43	25	102
14	Engagement/Engaged	36	18	16	22	92
15	Success	14	13	2	37	66
16	Technology/1:1	25	7	6	6	44
17	Recognize	12	6	10	11	39
18	Staff	14	7	10	2	33
19	Conversations	17	0	3	10	30
20	Opportunity	17	3	4	3	27
21	Rounding	9	0	0	1	10

The researcher organized the 21 key terms/phrases in another way in order to analyze from multiple angles. Table 2 shows the 21 key terms/phrases organized by themes that align with Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model.



Table 2

*Top 21 Key Terms/Phrases Organized by PERMA Theme*

Rank	Theme	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Total
Positive Emotion						
2	Feel/Feelings	56	74	58	61	249
8	Strengths/Strengths Finder	38	28	23	40	129
12	Positive Emotions	28	17	32	31	108
Engagement						
1	Students/Kids	78	148	66	155	447
3	Teachers/Teaching	41	70	34	68	213
11	Learning	28	38	23	33	122
14	Engagement/Engaged	36	18	16	22	92
16	Technology/1:1	25	7	6	6	44
Relationships						
1	Students/Kids	78	148	66	155	447
5	People	64	44	33	37	178
6	Building	63	17	43	26	149
7	Relationships	38	42	24	29	133
8	Strengths/Strengths Finder	38	28	23	40	129
9	Talking/Talk	19	52	23	34	128
10	Help	38	31	25	33	127
19	Conversations	17	0	3	10	30
Meaning						
4	District	94	42	35	25	196
8	Strengths/Strengths Finder	38	28	23	40	129
10	Help	38	31	25	33	127
20	Opportunity	17	3	4	3	27
Accomplishments						
13	Accomplishments	17	17	43	25	102
15	Success	14	13	2	37	66
17	Recognize	12	6	10	11	39

The researcher found that 19 of the top 21 key terms/phrases fit logically into one of the five components of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments. The remaining two key terms/phrases were found to not fit logically into a theme. Due to participants' responses regarding these key terms/phrases, the researcher found "strengths/strengths finder" aligned with the themes of Positive Emotion, Relationships, and Meaning. The

phrase “students/kids” aligned with the themes of Engagement and Relationships. The term “help” aligned with the themes of Relationships and Meaning.

The theme of Positive Emotion comprised the second, eighth, and twelfth key terms/phrases from participant responses including “feel/feelings,” “strengths/strengths finder,” and “positive emotions.” The theme of Engagement comprised the first, third, eleventh, fourteenth, and sixteenth key terms/phrases from participant responses including “students/kids,” “teachers/teaching,” “learning,” “engagement/engaged,” and “technology/1:1.” The theme of Relationships comprised the first, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, and nineteenth key terms/phrases from participant responses including “students/kids,” “people,” “building,” “relationships,” “strengths/strengths finder,” “talking/talk,” “help,” and “conversations.” The theme of Meaning comprised the fourth, eighth, tenth, and twentieth key terms/phrases from participant responses including “district,” strengths/strengths finder,” “help,” and “opportunity.” The theme of Accomplishments comprised the thirteenth, fifteenth, and seventeenth key terms/phrases from participant responses including “accomplishment,” “success,” and “recognize.” The researcher found that “staff” and “rounding” were both minimally used by the participants in ways that did not have a direct fit into any single category, but rather overlapped in all five categories.

Orcher (2016) described the use of enumeration as assigning importance to responses using terms like “many,” “some,” and “few.” The researcher followed this technique to offer clarity without the clutter of exact numbers and percentages for each participant response. The following was practiced within the reporting of the data: “Many” signified more than 50% gave a certain response. “Some” signified between

25% and 50% gave a certain response. The term “few” signified less than 25% gave a certain response.

### **Research Question 1**

The researcher organized interview data in order to “stimulate the reader to think beyond the particular bit of information.” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 203). The researcher assured consistency through the use of the Research Question Interview Protocol and shifted from the role of investigator of facts to a story teller, in order to accurately portray a holistic account through the subject’s stories. Discoveries from research question one were conveyed using the components of Seligman (2011)’s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments. The researcher used memo writing to capture reactions from the participants in order to interpret responses accurately (Orcher, 2016). The following was the first research question to direct this study: How do educators from a Mid-Missouri school district describe positive psychology practices?

### **Positive Emotion**

The first component of PERMA was the most accessible to participants across all four interview sessions as they could easily conceptualize the terms “positive” and “emotion.” The researcher did not have to spend any time giving examples, as each of the participants used their personal and professional past experiences in their responses. These real-life examples of connecting positive emotions to their interactions with other adults and students were a logical starting point for the responses that followed throughout each interview session. It was evident across all four interview sessions that any of the participants that were initially uneasy about what to expect from this

experience were quickly drawn into the connections that they and fellow participants made to paint a picture of the power of positivity.

One participant stuck out with their simplistic approach to applying positive emotion. As a classroom teacher at the secondary level, they described how the common belief is that older students are not receptive to positivity. This did not ring true to this educator, as they attack every day in the hallways with high fives, small talk, and an overall upbeat attitude. The researcher could see in their eyes that nothing else could happen educationally without engaging students in this positive practice on a daily basis.

Participants were asked the following question in the interview session: How are positive emotions connected to your day to day duties? According to several participants in the study, positive emotions set the tone for a positive culture and climate as an accelerator to building relationships and fostering engagement (A2, T6, T9, T10, T11). It was evident that the more enjoyment that students feel, the more positive they will be, and be able to combat the negative with the positive. One participant stated, “Part of my role here is really making sure we're doing everything we can to see students succeed and that means everybody to have a positive emotion to feel good about what we're doing” (D2). Some participants communicated a connection to academic and emotional success, stating that the message to be resilient and to fail forward were essential.

### **Engagement**

The second component of PERMA fit into participants’ past experience as engagement had been a district focus for the last decade. With the evaluation system adopted by the district, engagement was one of four indicators that all participants comprehended as a measurement for educator effectiveness. Whether as an evaluator or

a classroom teacher, all participants had a unified understanding about the importance of engagement in the classroom. Although this preliminary understanding was centralized on teaching and learning in a classroom setting prior to 2015, the definition of engagement broadened to workforce engagement in the years since 2015. Beginning in 2015, the district initiated a systematic approach to quantifying workforce engagement through bi-yearly surveying, which unified all district employees on their understanding of all aspects of engagement in the workplace.

Participants were asked the following question in the interview session: What does engagement look like in your classroom/department? All participants supported the value of engagement with regard to teaching and learning and saw the connection between teacher engagement and student engagement. One participant stated, “I had to almost teach them what engagement looks like. I want it [engagement] when they're working in groups, they are truly engaged with each other and talking through a problem” (T4). Many described this looking like students doing what they are supposed to be doing, when they are supposed to be doing it. One teacher described the connection between engagement and discipline in a way that spurred the conversation in a new direction. “We have a different energy level when we're engaged and less likely to have a lot of discipline in the classroom. I think it just takes a lot of thought and a lot of effort into the planning” (T8). One administrator mentioned the posture of servant leadership as a vehicle to communicate that they could be trusted. Some participants stated a decrease in engagement in connecting with the district as a whole the further they got away from their individual grade level or building (A1, D1).

## Relationships

The third component of PERMA proved to bring the most nostalgia among all participants' responses. As each collective group of educators shared their personal stories, there was a consistent connection from their path to the field of education and a specific person who had inspired them. Some participants became emotional as they recalled specific details of names, events, and life lessons due to the relationships that had pointed them to where they were today. One participant in the elementary recalled a teacher they had in the exact grade that the educator currently taught. It was a surreal experience to recall the authentic and personalized impact that teacher had made in their life. As the participant spoke of multiple professions they pursued prior to becoming a teacher later in life, it became clear that the relationship forged as a young student solidified the path that eventually led to being an educator. Without people like this in crucial times, it was consistently portrayed that participants would likely have chosen other professional paths without the relationships that were formed.

Participants were asked the following question in the interview session: How do relationships fit into your experience in the workplace? All of the participants agreed that relationships were at the core of why they do what they do. One administrator commented, "They are everything, the most important part of what I do, both personally and I think professionally. Without those relationships, I'm not able to help our district achieve our mission of educating every child, every day at the highest level possible" (A2). Some participants noted that it takes some students time to be able to trust in adults at school due to their background of being let down by other adults in their lives. Two participants stated relationships that occur at school are the very reason why schools exist

in order to get maximum effort from students (D1, T6). Many participants spoke with excitement when they recalled specific examples of how relationships are related to their experiences at work. One teacher stated, “I’ve never met a better bunch of people and teachers with just high quality and good character. It’s just a pleasure to continue to build those relationships with those other teachers, so I think that’s what keeps me here” (T9).

A few participants noted the importance of having firm boundaries when it came to establishing relationships. “They need to be secure and confident, and safe. The thing is the relationship thing can be misconstrued because you can have a really good relationship with kids and you can have fun and it’s okay to be yourself” (T3). This understanding of boundaries was communicated as needing to be safe, confident, and a consistent message that school adults are not student’s friends (T2, T3). Many participants stated that their days seem better when they are making an intentional effort to make meaningful connections with staff and students.

