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Cultivating Early Career Teachers' Purpose: A Mechanism to Sustain Early Career Teachers'  
Commitment to the Profession

by

Neesha Daulat

Claremont Graduate University

2021

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## Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Neesha Daulat as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology.

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## Abstract

Cultivating Early Career Teachers' Purpose: A Mechanism to Sustain Early Career Teachers'

Commitment to the Profession

by

Neesha Daulat

Claremont Graduate University: 2021

The attrition rate of early career teachers is high. In fact, the government spends \$2 billion annually to replace teachers in the first five years of their tenure (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). The purpose of this dissertation is two-fold: 1) to test the relationship between purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment to the profession, and 2) to design and examine the impact of a purpose-centered intervention in a sample of early career teachers in their first or second year of teaching, in the northeast. Study 1 examined the relationship between early career teachers' purpose, psychological well-being, and commitment to the profession through a cross-sectional survey ( $N = 78$ ) and regression-based analyses of a full mediation model. I hypothesized that early career teachers' sense of purpose would contribute to their affective commitment to the profession through their feelings of psychological well-being. Results of Study 1 suggested that early career teachers' purpose was a strong predictor of their psychological well-being and affective commitment to the profession. Building on Study 1, in Study 2 I developed, piloted, and tested a one-hour purpose-centered intervention (called Grounding in Purpose) using two t-tests (independent and dependent samples): 1) comparison of the waiting control group ( $n = 43$ ) with the intervention group ( $n = 67$ ) and 2) comparison of pretest and posttest scores of some participants in the intervention group ( $n = 20$ ). Research findings for Study 2 indicate that a purpose-centered intervention may positively influence early

career teachers' purpose. Theoretically, the findings establish purpose as a key contributor to affective commitment in ECTs. Practically, the results offer educational leaders and professionals who support early career teachers with tangible recommendations to foster early career teachers' purpose.

*Keywords:* early career teacher, attrition, retention, affective commitment, purpose, well-being

## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all the K-12 teachers in the United States who, against all odds, made a quick and efficient transition to online and distance education. I am sure they experienced several challenges and felt like quitting, but they persevered through the obstacles and stayed dedicated to their students' learning. It is for these resilient teachers that I will continue my work on understanding and promoting teachers' well-being.

## Acknowledgements

*“And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.”*

– Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

Twelve years ago, I reflected on the quote above by Paulo Coelho during my high school valedictorian speech; the end of one chapter and beginning of a new chapter in my education journey. Now, as I complete my Ph.D. and end my (formal) education journey, it is only fitting to reflect on this quote once again. After college I serendipitously applied to be a Teach for America (TFA) corps member while I reapplied to medical school. Unbeknownst to me (at the time) doing TFA would be an experience that fundamentally changed the trajectory of my professional career. It was during my time as a science teacher at Desert Pines High School (Las Vegas, NV) when I realized that my true calling was to improve teachers’ work lives, so they feel less burnout and more satisfied. I remembered discussions of organizational psychology from my Psychology of Stress course at the University of San Diego and immediately began applying to Ph.D. programs for Organizational Psychology. When I was accepted to CGU and visited the campus, I knew I was in the right place to explore my passion. Somehow the universe knew to drop several hints until I found my path.

It goes without saying that much of my universe includes all the people in my life who supported me throughout my education and Ph.D. journey. First and foremost, I thank all my professors and teachers who shaped and helped me forge ahead in my education journey. I acknowledge my dissertation committee members (Dr. Michelle Bligh, Dr. M. Gloria González-Morales, Dr. Kendall Cotton-Bronk, and Dr. Claire Robertson-Kraft), without whom I would not have made it to this point. Their guidance and encouragement helped me stay focused and

motivated during the dissertation process. I also thank Dr. Becky Reichard for serving on my portfolio and orals committee. Her constructive feedback was pivotal in my doctoral journey.

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11) Dr. Hena Wadhwa. Each of these individuals provided me with unconditional support as I developed myself as a scholar and practitioner of Organizational Psychology.

I would not be here today if it were not for my universe conspiring to help and support me. I enter a new chapter of my life with open arms knowing that my universe will always help me achieve whatever it is I desire as long as I work hard.

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# Cultivating Early Career Teachers' Purpose: A Mechanism to Sustain Early Career Teachers' Commitment to the Profession

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Meet Eunice, a third-year middle school teacher. She chose to be an educator because she wanted to inspire young people, make a difference, and shape the future. Her first two years in the profession were tough for which she was mentally prepared; she had to teach three different courses and develop her lesson plans from scratch all while trying to find her footing as an educator. However, her third year continues at the same grueling pace, and she is experiencing burnout. She is more anxious than ever because of a demanding workload, an unhealthy work-life balance, and a lack of support from peers, veteran colleagues, and school leaders. For these reasons, she plans to resign after the school year and explore other career options.

Many early-career teachers (ECTs), like Eunice, enter the classroom eager to provide their students with a quality education. However, research shows ECTs are more likely to leave the profession as compared to their more experienced colleagues (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). Almost half of ECTs leave the classroom in the first five years (Chang, 2009; Ronfeldt et al., 2013) in part due to the unique challenges they face, which further exacerbates the shortage of teachers in the United States (Sutcher et al., 2019). First, school leaders often assign ECTs low performing, high-need students to but do not provide the professional support ECTs' need to serve these students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). Additionally, ECTs also experience conflict between their expectations and reality (Schaefer, 2013). Essentially, ECTs have a set of expectations related to their students' behavior and motivation, success of lessons, and the impact they hope to make. These expectations may not align with reality, a disillusionment that induces shock and is difficult to reconcile (Schaefer, 2013). The lack of professional support and disillusionment discourage ECTs from staying in the profession. As a

result, high rate of attrition negatively impacts student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). ECTs' purpose influences and drives their decision to become teachers (Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017; Moran, 2016; Schaefer, 2013). However, as ECTs spend time in the profession, their purpose may diminish, resulting in them leaving the field. Cultivating ECTs' purpose could be a potential solution to keep beginner teachers in the profession.

Fostering purpose is a type of positive psychology intervention, or an approach to enhance well-being that is consistent with positive psychology theory, that moves away from the deficit-focused approach of alleviating attrition causes and focuses on leveraging positive components (Carr et al., 2020; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). This strength-based focus may not only reduce the rate of ECTs' attrition but also improve the quality their retention (Gu & Day, 2007; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The purpose of this dissertation is to examine ECTs' purpose and well-being as a mechanism to sustain their affective commitment to the profession as well as suggest an approach to cultivate ECTs' purpose.

The key variables under investigation were purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment. Scholars define purpose as an individual's intention to pursue and accomplish goals that are meaningful to both the self and the world (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2003). Next, psychological well-being refers to the extent to which individuals experience optimal and healthy functioning (Ryff, 1989). Lastly, affective commitment is an individuals' attachment to the work, mission, and people in the profession (Meyer et al., 1990). I examined these variables in a sample of Teach for America (TFA) teachers.

Teach for America is an organization that addresses the shortage of teachers and education inequity by creating a pipeline of educators and educational leaders who believe that every student has the right to a quality education (Kopp, 2012). Recent college graduates,

emerging adults, and young professionals who do not have any previous classroom/teaching experience join the movement for at least a two-year commitment to teach pre-kindergarten through high school students in 52 of the nation's most under resourced communities (Kopp, 2012; Trujillo et al., 2017). Interestingly, only a few of the teachers who enter TFA want to teach initially (Kopp, 2012). However, after spending time as a TFA teacher (also referred to as a Corps Member), over 60% of alumni continue to teach, work in education, contribute to the education equity movement, or support low-income communities through other work after their two-year commitment (Kopp, 2012). Clearly, the teaching experience with TFA is so purposeful that it influences alumni's future career decisions. TFA teachers are also nontraditional teachers, which means that they have not gone through the traditional education programs before they enter the classroom (TFA, 2020). Instead, they go through a few weeks of intense, hands-on, pre-service training in the summer prior to them starting the school year, receive on-going development throughout the year, and work towards a teaching license and graduate degree in education (TFA, 2020). That being said, current TFA teachers are an ideal population to examine through the dissertation studies because they are ECTs who teach in underserved communities and highly challenging environments, making them even more susceptible to burnout, decreased affective commitment, and loss of purpose. Therefore, an intervention designed to foster their purpose could be well-suited for them.

This dissertation includes two studies that examined early career teachers' purpose, psychological well-being, and their commitment to the profession. Study 1 was a cross-sectional survey study examining the relationship between ECTs' purpose, psychological well-being (and its sub-components), and affective commitment to the profession. I hypothesized that ECTs' sense of purpose would relate positively to ECTs' affective commitment to the profession

through the mediation of ECTs' perception of psychological well-being. Building on Study 1, in Study 2 I designed and tested the impact of a purpose-centered intervention, called Grounding in Purpose, through a pretest/posttest design utilizing intervention and waiting control groups for comparison to answer the following research question: Does a purpose-centered intervention result in significant differences in purpose among early career teachers? As such, Study 1 investigated the theoretical relationships that suggest ECTs' purpose is a key antecedent to their psychological well-being and affective commitment to the profession, while Study 2 empirically tested a method to intervene and foster ECTs' sense of purpose. Overall, Study 1 was the explanation and rationale for why ECTs need a purpose-centered intervention and Study 2 provided the evidence of the intervention's efficacy.

This dissertation offers a few theoretical contributions to the developing body of research on sense of purpose and well-being among ECTs. First, I examined theoretical relationships that extend existing relationships in the literature. For example, research suggests that well-being relates to decreased turnover intention in nurses (Brunetto et al., 2013) and professional commitment in teachers (Meyer et al., 2019), however it is unclear whether this relationship holds for ECTs' affective commitment to the profession. Given that ECTs are a vulnerable population with a high attrition rate, this dissertation investigates the relationship between sense of purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment to the profession in a context that is specific to ECTs. Next, I investigated the mechanism by which the relationship between ECTs' purpose and their affective commitment to the profession occurs. Although findings from this dissertation do not suggest psychological well-being (and related components) are key intermediaries in the relationship between ECTs' sense of purpose and their affective commitment, they do indicate that sense of purpose is a strong predictor of affective commitment



and catalyst that triggers components of psychological well-being (self-acceptance, quality relationships, environmental mastery, and personal growth).

Next, the results of the studies offer several practical contributions to the field. Most importantly, this dissertation focused on ECTs, a population that is need of support and attention given the unique challenges they experience, their high attrition rates, and the high costs of replacing them. In addition, the findings offer educational leaders and professionals who work with ECTs a practical and evidence-based approach to cultivate ECTs' sense of purpose. Particularly, supported findings inform ECTs professional development and mentorship. Lastly, this dissertation added to the small body of literature and research on the impact of purpose-centered interventions. Overall, this dissertation takes a positive psychology approach to uncover antecedents to ECTs' affective commitment to the profession.

To begin, I will first review the current literature surrounding ECT attrition, purpose, and well-being in Chapter 2. Following theoretical background, Chapters 3 and 4 include the methodological approach, results, and discussion for each study. The dissertation concludes with the general discussion (Chapter 5), which highlights the implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Background**

### **Causes of Early Career Teacher Attrition**

The early years of a teacher's career are critical in determining their motivation, passion, and a sense of purpose to remain in the profession (Schaefer et al., 2012). ECT attrition costs US school districts billions of dollars, making it a critical issue for educational leaders to address. Exploring ECTs' personal experiences and environmental context provides a better understanding of why this population of teachers is more susceptible to attrition. The first five years are extremely difficult for new teachers and differ significantly from that of their more tenured counterparts. Specifically, these early years include significant differences in terms of opportunities for support and professional development, environmental familiarity, the experience of negative emotions, and challenges with work-life balance.

ECT attrition is not a singular event but rather the culmination of many small events and experiences that ultimately diminish ECTs' sense of purpose. Schaefer et al. (2012) explain that ECTs go through a lengthy process of decision-making, planning, and negotiating with themselves before they leave. Job demotivation develops over time (Gallant & Riley, 2017) through the accumulation of small experiences or events, burnout and its related symptoms, lack of leadership and peer support, and other personal characteristics (i.e., career path, resilience, and identity).

### ***Burnout***

Maslach et al. (2001) define job burnout as a response to chronic on-the-job stressors that includes three distinct dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (or cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment (professional inadequacy). Research suggests that teachers are particularly likely to experience burnout related symptoms in comparison to other professions

due to the nature of their job and context (Chang, 2009). Vandenberghe and Huberman (1999) highlight that teacher burnout results in turnover intentions as well as stress, depression, and truancy. Moreover, Bronk (2014) explains that increased stress correlates with a lower sense of purpose. The three components of teacher burnout develop and may diminish ECTs' purpose separately (Bronk, 2014), and as such, I discuss the unique contribution of each below.

**Emotional Exhaustion.** Emotional exhaustion is a general lack of energy in work paired with feelings of tiredness (Maslach et al., 2001). This symptom of burnout embodies the physical sensation of burnout. For ECTs, emotional exhaustion results from a demanding workload, long hours, and low salary (Gallant & Riley, 2017; Schaefer et al., 2012).

Because they are new to the profession, ECTs receive less pay than their veteran colleagues receive, but do the same level of work if not more. The low pay may cause ECTs to take up other jobs for supplemental income to meet their financial needs or live in less-than-ideal conditions (Schaefer et al., 2012). Additionally, ECTs' busy schedules take away from their time to reflect on their experiences and the purpose of their work (Chang, 2009). However, reflection time is a crucial aspect of sustaining a commitment to an individual's purpose, as evidenced in several purpose-centered interventions (Bronk, 2014; Bundick, 2011; Dik et al., 2011; Pizzolato et al., 2011).

Additionally, ECTs frequently report difficulty in maintaining a healthy work-life balance, which further contributes to their feelings of emotional exhaustion (Brunetti & Marston, 2018). Mid-to-late career teachers take on the responsibility or specific roles that appeal to their interests; whereas, ECTs have to focus on their primary role as a teacher and disregard any other opportunities that may contribute to their professional growth (Brunetti & Marston, 2018). ECTs' sole focus on their teaching responsibilities is a result of their lack of professional

experience and a demanding workload; however, the heavy time commitment often forces them to sacrifice work-life balance. Financial stress, no time for reflection, and an unhealthy work-life balance exacerbate ECT's emotional exhaustion, which results in turnover intentions and, eventually, attrition.

**Professional Inadequacy.** Next, professional inadequacy occurs when one feels incompetent to complete daily tasks and overcome challenges (Maslach et al., 2001). This dimension of burnout includes professional responsibilities, such as confidence in the curriculum as well as managing classroom behavior. ECTs are more susceptible to feelings of incompetence because of their lack of experience. The perception of professional inadequacy prevents ECTs from effectively solving and learning from challenging problems (Heikonen et al., 2017). The fast-paced learning environment ECTs face also contributes to perceptions of decreased competence (Berliner, 1986). Furthermore, Sedas (2015) asserts that feelings of incompetence, lack of self-confidence in abilities, and inability to overcome obstacles further lead individuals to experience purposelessness. When taken together, these aspects of professional inadequacy contribute to ECT's diminished sense of purpose and desire to leave the profession.