### **Meaning**

The fourth component of PERMA brought with it deep-rooted educational philosophies. Participants described how meaning was at the core of their daily actions and built on each other’s responses to connect best practices to core beliefs about what was most important. These beliefs were raw and uncensored, which pointed toward a genuine desire to truly educate. It was manifested throughout all four interview sessions that all participants acknowledged the direct line between a consciousness of having their own buckets filled in order to give what was necessary for their students and fellow colleagues. One participant embodied that pride they had in working for a school district who poured into them at a personal level. This individual had been with the district for

nearly half of their educational career, as measured by a traditional 30-year career in the field. Coming from a perspective of a non-core subject area, this participant admitted their attempts at times to look at other districts for employment. Each time they would entertain this possibility, there was a deep guilt for turning their back on the administrators, staff, and district that had offered so much to their growth, not only as an educator, but also as a person.

Participants were asked the following question in the interview session: What are some examples of finding meaning in what you do at this school? Most participants connected meaning to the purpose of why they chose to be in the field of education. One teacher mentioned that while their role was beneficial as part of the process, the overall district purpose seemed empty (T6). The connection to real world problems and challenges was universally agreed upon across all participant responses. One teacher stated, “I’m laying this layer of bricks. And when it’s done, somebody’s gonna lay another level on top of that, and when the kid grows up, they will see the finished product” (T1). The belief that connecting with kids matter and today’s actions effect tomorrow’s outcomes was apparent in multiple responses (T3, T4, T5). Some of our students need the most basic reinforcement of social skills as described by the following teacher. “Reciprocity means you know someone does something for you. You know, it makes sense to do something back for them, and to think how to be more likeable to other people” (T9). Some participants gave their appreciation for the support and recognition they perceive from the community. One teacher mentioned, “I feel like the community is really supportive of everybody and everything, and administration in all the buildings and all the way up to the top is really supportive of what we’re doing” (T10).



Student achievement was mentioned by a few participants in the context described by the following teacher.

I always try to reiterate to my kids, especially at this time of the year with MAP testing coming up, you are more than a test. You are more than a grade. It's important to do your best, but you are more than this (T8).

Continuing with the focus on student achievement, there was an emphasis on the personalization of learning and the belief about a strengths-focus for students with disabilities (T1, C1). Regarding special education, one coordinator expressed,

I think there is a quality vision of what special services should look like in this district who recruited me. I think that that's one of those steps that's a little bit different about this district, that we are proactive in trying to obtain people that have the same philosophy around education (C1).

### **Accomplishments**

In the final component of PERMA, it was uncovered that everyone, and that rang true with all 16 participants' responses captured below, loves the taste of victory. Although the term accomplishment could be subjective, it was exposed in the following responses that whether big or small, there is great pride in the recognition of individual and group success. One such response represented a sense of selflessness, as the participant relayed the gift of being a part of someone else's success. This participant represented the unique opportunity of teaching a subject area where they have some of the same students for up to seven years. This participant went on to give some examples of some of their own personal goals they had accomplished in their lifetime. Although satisfied with these feats, there was a noticeable shift in posture and voice inflection

when they began to describe the journey of being with someone else every step of the way, and seeing them achieve something that had never been done in this educator's career.

It is human nature to have the desire to be recognized for attributes such as grit, hard work, perseverance, and long-suffering. Through the acknowledgement and respect for the process that is required to truly attain success, it became evident that there is great power in the simplicity of recognition. The reality that was uncovered showed that everyone has a type of recognition they would prefer, but the common thread proved to be the intentional practice of showing a personalized interest in the individual.

Participants were asked the following question in the interview session: How are accomplishments recognized in your department/classroom as well as throughout the entire district? Many participants referenced the weekly whole-district communication email as a driver to highlight accomplishments. Although the consistency was perceived as overall positive, there were a few who stated that the specific "shout outs" to individuals may have run their course (A2, T4, T11). One teacher framed accomplishments on a personal level to detail personal growth. "I feel like working here gives me the opportunity to be a lifelong learner. I really like that about working here because I feel like even if I never get to be a principal, I still always know that I'm going to grow while I'm here" (T7). Some participants mentioned the power of specific verbal feedback through the positive feedback received from administrators (T4, T5, T7, A2). One teacher stated,

I think that's very important as far as the recognitions go, to be specific. It's amazing to see some of those kids at the fifth-grade awards ceremony that have

struggled all year long, and then the emotions that they show when they realize that they've won an award (T9).

Many participants built on the importance of focusing on the intrinsic sense of accomplishments as opposed to the external recognition. The art of teaching autonomy by one teacher who stated,

You don't have to be a super teacher in order to get super results when you've got that smaller group [of students]. I think it's being a learner and always trying new things and trying to do things that may not have been tried before (T9).

The joy that student success brings to an educator was captured by one teacher who said,

Having a small part in a child's life and just seeing them kind of grow up and morph into the humans that they become, I just think it's just a gift and it's a reward to be able to be a part of that (T8).

Although many had positive examples of building, department, and district practices of celebrating accomplishments, a few noted there was a lack of consistency in what the district celebrated (T10, T11).

Participants' responses were consistent from both subgroups of employees hired before 2015 and those hired since 2015. Responses aligned with participants' completion of the concept map (Appendix F) to link to all of the PERMA themes. Participants credited autonomy and collaboration to be able to provide new experiences to their students.

## **Research Question 2**

Discoveries from research question two are conveyed using the components of Seligman's (2011) PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c)

Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments. The researcher sought to connect participants' responses to provide a deeper understanding of how positive psychology is implemented in a school setting through the eyes of all stakeholders. The researcher used these components to apply participant responses in the following sub questions.

Responses to questions seven through twelve of the Research Question Interview Protocol were analyzed specifically for the second research question. The following was the second research question to direct this study: What positive psychology practices have been put in place in one Mid-Missouri school district since 2015?

All participants were eager to share their experiences with district initiatives that have been put in place since 2015. One administrator said, "I think if you ask a lot of our teachers, being able to be innovative, but then also taking that risk to be a failure, is a valuable opportunity to learn" (A1). Some participants indicated personal investment the district showed to staff through administrative backing, including positive feedback. "It sets the atmosphere for my classroom. I try to be positive so that positivity goes out to my kids, and I hope that in return, it will make them positive" (T6). The top three initiatives mentioned through participant responses were Strengths Finder, 1:1 technology implementation, and feedback training through research-based strategies. These initiatives came with intentions to be consistent across the district with implementation. One teacher saw this coordination and stated,

I do believe that having that common focus is going to make a difference if you can really laser everyone in on it. And I think that's really hard to do, but I do believe we try really hard to do it (T7).

The district's partnership with Gallup's consulting at a whole district level provided that the focus on strengths was seen as a vehicle to understand students and staff alike, and to acknowledge differences (T4, A2). Regarding the 1:1 technology implementation, one participant reported, "If it's [using an iPad] not something that can be transforming or a powerful opportunity on that device, there's no difference from them sitting at home watching the video and them being at school" (D1).

Other notable responses to district initiatives were connected to district collaboration and professional development. One teacher noted,

The most challenging district initiative has been PLC time as a humanities department, because we are all kind of singletons in a way. When you talk about all the things that you're supposed to do as a PLC, develop common formative assessments and look at student data, it doesn't really make sense (T7).

Speaking to the price it takes to be great, another teacher gave details about the process of doing what's best for kids.

While I feel like Reading Workshop has been a great change and it's been very beneficial, I think it's probably been one of the most challenging. It's about learning what works best for your students and how to make it successful, because that's ultimately what we want it to be (T8).

### **Sub Question 1**

With each participant's understanding of the current evaluation system adopted by the district, engagement was an agreed upon measurement for educator effectiveness. Each participant had a shared understanding about the importance of engagement in the school setting. Since 2015, the definition of engagement broadened to workforce

engagement. Beginning in 2015, the district's systematic approach to measuring workforce engagement through bi-yearly methods of surveying all district employees has put everyone's knowledge on an equal playing field. One participant who was able to provide a whole district perspective due to the nature of their position, pointed to the commonalities that were present throughout the district. It was because of this common understanding that student-driven decisions could be made based on the personalization of success, tied to the district's strategic plan, mission, and vision. This participant added that this cohesion is unique to this district, as they had been at multiple other districts prior to their employment with this district.

The following was the first sub question to address positive psychology practices within the district: How would a Mid-Missouri school district employee describe workforce engagement before and after 2015? The researcher found that participant responses were consistent across the four interview sessions to show little difference between employees hired before and after 2015. The topic that led to the largest discrepancy between newer and older hires to the district was on the topic of the district's practice of having a yearly theme ("Year of Strengths," "Year of Gratitude," "Year of Hope," and "Year of Success"). A few employees hired after 2015 stated their appreciation of focus to the most recent district theme, stating specific practices that it had inspired in their classrooms (T2, T5). Conversely, one teacher hired before 2015 stated, "Sometimes I feel like as a whole district we have a purpose, but that purpose is kind of empty. And that's hard for me to explain. Sometimes I feel like, yeah, it's there, it's good window dressing" (T6).