Alternatively, some believe that professionally inadequate teachers are ineffective and reduce student achievement (Henry et al., 2011; Henry et al., 2012). Research suggests that ECTs leaving the profession due to incompetence are a benefit to student achievement (Henry et al., 2011). Although the previous assertion provides a positive view to ECT attrition, it wrongly assumes that there are ample, qualified teachers available at any given moment (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). Supporting the departure of professionally inadequate teachers (instead of supporting them to improve) only worsens the already skyrocketing rate of attrition (Sutcher et al., 2019).

Further enhancing feelings of professional inadequacy, ECTs often experience negative emotions and shock from a misalignment between expectations and reality. ECTs enter the profession with a set of “incoming beliefs”, which are the expectations they set for themselves, and how their classroom and students should be (Nichols et al., 2016, p. 407). An example of an “incoming belief” or expectation is that students will complete their work most of the time. Any situation in which students do not complete their work most of the time is a misalignment, while any situation in which students complete their work most of the time is alignment. In this example, ECTs will experience positive emotions (joy, happiness, excitement, etc.) when students complete their work. In contrast, when students do not complete their work, ECTs may feel negative emotions (anger, sadness, frustration, etc.). As a result of the negative emotions, ECTs make an attribution, or explanation, of the misalignment’s cause (internal or external, controllable or uncontrollable), and rethink what it means to be a teacher (Nichols et al., 2016). The conflict between the expectations and the reality of teaching causes praxis shock, or reality shock (Goddard & Foster, 2001), because of classroom challenges new teachers are often not prepared for (Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017). The experience of praxis shock causes stress, resulting in exhaustion and lower self-efficacy, and contributes to adverse outcomes for schools and the surrounding community (Ballantyne & Zhukov, 2017).

**Depersonalization.** Finally, depersonalization refers to teachers’ detachment from colleagues, students, parents, and other work relationships (Maslach et al., 2001). Essentially, this dimension of burnout encompasses the social aspects of teaching. Daily, teachers must cultivate strong relationships with their students and peer organizational networks.

***Relationships with Students.*** Students’ behavioral issues avert ECTs from interacting with their students, especially when they may not feel equipped to handle the situation

effectively (Schaefer et al., 2012). Furthermore, ECTs also experience a unique challenge when they come from a different cultural background than their students. When they begin teaching, new teachers may not have sufficient knowledge about their students' backgrounds to be culturally relevant (Flory, 2015). Teachers with an insider status, typically those that have spent a few years teaching the particular population of students, are more effective because they can close the cultural gap quickly and efficiently (Flory, 2015). These teachers know about their students' backgrounds, and they design lessons and employ strategies that culturally align (Flory, 2015). ECTs who initially have an outsider status become insiders eventually, but at that point, it is often too late to erase the initial struggle of connecting with their students. When ECTs think they are unable to control students' behavior or connect with their students, they may feel a lower sense of purpose and actively distance themselves from their students (Schaefer et al., 2012).

***Relationships Within ECTs' Organizational Network.*** The organizational network, comprised of colleagues and mentors, provides ECTs with necessary social support to overcome challenges (Andrews et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2017; Schaefer, 2013). However, Gallant and Riley (2017) and Flory (2015) cite a lack of this support as a major frustration in teachers' beginning years.

In fact, the support network may often fail to understand or underestimate ECTs' actual needs. For example, ECTs view observation and discussion as beneficial to their development, whereas their veteran colleagues may favor internal reflection (Fenwick, 2011). Some research suggests that ECTs depend on collaboration with peers as a mechanism to develop their skills, but do not seek it out as often as they should because they are not experienced enough to do so (Brunetti & Marston, 2018). In terms of feedback as a form of support, ECTs require external

validation rather than self- or internal validation to support their growth (Brunetti & Marston, 2018). The need for external validation is rooted in ECTs' lack of self-confidence in their new profession, and tendency to over-value the perceptions of more experienced colleagues, both of which may not be evident to their veteran peers and supervisors. Similarly, ECTs' professional development does not consider their unique learning requirements. Often, ECTs engage in the same formal and informal professional development as their more experienced colleagues (Schaefer et al., 2012). A "one size fits all" approach to professional learning is often frustrating and ineffective in meeting ECTs' developmental needs (Schaefer et al., 2012; Brunetti & Marston, 2018). Taken together, these research findings illustrate the lack of differentiated support ECTs receive in light of their particular learning needs. When ECTs do not receive relevant support to motivate and guide their professional development, ECTs may experience a diminished sense of purpose (Olsen & Anderson, 2007; Andrews et al., 2007).

In addition, ECTs often experience inequality within their organizational networks. For example, ECTs are not included in school-wide decision-making and have very little autonomy, resulting in ECTs' perception of low professional trust and support from their seniors (Gallant & Riley, 2007; Schaefer, 2013). Further exacerbating the problem, organizational politics often favor veteran teachers, which may decrease ECTs' level of comfort to ask for help (Gallant & Riley, 2017). As a result of the unfair and unequal treatment, ECTs feel helpless and purposeless (Gallant & Riley, 2017), further pushing them away from the profession.

Overall, social interactions with students and colleagues, and an inadequate level of social and professional support are other prominent reasons why ECTs may have a diminished sense of purpose and consider leaving the profession.

### ***Personal Factors***

In addition to burnout and lack of support, personal factors including career path and progression, identity, and resilience can all reduce ECTs' sense of purpose and influence an ECT to leave the profession. ECTs often realize within the first few years that there is a limited career path in the profession – something they may not have seriously considered when they entered (Gallant & Riley, 2017). Within the first couple of years of teaching, ECTs begin to see that their career choice may not meet their personal and professional goals or purpose (Bronk, 2014; Olsen & Anderson, 2007; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Purpose does not have an end-state; instead, it is a fluid and dynamic aim that directs one's daily and overall life goals (Bronk, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Therefore, at any given moment, an individual may decide to change course to improve alignment with their purpose. In this case, ECTs' enhanced or diminished sense of purpose propels them to leave the profession. For example, many ECTs recognize the need to make large-scale, systemic change in education. Still, they are unable to effect change as a classroom teacher because their position does not have the impact power they desire (Tricarico et al., 2015). ECTs may want to change policy at the school or district level, propelling them out of the classroom and into leadership roles. Essentially, ECTs decide to take their few years of experience from the classroom and transfer it to a more influential career path. ECTs may also want to stay in the classroom but teach classes that are more challenging. However, teaching these classes is rarely an opportunity ECTs receive (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). As such, ECTs may feel less and less motivated to continue in the profession because they are unable to progress in their goals or feel like their contributions are purposeful.

Next, ECTs' professional identity also plays a role in attrition. Through an autobiographical narrative study, Schaefer (2013) explains that ECTs feel frustrated when the profession does not fulfill preconceived notions about their role and impact. As a result, ECTs'



question their values and idea of what it means to be an educator. Feeling unfulfilled, ECTs conform to a specific “teacher identity” by adopting the values and norms prescribed by the school. In doing so, an ECT experiences decreased creativity and innovation, and forgets their own individual identity, unique story, and purpose (Schaefer, 2013; Shann et al., 2014). This identity conflict pushes many ECTs away from teaching.

Finally, and perhaps the most frequently researched personal factor that causes teachers to leave the profession, is lack of resilience. Introduced into psychology during the 1970s, Werner (1971) described resilience as children’s positive responses to adverse events. Since then, researchers describe resilience as the coping mechanism adults use to recover from negative and positive work experiences. Resilience is also a prominent concept in positive organizational behavior as part of psychological capital, a second-order construct (Luthans et al., 2006). According to Tricarico and colleagues (2015), teachers’ ability to balance aspects of their lives and focus on the positives of staying in the profession together represent resilience. Furthermore, resiliency develops by having a clear sense of purpose (Bernard, 1991). Thus, ECTs who leave the profession tend to lack feelings of purposefulness, which reduces their resilience to cope with difficult situations (i.e., demanding workload, student issues, etc.; Schaefer et al., 2012).

### ***Summary of ECT Attrition and Purpose***

Burnout, lack of adequate professional and social support, and other personal factors contribute significantly to ECT attrition. Each of these causes is ultimately a result of ECT’s sense of purpose or lack thereof. If ECTs have a stronger purpose, it may act as a buffer to reduce burnout and increase resilience. Similarly, ECTs who reflecting on their purpose may be better equipped to weather the disillusionment and feelings of purposelessness resulting from the

inability to make purposeful contributions in the classroom. ECTs are unable to sustain a commitment to their purpose because their personal experiences and external contexts do not reinforce their purpose. As a result, ECTs' sense purpose deteriorates over time, contributing to their attrition. Historically, research has primarily focused on these causes and alleviating them. The next section explains mechanisms that may be effective in retaining ECTs by correcting the causes of their attrition.

### **Retaining ECTs in the Profession**

The high rate of ECT attrition has prompted researchers to focus on improving ECTs' environmental and internal contexts by alleviating the causes of their attrition. Research suggests that enhancing ECTs' resilience and support may be more efficient in reducing burnout and encouraging them to stay in the profession. However, these two approaches are deficit-focused because they are only correcting the causes of ECT attrition. Are they enough to sustain ECTs' commitment to the profession? This section aims to answer this question.

### ***Enhancing Resilience***

Some researchers have proposed various models and frameworks to understand and enhance resilience in ECTs. Mansfield et al. (2012) surveyed 200 ECTs to understand ECT resilience and developed a four-dimension model (professional, emotional, motivational, and social). The professional dimension includes effective teaching skills, organization and preparation, and commitment to students. Next, emotion management, enjoyment, and other coping skills are within the emotional dimension of resilience. The motivational dimension encompasses realistic goal setting, enthusiasm, and seeking out challenges. Lastly, effective communication and relationship-building skills encompass the social dimension of resilience. Each of the dimensions highlights internal factors and skills that contribute to the development of

resilience. For example, effective skills, enjoyment, enthusiasm, and communication skills are all characteristics ECTs should possess to enhance their resilience. This model exemplifies resilience as an individual characteristic mainly influenced by internal and personal factors.

Recognizing that external factors also play a role in ECT resilience, Mansfield and colleagues (2014) expanded their previous research. They developed a model to incorporate the interplay between external and internal resources and challenges. The broader environmental (political, cultural, historical) context offers both resources and challenges that impact resilience. Quality relationships from all external contexts play a vital role in teachers developing resilience. The model highlights that resilient teachers may still decide to leave the profession due to external influencers, such as harsh working conditions or family responsibilities. This model of resilience illustrates that external factors affect an ECT's resilience as much as personal resources.

Based on these two models of resilience, Johnson et al. (2014) designed a framework of five areas (policies and practices, teacher work, school culture, relationships, and teacher identity) through which school leaders can promote ECT resilience. First, schools should provide relevant preparation, smooth transition into employment, and fair employment practices. School leaders should acknowledge the intensity and complexity of ECTs' work, give ECTs time and space to develop their teaching practice, offer support for student engagement in learning, and provide access to continued learning and development opportunities. In addition, the school's culture should form the foundation for collaborative relationships, professional learning communities, and the inclusion of ECTs in decision-making. Culture will also influence the relationships in the ECTs' social network, which will ideally include relationships embodying trust, respect, care, and integrity. Finally, those who work with ECTs should recognize that

teacher identity is comprised of both the personal and professional identities. The promotion of self-reflection and work-life balance is essential to personal identity, which will enhance ECT resilience.

Overall, Johnson and colleagues' (2014) framework suggests that external factors (teacher identity is the only related internal factor) influence the development of resilience and offers school leaders multiple strategies to cultivate and enhance ECT resilience. Ultimately, supportive school leaders who promote quality relationships and self-reflection may enhance ECT resilience and have a higher chance of preventing ECT attrition.

### ***Improving Support***

Improving the career support provided to ECTs is another avenue to enhance retention and mitigate burnout related symptoms (Manuel, 2003). As explained earlier, ECTs value relevant support that meets their short-term, immediate, and long-term needs. Such support includes not only physical resource sharing but also collaborative planning and mentoring (Burke et al., 2015). For social support, ECTs frequently turn to other teachers, staff members, and leadership because these interactions reduce ECTs' experience of isolation and depersonalization.

**Mentoring.** Mentoring is one form of relation-based support that meets ECTs' developmental and learning needs. ECTs find formal and informal mentoring to be extremely helpful in becoming effective teachers (Burke et al., 2015; Du & Wang, 2017). In fact, informal mentoring is often more effective than formal mentoring because it is dynamic (Du & Wang, 2017). While the organization may mandate formal mentoring, informal mentoring occurs when the mentor and mentee organically establish the relationship (Du & Wang, 2017). Informal mentoring can cover the full breadth and depth of teaching from lesson planning to student

issues, as well as specific, immediate needs because there are no structures, preset list of topics, or boundaries on the types of conversations that can occur. This flexibility results in the ECT feeling a greater sense of satisfaction and fulfillment (Du & Wang, 2017). Taken together, prior research suggests that mentoring, particularly informal mentoring may be an effective approach to improve ECT support.

The personal characteristics of the ECT, the organizational environment, and the mentor-mentee relationship all help to determine the effectiveness of informal mentoring. First, ECTs' proactivity and high self-efficacy are antecedents to informal mentoring (Du & Wang, 2017). The ECTs must be able to assess the areas in which they are weak and be willing to ask for and accept help from a more experienced colleague. An ECT who does not possess this level of self-awareness may be unable to form an informal mentoring relationship. Furthermore, the organizational context also plays a role in inducing informal mentoring relationships because the school environment must embody a culture of encouragement and openness to nurture a strong mentor-mentee relationship, which correlates with high-quality support.

In addition, the mentor-mentee relationship may serve different purposes and communicate the values and ideals held within the school community (Kemmis et al., 2014). For example, when the purpose of the mentoring relationship is supervision, ECTs will perceive compliance and professionalism to be key values of the school. If support is the primary function of the mentor-mentee relationship, ECTs will see effectiveness in teaching as an essential focus of the school's culture. When the mentoring relationship serves to enhance collaborative self-development, ECTs may feel a sense of empowerment and autonomy. As such, an effective mentoring relationship (one whose function is support or collaborative self-development) may positively shape ECTs' views of the school and field.

**Coaching.** Although mentoring and coaching are fundamentally different in process, a coaching model may also align with ECTs' complex needs (Shernoff et al., 2015). Coaches are not only sensitive to ECTs' struggles in the classroom but can simultaneously help problem solve in real-time and provide emotional support during that process. Through a mixed methods study, Shernoff and colleagues (2015) examined the feasibility and effectiveness of a coaching model specifically for ECTs. They found that variability in coaching dosage is necessary to meet the varying needs of each teacher that are not one size fits all. Additionally, although coaches do not typically offer emotional support, ECTs needed both developmental (and instrumental) and emotional support, suggesting a more holistic approach to coaching. Lastly, Shernoff et al. (2015) found that coaches also required differing levels of supervision; some coaches adjusted to their role easily whereas some needed guidance that is more responsive. One of the major barriers of the coaching model under study was that the coaching conversations lacked flexibility and time (e.g. limited time for conferences during the school day, coach schedules misaligned with ECTs' schedules, etc), which resulted in rushed support. Therefore, Shernoff et al. (2015) suggest a coaching model that aligns with the school's context and ECTs' needs may provide the most effective support.