One administrator described the engagement of staff in relation to meeting student's needs. "I think that trust has been built with the staff, and also with building that credibility within myself, the teachers know that I'm responsive when they need something or responsive with our students" (A1). A few participants who had been hired before 2015 noted the reputation of the school district had been enough for so long, that it has not been until recently that greatness has been shown in the collective actions of the district (A2, C1). One participant communicated the progress as, "We're really trying to be intentional about being good or great, really. And that may look different for different departments and different people. And that's the other thing that I appreciate" (C1).

Participants' responses describing workforce engagement were overall consistent from both subgroups of employees hired before 2015 and those hired since 2015. Responses differed the most in the district's use of a theme for the year, pointing to the PERMA themes of engagement and meaning. These beliefs from participants were grounded in the experiences of having the words of the district's mission aligning to the practices that affected students.

### **Sub Question 2**

The identification of strengths and weaknesses is not an innovative practice in any personal or professional circle. What did arise as revolutionary throughout the uncovering of data was the identification, application, and forward-thinking of solely focusing on strengths. It is ignorant to ignore blatant blind spots that someone may have. Yet, it would be far more unforgivable to look past what is unequivocally the best parts about an individual. It was this mindset that led to the connection between the identification of strengths and workforce engagement.

The following was the second sub question to address positive psychology practices within the district: What examples exist between identifying strengths and workforce engagement? The researcher found that participant responses were consistent across the four interview sessions to show little difference between employees hired before and after 2015. The implementation and application of using strengths language has offered an awareness of common language to be able to recognize how to view people in a positive way (D1, A2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T10). One participant shared, “I think Strengths Finder is really powerful. For me, it was nice that we have that common language now. I saw a real difference in how IEP meetings were ran” (C1). Teachers in one of the buildings were asked at a faculty meeting to think of a student that was really bothering them in the classroom. They were instructed to look at that student’s strengths according to the StrengthsFinder. One teacher reported,

That was the single most effective thing I did in the classroom when we're thinking about relationships. I love that student now and that is putting a positive spin on something that could have just been a frustration all year (T5).

Some participants noted that the identification of strengths confirmed past life experiences and effected professional conversations with colleagues in order to leverage the attainment of common goals (T3, T11, A1). The focus has shifted from weaknesses to strengths and forced conversations to uncover new discoveries in student behavior (D1, T8). One teacher stated,

Having certain things like the Strengths Finder, I feel like every single teacher, parent, and person can use the Strengths Finder and look at a student's strengths



and use that, when they're dealing with a certain student for whatever it is that they're doing in our district (T11).

This participant gave insight to classroom practices that they used prior to the district's implementation of Strengths Finder. It was not intentional at the time, but looking back, this participant had been using strengths-based approaches before even knowing how to define them as such. This has since redefined staff and student conversations to be focused on strengths. Speaking to the progress that the district had made in these strengths-based shifts, another participant offered their perception of the whole district in stating, "It's helped me view people differently. But I also don't think it's made a profound change within the school district since we have not flipped this place on its head, because we understand each other better" (D1).

Participants' responses to identifying strengths and workforce engagement were consistent from both subgroups of employees hired before 2015 and those hired since 2015. Responses showed importance on speaking common language with students and colleagues, which showed congruence with the PERMA themes of engagement, relationship, and meaning. These beliefs from participants started the process of changing the way they viewed others.

### **Sub Question 3**

There are institutions all over the world that implement the common practice of personality tests and strengths assessments as part of their onboarding procedures. Too often, these assessments feel more like hoops to jump through rather than stepping stones to maximizing one's effectiveness and capacity to impact others. It is an uphill fight to combat an individual's desire to stay engaged when everything they have experienced has

been based on a deficiency model. With demands continuing to increase for educators, there is a reciprocated deficiency in resources and support in many cases. It is illogical to ask someone to do more with less, but with the motivation of engagement being linked to strengths development, there is hope for the field of education.

The following was the third sub question to address positive psychology practices within the district: How do school employees discover and develop their strengths into motivators to engagement? The researcher found that participant responses were consistent across the four interview sessions to show little difference between employees hired before and after 2015. One participant indicated, “There needs to be simplicity to the application in order to get to the student level” (D1). Through the explanation of one teacher detailing their personalization to student’s needs, they asserted,

So there's planning for attention capture that's so important for engagement, having some sort of novelty or some sort of ingenuity that you pose to the students. We are natural puzzle solvers, in a way, but then once you're going, you know that constant monitoring and you know mid-course correction (T9).

The connection to student behavior in this picture into the classroom was shown to raise the bar of teacher’s expectations for their students (T9, T11). Some participants saw connection to purposefully applying strengths through constant improvement of engaging students in their day to day responsibilities (D1, A2, D2).

One administrator reported an informal study conducted in the participant’s building that revealed some enlightenment for poor student behavior. Participant A2 ran a discipline report and took the building’s top 10 students with the greatest number of discipline referrals. With these 10 students, A2 pulled up all 10 student’s strengths

(according to the Strengths Finder assessment). Every student on the list had two strengths that were the same: presence and competition. Participant A2 concluded that the teachers in the building with interactions with these students needed to be equipped to recognize how to leverage those strengths, because those kids were going to utilize those strengths one way or another. If educators were not actively providing outlets to utilize those strengths, then those students were going to find negative ways to be recognized.

Participants' responses to developing their strengths into motivators to engagement were consistent from both subgroups of employees hired before 2015 and those hired since 2015. Responses showed a value in discovering what is best about others, which showed a connection to the PERMA themes of engagement, relationship, and meaning. These beliefs from participants were grounded in experiential learning through the discovery of strengths-based practices.

#### **Sub Question 4**

As captured through the words of many of the participants, humans love experiencing victory. A successful school is a designation that could be measured quantifiably through academic metrics, yet still argued as not truly being successful by some. The researcher has deduced through participants' responses that all success matters, whether big or small. Individual and group celebrations alike can be traced back throughout our history as unifying events that remind us who we are, and what we stand for. The downfall of these acknowledgements of success occur through inconsistent systems. Humans want something to celebrate, and the responses below show the importance of individualized, specific acknowledgement of success.

The following was the fourth sub question to address positive psychology practices within the district: What is the most effective measurement of success in school? The researcher found that participant responses were consistent across the four interview sessions to show little difference between employees hired before and after 2015. Many participants stated the practice of offering “shout outs” to any district employee as an avenue to expose the great things that not everybody knows about. One participant indicated,

This is really my first year of dealing with a means for any person in the district to be able to submit a shout out to the district, and it's going to go out for the school board and the entire staff to see, which is great (D2).

Similarly stated by another participant, “I think shout outs are a big feature of how we make sure district-wide people are acknowledged for things that if you're in different buildings or different departments, you may not know good things that are going on” (C1). Some participants spoke to indicators of success being the ability to connect with kids, build relationships, and gain trust (A2, D1). Most of the participants spoke to the unquantifiable metrics of measuring success by the positive investments in human capital. The attributes of being a servant leader, dependable, genuine, consistent, and a learner were evident in participant responses (A1, T3, T5, T9).

One participant expressed their appreciation of support they receive from building administration by expressing, “I love being here. I feel really respected from my building leaders. I have a lot of guidance I feel like I'm able to ask questions and get real honest answers” (T8). Meeting the needs of the whole child was indicated by one participant who mentioned, “We do a good job student achievement-wise. We strive for that, but we

also have student's best interests in mind, and their basic needs in mind" (D2). Although most responses were positive about the district's measurements of success, one participant clarified,

I'm critical of the way that we do our accomplishments, but still I feel like that is just kind of like a communications piece, but at the core, like the heart of how our administration and our community supports our kids and cares about our kids, is really really strong and really really pure, and I appreciate that a lot" (T10).

Many participants expressed that the field of education is a difficult field, but through the care and concern shown throughout the district, there is hope to effect change (D2, T3, T8, T10, T11).

Participants' responses for the most effective measurement of success in school were consistent from both subgroups of employees hired before 2015 and those hired since 2015. Responses showed a value in measurement standards such as state achievement tests, but were overwhelmingly drawn to the PERMA themes of engagement and meaning, but especially relationship, to drive success. These beliefs from participants were set up through a structure of support through instructional support and building leadership.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this narrative case study was to describe the components of positive psychology within a Mid-Missouri school district through the words of participants' experiences to tell their story. It has been through the narrative of their own experiences that positive psychology can serve as the vehicle to drive school success. Although not seen on a state scorecard, each of these components have the potential to

transfer to maximizing success in any domain. Strengths-based practices prove to be far more motivating than deficiency models and standardized measures of achievement.

Themes were exposed through the lens of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments. It was discovered that any one of these components fosters positive results in students and adults alike. Maximized impact occurs when all five components are leveraged together in a systematic approach that leads to clear expectations and measurements of success.

Chapter Four presented the analysis of the data. Also included was a description of participants. Results were gathered through analyzing the data through four group interview sessions. The researcher analyzed the data as it pertained to each of the research questions. Perceptual data was captured from participants and organized in two different manners: frequency and by theme to provide a holistic narrative of positive psychology practices throughout the district. Chapter Five will include conclusions and recommendations for future research. It was the researcher's goal in the interviews and analysis to give support to using positive psychology, while leveraging strengths-based approaches. Other researchers that follow may have the opportunity to extend and maximize the possibilities of this conquest.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

Human capital matters and is highlighted by the capitalization of strengths that lead students in doing what they do best (Gallup Case Study, 2017; Lopez & Louis, 2009). Building upon a framework that promotes individuals, communities, and entire populations flourishing is imperative (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The purpose of this qualitative narrative case study was to describe the components of positive psychology within a Mid-Missouri school district. This study addressed the problem of focusing solely on academic metrics, such as assessments gauging student achievement, instead of leveraging the motivational components of positive psychology that when utilized effectively, lead to achievement of state expectations.

The following chapter offers a summary of findings, analysis, implications of the study, and recommendations for future research. This qualitative narrative case study was conducted to provide descriptive narrative data to inform educators about the problem of focusing solely on academic metrics, such as assessments gauging student achievement, instead of leveraging the motivational components of positive psychology to enhance the achievement of state expectations. This design was chosen to give a holistic account by reporting various perspectives along with multiple factors that contribute to the clarity of the problem (Creswell, 2014). The intent of this narrative case study was to expose perceptions about implementation of positive psychology practices throughout a school district.

Research was conducted at one Mid-Missouri school district. Four group interview sessions were conducted, as the researcher deemed the quality of responses

would be maximized with group responses as opposed to individual responses. A comprehensive view of the problem was developed by reporting multiple perspectives and portraying the central phenomenon on a larger scale (Creswell, 2014). Interview questions were grounded in the work of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation to this study was that the researcher was an employee in the district in which interviews were conducted. The researcher's position as assistant principal at the K-2 elementary school made this building exempt from the study due to potential researcher bias. Employees from the K-2 elementary were included in the comprehensive narrative process within the construct of a pilot group in order to calibrate the validity and usability of the interview questions. The addition allowed for full implementation of all employee groups being represented within the research setting. Another limitation was the reality that researcher and participant bias was always a possibility in a qualitative study, including the honesty of each participant. This was addressed by issuing the following letters: Request for Participation (Appendix C), Informed Consent Form (Appendix D), and Member Checking Letter (Appendix E). In addition, the researcher attempted to add reliability by triangulating data through member checking, review of the interview session recordings, and concept mapping. Given the research design of interviews, there was a limitation on the scope of information that could be gathered from an anonymous survey. Another limitation was that participants had varying degrees of recognition and comfortability with positive psychology



components. The final limitation was that only participants who accepted the request to participate were included.

The scope of this study was a limitation as well due to the geographical constraints of focusing on one specific school district in Mid-Missouri. Despite the study being limited to sixteen participants in one school district, research practices were exposed through an extensive review of the literature. In the event that this study was replicated in a district with similar programs in place, different results may be gathered due to the change of location. Although a change in results may occur with different participants, participant perspectives regarding this study would be unchanged.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative case study was to describe the components of positive psychology within a Mid-Missouri school district. The researcher intended to fill a gap in prior research on the use of positive psychology in schools to drive academic success through enhancing school culture. Building upon the framework of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) that promotes individuals, communities, and entire populations to flourish is imperative. Lopez and Louis (2009) claimed the problem is that the focus is not on what schools do best, the development of human capital, which leads to engagement at the highest level and increased productivity.

The researcher was able to extract meaning from the interview sessions in order to make connections and come to data-driven conclusions tied to each of the research questions. Perceptual data was gathered through participants' responses during the interview sessions. Through the framework of both research questions, data revealed the connection of best practices throughout the school district, and the connection to

Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments. An analysis to each of the research questions is provided below.

The researcher attempted early on in the research journey to find a logical fit for how strengths-based approaches connected with certain components of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model. This connection was based on the knowledge of being the only known district in the state to deploy strengths-based approaches through Gallup's focus on engagement through strengths. Through the process of following where the review of literature led, it became clear that strengths identification and application could not be individually categorized. With this foundation laid, confirmation through participant responses confirmed that strengths are interwoven into all five of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model. This connection was made most evident through the responses to research question two, and subsequent sub questions.

Data gathered from interviews were matched with the review of literature to interpret and draw conclusions for this study. The themes of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments not only served as the five themes in the researcher's review of literature, but also a road map to the development of interview questions which led to the study's core of leveraging positive psychology to promote success in schools. Although relationships, followed by meaning, proved as the leading indicators to this promotion, the researcher found that it was the coordination of all five components to reach maximum potential. The components of leveraging a successful school with the investment in human capital matters and is highlighted by the capitalization of strengths that lead students in doing what they do best (Gallup Case

Study, 2017; Lopez & Louis, 2009). It is for this reason, among the resounding responses from solution-seeking educators in the study, that the connection of positive psychology practices to school practices is an accelerator to success in schools.

### **Research Question 1 Conclusions**

Research question one captured a perceptual reality of how educators from a Mid-Missouri school district describe positive psychology practices. Findings were presented using the five components of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model. The overall findings related to research question one confirm the focus in the theoretical framework that identified the shift from languishing to flourishing through the importance placed on positive self-fulfillment, self-actualization, the fully-functioning individual, and human development (Fredrickson 2001; Kristjansson, 2012; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951). Through grouping of the 21 key terms/phrases into the five components of Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model, it was discovered what the most common themes were throughout the interview sessions. Responses from this research question supported the review of literature in that there is a need for psychological theory to be the foundation for fighting against the stressors in the teaching profession (Paterson & Grantham, 2016). This cohesion was present in all four of the interview sessions through participants' examples of practices they had been utilizing even without knowing the research behind their methods. Positive emotions set the tone for a positive culture and climate as an accelerator to building relationships and fostering engagement (A2, T6, T9, T10, T11). It was through these connections to positive psychology that increased participants' willingness to respond as they continued to be affirmed in these best practices. Soots (2015)'s qualitative, multiple case study attempted to connect the application of positive

psychology to the school setting. This study showed similar connections, though it was found that maximizing success is only possible through the systematic coordination of all five components being leveraged together. Soots (2015) found value in the advancement of assessment and a continued list of descriptive terminology in the psychological field specifically with adults. It was supported in this study that it is through the development of strengths through relationship-building that is the accelerator to school success, which positive psychology suggests happens within organizations and communities. The district's partnership with Gallup's consulting at a whole district level provided that the focus on strengths was seen as a vehicle to understand students and staff alike, and to acknowledge differences (T4, A2). Similarly, both this study and Soots (2015) gathered perceptual data through experiences that educators shared about their students.

Positive psychologists claim reformative results through making life worth living by exploring more about human happiness, positive traits, emotions, and institutions (Kristjansson, 2012; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This was confirmed through participant responses regarding the theme of positive emotions justifying the power of positivity as a driver of culture, climate, and relationship-building. This theme comprised the second, eighth, and twelfth key terms/phrases from participant responses including "feel/feelings," "strengths/strengths finder," and "positive emotions." It was through the power of positivity that collectively was the one "silver bullet" to combat the bleak negativity of life's realities found in public schools. When students feel good, they can experience success. The personal interest taken in another person showed to be an investment that would never be returned void. This was seen by Lomas and Ivztan (2015), as they saw positive emotions as being powerful enough to stating excessive

enjoyment may lead others to not act, or even lead to even riskier conduct. This study supported this research through many examples of the power of positivity through the avenue of building relationships. Some participants indicated personal investment the district showed to staff through administrative backing, including positive feedback. “It sets the atmosphere for my classroom. I try to be positive so that positivity goes out to my kids, and I hope that in return, it will make them positive” (T6). The implementation and application of using strengths language has offered an awareness of common language to be able to recognize how to view people in a positive way (D1, A2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T10).

The knowledge gained from the theme of engagement offered calibration to the realistic practices of focusing on the day to day, without the distractions of things that are outside of our control. This was found to coincide with the top tier of talented teachers who are 2.8 times more likely to be engaged in their classroom (“Gallup Case Study,” 2017). Participants in this study confirmed the findings in this research through the use of common language throughout the district around the identification and implementation of strengths. It was made abundantly clear that engagement is not implied, rather it is developed through consistency and innovative practices. This theme comprised the first, third, eleventh, fourteenth, and sixteenth key terms/phrases from participant responses including “students/kids,” “teachers/teaching,” “learning,” “engagement/engaged,” and “technology/1:1.” The question of “why” must be asked and answered to reach an optimal level of engagement. The practicality of how to achieve this level of engagement in classrooms spanned from seating charts, teacher proximity, flipped classrooms, formative

assessment, promotion of critical thinking and problem solving, academic vocabulary, and consistency of best practices.

The theme of relationships brought with it the most agreed upon response among participants being the very reason they do what they do. Cinches et al. (2017) recognition that teachers need to build relationships with colleagues, but the core of relationship-building needs to happen with their students. This connection was confirmed as the most repeated leverage point of the five components of positive psychology. Participants built off one another's responses to speak about their relationships with colleagues and students, with correlation to the district's focus of strengths. This theme, more than any of the other four, showed up consistently in participants' responses to relationships in the workplace, connection of strengths to relationships, and the change that has occurred with employee relationships. With healthy boundaries, educators gain the opportunity to be authentic and be the recipients of observing what others are capable of when they know someone is genuinely supporting them. This theme had more key words/phrases paired with it than any other theme, and seven of them were in the top ten of the comprehensive list. These included "students/kids," "people," "building," "relationships," "strengths/strengths finder," "talking/talk," "help," and "conversations." Although the focus was primarily on educator to student relationships, there were multiple comments made about the breakthrough of learning a colleague's strengths which connected to gains in grade level/department collaboration. Participants supported the expectations of leveraging strengths in order to speak truth to fellow colleagues. One participant shared, "I think Strengths Finder is really powerful. For me, it was nice that we have that common

language now” (C1). Some participants noted that the identification of strengths confirmed past life experiences and effected professional conversations with colleagues in order to leverage the attainment of common goals (T3, T11, A1). This peer to peer transformation was seen as Bolman and Deal (2008) described empowerment as a leadership characteristic and coaching as a mechanism for increasing the competence of individuals with high commitment.