**Professional development.** In addition to mentoring and coaching, relevant and effective professional development (PD) is another avenue that can not only reduce the feelings of professional inadequacy but also keep ECTs in the profession (Manuel, 2003; Simon et al., 2011). The PD experience influences ECTs' desire to stay in the profession by providing them with the necessary tools to succeed (Ado, 2013). Simon and colleagues (2011) suggest that effective PD should primarily focus on the ECTs' needs. Often, external demands and sources determine the PD topics without any regard for what is relevant to ECTs. School leadership

should not only prioritize professional development but also deliberately allocate resources (monetary, staff, etc.) to it (Simon et al., 2011). Additionally, there are certain forms of development and school environments that are more conducive to ECTs' success. As with mentoring, the school culture should be one that is open and caring (Simon et al., 2011). In terms of PD format, opportunities that allow ECTs to observe other experienced teachers, receive feedback from peer observations, and reflect through discussion with others (perhaps after watching a video of oneself) are most effective (Simon et al., 2011). Professional development that is relevant to ECTs in terms of format, content, and needs will result in more significant learning and growth.

For PD to be relevant to ECTs, school leaders must solicit topics directly from ECTs (Ado, 2013). A collaborative professional development structure, such as action research, fosters relevant learning (Ado, 2013). Action research is a collaborative, cyclical process through which a group of individuals identifies a problem, implements a solution, and evaluates the success of the solution (O'Brien, 2001). In this type of PD format, teachers first identify the most relevant topics through a needs assessment (Ado, 2013). Then, teachers self-select into groups based on their developmental needs (Ado, 2013). The groups meet regularly to discuss and test solutions for the identified needs. For ECTs, in particular, this process results in new learning and provides a space for meaningful interactions with other experienced teachers (O'Brien, 2001; Ado, 2013). However, the limitation of utilizing this approach is that it requires time from teachers and school administrators should be aware of this (Ado, 2013). Although this format of PD is effective, the implementation should strive to reduce the time burden on the ECT.

**Limitations of Correcting the Causes of ECT Attrition.** Enhancing resilience and improving support may indeed reduce the rate of turnover and retain teachers in the profession.

Still, the real question lies in whether the quality of retention will be enough to sustain teachers in the profession over the long-term (Gu & Day, 2007). Initially, the answer seems like it would be a clear “yes.” ECTs’ unique context includes specific pain points such as burnout, lack of leadership and collegial support, and decreased resilience, which together may propel them to leave the profession. These same pain points have become the focus of interventions (enhancing resilience and improving support) to retain ECTs in the profession. However, alleviating a deficit and achieving a state of quality retention in which the ECT is thriving and committed to the profession (a strength-focused approach) are fundamentally different mechanisms (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Alleviation of a deficit brings an individual to a neutral point of complacency, whereas a positive-focused approach pulls an individual towards flourishing and thriving (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The two approaches also require different skills, abilities, and perspectives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Herein lies the difference between retaining ECTs and sustaining ECTs commitment to the profession. Enhancing resilience and improving support only function to retain ECTs because they do not address one key aspect – ECTs’ purpose.

### **Purpose & ECT Well-being**

Sustaining early career teachers’ commitment to the profession leverages their sense of purpose to promote well-being. Purpose is a critical motivator in an ECT’s desire to become an educator, which contributes to their feelings of well-being (Ballantyne & Zhukhov, 2017). This section reviews the theoretical background related to purpose and ECT well-being.

#### ***Purpose***

Purpose refers to an individual’s intention to pursue and accomplish goals that are meaningful to both the self and the world (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2003). There are



three defining characteristics of purpose: 1) purpose is a self-motivated aim, and the individual is the primary driving force, 2) individuals actively dedicate time, energy, and personal resources to work towards their purpose, and 3) purpose constitutes a “beyond the self” goal (p. 121) that serves to impact the world beyond the individual (Damon et al., 2003). These characteristics distinguish meaning from a purpose; meaning is a personally valued, overarching aim that does not contribute to a larger cause (Bronk, 2012). An individual’s sense of purpose guides them not just through day-to-day choices but also in longer-term decisions, such as work focus and career advancement (Ryff & Singer, 2008). An important note about purpose under this conceptualization is that purpose may not necessarily be noble or prosocial in nature. For example, terrorists have a clear beyond-the-self intention, and allocate time, resources, and energy to fulfilling the intention. However, for this dissertation I consider early career teachers’ purpose to enter the profession to be positive and moral in nature.

In the context of work, purpose may embody a calling (Bronk, 2014). Those who perceive their work as a calling perform their jobs with passion, do not expect anything in return and tend to experience more enjoyment and satisfaction in work (Bonebright et al., 2000; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Additionally, Barrick et al. (2013) suggest that perceptions of purposeful work may contribute to increased task performance, enhanced organizational citizenship, and lower counterproductive work behaviors. Research also shows that having a sense of calling relates negatively to turnover intention in healthcare professionals (Afsar et al., 2019; Esteves & Lopes, 2017). Taken together, an individual’s purpose and calling contributes to various positive work-related outcomes.

ECT’s purpose substantially contributes to their commitment to education and teaching (Bronk, 2014; Ryff, 1989; Schaefer, 2013). Research findings affirm that many schoolteachers

enter the profession not just to serve themselves, but also to contribute to positive youth and societal development (Ballantyne & Zhukhov, 2017; Moran, 2016; Schaefer, 2013). Inherently, there is a higher goal involved in the decision to become a teacher; it is a personally valued aim that is “beyond the self” (Damon et al., 2003; Bronk, 2012). Additionally, Vassilopoulos and Pouis (2017) found that teachers who experience a meaningful life may also feel enhanced well-being and life satisfaction. Overall, ECTs’ purpose is a crucial contributor to ECTs’ feelings of well-being. Thus, I hypothesize:

*H1: ECTs’ purpose positively relates to ECTs’ affective commitment to the profession.*

**Sustaining ECTs Commitment to the Profession.** As discussed above, the current approaches to correct ECT attrition do not address ECTs’ sense of purpose. The existing literature on strategies to enhance ECT resilience provides school leaders and practitioners with specific actions to take that may reduce the rate of ECT attrition. However, there is a lack of focus on specifically reinforcing ECT’s purpose, which is a critical antecedent to resilience (Bernard, 1991). Furthermore, sense of purpose may help ECTs develop grit, “the tendency to sustain perseverance and passion for challenging long-term goals,” which may further sustain ECTs the profession (Hill et al., 2016; Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014, p. 6). In fact, ECTs who embody grit and have a strong sense of purpose (particularly before entering the profession) tend to stay in the profession longer and achieve greater success with their students (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). Furthermore, grit relates specifically to long-term goals, and purpose focuses on “beyond the self” outcomes of those goals, while resilience does not (Damon et al., 2003; Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). Therefore, fostering ECTs’ purpose may result in greater intrinsic desire to stay committed to the profession.

Similarly, research suggests improving ECTs' social and professional support is a suitable avenue to prevent ECT attrition. Although best practices of supporting ECT emphasize meeting ECTs' immediate needs, they do not highlight anything related to cultivating ECTs' purpose. ECTs' social and professional support systems (leaders, peers, and mentors) are essential catalysts that inspire purpose development and commitment (Bronk, 2014). These individuals help ECTs' identify their purpose, encourage regular reflection about how ECTs' work is purposeful, and connect ECTs with opportunities that align to their purpose (Bronk, 2014). As a result, ECTs will feel more connected to their purpose and the profession.

### ***Well-being***

Well-being is the experience of life satisfaction, thriving, and optimal functioning in the beginning teacher's work context (Ballantyne & Zhukhov, 2017; Deiner et al., 1984; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011). Various definitions for well-being exist in the literature. For example, Diener's (1984) concept of subjective well-being is the overall satisfaction one has in life. Next, engagement, relationships, positive emotions, meaning, and accomplishment comprise Seligman's (2011) PERMA model also known as flourishing. For this research, I measure well-being as aligned to Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being that includes six components: 1) self-acceptance, 2) purpose in life, 3) environmental mastery, 4) quality relationships, 5) personal growth, and 6) autonomy. This model is multi-dimensional, which offers practitioners more levers to utilize in promoting well-being (van Horn et al., 2004), rather than one single indicator (i.e., life satisfaction for subjective well-being; Deiner, 1984). Moreover, in comparison to the PERMA model, this model is one of the better-established, well-researched models of well-being validating the salience of the model (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008). In fact, the longitudinal Mid-life in the United States (MIDUS) studies found that psychological well-being

accounts for variations in age-related health changes and other demographics. Therefore, Ryff's model of psychological well-being is a suitable approach to measure ECTs' well-being.

Like purpose, well-being also contributes to lower turnover intention. Gordon et al. (2019) found that subjective well-being mediates the relationship between supervisor support and turnover intention of hotel employees. As such, they recommend that organizations should strive to improve well-being to ensure the retention of employees (Gordon et al., 2019). Additionally, Brunetto et al. (2013) discovered that well-being relates to decreased turnover intention in nurses. Past research also suggests the positive relationship between and psychological well-being and affective commitment in German employees from all industries (Rivkin et al., 2018). Furthermore, Setti et al. (2018) found that increased colleague support (i.e., quality relationships), and decreased job burnout and role conflict may contribute to increased affective commitment. Lastly, psychological well-being is associated with organizational and professional commitment in teachers (Meyer et al., 2019).

Much of the research surrounding ECT' well-being, in particular, has only emerged in the last 10-12 years (Hobson & Maxwell, 2017). Most notably, Ballantyne & Zhukov (2017) conducted a study in which they interviewed ECTs to understand their identity development and how they experience success. In their initial analysis, the researchers saw signs of ECTs' resilience during adverse events. They decided to do a secondary deductive analysis in which they mapped teachers' comments on to Seligman's (2011) model of flourishing (PERMA). Most of the ECTs in their sample highlighted that positive emotions, engagement, close relationships, meaning, and achievement helped them sustain motivation through maintaining strength in the face of negative experiences. Based on this analysis, Ballantyne and Zhukov (2017) suggest that

it is essential to create conditions for ECT well-being and flourishing during the early years of teachers' careers to sustain their professional commitment.

Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity regarding whether the relationship between purpose and turnover intention exists due to enhanced feelings of psychological well-being (Meyer et al., 2019). Developing purpose may also lead to enhancements of the psychological well-being components (self-acceptance, environmental mastery, personal growth, quality relationships, and autonomy; Ryff, 1989). Together, these components may reduce attrition. An individual who has a strong sense of purpose may have a positive self-image because they are striving towards a goal for the greater good of society (Bronk, 2012). Additionally, fulfilling one's purpose may come with challenges and could motivate an individual's desire to pursue environmental mastery and personal growth (Bronk, 2014). Accomplishing one's purpose is also self-driven and motivated, which may lead to heightened feelings of autonomy (Bronk, 2012). Lastly, someone who wants to progress in their life's purpose may form quality relationships with colleagues, mentors, and others for support (Bronk, 2014). Essentially, a sense of purpose is the driving force that propels an individual to feel a sense of thriving and optimal functioning. Per this rationale and research evidence discussed in the previous sections, I hypothesize the following:

*H2: ECTs' purpose positively relates to ECTs' psychological well-being.*

*H2a: ECTs' purpose positively relates to ECTs' self-acceptance.*

*H2b: ECTs' purpose positively relates to ECTs' perceptions of quality relationships.*

*H2c: ECTs' purpose positively relates to ECTs' perceptions of autonomy.*

*H2d: ECTs' purpose positively relates to ECTs' perceptions of personal growth.*

*H2e: ECTs' purpose positively relates to ECTs' perceptions of environmental mastery.*

*H3: ECTs' perceptions of psychological well-being (and its dimensions H3a-H3e) positively relate to ECTs' affective commitment to the profession.*

And, therefore:

*H4: ECTs' perceptions of psychological well-being (and its dimensions H4a-H4e) mediate the relationship between ECTs' purpose and affective commitment to the profession.*

Overall, there is a need to have a greater focus on sustaining ECTs in the profession by reinforcing their sense of purpose and promoting their well-being. Following this strength-focused approach through a purpose-centered intervention will serve to reduce the rate of attrition and improve the quality of ECT retention to ensure ECTs feel a sense of thriving, not merely surviving. Current approaches to improve ECT retention do not address cultivating ECTs sense of purpose, which is a critical component. The next section reviews literature on existing purpose-centered interventions to gain further insight about what may consist of a purpose-reinforcement intervention for ECTs.

### **Purpose-Centered Interventions**

Purpose-centered interventions are a type of positive psychology intervention (Carr et al., 2020). There are a few evidence-based, purpose-centered interventions developed for adolescents, emerging adults, and adults (Bundick, 2011). Reviewing these interventions will provide insight into the development of a purpose-centered intervention for ECTs.

First, Kosine, Steger, and Duncan (2008) suggested a strengths-based approach to help young adults build purpose in their career development. Their approach reinforces five elements that drive purpose development: identity, self-efficacy, metacognition, culture, and service. They recommend students engage in meaningful, small group, structured discussion and reflection about personal and social topics of interest, strengths, weaknesses, cognitive processes and

decision making, how career choices impact culture, and the relationship between their work and the greater good of society. In so doing, students gain a better sense of who they are and of their environment, and this allows them to make purposeful decisions about their future career. The researchers offer a thorough theory-based rationale for their approach, and certain components of the approach, such as group discussion and reflection on work's impact on society, might help reinforce ECTs' sense of purpose.

Utilizing the framework proposed by Kosine et al. (2008), Dik and colleagues (2011) created a purpose-centered career education intervention for middle school students called *Make Your Work Matter*. The intervention itself is a week's worth of three modules, which include a parent/trusted adult interview, career values card sort, and one village game. Starting with the interview, the student gains insight into the role work plays in one's life, identity, and cultural heritage. After, the students engage in the values sort, which encourages them to reflect on what is most meaningful to them in the context of work. In the last module, one village game, the students learn about service is important in meeting the needs of a community. The pilot study revealed that participation in the intervention did not contribute to students' stronger sense of purpose. Dik et al. attribute this result to the fact that the development of purpose may be gradual and takes time. Taken together, this intervention shows promise for both younger and older individuals.

Pizzolato and colleagues (2011) developed a purpose-centered intervention for high school students that consisted of bi-monthly small group sessions over 18 weeks. The session topics included identifying a postsecondary purpose, engaging with and fulfilling the participants' purpose, and purpose planning and evaluation. The results of the study showed that

the intervention was effective in increasing the students' purpose, suggesting that a more extended purpose-centered intervention could be beneficial if ECTs have the time.

Bundick (2011) assessed the effectiveness of a one-time, in-depth discussion and reflection session about purposes in life, essential goals, and core values in emerging adults' purpose identification, goal-directedness, and life satisfaction. Trained interviewers conducted one-on-one, 45-minute interviews and asked participants about important goals, the reasons behind them, ways in which the participant is working towards those goals, and how these goals contribute to other aspects of life. The results of the study suggest that the deep reflection and discussion session did not contribute to the participants' purpose identification nine months later. Still, it did enhance the participants' goal-directedness and life satisfaction. Furthermore, Bundick (2011) explains that this intervention is still advantageous in terms of time and feasibility. The discussion session does not require any special instruments and much time. In addition, the discussion can be bi-directional between two young people, given they follow the general protocol of the conversation. Overall, this purpose-centered intervention offers feasible recommendations to consider when developing a purpose-centered session for ECTs.