The theme of meaning revealed some core beliefs to justify participants’ actions within the workplace, exposed reasons why they chose to work in the school district, and connected how learning about strengths affected them. Literature showed the most talented employees are attracted to a culture that attracts talent, improves performance, and creates alignment on what is the most important (Gallup’s Perspective, 2019). Participants in this study confirmed that they continue to feel supported and challenged through the efforts of the district to offer personalized growth opportunities focused on the betterment of their educational craft. This theme had the second most key words/phrases in the top 10, including the fourth, eighth, tenth, and twentieth responses which were “district,” strengths/strengths finder,” “help,” and “opportunity.” Most of the participants’ connected with this line of questioning because they had been recipients of someone else believing in them. The belief was resounding that students are eager to find meaning beyond themselves, and this district was a place that allowed for that structure to be present.

With regard to the responses of why participants chose to be employed at this district, there was a well-supported commitment to students that was present throughout all four interview sessions. Those that had been in other places prior to their employment

at this district saw an obligation to advocate for best practice, as opposed to settling for minimum compliance. Research points to the ability of the teacher to have an identified and progressively-growing ability to enhance the current state of teaching and learning (Cinches et al., 2017; Dassa & Derose, 2017; Mosoge et al., 2018). It was confirmed in the data that this district was about the people, collaboration, and cooperation in order to be innovative in providing students with everything they needed to be functional citizens. Speaking to the progress that the district had made in these strengths-based shifts, another participant offered their perception of the whole district in stating, “It’s helped me view people differently. But I also don't think it's made a profound change within the school district since we have not flipped this place on its head, because we understand each other better” (D1).

The theme of accomplishments exposed the strategies that the district has deployed to strategically and systematically promote celebrations. This theme comprised the thirteenth, fifteenth, and seventeenth key terms/phrases from participant responses including “accomplishment,” “success,” and “recognize.” All four sessions communicated ways that accomplishments were being recognized at the classroom, building, department, and district level. The need to be consistent and timely was a common premise in all four interview sessions.

The value of learning about someone else’s strengths and connecting that to how that person would be most receptive to being acknowledged for something great was evident. The literature review showed that building on identified strengths causes teachers to see themselves as highly efficacious, [which causes them to be] more likely to use differentiated instructional methods, employ emotionally supportive behaviors that



increase students' confidence, and adopt proactive approaches to managing student-teacher conflict (Zee et al., 2016). Ultimately, the primary purpose of accomplishments is student achievement. Research points to the importance of effective teachers' being the leading factor in maximizing student learning (Gallup's Perspective, 2019; Jennings et al., 2017; Jimerson & Haddock, 2015; Zee et al., 2016). Participants across all four interview sessions agreed that although the education profession continued to require an increase in demands, there continued to be a purpose for choosing to battle the difficulties with the hope that their actions would reap a harvest one day.

### **Research Question 2 Conclusions**

Research question two captured a perceptual reality of what positive psychology practices have been put in place in one Mid-Missouri school district since 2015. Participants were given a non-exhaustive list of district initiative that have been put in place at differing levels throughout the district since 2015. Due to participants having varying experience due to their tenure in the district, a wide range of responses were collected. Using the context from the concept map (Appendix F), including the components of positive psychology, participants provided examples of practices in their classrooms/buildings/departments. The work that participants engaged in prior to the interview sessions enriched their responses, and shifted their background knowledge from traditional psychology to positive psychology. It was this mind shift, from remedying mental illness and weakness identification known as traditional psychology, to the promotion of happiness and well-being in order to live a prosperous life (Baker et al., 2017; Seligman, 2011).

The first sub question addressed how a Mid-Missouri school district employee described workforce engagement before and after 2015. The researcher found that there were no reportable differences between employees hired before 2015 and those hired since 2015 in relation to their engagement in the workplace. This connected to the literature as Gallup's Perspectives (2019) stated the engagement of teachers has a direct correlation to the engagement of students, which has positive effects on subject matter performance, graduation rates, and college readiness. Responses coincided with this domino effect as participants communicated that even when they didn't feel like looking at the positive side of a situation, they tried their best to realize how their reaction would be replicated by their students and colleagues. One participant responded, "It sets the atmosphere for my classroom. I try to be positive so that positivity goes out to my kids, and I hope that in return, it will make them positive" (T6).

The implementation of district initiatives was not connected to how engaged the participants were in the workplace. The largest discrepancy between the two participant groups were the opinions about the district themes that had been in place for the past four years. Some participants hired before 2015 concluded that the theme did not affect their engagement in the workplace. Conversely, many participants hired after 2015 communicated gratefulness and strategic connection to their personal duties due to a consistent district theme.

The second and third sub questions garnered similar participant responses, which led to the researcher reporting the findings simultaneously. Sub question two explored examples that exist between identifying strengths and workforce engagement. A connection was made to the literature stating if grit and perseverance are attributes that

educators are trying to instill in their students, then the learning must be supported by adults who are focused on strengths rather than deficiencies (Laursen, 2015; Reckmeyer & Robison, 2016). Although there was not 100 percent enthusiasm for the identification and implementation of strengths, as deployed throughout the district, it was agreed upon that this shift in thinking had the potential to change teaching and learning. Sub question three asked how school employees discover and develop their strengths into motivators to engagement. All participants spoke of strengths being a positive addition related to having common district language. The self-awareness of strengths identification has led to confidence in employee's own abilities. Gallup Case Study (2017) found this engagement in developing strengths enhanced teacher quality while decreasing number of days absent and attrition.

With these realizations, there has been the opportunity to highlight positive examples, even when having difficult conversations. A few participants had taken part in more extensive strengths training through district leadership professional development and even being sent out of state to an international conference. This discrepancy in exposure led to the realization that the entire staff has not had the chance to experience strengths at an intimate level. This has led to the growing disconnect of viewing strengths as something extra as opposed to the belief that strengths are engrained in how employees within the district maximize opportunities. Literature showed that strengths-spotting is an intentional observation of an individual's possible strengths that are caught through interactions and repeated behaviors (Niemic et al., 2017; Reckmeyer & Robison, 2016). The researcher found that this was the largest point of growth through the experiences of participants and suggests more intentionality to naming and claiming

current practices to strengths. The focus shifted from weaknesses to strengths and forced conversations to uncover new discoveries in student behavior (D1, T8). This shift in understanding of how the uncovering of strengths could crack even the most difficult student behavior issues. Some participants saw connection to purposefully applying strengths through constant improvement of engaging students in their day to day responsibilities (D1, A2, D2). This practice would take a collective commitment to a systematic approach to enhance current practices with the powerful lens of being strengths-focused.

The fourth sub question asked about the most effective measurement of success in school. There was little mention of achievement testing results as a determiner to success in school from all participant groups. Participant responses focused primarily on one of two areas: district recognitions and celebrations and positive feedback received from building level administration. Taking into account the compilation of effective and ineffective feedback in relation to positive psychology, they saw great success with the use of feedback targeted around character strengths (Laursen 2015; Voerman, Korthagen, Meijer, & Simmons, 2014). Specific feedback provided by the evaluator is critically important in improving practice (Gallup's Perspective, 2019; Reinking, 2015).

Some participants indicated the growth in the district as the focus was on positive feedback through research-based strategies. Three participants listed feedback training as their single-most influential district initiative toward their professional growth, and among the 13 others, many mentioned it as being a positive shift in their development. These comments regarding educator's performance, as gauged by their supervisors, supported the bridges that have been gapped through the comfortability with viewing

evaluation as growth-inducing formative assessment rather than definitive judgements. The outcome in this study was supported in the literature that stated the more investment that principals make to offer coaching, including listening, offering feedback, and calling out exceptional performance, the better teachers will perform (Gallup's Perspective, 2019).

Responses from the second research question, including all sub questions, were confirmed with what the researcher found in the review of literature. As described in Building a High-Development Culture (2019), the Gallup Organization implemented an engagement approach to link engagement with experience that permeated into every element of an organization. The researcher exposed systems within the Mid-Missouri school district that aligned with research from the review of literature. Hass (2018) stated that there must be a system in place to recognize and name strengths in order for them to be taken seriously. Individuals with a comprehensive understanding of strengths development are able to confidently connect strengths-based approaches to optimal performance (Simon, 2019). As the researcher experienced overall cohesion among participants, it was concluded and confirmed by previous literature that the identification and development of strengths leads to the collective teacher efficacy that improves the overall academic performance of students (Mosoge et al., 2018).

### **Implications for Practice**

The professional implications from this qualitative narrative case study revealed how rigorous academic standards can be achieved through a teacher's belief that when they are at their best, students will, in return, yield higher levels of achievement (Cinches, Russell, Chavez, & Ortiz, 2017). The most frequently used key term/phrase from the

interview sessions was “students/kids” which was repeated 447 times. Most educators say that they are student-centered, but these participants demonstrated their focus was on students through this metric used nearly 200 more times than the second most used key term/phrase of “feel/feelings.”

Although there were some participant responses that exposed growth opportunities for the district, the resounding message was consistent throughout interview sessions that a focus on what is best about people, their strengths, is what is most sustainable and growth-driven. Harter et al. (2016) reported Gallup’s commitment to the study of human needs and satisfaction in his landmark research on well-being. In the earliest stages of these developments, researchers concluded that the measurement of employee satisfaction alone was inadequate to sustain change. There became a need for this data to be accessible by those who could initiate action, offer accountability, and be the creators of change.

Relationships are a proven accelerator to driving student achievement. Eight of the top 21 key terms/phrases recorded during interview sessions were in the relationship theme. Bolman and Deal (2008) stated successful leaders focus on developing people as their most appreciable asset. These leaders build effective relationships using social skills, awareness of self and others, and the ability to handle emotions.

Through a comprehensive look into scripts of each interview session, each of the five components of PERMA were found throughout the district. Positive Emotion was found to be the doorway to modeling positivity to students. Engagement showed multi-leveled effects on a staff-staff, staff-student, and student-student level. Relationships were exposed as the core of any sustainable growth worth celebrating. Meaning was

proven to acknowledge the root of why educators do what they do. Accomplishments were seen as the calibration to the belief of what is monitored gets done to a high degree of quality.

The only way that components of positive psychology become habitual in a school setting would be through a system of organizational consistency with a strengths-based vision. Proven throughout the interview sessions, it was made abundantly clear that focusing on what is positive is far greater than a deficiency mindset. This belief goes beyond the initial training, and would require accountability to be sustainable. Professional development for all district staff would be required to ensure all employees were consistency enhancing what they were doing with the thermometer of positive psychology. Following a top-down approach, district and building leadership must be the trailblazers in leading by example to model the power of this structure. The implications this has on schooling is unimaginable due to the personal attention this strengths-mindset gives to the redefinition of success. The researcher believes this direction is imperative in order to put action to the claim that most, if not all, schools claim to be: student-centered.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

One recommendation for future research would be to have the components of positive psychology laid out in this study as part of a quantitative study. The researcher acknowledged that the results of the current qualitative study may not be transferable to other research settings, so the possibility of a quantitative study would expand the reach of the results gathered. Another path worth pursuing would be to expand this qualitative study to the following participant groups: preschool certified employees and classified

employees in all levels. With the unique perspective that each of the 16 participants offered in the current study, expanding the participant pool could enhance the credibility to include all voices within a school district. A final recommendation would be to expand this research design to different school structures: larger districts, smaller districts, private schools, and charter schools.

Future studies must address and expand the framework of positive psychology to improve learning opportunities for students. Using this framework in new or slightly altered settings would open up possibilities of uncovering new and innovative ways to encourage best practices in the field of education, as well as other professional fields. Further research into the background of the components of positive psychology could lead to pilot schools to experiment with true measures of success. It is not difficult for any educator to agree that the five components of PERMA should be included in every school setting. The difficult, yet necessary, task would be to ensure that there are strategic action steps under each theme to be transferable to other research settings. There is a need for future research to explore these components in order to continue the evidence of Seligman (2011)'s work, and validate their place in the public school setting.

### **Summary**

This narrative began to fill a gap of the application of positive psychology in the educational setting not addressed previously in the publication of peer-reviewed literature. It was the purpose of this qualitative narrative case study to describe the components of positive psychology within a Mid-Missouri school district. The researcher accomplished this holistic account by reporting various perspectives along with multiple factors that contribute to the clarity of the problem (Creswell, 2014).



The objective was to address the problem of focusing solely on academic metrics, such as assessments gauging student achievement, rather than leveraging the motivational components of positive psychology that when utilized effectively, lead to achievement of state expectations. The researcher sought to highlight where the gap in the research led to the justification of a narrative case study. Between 1980 and 2016, Diener, Oishi, and Tay (2018) found that published literature on positive psychology expanded a hundredfold. The literature revealed that although some educational institutions have incorporated parts of positive psychology, the current study sought a holistic account to develop a more comprehensive view of the issue (Creswell, 2014).

The researcher found that Seligman (2011)'s PERMA Model: (a) Positive Emotion, (b) Engagement, (c) Relationships, (d) Meaning, and (e) Accomplishments provided the thematic road map to exploring the research questions. It was found with the 16 participants in this narrative case study that positive psychology was worth pursuing in any school setting in order to pursue student success. Through participant responses, it was found that these components were more controllable, and motivating than the difficult task of attempting to teach to the ever-changing state achievement expectations. The incorporation of these results could point toward the ultimate goal of leveraging the motivational components of positive psychology to enhance the achievement of state expectations from state departments, as measured by Missouri's Top 10 by 20 Plan.

It is the professional opinion of the researcher that the truest definition of success in schools is through the vehicle of positive psychology. Instead of dwelling on what is wrong with people, one can focus on what is right about them, and makes them succeed

(Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal, Plowman, & Blue, 2016). Relationships are the engine that make all other components of positive psychology flourish. Without tangible examples of genuine love and care for one another, schools will continue to be measured based on quantifiable achievement metrics. This study was grounded on the rationale that drove the mind shift from remedying mental illness and weakness identification known as traditional psychology to the birth of positive psychology's promotion of happiness and well-being in order to live a prosperous life (Baker et al., 2017; Seligman, 2011). Through this shift, educational systems can benefit from focusing on the positive psychology themes built to enhance the relationships within the organization.

## References

- Ackerman, C. (2019). *What is positive psychology & why is it important?* Retrieved from <https://positivepsychology.com/what-is-positive-psychology-definition/>
- Anney, V. N. (2014). Ensuring the quality of the findings of qualitative research: Looking at trustworthiness criteria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 5(2), 272-281.
- Arslan, E. (2017). Self-efficacy as predictor of collective self-efficacy among preschool teachers in Turkey. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 12(8), 513-517.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5897/ERR2017.3222>
- Baker, L., Green, S., & Falecki, D. (2017). Positive early childhood education: Expanding the reach of positive psychology into early childhood. *European Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 1(8), 1-12.
- Baum, S. M., Schader, R. M., & Hebert, T. P. (2014). Through a different lens: Reflecting on a strengths-based, talent-focused approach for twice-exceptional learners. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 58, 311-327. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0016986214547632>
- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544-559. Retrieved from <http://tqr.nova.edu/>
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal T. E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Butler, J., & Kern, M. L. (2016). The perma-profiler: A brief multidimensional measure of flourishing. *International Journal of Well-being*, 6(3), 1-48. doi:10.5502/ijw.v6i3.526

- Butler-Kisber, L., & Poldma, T. (2010). The power of visual approaches in qualitative inquiry: The use of collage making and concept mapping in experiential research. *Journal of Research Practice*, 6(2), 1-17.
- Carrillo, A., Martinez-Sanchis, M., Etchemendy, E., & Baños, R.M. (2019). Qualitative analysis of the best possible self intervention: Underlying mechanisms that influence its efficacy. *PLoS ONE*, 14(5), e0216896. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0216896>
- Chen, H. (2012). *An investigation of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' strengths awareness and utilization* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Database. (Accession Order No. AAT 3509962)
- Cinches, M. C., Russell, R. V., Chavez, J. C., & Ortiz, R. O. (2017). Student engagement: Defining teacher effectiveness and teacher engagement. *Journal of Institutional Research in South East Asia*, 15(1), 5-19.
- Cochran-Smith, M., Baker, M., Burton, S., Chang, W., Carney, M. C., Fernandez, M. B., ... Sanchez, J. G. (2017). The accountability era in us teacher education: Looking back, looking forward. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 40, 572-588. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2017.1385061>
- Conceição, S. C.O., Samuel, A., & Biniecki, S.M.Y. (2017). Using concept mapping as a tool for conducting research: An analysis of three approaches. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 3(1), 1-18.
- Cooper, L., & Woods, K. (2017). Evaluating the use of a strengths-based development tool with head teachers. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 33(1), 31-49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2016.1220924>

- Côté, J., Turnnidge, J., & Vierimaa, M. (2016). A personal assets approach to youth sport. In K. Green & A. Smith (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of youth sport* (pp. 243-256). London, UK: Routledge.
- Creswell, J. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper Row
- Dassa, L., & Derose, D. S. (2017). Get in the teacher zone. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 26(1), 101-113.
- Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (2016). *Shaping school culture* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Diener, E., Oishi, S., & Tay, L. (2018). Introduction by the editors. In E. Diener, S. Oishi, & L. Tay (Eds.), *Handbook of well-being* (pp. 1-2). Salt Lake City, UT: DEF Publishers.
- Donahue, E., & Vogel, L. R. (2018). Teacher perceptions of the impact of an evaluation system on classroom instructional practices. *Journal of School Leadership*, 28(1), 31-55.
- Drucker, P. F. (1967). *The effective executive*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychology*, 56(3), 218-226.