Bronk, Baumsteiger, et al. (2019) tested the effectiveness of a purpose development online intervention for young adults (age 18-30), a population with similar age demographics to that of ECTs. Researchers asked participants to complete 15-20-minute exercises over the course of three days that were either part of a purpose or gratitude toolkit. Each exercise was self-paced, asynchronous, and fully online. On the first day, participants watched a video that discussed the concept of purpose, reflected on a quote about purpose, and answered the prompt "Imagine you were given a magic wand and could change anything you want about the world. What would you want to be different? Why?". On the second day of the intervention, participants watched a video



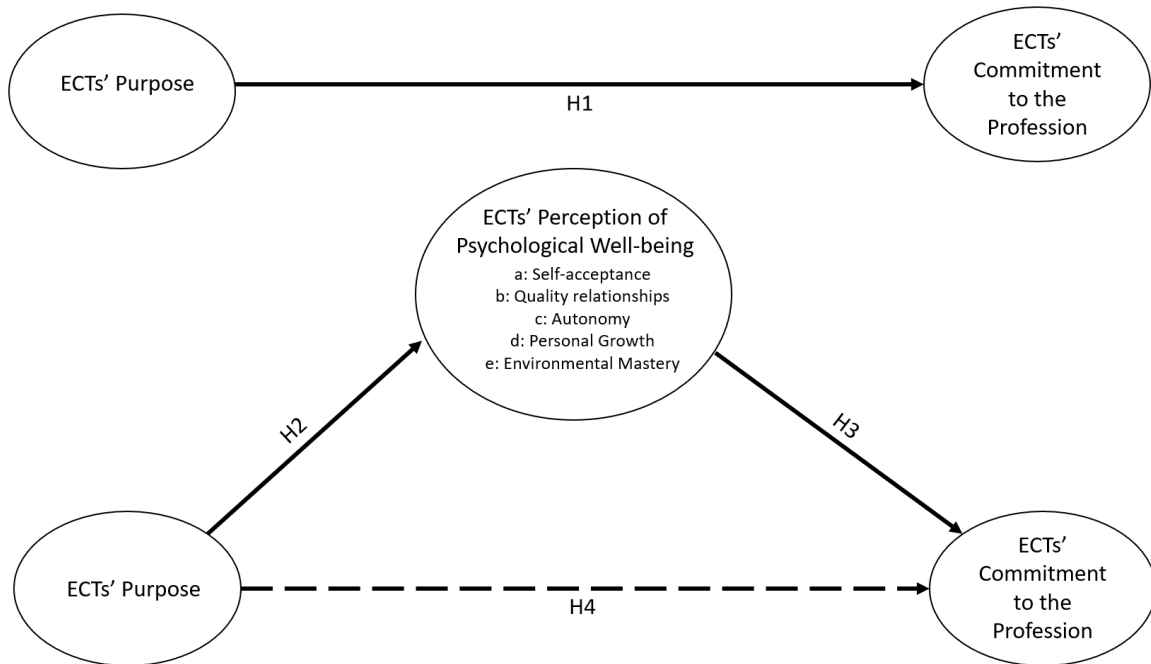
clip of a famous comedian describing his purpose and completed a values q-sort task with reflection. On day three, participants completed the “Best Possible Selves” activity in which they wrote about the best vision of their life in 20 years, created a tattoo to symbolize what they value most and hope to accomplish, and reflected on challenges they may face when working towards the goals. Pretest and posttest analyses suggest that participants who completed the purpose toolkit intervention had a greater sense of purpose after the intervention (as measured by the Claremont Purpose Scale). Overall, the purpose toolkit offers empirically tested, effective, and concrete activities that can be adapted for ECTs who tend to be young adults.

Unlike previously reviewed interventions that focus on purpose development in youth, Radomski et al. (2019) created a purpose-renewal intervention to reinforce a breast cancer patients’ sense of purpose. The logic model of the intervention depicts the fundamental aspects of the program, which include eight facilitator-led sessions (education, experiential activities, discussion, reflection, and personal planning) supplemented by individual homework (self-reflection). Through participation in the sessions and completion of the homework, participants develop and implement a purpose renewal plan. Due to the small sample size, the researchers did not quantify their findings but did suggest that this intervention was feasible and recommended further research.

Overall, the previously researched and tested purpose-centered interventions provide a practical starting point in developing and designing a purpose-reinforcement intervention for ECTs. However, current literature lacks sufficient evidence on the efficacy of these interventions, especially for ECTs. The concluding section of this chapter explains the underlying rationales for the studies in the proposed dissertation.

## **Overview of Study 1 and Study 2**

Based on the theoretical background discussed above, cultivating ECTs' purpose is necessary to reduce the rate of ECT attrition as well as to sustain ECTs' affective commitment to the profession. Additionally, sustaining ECTs in the career requires a focus on developing their purpose, and in turn, their well-being. However, there is not enough evidence in the literature to suggest that the hypothesized relationships (indicated above) also apply to ECTs. Thus, the main objective of Study 1 was to test the relationship among an ECTs' purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment to the profession (see Figure 1) through a cross-sectional survey that included measures for sense of purpose, psychological well-being, and commitment to the profession. I recruited Teach for America (TFA) teachers in the northeast to complete the survey. After cleaning the data, I utilized regression-based analyses to test the hypothesized full mediation theoretical model (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Conceptual model of early career teachers' (ECT) purpose and influence on ECTs' commitment to the profession. Relationships labeled by hypothesis.

ECTs generally have a clear purpose when they enter the profession (Ballantyne & Zhukhov, 2017), but it diminishes as they spend time in the profession. The decreased clarity of purpose contributes to ECTs decision to leave the profession. Thus, there is a critical need to reinforce their purpose through an intervention. Given the overall inconclusive results of the previously developed purpose-centered interventions (except for findings suggested by Bronk, Baumsteiger, et al., 2019), there is a particular need to design and empirically test a practical purpose-centered intervention for ECTs. The purpose of Study 2 was just that: to develop a positive psychology, purpose-centered intervention for ECTs and gather evidence to support its impact. The following research question drives the examination of the intervention:

Does a purpose-centered intervention result in significant differences in purpose among early career teachers?

Study 2 consisted of pilot testing, intervention development, and testing of the integrated intervention. The purpose of the pilot test was to test individually the efficacy of six activities designed to cultivate teachers' purpose through a pre-test/posttest method. After pilot testing and conducting a couple cognitive interviews, I integrated two activities into a full one-hour workshop (called Grounding in Purpose) for Teach for America (TFA) teachers in the northeast. I test the tested intervention using a pretest/posttest method with two comparison groups (intervention and waiting list control groups). I utilized t-tests to analyze the data gathered in Study 2.

Together, the studies in this dissertation fill an important gap in the research and literature on early career teachers' sense of purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment to the profession, and interventions to sustain ECTs in the profession. Study 1 provides empirical evidence to focus on ECTs' purpose as a mechanism to sustain ECTs in the

profession, and Study 2 tests the efficacy of an intervention designed to develop ECTs' purpose. The following chapters thoroughly describe the methods and results for each study.

## Chapter 3: Study 1 Method, Results, and Discussion

### Study 1 Method

#### *Study Design: Cross-sectional Survey*

To test the hypotheses stated in the previous chapter, I conducted a cross-sectional study using a survey sent to Teach for America (TFA) teachers, currently in their first- or second-year teaching in kindergarten (K) through 12<sup>th</sup> grade schools in the northeast. TFA teachers are a suitable sample for this study because they perform all the roles and responsibilities of teachers and experience similar challenges to that of other ECTs (Trujillo et al., 2017). The survey assessed the teachers' purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment to the profession.

#### *Participants*

Per Monte Carlo power analysis for indirect effects (Schoemann et al., 2014), I required 61 participants for power of .80, and 89 participants for power of .90. I achieved a sample size of 78 TFA teachers, resulting in good power ( $P = .99$ ,  $R^2 = .377$ ,  $f^2 = .60$ ). The only inclusion criterion for this study is that the participants must be current TFA teachers in the northeast in their first (55.1%) or second (44.9%) year of teaching. A majority of the participants identified as Caucasian (70.5%), with few indicating they were Black (10.3%), Multi-racial (7.7%), Other (5.1%), and Asian (3.8%). Additionally, a few identified as Latinx (12.8%), with a majority indicating they did not identify as Latinx (85.9%). When asked if they identified with the LGBTQIA+ community, majority indicated no (74.4%), and few indicated yes (21.8%). Moreover, a majority of the participants did not come from a low socioeconomic background (62.8%); however, a sizeable minority did (35.9%). Most of the teachers taught students in middle school (grades 6-8; 47.4%), with a few teaching students in high school (grades 9-12;

30.8%) and elementary school (grades K-5; 21.8%). See Table 1 for full participant demographics.

Table 1

*Study 1 Demographics*

Demographic Questions	Frequency	%
Please indicate your racial identity: (N = 78)		
Caucasian	55	70.5
Black	8	10.3
Multi-racial	6	7.7
Other	4	5.1
Asian	3	3.8
I prefer not to answer	2	2.6
Do you identify as Latinx? (N = 78)		
No	67	85.9
Yes	10	12.8
I prefer not to answer	1	1.3
Do you identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community? (N = 77)		
No	58	74.3
Yes	17	21.8
I prefer not to answer	2	2.6
Do you identify as coming from a low-income background? (N = 78)		
No	49	62.8
Yes	28	35.9
I prefer not to answer	1	1.3
What grade level do you teach? (N = 78)		
K-2	8	10.3
3-5	9	11.5
6-8	37	47.4
9-12	24	30.8
What year of the corps are you in? (N = 78)		
Year 1	43	55.1
Year 2	35	44.9

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

The data collection procedure for this study was one survey. To recruit participants and disseminate the survey, I enlisted the help of a staff member at TFA who works with the teachers. We framed the survey as part of the pre-work for their day of professional development (when the intervention was to be delivered) because part of the survey also served as the pretest for the intervention (refer to methods of Study 2). All the teachers in this region received the survey, but completing the survey was voluntary as disclosed in the informed consent. Upon completion of the survey, participants were eligible to enter a raffle of a few GrubHub gift cards.

**Measures.** The following section describes the measures that I used for this study.

**Purpose.** To measure the extent that ECTs meet the criteria for purpose, I utilized the Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS; Bronk et al., 2018). The scale consists of three subscales (meaningfulness, goal orientation, and beyond-the-self dimension) with four items each for a total of 12 items. The response options are on a five-point Likert (1 to 5) scale and are not the same for every item. An item for meaningfulness is, “How clear is your sense of purpose in life?” (Response options: “not at all clear” to “extremely clear”). An item for goal orientation is “How hard are you working to make your long-term goals a reality?” (Response options: “not at all hard” to “extremely hard”). An item for beyond-the-self dimension is “How often do you hope to leave the world better than you found it?” (Response options: “almost never” to “almost all the time”). I combined the scores into an average (composite;  $\alpha = .88$ ) score for analysis with higher scores denoting more purpose.

**Psychological well-being.** To measure ECTs’ perception of psychological well-being, I used the 42-item version of the Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989). Each dimension of psychological well-being has seven items, for a total of 42 items (Ryff, 2014).

Response options are on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being strongly disagree and 6 being strongly agree. An item for autonomy is: “I am not afraid to voice my opinions, even when they are in opposition to the opinions of most people.” An item for environmental mastery is: “In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I work.” A sample item for personal growth is: “I am not interested in activities that will expand my horizons.” An item for quality relationships is: “Most of my colleagues see me as loving and affectionate.” An item for self-acceptance is: “When I look at the story of my work-life, I am pleased with how things have turned out.” A sample item for purpose in life is: “I live life one day at a time and don’t really think about the future.” Interestingly, the purpose in life subscale does not include items to assess the “beyond-the-self” component of purpose unlike Bronk et al.’s (2018) scale, whose measure aligns with Damon et al.’s (2003) definition of purpose. That said, I used the purpose in life subscale only to create the composite for psychological well-being and not as part of the subsequent mediation analyses (see below). There are 21 reverse coded items in this scale. I created composites for each sub-scale (autonomy:  $\alpha = .80$ ; environmental mastery:  $\alpha = .78$ ; personal growth:  $\alpha = .85$ ; positive relations:  $\alpha = .79$ ; self-acceptance:  $\alpha = .83$ ) as well as an overall composite ( $\alpha = .90$ ) for analysis (Ryff, 2014), with higher scores denoting greater perceptions of psychological well-being and related components.

*Affective commitment to the profession.* To measure ECTs’ commitment to the profession, I used the Affective Commitment subscale of the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Allen & Meyer, 1990). The subscale consists of eight items with response options ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 is strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree. The items will be modified to replace the word “organization” with “profession”, as has been done successfully by other scholars for Mowday and colleagues’ (1979) organizational commitment scale (Aranya et



al., 1981; Aranya & Ferris, 1984; Morrow & Wirth, 1989). A sample item from this scale is: “I enjoy discussing my profession with people outside of it”. There are four reverse coded items in this scale. I created a composite of the scores ( $\alpha = .83$ ) for analysis, with higher scores denoting greater commitment to the profession.

**Attention Check.** I included an attention check in the survey (Please select 1 for this item) to ensure participants were paying attention for quality data from online surveys (Berinsky et al., 2014).

**Control Variables.** Previous research on ECT attrition indicates that some personal/demographic characteristics may cause ECTs to leave the profession because they are barriers in forming relationships with students (Flory, 2015). Thus, the control variables and demographics for this study are racial identity, sexuality, coming from a low-income background, and grade level they are teaching.

## **Study 1 Results**

To test the hypotheses for Study 1, I utilized multiple regression analysis for a simple full mediation model using the PROCESS Macro v.3 in SPSS (Hayes, 2017). The regression analysis output provided unstandardized coefficients and p-values for each individual effect in the relationship. The following sections discuss the results of the mediation analyses controlling for racial identity, sexuality, coming from a low-income background, and the grade level participants teach.

### ***Data Cleaning & Management***

I cleaned and managed my data in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). To begin, I ensured that all data (93 responses) was appropriately coded and labeled. Afterwards, I removed responses (listwise) that had majority of the data missing (14). Additionally, I deleted 1

response from a participant who completed the survey twice. Then, I conducted tests to assess for missing data and common method bias. Afterwards, I created the average scores for each of the variables. Next, I checked for univariate (none; all z-scores between +3 and -3) and multivariate outliers (no outliers; all Cook's distances are under 1), and the assumptions of regression, such as normality (yes: skew and kurtosis values are between -2 and 2 (see table 3); George & Mallery, 2010), linearity (yes: per significant correlation and examination of scatter plots; Cohen et al., 2013), multicollinearity (no: correlation between independent variables is less than 1 (0.61) and VIF values are less than 5 (1.58); Cohen et al., 2013), and homoscedasticity (yes: per examination of scatter plot (regression standardized residual vs. standardized predicted value), no obvious pattern and points are equally distributed; Cohen et al., 2013).

**Missing Data.** Less than 0.001% of the data was missing (3 items) after the listwise deletions explained above. I conducted Little's MCAR test to assess the missing data. The non-significant test result ( $\chi^2 (179) = 180.619, p = .452$ ) indicates the values are missing at random. Thus, I replaced the values with the series mean.