- Gallup Case Study. (2017). *Teacher talent and engagement boost student and human capital outcomes*. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/education/227657/improve-k-12.aspx>
- Gallup's Perspective on Building a High-Development Culture Through Your Employee Engagement Strategy. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/267512/development-culture-engagement-paper-2019.aspx>
- Gallup's Perspective on Understanding the K-12 Teacher Experience. (2019). Retrieved from [https://www.gallup.com/education/247073/k-12\\_teacher\\_experience.aspx](https://www.gallup.com/education/247073/k-12_teacher_experience.aspx)
- Gardner, D. P. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington D.C.: National Commission on Excellence in Education.
- Giles, D., & Bills, A. (2017). Designing and using an organizational culture inquiry tool to glimpse the relational nature of leadership and organizational culture within a south Australian primary school. *School Leadership & Management*, 37(1-2), 120-140. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2017.1293637>
- Gliner, J. A. (1994). Reviewing qualitative research: Proposed criteria for fairness and rigor. *The Occupational Therapy Journal of Research* 14(2), 78-90.
- Grant, A. M., & Palmer, S. (2015). Integrating positive psychology and coaching psychology into counselling psychology. *Counselling Psychology Review*, 30(3), 22-25
- Gush, M., & Greeff, A. P. (2018). Integrating positive psychology principles and exercises into second-language high school curriculum. *South African Journal of Education*, 38(3), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n3a1638>

- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., Agrawal, S., Plowman, S. K., & Blue, A. (2016). The relationship between engagement at work and organizational outcomes [Special issue]. *2016 Q12 Meta-Analysis: Ninth Edition*.
- Hass, M. R. (2018). Interviewing to understand strengths. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, *10*(3), 315-321. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26822/iejee.2018336189>
- Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hattie, J. (2016). *Mindframes and maximizers*. Symposium conducted at the Visible Learning Plus, National Harbor, MD. Retrieved from <http://www.sagepublications.com/images/eblast/CorwinPress/PDF/AVL-program-2016.pdf>
- Imms, W., & Byers, T. (2016). Impact of classroom design on teacher pedagogy and student engagement and performance in mathematics. *Learning Environments Research*, *20*(1), 139-152. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10984-016-9210-0>
- Jennings, P. A., Brown, J. L., Frank, J. L., Doyle, S., Oh, Y., Davis, R., ... Greenberg, M. T. (2017). Impacts of the CARE for teachers' program of teachers' social and emotional competence and classroom interactions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *109*(7), 1010-1028. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000187>
- Jimerson, S. R., & Haddock, A. D. (2015). Understanding the importance of teachers in facilitating student success: Contemporary science, practice and policy. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *30*(4), 488-493. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/spq0000134>

- Keyes, C. L. M., Shmotkin, D., & Ryff, C. D. (2002). Optimizing well-being: The empirical encounter of two traditions. *Journal of Personality, 82*(6), 1007-1022.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.6.1007>
- Kopinak, J. (1999). The use of triangulation in a study of refugee well-being. *Quality Quantity 33*(2), 169-183.
- Krishnakumar, S., Hopkins, K., & Robinson, M. D. (2017). When feeling poorly at work does not mean acting poorly at work: The moderating role of work-related emotional intelligence. *Motivation and Emotion, 41*(1), 122-134. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11031-016-9588-0>
- Kristjansson, K. (2012). Positive psychology and positive education: Old wine in new bottles. *Educational Psychologist, 47*(2), 86-105.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2011.610678>
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B.Z. (2007). *The leadership challenge* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kun, A., Balogh, P., & Gerakne Krasz, K. (2017). Development of the work-related well-being questionnaire based on Seligman's perma model. *Periodica Polytechnica Social and Management Sciences, 25*(1), 56-63. doi:10.3311/PPso.9326.
- Langford, L. J. (2015). *Leading and learning: An exploratory study of teachers' experiences implementing change through a professional learning community* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Database. (Accession Order No. AAT 3704141)
- Laursen, E. K. (2015). The power of grit, perseverance, and tenacity. *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 23*(4), 19-24. [www.reclaimingjournal.com](http://www.reclaimingjournal.com)



- Leadership Perspectives on Public Education. (2018). *The gallup 2018 survey of K-12 school district superintendents*. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/education/241151/gallup-k-12-superintendent-report-2018.aspx>
- Linley, A., Woolston, L., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2009). Strengths coaching with leaders. *International Coaching Psychology Review, 4(1)*, 20-31.
- Lomas, T., & Ivztan, I. (2015). Second wave positive psychology: Exploring the positive-negative dialectics of well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies, Advance online publication, 17(4)*, 1753-1768. doi:10.1007/s10902-015-9668-y.
- Lopez, S. J., & Louis, M. C. (2009). The principles of strengths-based education [Special section]. *Journal of College & Character, 10(4)*, 1-8.
- Lopez, S. J., Pedrotti, J. T., & Snyder, C. R. (2015). *Positive psychology: The scientific and practical explorations of human strengths* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Mason, M. (2010). Sample size and saturation in PhD studies using qualitative interviews. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research (Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung), 11(3)*, Art. 8  
Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1428>
- Maxwell, J. C. (1993). *Developing the leader within you*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Mazzola, V. J. (2016). Fostering student connections: The hidden gems in our schools. *Children & Schools, 38(4)*, 247-251. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdw030>
- McCullough, M. M. (2015). *Improving elementary teachers' well-being through a strength-based intervention: A multiple baseline single-case design*. Graduate Theses and Dissertations. <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5990>

- Meijer, P., Verloop, N., & Beijaard, D. (2002). Multi-method triangulation in a qualitative study on teachers' practical knowledge: An attempt to increase internal validity. *Quality & Quantity*, 36(1), 145-167.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E.J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mette, I., Anderson, J., Nieuwenhuizen, L., Range, B., Hvidston, D., & Doty, J. (2017). The wicked problem of the intersection between supervision and evaluation. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 9(3), 709-724.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Missouri Department of Secondary and Elementary Education. (2019). *Missouri School Improvement Program*. <https://dese.mo.gov/quality-schools/mo-school-improvement-program/msip-6>
- Moskal, A. C., Stein, S. J., & Golding, C. (2016). Can you increase teacher engagement with evaluation simply by improving the evaluation system? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(2), 286-300. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1007838>
- Mosoge, M. J., Challens, B. H., & Xaba, M. I. (2018). Perceived collective teacher efficacy in low performing schools. *South African Journal of Education*, 38(2), 1-9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n2a1153>
- Moyer, M. E. (2015). *Professional development, teacher efficacy, and student achievement* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Database. (Accession Order No. AAT 3732571)

- Ng, W. (2017). Extending traditional psychological disciplines to positive psychology: A view from subjective well-being. *Journal Happiness Studies*, 18(5), 1553-1571.  
doi:10.1007/s10902-016-9782-5.
- Niemiec, R. M., Shogren, K. A., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2017). Character strengths and intellectual and developmental disability: A strengths-based approach from positive psychology. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 52(1), 13-25.
- Okhremtchouk, I. S., Jimenez, R. M., Rosa, R., Porter, S. G., Bhandal, N., Cramer, M., Poulin, K. (2015). From student-teachers to teachers of students: beginning teachers' journeys from pre-service to the classroom. *Creative Education*, 6(1), 331-337.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ce.2015.63031>
- Orcher, L. T. (2016). *Conducting research: Social and behavioral science methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Paterson, A., & Grantham, R. (2016). How to make teachers happy: An exploration of teacher well-being in the primary context. *Educational & Child Psychology*, 33(2), 90-104.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Positive Psychology Center, University of Pennsylvania. (2019). *PERMA Theory of Well-being and PERMA Workshops*. Retrieved from <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/learn-more/perma-theory-well-being-and-perma-workshops>
- Petrosino, A., Buehler, J., & Turpin-Petrosino, C. (2013). *'Scared straight' and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency*. Retrieved from <https://www.campbellcollaboration.org/library/juvenile-delinquency-scared-straight-etc-programmes.html>

- Prelli, G. E. (2016). How school leaders might promote higher levels of collective teacher efficacy at the level of school and team. *English Language Teaching*, 9(3), 174-180.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n3p174>
- Pressler, M. W. (2011). *The role of strengths focus to improve teaching and learning* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Database.  
(Accession Order No. AAT 3479165)
- Reckmeyer, M., & Robison, J. (2016). *Strengths-based parenting: Developing your children's innate talents*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.
- Reinking, A. K. (2015). Increasing accountability measures for early childhood teachers using evaluation models: Observation, feedback, and self-assessment. *Current Issues in Education*, 18(1), 1-10.
- Rogers, C. (1951). *Client-centered therapy: Its current practice, implications and theory*. London: Constable.
- Rusk, R. D., & Waters, L. (2015). A psycho-social system approach to well-being: Empirically deriving the five domains of positive functioning. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 10(2), 141-152. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2014.920409>
- Rutherford, M. (2013). *The artisan teacher: A field guide to skillful teaching*. Weddington, NC: Rutherford Learning Group, Inc.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68-78.
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069-1081.

- Santos, F., Gould, D., Strachan, L., Pereira, P., & Machado, C. (2019). The role of team captains in integrating positive teammate psychological development in high-performance sport. *The Sport Psychologist, 33(1)*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2017-0135>
- Seligman, M. (1999). APA President Address 1998. *American Psychologist, 54(8)*, 537-568.
- Seligman, M. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. New York, NY: Atria Paperback.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Seligman, M. (2018). PERMA and the building blocks of well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 13(4)*, 333-335. doi:10.1080/17439760.2018.1437466
- Seligman, M. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology. *American Psychologist, 55(1)*, 5-14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5>
- Simon, T. (2019). *Soft skills? How cliftonstrengths is a research-based tool*. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/249422/soft-skills-cliftonstrengths-research-based-tool.aspx>
- Smaling, A. (1987). Methodological objectivity and qualitative research. Doctoral dissertation. Lisse, The Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger.
- Snipes, J., & Loan, T. (2017). *Growth mindset, performance avoidance, and academic behaviors in Clark County School District (REL 2017–226)*. Washington, DC: U.S.: Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.
- Soots, L. M. (2015). *The educator's portrayal of learning transformations in a positive psychology adult learning course room: A qualitative study* (Doctoral dissertation).

Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global database. (Accession Order No. AAT 3700863)

Stake, R. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Tellis, W. (1997). Introduction to case study. *The Qualitative Report*, 3(2). Retrieved from <http://tqr.nova.edu/>

Top 10 By 20 Plan (2014). *Missouri State Board of Education*. Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Retrieved from <https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/10x20Oct2014.pdf>

Trochim, W. (1989). An introduction to concept mapping for program planning and evaluation. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 12(1), 1-16.

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing & health sciences*, 15(3), 398-405. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/nhs.12048>

Voerman, L., Korthagen, F. A., Meijer, P. C., & Simmons, R. J. (2014). Feedback revisited: adding perspectives based on positive psychology. Implications for theory and classroom practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 43(1), 91-98. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.06.005>

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Walkowiak, T. (2016). Five essential practices for communication: The work of instructional coaches. *Clearing House*, 89(1), 14-17.
- Warford, M. K. (2011). The zone of proximal teacher development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(2), 252-258.
- Young, S., Range, B. G., Hvidston, D., & Mette, I. M. (2015). Teacher evaluation reform: Principals' beliefs about newly adopted teacher evaluation systems. *Planning and Changing*, 46(1/2), 158-174.
- Zee, M., de Jong, P. F., & Koomen, H. M. (2016). Teachers' self-efficacy in relation to individual students with a variety of social-emotional behaviors: A multilevel investigation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(7), 1013-1027.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000106>

## Appendix A

### Research Question Interview Protocol

Instructions: The following interview will be audio recorded and will be around an hour in duration.

Introduction: This interview is being recorded, and confidentiality will be preserved as outlined in the consent form. Before we begin, I would like to review the district initiatives that have been put in place since 2015:

- Strengths Finder
- Feedback Training through research-based strategies
- Studer Workforce Engagement Surveys
- Reading Workshop Professional Development
- Personalized Professional Development Plans
- 1:1 (3rd grade - 12th grade) and 2:1 (PreK - 2nd grade) technology implementation
- Rounding Report conducted by Central Office

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Questions:

1. How are positive emotions connected to your day to day duties?
2. What does engagement look like in your classroom/department?
3. How do relationships fit into your experience in the workplace?
4. What are some examples of finding meaning in what you do at this school?
5. How are accomplishments recognized in your department/classroom as well as throughout the entire district?
6. What makes you choose to be employed at this school district?
7. Since 2015, what has been the single-most influential district initiative toward your professional growth?
8. What are the benefits of having commonalities of what is important district-wide?



9. How has finding out your strengths and the strengths of other colleagues/students around you affected what you do?
10. What is the one thing in your career that has led to the greatest success?
11. What has been the most challenging district initiative to implement into your individual department/grade level?
12. How have your relationships with staff changed over the past 4 years?

Closing: I appreciate your time and your participation in this study. As discussed earlier, your identity will be anonymous and not tied to your individual responses.

**Nondirective probes for open-ended questions:**

- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Tell me more about what makes you think this?
- What other things come to mind as this topic has been discussed?
- If I have missed anything in accurately portraying this narrative, what would you add?

## Appendix B

### Request for District Approval to Conduct Research

Dear Superintendent,

My name is David Sperling, and I am the assistant principal at Heritage Elementary at School of the Osage. I am a doctoral student at Southwest Baptist University, and I am conducting a narrative case study focusing on how positive psychology looks within a school district. I would like to use School of the Osage as the research setting to perform this qualitative case study incorporating in-depth, semi-structured interviews. I have chosen this district for my study because of the district initiatives put in place since 2015 that have been aligned with the components of positive psychology. I believe this study will encourage growth-inducing reflection how a school district can leverage positive psychology to reach and exceed state expectations.

Before you make a final decision about consenting to this study, please read the following statements about how responses will be used and how rights will be protected:

- Participation in this study is completely voluntary.
- Answers will be kept confidential. Results will be presented to others in summary form only, without names or other identifying information.
- Participants will be asked to give approximately one hour of their time.


A copy of my dissertation proposal is available upon request. Upon completion of the study, I will provide the district with results and recommendations for future study.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the RRB Committee at Southwest Baptist University (326-1659). The committee believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights.

You may contact me at 573-723-0742 if you have questions or concerns about your participation.

If you consent for me to conduct this research within the district, please sign and date below:

Laura Nelson                      Feb. 20, 2020  
Print                                      Date

  
Signature

Thank you,

David Sperling

## Appendix C

### Request for Participation

February 21, 2020

Name of Participant:

Address:

Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral student at Southwest Baptist University and am working on my doctoral dissertation. It will be a qualitative narrative case study focusing on how positive psychology looks within a school district. You have been intentionally selected as a potential participant in this study, because you meet the following specific criteria established by the researcher: you have been a certified employee of the district prior to 2015 or you have been hired as a certified employee by the district since 2015.

The purpose of this study is to gather perceptual data as to how the components of positive psychology are used to leverage toward academic success. Your involvement will require setting aside time for an interview in which you are asked to elaborate on how you have incorporated components of positive psychology throughout your job duties. At the completion of the interview session, you will be provided a transcript and will have an opportunity to change any statements that are unclear or inaccurate.

If you choose to participate, I will work to coordinate the most convenient time for you and three other participants to set up our interview session. Please respond back with your willingness to participate in this study using the phone number or the e-mail below.

Thank you for your consideration.

David Sperling  
School of the Osage Heritage Elementary  
573-723-0742  
sperlingd@osageschools.org

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent Form

Dear Colleague,

My name is David Sperling, and I am the assistant principal at Heritage Elementary at School of the Osage. I am a doctoral student at Southwest Baptist University, and I am conducting a narrative case study focusing on how positive psychology looks within a school district. Would you consider participating in this qualitative case study incorporating in-depth, semi-structured interviews? You have been purposefully selected as a potential participant in this study, because you meet the specific criteria established by the researcher, as you are a certified staff member who has been hired either before or after 2015. I believe your participation in this study will encourage growth-inducing reflection into your job duties within the district.

The interview should take about 90 minutes to complete. During the interview, I will ask you for information about how you implement components of positive psychology to leverage success. I have included Researcher Question Interview Protocol as well as a concept map with instructions to begin brainstorming prior to the interview session.

In order to keep your identity private, the information reported will not indicate individual participants. No identifying characteristics will be given. You will not be required to answer all of the questions. Your response to this letter will indicate your consent to participate and permission to use the information that you have provided in my study.

Before you make a final decision about participation, please read the following statements about how your responses will be used and how your rights as a participant will be protected:

- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any point without penalty.
- You need not answer all of the questions.
- Your answers will be kept confidential and presented in alphanumeric form only.
- Your participation will take approximately 90 minutes.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the RRB Committee at Southwest Baptist University (326-1659). The committee believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights.

You may contact me at 573-723-0742 if you have questions or concerns about your participation.

Sincerely,  
David Sperling

## Appendix E

### Member Checking Letter

Name of Participant:

Address:

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in my doctoral research project concerning how positive psychology looks within a school district. The descriptive data you included through the interview session provided insight into the research questions for this study.

I am currently in the process of analyzing the descriptive data you provided. It is a high priority that trustworthiness is ensured through this qualitative research. For this reason, I am using member checking as a way to address validity of this study.

Included is a copy of the transcription of our interview. Please review and let me know if there are any statements that need to be corrected or changed for accuracy or clarity purposes. As stated in the interview session, these transcriptions will remain confidential. Quotations and paraphrases from our interview will be used to support the themes in the review of literature.

If you have any comments to add or clarify, please let me know. Time is a valuable resource, and I appreciate your willingness to offer your perceptions for my study.

Sincerely,

David Sperling

School of the Osage Heritage Elementary

Doctoral Student, Southwest Baptist University

## Appendix F

### Concept Map

In preparation for the interview, please complete the concept map on the opposite side of this page. The purpose of this activity is to get you thinking about your experiences while you have been employed at School of the Osage (SOTO). Not all boxes may apply to you, so some spaces may be left blank.

This will serve as a guide during the interview session.

Please refer to the definition of each term before giving your examples:

**P**ositive Emotion = feeling good

**E**ngagement = being completely focussed in activities

**R**elationships = being genuinely connected to others

**M**eaning = purpose that is larger than one's self

**A**ccomplishments = attainment of accomplishment and success