**Common Method Bias.** Before creating composite scores for each variable, I conducted a preliminary test, Harmon's Single Factor Test, to diagnose potential common method bias because this study follows a cross-sectional survey methodology (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The results of this test show that a single factor is explaining 21.68% of the variance, which indicates that there is no threat of common method bias (Aguirre-Urreta & Hu, 2019).

### ***Descriptive Statistics & Correlations***

Table 3 depicts the mean values, standard deviations, inter-pairwise correlations, skew, kurtosis, and Cronbach's alphas of the variables in this study. Affective commitment significantly and positively correlates with psychological well-being ( $r = 0.34, p < .01$ ), quality

relationships ( $r = 0.35, p < .01$ ), self-acceptance ( $r = 0.34, p < .01$ ), and environmental mastery ( $r = 0.35, p < .01$ ). However, autonomy does not significantly correlate with purpose and, therefore, these findings do not support that ECTs' purpose positively relates to their perceptions of autonomy. As such, I will not explore H3c and H4c (mediation effect of autonomy) in the following mediation analyses.

Table 3

*Study 1: Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation Analysis of Variables*

<b>Variable</b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>	<b>Skew (SE = 0.27)</b>	<b>Kurtosis (SE = 0.53)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
1. Purpose	3.83	0.58	-0.77	1.52	0.88							
2. Affective Commitment	4.79	1.14	-0.52	0.33	0.40**	0.83						
3. Psych. Well-being	4.50	0.54	-0.51	0.16	0.60**	0.34**	0.90					
4. Self- Acceptance	4.45	0.89	-0.52	-0.09	0.41**	0.34**	0.79**	0.83				
5. Quality Relationships	4.91	0.76	-0.54	-0.55	0.23*	0.35**	0.61**	0.46**	0.79			
6. Autonomy	4.04	0.84	0.33	-0.46	0.14	-0.22	0.46**	0.21	0.17	0.80		
7. Personal Growth	5.25	0.69	-1.32	1.41	0.51**	0.19	0.67**	0.43**	0.23*	0.22*	0.85	
8. Env. Mastery	3.73	0.87	-0.47	-0.35	0.41**	0.35**	0.68**	0.53**	0.36**	0.06	0.26*	0.78

*Note.*  $N = 78$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

## ***Hypothesis Testing***

I used the PROCESS Macro v.3 in SPSS (Hayes, 2017) and the Model 4 template to conduct two mediation analyses and test my hypotheses. The first mediation analysis tested the composite model, or the mediational relationship between purpose, psychological well-being (composite score), and affective commitment. The second mediation analysis tested Hypotheses 2a-e and 3a-e to account for the dimensions of psychological well-being (self-acceptance, quality relationships, personal growth, and environmental mastery) as mediators.

**Model with Psychological Well-being (Composite) as Mediator.** In Hypothesis 1, I predicted that ECTs' purpose would positively relate to ECTs' affective commitment to the profession. The results indicate that the relationship between purpose and affective commitment to the profession (total effect) is significantly positive ( $b = 0.813, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.441, 1.185]$ ), providing support for the relationship. In Hypothesis 2, I predicted that ECTs' purpose would positively relate to ECTs' psychological well-being. The results showed that the relationship between sense of purpose and psychological well-being was significantly positive ( $b = 0.559, p < .001$ ), providing support for the relationship. In Hypothesis 3, I predicted ECTs' perceptions of psychological well-being would positively relate to ECTs' affective commitment to the profession. The results indicate that there is no significant relationship between perceptions of psychological well-being and affective commitment to the profession ( $b = 0.157, p > .05$ ). Moreover, in Hypothesis 4, I predicted that ECTs' perceptions of psychological well-being mediate the relationship between ECTs' purpose and their affective commitment to the profession. The results show that the relationship between ECTs purpose and affective commitment accounting for psychological well-being as a predictor (direct effect) is significantly positive ( $b = 0.725, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.249, 1.201]$ ). Additionally, I tested the indirect effect of

psychological well-being using bootstrapping procedures for 5,000 samples. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect is 0.088 (95% CI [-0.161, 0.361]). Thus, the indirect/mediation effect of psychological well-being is not statistically significant. In addition, a couple of the control variables/covariates had significant relationships with affective commitment to the profession. First, coming from a low socioeconomic background has a negative and significant relationship with affective commitment to the profession ( $b = -0.511, p < .05$ ). Furthermore, identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ community also has a negative and significant relationship with affective commitment to the profession ( $b = -0.963, p < .001$ ). See Figure 2 for a depiction of the relationships in this model and Table 4 for the complete model summary statistics.

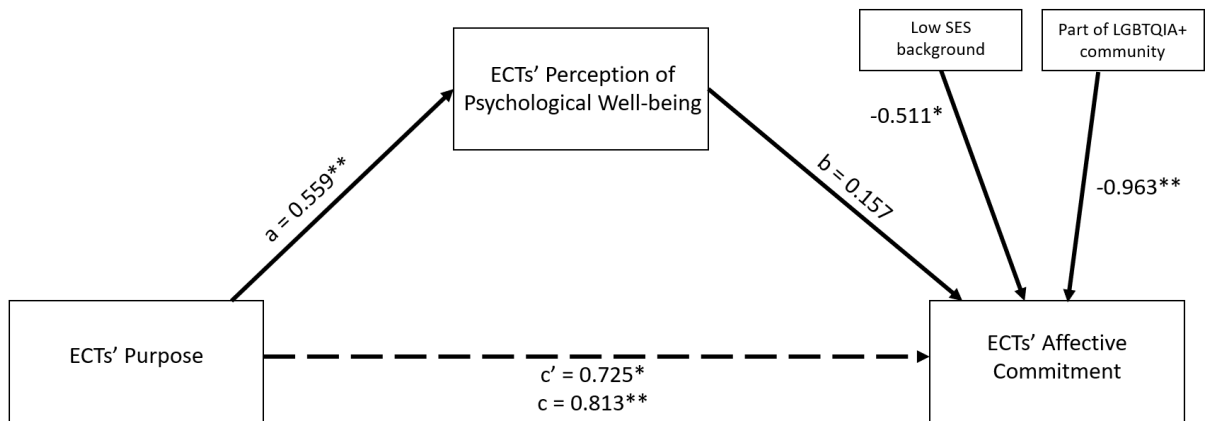


Figure 2. Relationship between ECTs' purpose, perception of psychological well-being, and affective commitment. Unstandardized beta weights with accompanying significance (\*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$ ).

Table 4

*Study 1: Summary Statistics for Model with Psychological Well-being (Composite) as Mediator*

Antecedent		Consequent						
		M (Psych. Well-being)			Y (Affective Commitment)			
		Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>		Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>
X (Purpose)	a	0.559	0.084	<.001	c'	0.725	0.238	<.01
M (Psych. Well-being)		----	----	----	b	0.157	0.246	0.552
Constant	i <sub>M</sub>	2.482	0.344	<.001	i <sub>Y</sub>	1.479	1.005	0.145
		$R^2 = 0.426$				$R^2 = 0.377$		
		$F(7,70) = 7.431, p < .001$				$F(8,69) = 5.229, p < .001$		
Effect		Coeff.				95 % Confidence Interval [LL CI, UL CI]		
Total		0.813, $p < .001$				[0.441, 1.185]		
Direct		0.725, $p < .01$				[0.249, 1.201]		
Indirect (Psych. Well-being)		0.088				[-0.161, 0.361]		

Note. Coeff. – unstandardized coefficient (beta weight).

**Model with Dimensions of Psychological Well-being as Mediators.** The relationship between ECTs' purpose and their affective commitment without the dimensions of psychological well-being (total effect) is significantly positive ( $b = 0.813, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.441, 1.185]$ ). The relationship with ECTs' purpose and their affective commitment accounting for the dimensions of psychological well-being as predictors (direct effect) is also significantly positive ( $b = 0.739, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.265, 1.213]$ ). See Figure 3 for a depiction of this model and Table 5 complete model summary statistics.

**Hypotheses 2a-2e.** In Hypothesis 2a, I predicted ECTs' purpose positively relates to ECTs' perceptions self-acceptance. The results showed that the relationship between purpose and perceptions self-acceptance is positive and significant ( $b = 0.635, p < .001$ ), providing support for the relationship. In Hypothesis 2b, I predicted that ECTs' purpose positively relates to ECTs' perceptions of quality relationships. The results indicated that the relationship between purpose

and perceptions of quality relationships is positive and significant ( $b = 0.342, p < .05$ ). In Hypothesis 2d, I predicted ECTs purpose positively relates to ECTs' perceptions of personal growth. The results indicated that the relationship between purpose and perceptions of personal growth is positive and significant ( $b = 0.608, p < .001$ ), thus providing support for the relationship. Hypothesis 2e, I predicted that ECTs' purpose would positively relate to ECTs' perceptions of environmental mastery. The results showed that the relationship between purpose and perceptions of environmental mastery is positive and significant ( $b = 0.616, p < .001$ ), thus providing support for the relationship.

**Hypotheses 3a-e.** In Hypothesis 3a, I predicted that ECTs' perceptions of self-acceptance positively relate to their affective commitment to the profession. The findings show this relationship is not significant ( $b = 0.016, p > .05$ ). Additionally, in Hypothesis 3b, I predicted that ECTs' perceptions of quality relationships positively relate to their affective commitment to the profession. The findings indicate this relationship is not significant ( $b = 0.264, p > .05$ ). Next, in Hypothesis 3d, I predicted that ECTs' perceptions of personal growth positively relate to ECTs' affective commitment to the profession. The findings show this relationship is not significant ( $b = -0.095, p > .05$ ). Finally, in Hypothesis 3e, I predicted that ECTs' perceptions of environmental mastery positively relate to their affective commitment to the profession. The findings suggest this relationship is not significant ( $b = 0.050, p > .05$ ).

**Hypothesis 4a-e.** I tested the indirect effect of each mediator using bootstrapping procedures for 5,000 samples. In Hypothesis 4a, I predicted that ECTs perceptions of self-acceptance would mediate the relationship between ECTs' purpose and their affective commitment to the profession. The results show that the unstandardized indirect effect of ECTs' perceptions of self-acceptance is 0.010 (95% CI [-0.217, 0.255]). In Hypothesis 4b, I predicted



that ECTs perception of quality relationships would mediate the relationship between ECTs' purpose and their affective commitment to the profession. The results indicate that the unstandardized indirect effect of ECTs' perception of quality relationships is 0.090 (95% CI [-0.030, 0.298]). In Hypothesis 4d, I predicted that ECTs perceptions of personal growth would mediate the relationship between ECTs' purpose and their affective commitment to the profession. The results show that the unstandardized indirect effect of ECTs' perceptions of personal growth is -0.058 (95% CI [-0.364, 0.141]). Lastly, In Hypothesis 4e, I predicted that ECTs perceptions of environmental mastery would mediate the relationship between ECTs' purpose and their affective commitment to the profession. The results indicate that the unstandardized indirect effect of ECTs' perceptions of environmental mastery is 0.030 (95% CI [-0.179, 0.221]). Overall, the results suggest that none of the mediations/indirect effects are statistically significant.

*Covariates.* There is a significant and negative relationship between identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ community and self-acceptance ( $b = -0.545, p < .05$ ). The relationship between ECTs' perceptions of environmental mastery and identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ community is negative and significant ( $b = -0.521, p < .05$ ). Additionally, coming from a low socioeconomic background has a negative and significant relationship with affective commitment to the profession ( $b = -0.526, p < .05$ ). Lastly, identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ community also has a negative and significant relationship with affective commitment to the profession ( $b = -0.999, p < .001$ ).

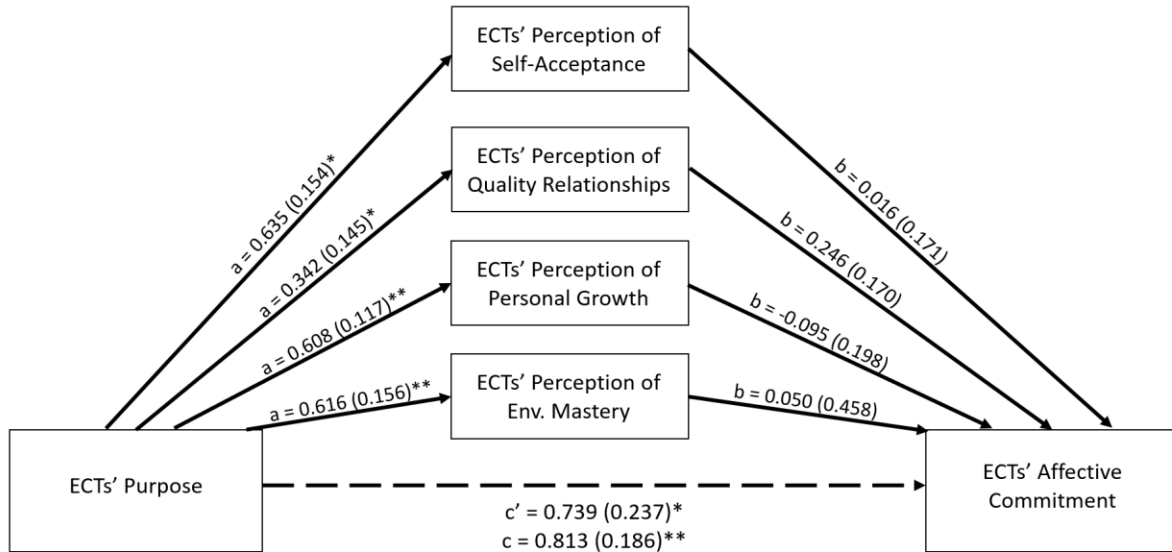


Figure 3. Relationship between ECTs' sense of purpose, perceptions of dimensions of psychological well-being, and affective commitment. Unstandardized beta weights with accompanying standard errors and significance (\*\*p<.001, \*p<.05).

Table 5

Study 1: Summary Statistics for Model with Dimensions of Psychological Well-being as

Mediators

	$R^2$	$F$ (df1, df2)	$p$
X → Self-Acceptance	0.299	4.283 (7, 70)	<.001
X → Quality Relationships	0.152	1.797 (7, 70)	>.05
X → Personal Growth	0.320	4.721 (7, 70)	<.001
X → Environmental Mastery	0.244	3.237 (7, 70)	<.05
Full Model	0.406	4.109 (11, 66)	<.001

Effect	Coeff.	95% Confidence Interval	
		[LL CI, UL CI]	
Total	0.813**	[0.441, 1.185]	
Direct	0.739*	[0.265, 1.213]	
Indirect (Self-Acceptance)	0.010	[-0.217, 0.255]	
Indirect (Quality Relationships)	0.090	[-0.030, 0.298]	
Indirect (Personal Growth)	-0.058	[-0.364, 0.141]	
Indirect (Environmental Mastery)	0.030	[-0.179, 0.221]	

Note. Coeff. – unstandardized coefficient (beta weight).

\*\*p<.001

\*p<.05.

## **Study 1 Discussion**

The purpose of Study 1 was to understand the relationship between ECTs' purpose, perceptions psychological well-being (including a few of its components), and affective commitment to the profession. Supported hypotheses confirm that ECTs' purpose is a key predictor of their psychological well-being and affective commitment to the profession. Overall, findings from Study 1 establish the evidence, rationale, and need to develop and test a practical approach to cultivate ECTs' purpose.

### ***Purpose and Affective Commitment***

Results from Study 1 illustrated that ECTs' purpose contributes to their affective commitment to the profession. In the context of this study, ECTs who demonstrated higher purpose scores were more likely to experience affective commitment, or attachment to the work, mission, and people in the profession (Meyer et al., 1993). In contrast, ECTs with low purpose scores reported diminished feelings of affective commitment to the profession. Therefore, this relationship suggests that cultivating purpose may enhance affective commitment. As such, encouraging ECTs to reflect on their purpose may enhance their affective commitment to stay in the classroom. These findings aligned with previous research examining the relationship between purpose and turnover intention in other helping professions (Afsar et al., 2019; Esteves & Lopes, 2017; Vassilopoulos & Pouis, 2017). However, Meyer et al. (1993) explain that considering individuals' commitment to the profession can help to better predict their turnover intention. Therefore, this study contributed to the literature by examining ECTs' purpose as it pertains to their affective commitment to the profession. As discussed in Chapter 2, purpose is a key motivator for teachers to enter the profession (Ballantyne & Zhukhov, 2017); they usually have an inherent goal to serve others and dedicate resources to achieve that goal (Bronk, 2014; Ryff,

1989; Schaefer, 2013). However, ECTs' sense of purpose becomes clouded by burnout, disillusionment, and other factors resulting in their attrition (Schaefer, 2013). The results suggested that reflection on purpose should be a consistent aspect of teachers' lives, especially in the early years of their career, and integrated into approaches to sustain ECTs in the profession.

### ***Psychological Well-being and Affective Commitment***

Results from Study 1's mediation analyses did not show support for the relationship between ECTs' perceptions of psychological well-being and its sub-components (self-acceptance, autonomy, quality relationships, personal growth, and environmental mastery), and their affective commitment to the profession. The non-significant results suggest that psychological well-being and its subcomponents are not mediators of the relationship between purpose and affective commitment in ECTs. Interestingly, the correlational analyses indicate that ECTs' affective commitment positively relates to their perception of psychological well-being, quality relationships, self-acceptance, and environmental mastery. These results are consistent with previous research findings, which suggest that psychological well-being relates positively to affective commitment (Rivkin et al., 2018; Setti et al., 2018). The significant correlations may be a result of examining the relationships in isolation (without any other predictors). However, when ECTs' perception of psychological well-being, quality relationships, self-acceptance, or environmental mastery are in a model with a strong predictor (i.e., ECTs' purpose), they are not significant predictors of ECTs' affective commitment to the profession. Thus, these findings contribute to the literature by suggesting that ECTs' purpose is a strong predictor (on its own) of ECTs' affective commitment to the profession. As explained in Chapter 2, much of the research on ECT retention focuses on remedying the causes of their attrition, rather than focusing on cultivating ECTs purpose. Lastly, results from Study 1 offer an alternative, positive-focused, and

(perhaps) more effective path (fostering ECTs' purpose) to not only reduce ECT's attrition but also sustain their affective commitment to the profession, further affirming the need for a purpose-centered intervention for ECTs.

### ***Purpose and Psychological Well-being***

Findings from Study 1 affirm that purpose is a significant and positive predictor of psychological well-being and some of its sub-components, namely, self-acceptance, quality relationships, personal growth, and environmental mastery. These noteworthy results suggest that the more ECTs fulfill the criteria purpose, the greater their perceptions of psychological well-being, self-acceptance, quality relationships, personal growth, and environmental mastery. However, ECTs who did not fulfill the criteria for purpose experienced lower perceptions of psychological well-being, self-acceptance, quality relationships, and environmental mastery. Thus, the findings further suggest the advantages of cultivating sense of purpose in ECTs. Scholars of psychological well-being and purpose have also found support for these relationships in other populations (Bronk, 2012; Bronk, 2014; Ryff, 1989). An important consideration for these findings is that they may, in part, be tautological in nature because purpose is a central dimension of psychological well-being and the Claremont Purpose Scale utilized items adapted from Ryff's Psychological Well-being purpose subscale (Bronk et al., 2018).

Although ECTs' purpose positively relates to their psychological well-being and the abovementioned sub-components, it does not significantly relate to ECTs' perception of autonomy. Existing literature supports the relationship between an individual's purpose and perceptions of autonomy in youth (Bronk, 2012); however, the current findings suggest otherwise. The non-significant relationship could be because other people or entities decide the

scope of ECTs' work (Hobson & Maxwell, 2017). Even though ECTs may fulfill the criteria for purpose, that alone is not enough to promote their feelings of autonomy.

These findings contribute to the developing body of literature related to ECT well-being, suggesting that ECTs' purpose is a key driving force that propels them to experience thriving and optimal functioning. Moreover, the supported relationships highlight specific sub-components of ECTs' psychological well-being that are most influenced by the extent to which ECTs meet the criteria for purpose. Thus, interventions aimed to cultivate ECTs' purpose may also promote self-acceptance, quality relationships, personal growth, and environmental mastery, in addition to enhancing ECTs' affective commitment to the profession. Overall, the results illustrate the many benefits of ECTs fulfilling the criteria of purpose.

## **Chapter 4: Study 2 Method, Results, and Discussion**

Study 2 aimed to answer the following research question: Does a purpose-centered intervention result in significant differences in purpose among early career teachers? To answer the research question, I developed a purpose-centered intervention through pilot testing individual activities and testing the effectiveness of the intervention through a pretest/posttest design with a waiting list control group.

### **Intervention Development Method**

Per previous research, a purpose-centered intervention should include a combination of content presentation, group discussions, and individual activities that together may help ECTs sustain a commitment to their purpose. The intervention requires a training or content presentation component to orient ECTs to the concept of purpose and ensure they have the required skills to engage in the rest of the intervention (Bronk, Baumsteiger, et al., 2019; Radomski et al., 2019). Group discussions, whether with just one person or multiple people, are a hallmark of most of the purpose-centered interventions and may result in significant benefits for ECTs (Bundick, 2011; Dik et al., 2011; Kosine et al., 2008; Radomski et al., 2019). Therefore, potential intervention activities should also consist of discussions. Moreover, individual activities such as reflection may help ECTs stay self-motivated in pursuing their purpose (Bronk, 2014), which I also included as possible intervention activities.

### ***Pilot Test Method***

To develop the final intervention, I tested each activity (discussed below) individually with distinct groups of teachers. The purpose of testing each activity was to ensure that the final integrated intervention included activities that successfully cultivate teachers' purpose.

**Activities.** I presented all the activities via zoom through a live group workshop as suggested by Radomski and colleagues' (2019) intervention. The sessions began with the definition of purpose proposed by Damon et al. (2003), and a discussion of why it is important to the work of teachers. The initial presentation ensured teachers had the required knowledge to engage in the rest of the activities (Bronk, Baumsteiger, et al., 2019; Radomski et al., 2019). I designed six activities (discussed below; see Appendix A for script) of which I included two in the final one-hour integrated intervention called "Grounding in Purpose" (GIP). I adapted a few of the activities from Purpose Toolkit (Bronk, Baumsteiger, et al., 2019) and purpose interview (Bundick et al., 2006) because of their effectiveness supported by strong empirical evidence. Per previous research, I had to make minor modifications to the activities to ensure the reflection would be relevant to ECTs' context and would not amplify their feelings of purposelessness (Olsen & Anderson, 2007; Andrews et al., 2007). Lastly, the activities included components of individual reflections and small group discussions as suggested by previous research (Bundick, 2011; Dik et al., 2011; Kosine et al., 2008; Radomski et al., 2019).

***Activity 1: Reflected Best-Self Exercise – Individual Reflection.*** The reflected best-self exercise (RBSE) is a well-known self-development activity in the field of positive organizational scholarship and helps participants develop positive relational, emotional, and agentic resources (Spreitzer et al., 2009). The RBSE requires participants to solicit feedback from individuals in their professional and personal networks about when the participants were at their best, analyze the feedback for common themes, and then develop goals and an action plan based on what they learned. This activity is a modified version from Bronk, Baumsteiger, and colleagues (2019) Purpose Toolkit. I instructed teachers to send an email to five people who know them well one week before the session. The email asks recipients to answer a few questions in less than five



minutes. The questions include: *As a teacher, what do you think I am particularly good at?*, *As a teacher, what do you think I really enjoy doing?*, and *How do you think I will leave my mark?* As the teachers receive the responses, I told them they should print the responses or archive them on a single document. I asked the teachers to bring the responses to the session. I was not able to test this activity because teachers did not complete the pre-work.

***Activity 2: Teaching-Related Purpose Quote - Individual Reflection.*** I modified this activity from Bronk, Baumsteiger, and colleagues (2019) Purpose Toolkit, which is empirically tested and supported. During this activity, I presented a quote that captures teachers' purpose and instructed the teachers to reflect individually on what the quote means to them and why they chose to be a teacher for 10 minutes.

***Activity 3: Your Mark – Individual Reflection.*** During this activity, I led teachers through an individual reflection on their identities, gifts, and passions as they relate to their role as educators. Research suggests that reflecting on these aspects helps individuals identify their purpose (Bronk, Baumsteiger, et al., 2019). As teachers reflect on the posed questions related to their identities, gifts, and passions, they will write their thoughts in a three-circle Venn diagram. After six minutes of individual reflection, teachers synthesized their reflections to determine the true mark they want to leave. During the last three minutes of the activity, I asked teachers to share their mark or thoughts on this process to the whole group.

***Activity 4: Q-sort – Small Group Discussion.*** Like Activity 2, I also modified this activity from Bronk, Baumsteiger, and colleagues' (2019) Purpose Toolkit and has been found to cultivate purpose. At the beginning of the session, I sent teachers a document with 20 statements that reflect different values of teaching. Some statements include: *I became a teacher to show students they are loved*, *I became a teacher to teach my students about social justice issues*, and *I*

*became a teacher to help struggling students achieve academically.* After, instructed teachers to choose five statements that are “most like me”, five statements that are “not like me”, and 10 statements that are “somewhat like me”. I gave the teachers five minutes to sort the statements individually. Then, I put the teachers in breakout rooms (two to four participants in each group) for seven minutes. They each read their “most like me” statements and discussed the values that are most important to teaching and common themes that emerged across the group.

***Activity 5: Purpose Interview – Pair Discussion.*** I modified this activity from Bundick et al.’s (2006) purpose interview. As discussed previously, an active listener simply asking about goals and purpose-related components encourages purpose development (Bundick et al., 2006). I paired up the teachers and have them interview each other for 10-15 minutes each. I instructed the interviewers to actively listen and probe as deeply as possible to elicit more reflection. The interview protocol consists of the following questions:

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself as a teacher. What are some of the things that you care about? What is really important to you? What kind of teacher are you? What do you do really well?
- 2) If you could change anything about the field of education, what would you change?
- 3) Picture yourself in 15-20 years. What will you be doing? Who will be in your life? What will be important to you?
- 4) What does purpose as a teacher mean to you? Do you think it will remain the same for the rest of your life?

***Activity 6: Final Reflection – Large Group Discussion.*** As suggested by Radomski et al. (2019), discussing one’s purpose and hearing others’ purposes helps individuals solidify their understanding of their own purpose and helps to build a support network that is crucial in

progressing towards one's purpose. To begin this activity, I asked teachers to gather their thoughts and write their reflections about their sense of purpose for about three to four minutes. After, I encouraged teachers to share their reflections in breakout groups of seven to 10 teachers for 15 minutes. Specifically, I instructed teachers to discuss how they plan to use their work as a way to make a personally meaningful difference in the broader world. After the group discussion, I recommended that the teachers share their emerging thoughts about their purpose as a teacher with any two or three people they choose in their support network.

***Control Group Activity.*** The control group activity for the pilot test consisted of two parts. For the first part of the session, I provided teachers with useful strategies to combat zoom/video conference fatigue for about seven to 10 minutes. After, I asked teachers to share any virtual teaching best practices and techniques that they have come across with each other about for another five to seven minutes. Although the activity topic does relate to teaching, there was no discussion of purpose. Additionally, this was the best option for teachers in the control group to gain value from the session in exchange for them giving me their time.

**Recruitment, sample, and method for pilot test.** I recruited teachers via convenience sampling on several education-oriented social media groups (Happy Teacher Revolution, Badass Teachers Facebook Group, TFA-MA, TFA-Las Vegas Alum Facebook Group, Infinite Focus App, Desis in Education Facebook Group) and emailed school district superintendents in MA, school principals, and faculty/deans of schools/colleges of education. See Appendix B for recruitment flyer.

Despite my recruitment efforts, I was not able to achieve the required sample size (60-70 teachers; Whitehead et al., 2016) to conduct any meaningful quantitative analysis. After 11 pilot

sessions, I had complete data (i.e., participants had both a pretest and posttest score) from 14 teachers. I utilized the activity feedback to inform the final intervention plan of GIP.

All the teachers were kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers (K-2: 7%; 3-5: 28%, 6-8: 28%; 9-12: 35%) in the United States, with average 13.5 years in the profession (range: 1-34 years). The majority of the teachers identified as Caucasian (57%), with a smaller number identifying as Asian (14%) and Black (14%). One of the teachers identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community (7%) and two teachers identified as coming from a low socioeconomic background (14%).

At the beginning of each session, I sent teachers the pretest survey (Claremont Purpose Scale and demographic questions). After the teachers engaged in the activity, I sent them the posttest survey (Claremont Purpose Scale and activity feedback). The time spent in each activity varied from 25-40 minutes.

**Interviews with TFA Staff.** I conducted interviews with two TFA staff members, who work closely with the teachers, to solicit their feedback on the planned intervention activities and format. The interviews provided insight to develop the final integrated intervention. The interview protocol is below:

- 1) What are your initial reactions to the activities?
- 2) What do you think will work well with the corps members?
- 3) What do you think won't work well with the corps members?
- 4) What aspects of the activities can be improved upon?

### **Pilot Study Results**

The purpose of the pilot study was to test each individual activity for effectiveness in cultivating purpose (see Appendix A for detailed description of each activity). As discussed

above, I did not have enough participants ( $N = 14$ ) to conduct any meaningful quantitative analyses to compare the activities in their effectiveness of cultivating purpose. However, I solicited qualitative feedback from the participants and analyzed the data using a conventional content analysis approach. I summarize the feedback for each activity below.

***Activity 1: Reflected Best-Self Exercise – Individual Reflection (n = 0)***

I was not able to test this activity because the teacher did not send the emails to people in her personal and professional network.

***Activity 2: Teaching-Related Purpose Quote - Individual Reflection (n = 1)***

The participant liked the quote because it reminded her of what it means to be an educator. She appreciated the time to reflect but felt that the introduction content could be shorter.

***Activity 3: Your Mark – Individual Reflection (n = 2)***

Participants expressed that the activity helped to understand who they are and what their purpose in life is. They felt that all parts of the session were valuable and enjoyed the Venn diagram format for reflection.

***Activity 4: Q-sort – Small Group Discussion (n = 3)***

Overall, participants felt the session helped them realize their purpose, why they became a teacher in the first place, and if teaching is contributing to their purpose. Additionally, participants found the introduction content, Q-sort, and talking to other teachers as valuable components of the session. Finally, participants expressed that the time in the breakout room (approx. 7 minutes) was too long.

***Activity 5: Purpose Interview – Pair Discussion (n = 3)***

Participants explained that the activity helped them really think about their purpose as it is something that they forget in the daily stress. Participants found the entire activity to be valuable. Lastly, one participant said she phased out during the introduction, suggesting it could be shorter.

***Activity 6: Final Reflection – Large Group Discussion (n = 3)***

Participants appreciated the time to personally reflect. One participant even said that it helped her immensely to reflect on her purpose and made her feel valued. Participants found the entire session and introduction slide deck to be helpful and something they can take away with them.

**Results from Interviews with TFA Staff**

Given the positive feedback for each activity from the pilot study, I analyzed the feedback from the interviews with the TFA staff members ( $N = 2$ ) using a conventional content analysis approach to narrow down the activities for the final integrated intervention. Below is a summary of the key themes that emerged from the interviews.

***Less is More***

Both staff members felt that trying to fit more activities into one-hour would be ambitious and rush the teachers through critical reflection opportunities. They thought two activities, an individual reflection and partner reflection, would be most suitable for the session. They expressed that the Your Mark and Purpose Interview activities would work best with the teachers. They suggested sending the remaining activities as pre-work and follow-up reflection. The Staff members' suggestion of decreasing the number of activities in the session is also supported by research which explains that time to reflect is necessary in the development of

purpose (Bundick, 2011; Dik et al., 2011; Kosine et al., 2008; Radomski et al., 2019). Including more activities would make it very challenging to ensure teachers have ample time for reflection.

### ***Framing and Connection of Activities***

The staff members shared the importance of explaining the importance of the session activities and connecting the two activities. They suggested that the Your Mark activity be first in the session so teachers can reflect individually and use the written reflection in the Purpose Interview. They also discussed that the introduction to the Purpose Interview questions specifically ask them to refer to the Your Mark Venn diagram.

### ***Closing***

The staff members explained that the intervention would be the last session of the teachers' day of professional development. They thought it would be helpful to connect the teachers' discussions from earlier in the day to the reflections about purpose.

### **Method to Test Intervention**

To investigate the impact of the purpose-centered intervention, called Grounding in Purpose (GIP), I utilized a pretest/posttest design with a "waiting list" control group. This design was useful for the present study because all Teach for America (TFA) teachers in the northeast were to receive the intervention as part of their monthly professional development sessions (Schimelpfening, 2020). I used survey research methods to obtain data to answer the following research question: Does a purpose-centered intervention result in significant differences in sense of purpose among early career teachers?

### ***Participants***

The participants in each group included teachers currently in their first or second year of teaching with TFA in the northeast and who attended the intervention as part of their

professional development. There were no other inclusion criteria for participants in the intervention and waiting list control groups.

**Pretest Group.** The pretest group sample size was 82 teachers, which was a suitable sample size per a priori sample size analysis (0.8-0.9 power, moderate effect size). When asked about their racial identity, majority of the participants identified as Caucasian (67.1%), with few identifying as Black (9.8%), Multi-racial (7.3%), Other (4.9%), and Asian (3.7%). A few of the participants also identified as Latinx (12.2%), while a majority did not (81.7%). Some of the participants also indicated they were part of the LGBTQIA+ community (20.7%), with a majority indicating they were not part of the community (70.7%). Additionally, a majority of the participants did not identify as coming from a low socioeconomic background (59.8%), with a few identifying as coming from a low socioeconomic background (34.1%). Most of the teachers taught students in middle school (grades 6-8; 45.1%), with a few teaching students in high school (grades 9-12; 29.3%) and elementary school (grades K-5; 20.8%). Lastly, a little over half of the teachers are in their first year of teaching (52.4%) and the rest are in their second year of teaching (42.7%).

**Intervention Group.** The intervention group sample size was 69 teachers, which was a suitable sample size per a priori sample size analysis (0.8-0.9 power, moderate effect size). When asked about their racial identity, majority of the participants identified as Caucasian (71.1%), with few identifying as Black (8.7%), Multi-racial (4.3%), Other (7.2%), and Asian (5.8%). A few of the participants also identified as Latinx (11.6%), while majority did not (84.1%). Some of the participants also indicated they were part of the LGBTQIA+ community (20.3%), with a majority indicating they were not part of the community (75.4%). Additionally, a majority of the participants did not identify as coming from a low socioeconomic background (68.1%).



However, a sizeable minority of participants did report that they came from a low socioeconomic background (27.5%). Most of the teachers taught students in middle school (grades 6-8; 55.1%), with a few teaching students in high school (grades 9-12; 24.6%) and elementary school (grades K-5; 20.2%). Lastly, over half in their first year of teaching (59.4%) and the rest are in their second year of teaching (40.6%).

**Waiting List Control Group.** The waiting control group sample size was 43 teachers, which was a suitable sample size per a priori sample size analysis (0.8-0.9 power, moderate effect size). When asked about their racial identity, majority of the participants identified as Caucasian (74.4%), with few identifying as Black (11.6%), Multi-racial (4.7%), Other (2.3%), and Asian (2.3%). A few of the participants also identified as Latinx (7%), while majority did not (88.4%). Some of the participants also indicated they were part of the LGBTQIA+ community (23.3%), with majority indicating they were not part of the community (74.4%). Additionally, majority of the participants did not identify as coming from a low socioeconomic background (65.1%), with a few identifying as coming from a low socioeconomic background (30.2%). Most of the teachers taught students in middle school (grades 6-8; 48.8%), with a few teaching students in high school (grades 9-12; 30.2%) and elementary school (grades K-5; 21%). Lastly, over half in their first year of teaching (55.8%) and the rest are in their second year of teaching (44.2%).

**Lagged Posttest Group.** No participants responded to the lagged posttest.

See Table 2 for full Study 2 demographics.

Table 2

*Study 2 Demographics*

<u>Demographic Questions</u>	Pretest (N = 78)		Intervention Posttest (N = 68)		Waiting List Control Posttest (N = 43)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Please indicate your racial identity:						
Caucasian	55	70.5	49	71	32	74.4
Black	8	10.3	6	8.7	5	11.6
Multi-racial	6	7.7	3	4.7	2	4.7
Other	4	5.1	5	7.2	1	2.3
Asian	3	3.8	4	5.8	1	2.3
I prefer not to answer	2	2.6	1	1.4	1	2.3
Do you identify as Latinx?						
No	67	85.9	58	84.1	38	88.4
Yes	10	12.8	8	11.6	3	7
I prefer not to answer	1	1.3	2	2.9	2	4.7
Do you identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community?						
No	58	74.3	58	75.4	32	74.4
Yes	17	21.8	14	20.3	10	23.3
I prefer not to answer	2	2.6	1	1.4	1	2.3
Do you identify as coming from a low-income background?						
No	49	62.8	47	68.1	28	65.1
Yes	28	35.9	19	27.5	13	30.2
I prefer not to answer	1	1.3	1	1.4	2	4.7
What grade level do you teach?						
K-2	8	10.3	7	10.1	3	7
3-5	9	11.5	7	10.1	6	14
6-8	37	47.4	38	55.1	21	48.8
9-12	24	30.8	17	24.6	13	30.2

### ***Procedure***

**Data Collection.** I asked a TFA staff member who works closely with the teachers to send the pretest survey one week before the intervention as part of the teachers' pre-work for the session. In addition to the survey, the pre-work asked teachers to reflect on a quote ("*It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is what are we busy about?*" – Henry David Thoreau). The quotation prompted teachers to think about how the quote relates to their work as a teacher and why they decided to enter the field in preparation for the session. The intervention group took the posttest immediately after participating in the intervention and the waiting list

control group took the posttest immediately before participating in the intervention. Although TFA required all teachers to participate in the intervention, completion of the pretest and posttest was voluntary. Participants received an informed consent before the pretest and posttest. I asked the teachers for their email addresses to pair the responses of the pretest and posttest. A day after the intervention, a staff member sent the teachers follow up activities for further reflection (reflected best-self email exercise and Q-sort) with a lagged posttest.

**Measures.** Below are brief descriptions of the pretest, posttest, and lagged posttest measures.

**Pretest.** The pretest measure included all the survey measures for Study 1 (Claremont Purpose Scale, Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-being, Professional Commitment; see Study 1 measures for detailed descriptions and reliability statistics), demographic questions that asked teachers about their racial identity, their sexuality, coming from a low-income background, and the grade level they teach, and an attention check.

**Posttest.** The posttest measure comprised of the Claremont Purpose Scale (intervention group  $\alpha = .94$ ; waiting list control group  $\alpha = .87$ ), demographic questions that asked teachers about their racial identity, their sexuality, coming from a low-income background, and the grade level they teach, and three questions about activity feedback (How did the session influence your thoughts and feelings (if at all)?; What part of the session was most valuable to you?; What part of the session was not valuable to you?).

**Lagged Posttest.** The posttest measure comprised of the Claremont Purpose Scale, demographic questions that asked teachers about their racial identity, their sexuality, coming from a low-income background, and the grade level they teach, and a question about how much of the follow up activities they completed.

### ***Final Integrated Intervention: Grounding in Purpose Session Format***

Based on the data and feedback I collected, I developed the final integrated intervention called “Grounding in Purpose” (see Appendix C for session plan and facilitator guide). I facilitated the intervention via Zoom. The intervention opened with a brief explanation of the definition of purpose (Damon et al., 2003), how purpose relates to the teachers’ context, and the goal of the session. After the introduction, I led the teachers through the My Mark activity (previously referred to as Your Mark). Once the teachers finished the individual reflection, I invited a couple of teachers to share their reflections while I created the breakout rooms for the Purpose Interview. Afterwards, I gave teachers the instructions for the Purpose Interview. Finally, I ended the session with an individual reflection connecting teachers’ reflections from the intervention and earlier sessions, and the posttest survey (for the intervention group).

### **Intervention Test Results**

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine the impact of the Grounding in Purpose (GIP) intervention in ECTs. The guiding question for this study is: Does the purpose-reinforcement intervention (Grounding in Purpose) positively impact ECTs’ purpose? The following sections discuss the results of the pilot study, and development and test of the integrated intervention.

Given that I did not have enough participants with complete data (i.e., both pretest and posttest scores), I conducted two t-tests (independent and dependent samples). I also analyzed qualitative data from three open-ended activity feedback questions to answer the research question. The following sections discuss the results of these analyses.

### ***Data Cleaning & Management***

I cleaned and managed my data in SPSS. To begin, I appropriately labeled and coded the data. Then, for each test (pretest and posttests), I deleted (listwise) any responses that had

majority of the data missing. The remaining responses did not have any missing data.

Afterwards, I created composite scores for purpose and checked the assumptions for independent and dependent samples t-tests.

**Independent Samples T-test Assumptions Check.** There were a couple significant outliers in the intervention group’s posttest scores, which I removed (intervention group  $n = 67$ , waiting list control group  $n = 43$ ). The scores were also normally distributed (skew and kurtosis scores are between +2 and -2; see Table 10). Lastly, the data did not violate the homogeneity of variance assumption (Levene’s  $F(1,108) = 0.878, p = 0.35$ ).

**Dependent Samples T-test Assumptions Check.** Before checking the assumptions, I created difference scores between the pretest and intervention group posttest scores. There was one significant outlier in the difference scores, which I removed ( $n = 20$ ). The difference scores were also normally distributed (skew and kurtosis scores are between +2 and -2; see Table 10).

Table 10

*Study 2: Descriptive Statistics (Main Results)*

<b>Group</b>	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Skew (<i>SE</i>)</b>	<b>Kurtosis (<i>SE</i>)</b>
Pretest	81	3.83	0.58	1.83	5.00	-0.74 (0.26)	1.45 (0.52)
Intervention Group Posttest	67	3.82	0.63	1.58	4.92	-0.63 (0.29)	1.28 (0.58)
Waiting List Control Group Posttest	43	3.85	0.52	2.67	4.92	-0.45 (0.36)	-0.23 (0.70)
Difference Scores	20	0.07	0.31	-0.42	0.66	0.31 (0.51)	-1.08 (0.99)

*Note.* Difference scores calculated for 20 paired samples (intervention group posttest – pretest);

$M_{\text{pretest}} = 4.02$  ( $SD = 0.48; n = 20$ ),  $M_{\text{intervention}} = 4.10$  ( $SD = 0.53; n = 20$ ).

***Comparison of Means***

As explained above, I utilized two t-tests to determine the impact of the Grounding in Purpose intervention. I discuss the results below.

**Intervention Group Posttest vs. Waiting List Control Group Posttest.** Participants in the intervention group ( $M = 3.82, SD = 0.63$ ) did not have significantly greater purpose compared to the participants in the waiting list control group ( $M = 3.85, SD = 0.52$ ),  $t(101) = -0.22, p = 0.82, d = -0.04$ .

**Pretest vs. Intervention Group Posttest.** Participants in the intervention group did not have significantly greater purpose after the intervention ( $M = 4.10, SD = 0.53$ ) compared to their sense of purpose before the intervention ( $M = 4.02, SD = 0.10$ ),  $t(19) = -1.04, p = 0.31, d = -0.23$ .

### ***Activity Feedback***

I asked participants in the intervention group three open-ended questions (part of activity feedback). I categorized participants' comments into themes using a conventional content analysis approach. Below is a summary of the key themes that emerged from the participants' comments.

**Influence on Thoughts/Feelings.** Three categories (positive influence:  $n = 34$ ; neutral influence:  $n = 6$ ; and negative influence:  $n = 5$ ) emerged from teachers' responses ( $N = 45$ ) when asked how the session influenced their feelings (See Table 11).

**Positive Influence.** Over 75% of the teachers believed the session had a positive impact on their thoughts and feelings (thoughts and feelings about what?). Many teachers ( $n = 16$ ) indicated that the session helped them reflect on their purpose as an educator and grounded them in their purpose. One middle school teacher commented, "This session helped me to feel much more grounded in my purpose both as an individual and as part of a collective." Additionally,

several teachers ( $n = 10$ ) mentioned that the session helped them realize their gifts, passions, strengths, and identities that they may use to work towards their purpose. A middle school teacher explained, “This session helped me focus on who I am and what I am good at, and thus what I bring to the table and can potentially grow into.” Furthermore, a few teachers ( $n = 4$ ) appreciated the opportunity to build a connection with another teacher. One elementary school teacher shared, “This session was helpful for me to take time to stop and reflect on how I see myself as a teacher. It was also really helpful to have some time to talk with another first year teacher going through similar struggles and use him as a sounding board and partner in making sense of the difficult situation we're facing.” Lastly, a few teachers ( $n = 4$ ) expressed the session’s reflections helped think of ideas or a plan to better support and impact students. A participant commented, “It gave me some good ideas in terms of how I can provide better accommodations for my students and made me become more reflective of my purpose as it relates to teaching.”

***Neutral influence.*** A few teachers felt neutral after the session. Most of the teachers ( $n = 4$ ) commented that the session only had a small impact on their thoughts and feelings. A high school teacher commented, “This session gave me a moment to reflect in a new way with the my mark activity. Beyond this short exercise my thoughts were not seriously influenced.” In addition, a couple of the teachers ( $n = 2$ ) expressed that the interview questions were unengaging or difficult to answer with someone they did not know well. One middle school teacher explained, “This session did not influence my feelings much . . . the breakout room was so long and I talked to my partner the whole time but the guiding questions were pretty unengaging.”

***Negative influence.*** A small number of teachers had a negative reaction to the intervention. Most of the teachers ( $n = 3$ ) simply commented that the session did not have an

influence on their thoughts and feelings. However, couple teachers ( $n = 2$ ) explained that they were not in a space to reflect or feel positive about their purpose. One elementary school teacher shared, “I think this session was a really poor use of our time. As teachers who spend their entire weeks staring at a screen and doing hard work to help our students this felt completely out of touch . . . completely misunderstanding our position. Not at all helpful.”

Table 11

*Study 2: Emergent Themes from Activity Feedback (Influence on Thoughts/Feelings)*

Theme	Sub-Theme	Exemplar Quote
Positive Influence ( $n = 34$ )	Reflect on purpose/grounded in purpose ( $n = 16$ )	<i>“This session helped me to feel much more grounded in my purpose both as an individual and as part of a collective.”</i>
	Realize gifts, passions, strengths and identities ( $n = 10$ )	<i>“This session helped me focus on who I am and what I am good at, and thus what I bring to the table and can potentially grow into.”</i>
	Build connection with another teacher ( $n = 4$ )	<i>“This session was helpful for me to take time to stop and reflect on how I see myself as a teacher. It was also really helpful to have some time to talk with another first year teacher going through similar struggles and use him as a sounding board and partner in making sense of the difficult situation we're facing.”</i>
Neutral Influence ( $n = 6$ )	Think of ideas/plan to better support students ( $n = 4$ )	<i>“It gave me some good ideas in terms of how I can provide better accommodations for my students and made me become more reflective of my purpose as it relates to teaching.”</i>
	Small impact on thoughts and feelings ( $n = 4$ )	<i>“This session gave me a moment to reflect in a new way with the my mark activity. Beyond this short exercise my thoughts were not seriously influenced.”</i>
	Interview questions were unengaging ( $n = 2$ )	<i>“This session did not influence my feelings much.... the breakout room was so long and I talked to my partner the whole time but the guiding questions were pretty unengaging.”</i>



Negative Influence ( <i>n</i> = 5)	Session did influence thoughts and feelings ( <i>n</i> = 3)	<i>“Did not influence my thoughts”</i>
	Not in a place to reflect or feel positive about purpose ( <i>n</i> = 2)	<i>“I think this session was a really poor use of our time. As teachers who spend their entire weeks staring at a screen and doing hard work to help our students this felt completely out of touch...completely misunderstanding our position. Not at all helpful.”</i>

*Note.* Question: How did this session influence your thoughts/feelings (if at all)? (*N* = 45).

**Most Valuable.** Four categories emerged from teachers’ comments (*N* = 50) when asked what part of the session was most valuable to them. The categories are: Purpose Interview (*n* = 30), My Mark (*n* = 12), all was valuable (*n* = 3), nothing was valuable (*n* = 3). Overall, 80% of the respondents (*n* = 42) thought at least one of the activities in the session was valuable, with some expressing that they found the entire session to be valuable (See Table 12).

**Purpose Interview.** Many teachers loved the partner reflection as part of the Purpose Interview. Some teachers (*n* = 9) enjoyed the experience because they got to hear others’ “why” behind their motivation to teach. One middle school teacher explained, “The portion that was most valuable to me was the interview session about our passions and future plans. I say this because, it was nice to hear how other educators want to make a change in our education system and to see what was most important to them.” Another middle school teacher commented, “We got to talk about some of the deeper intricacies of why we teach and what motivates us, which was really cool.” Lastly, an elementary school teacher expressed, “The interview was a good way to verbalize some of the thoughts I had about teaching and it was great to hear what my interview partner had to say about her purpose in life.”

**My Mark.** Several teachers thought the My Mark activity was the most valuable part of the session. A few teachers (*n* = 3) thought it was an insightful reflection. One elementary school

teacher commented, “The opening activity was the most helpful. It helped me reflect on my different identities and how different ones are more meaningful than others”. Additionally, another high school teacher explained, “The Venn diagram. It helped me identify specific traits of mine and see the connections between identity, gifts, and passions.”

Table 12

*Study 2: Emergent Themes from Activity Feedback (Most Valuable)*

Theme	Sub-Theme	Exemplar Quote
Purpose Interview ( <i>n</i> = 30)	Hear others’ “why” behind their motivation to teach ( <i>n</i> = 9)	<i>“The portion that was most valuable to me was the interview session about our passions and future plans. I say this because, it was nice to hear how other educators want to make a change in our education system and to see what was most important to them.”</i>
My Mark ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Insightful reflection ( <i>n</i> = 3)	<i>“The Venn diagram. It helped me identify specific traits of mine and see the connections between identity, gifts, and passions.”</i>

*Note.* Question: What was the most valuable part of the session? (*N* = 50).

**Not Valuable.** A few major themes emerged from the teachers’ comments (*N* = 37) when asked about what part of the session was not valuable to them (see Table 13). The themes include: Purpose Interview (*n* = 6), My Mark (*n* = 6), all was not valuable (*n* = 4), and entire session was not valuable (*n* = 7).

**Purpose Interview.** A handful of teachers felt the Purpose Interview was not valuable. A couple of teachers (*n* = 2) explained that they felt uncomfortable reflecting with someone they had never met and would have preferred to have a partner who they knew; they thought the format was not conducive to meaningful reflection. One middle school teacher shared, “I found it hard to reflect with a partner who was a stranger.” Additionally, a couple of teachers (*n* = 2) did not follow the interview protocol and discussed aspects that were more relevant to their current

situation and context. An elementary school teacher commented, “My interview partner and I ended up talking more about returning to in-person teaching since it's top of mind right now.”

**My Mark.** A few teachers found the My Mark activity was not helpful or valuable. A few of the participants ( $n = 4$ ) felt the reflection was confusing, did not provide much insight, or was too abstract. One middle school teacher explained, “The identity part at the beginning felt a little forced and awkward.”

**Entire Session Was Not Valuable.** A handful of teachers did not think any aspect of the session was valuable. One high school teacher explained, “This session seemed to force self-reflection in a relatively inauthentic way. I did not find the way of engagement compelling.” Teachers’ current context also played a role in whether they gained value from the session. An elementary school teacher shared, “I personally did not find much value in the session, especially given the current context many of us are facing at our jobs (reopening, going back to school, etc). I have done a lot of reflection personally and via my staff at school around my "why" so this did not elicit anything new for me.”

Table 13

Study 2: Emergent Themes from Activity Feedback (Not Valuable)

Theme	Sub-Theme	Exemplar Quote
Purpose Interview ( $n = 6$ )	Uncomfortable reflecting with someone new ( $n = 2$ )	<i>“I found it hard to reflect with a partner who was a stranger.”</i>
	Did not follow protocol ( $n = 2$ )	<i>“My interview partner and I ended up talking more about returning to in-person teaching since it's top of mind right now.”</i>
My Mark ( $n = 6$ )	Reflection was confusing, not insightful, and abstract ( $n = 4$ )	<i>“The identity part at the beginning felt a little forced and awkward.”</i>

Entire session was not valuable (n = 4)	Inauthentic reflection (n = 1)	<i>“This session seemed to force self-reflection in a relatively inauthentic way. I did not find the way of engagement compelling.”</i>
	Current context (n = 1)	<i>“I personally did not find much value in the session, especially given the current context many of us are facing at our jobs (reopening, going back to school, etc). I have done a lot of reflection personally and via my staff at school around my "why" so this did not elicit anything new for me.”</i>

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*Note.* Question: What part of the session was not valuable to you? (N = 37).

### **Ancillary Analyses**

I conducted a few ancillary analyses to make greater sense of the results above.

**Descriptive Statistics for Participants with Complete vs. Incomplete Data.** Given that only 21 participants had complete data, I wanted to understand if there are any other differences that could help explain the attrition of participants. Table 12 depicts the means and standard deviations of psychological well-being, purpose, and affective commitment for participants with complete versus incomplete data. On average, participants with complete data had higher psychological well-being, purpose, and affective commitment.

Table 14

*Study 2: Descriptive Statistics for Participants with Complete vs. Incomplete Data*

	Complete Data (n = 25)		Incomplete Data (n = 53)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Purpose	4.01	0.44	3.75	0.63
Psychological Well-being	4.57	0.50	4.47	0.56
Affective Commitment	4.99	1.39	4.70	1.00

*Note.* N = 78.

**Independent Samples T-test.** I conducted three independent samples t-tests to better understand the statistical significance of the difference between the participants with complete

data and those with incomplete data in psychological well-being, purpose, and affective commitment. I discuss the results of the analyses below.

**Psychological Well-being.** Participants with complete data did not have significantly greater psychological well-being ( $M = 4.57, SD = 0.50$ ) compared to that of participants who had incomplete data ( $M = 4.47, SD = 0.56$ ),  $t(76) = 0.75, p = 0.45, d = 0.18$  (Levene's  $F(1,76) = 0.040, p = 0.84$ ).

**Purpose.** Participants with complete data did not have significantly greater purpose ( $M = 4.01, SD = 0.44$ ) compared to that of participants who had incomplete data ( $M = 3.75, SD = 0.63$ ),  $t(76) = 1.84, p = 0.06, d = 0.44$  (Levene's  $F(1,76) = 2.33, p = 0.13$ ).

**Affective Commitment.** Participants with complete data did not have significantly greater affective commitment ( $M = 4.99, SD = 1.39$ ) compared to that of participants who had incomplete data ( $M = 4.70, SD = 1.00$ ),  $t(76) = 1.00, p = 0.31, d = 0.24$  (Levene's  $F(1,76) = 2.36, p = 0.12$ ).

### **Descriptive Statistics for Participants Who Shared Positive/No vs. Negative**

**Comments.** As explained above, the intervention had a negative influence on some participants. I decided to further examine their psychological well-being, purpose, and affective commitment to understand if these factors could explain the negative feelings. Table 13 shows the comparison of means and standard deviations for these participants. Interestingly, participants who shared negative comments had lower average affective commitment ( $M = 3.70, SD = 2.21$ ) than those who shared positive or no comments ( $M = 4.84, SD = 1.09$ ). Otherwise, on average, participants who shared negative comments had higher psychological well-being and sense of purpose.

Table 15

*Study 2: Descriptive Statistics for Participants who Shared Positive/No vs. Negative Comments*

	Positive/No Comments ( <i>n</i> = 75)		Negative Comments ( <i>n</i> = 3)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Purpose	3.83	0.58	3.97	0.61
Psychological Well-being	4.50	0.55	4.60	0.38
Affective Commitment	4.84	1.09	3.70	2.12

*Note.* *N* = 78.

Findings from Study 2 provide practitioners with an actionable approach to foster ECTs sense of purpose to sustain their commitment to the profession.

## **Study 2 Discussion**

### ***Effectiveness of Grounding in Purpose (GIP) Intervention***

The quantitative findings from Study 2 suggest that GIP was ineffective in cultivating ECTs' purpose, given the non-significant t-test results. Although ECTs in the intervention group had a slight increase in their purpose after participating in GIP compared to their purpose before participating in GIP, the change was not significant. Similarly, there was not a significant difference in purpose between ECTs in the intervention group and those in the waiting list control group. Surprisingly, these quantitative findings align with Dik et al.'s (2011) purpose-centered intervention pilot study results; they did not find any significant differences in sense of purpose before and after the intervention. A few explanations for the non-significant results could be that purpose takes time to develop, participant attrition due to depletion of their personal resources (specifically psychological well-being), ceiling effects, or inability to fully pilot test the activities.

Another reason for the null results may be that purpose development is gradual and a posttest immediately after the intervention may not detect any significant changes (Dik et al., 2011). Although I included a reflection prompt as pre-work one week before the intervention, it was likely not enough time to contribute to the teachers' sense of purpose. Additionally, I sent

follow-up activities and a lagged posttest a day after the session, but I did not receive any responses. Ideally, the lagged posttest comparison could have offered some insight into the teachers' sense of purpose over time. The appropriate length of an effective purpose-centered intervention is unclear; Pizzolato et al.'s (2011) intervention was 18-weeks, while Bronk et al.'s (2019) Purpose ToolKit spanned over one week. Being cognizant of the time burden on ECTs, I opted for a short workshop, but perhaps one that spans a few days would be more effective in cultivating purpose.

Another possible explanation for the non-significant results could be the lack of enough complete data due to participant's lack of personal resources, or psychological well-being. Essentially, the teachers may not have had the psychological capacity to complete both the pretest and posttest. Ancillary analyses showed that participants with complete data, on average, had higher scores for psychological well-being, purpose, and affective commitment in comparison to that of participants who had incomplete data. However, the t-tests comparing the mean scores for those variables are non-significant. Therefore, participants' lack of personal resources is not a plausible explanation for participant attrition and some other factor affected teachers' ability to complete both the pretest and posttest.

Additionally, another potential reason for the null quantitative findings could be ceiling effects (Goedendorp & Steverink, 2017). The t-test comparing purpose for participants with complete data versus purpose for participants with incomplete data was almost significant and with a noteworthy effect size (Cortina & Landis, 2009). These results could confirm the potential for ceiling effects. Participants who completed both the pretest and posttest already had a high purpose scores and were interested in the topic, thus the intervention did not have a significant impact on them. These findings also suggest that there could be a possibility of some self-

selection bias, where participants choose whether to participate (Heckman, 1990). Although all TFA teachers in the northeast participated in the intervention, only those who were committed to the topic chose to complete both the pretest and posttest surveys, also contributing to the ceiling effects. Lastly, teachers tend to have greater purpose as it is (Moran, 2016), and TFA teachers may have even purpose compared to other teachers because TFA teachers choose to teach in underserved communities and challenging environments to contribute to the movement of educational equity (Kopp, 2012).

Lastly, a plausible reason for the non-significant quantitative results could be that I was not able to completely pilot test each of the activities individually. The handful of negative comments from the teachers suggested that they felt the session was not relevant given their extenuating circumstances (i.e., global pandemic, online education, returning to in-person teaching, etc.) Due to the lack of participants, I could not fully assess the relevancy and effectiveness of each activity; I did not have enough data and feedback to make any meaningful modifications. If I had more participants with whom to test the activities individually, I would have been able to modify the activities accordingly based on the feedback I received and select the activities that were most effective and relevant for my final intervention (GIP).

In contrast to the non-significant quantitative findings discussed above, qualitative findings from Study 2 reveal that GIP may have had somewhat of a positive impact on participants. The majority of teachers who shared comments felt the intervention had a positive influence on their thoughts and feelings about their purpose because they were able to engage in key reflection on their purpose, strengths, identities, gifts, and passions, and discuss those reflections with a fellow teacher. I expected these positive feelings in the young TFA teachers given that the search and identification of purpose contribute to greater life satisfaction in



emerging adults (Bronk et al., 2009). Additionally, many teachers also found the two activities (My Mark and Purpose Interview) to be valuable. In particular, the Purpose Interview was immensely popular because it allowed teachers to connect with one another and hear a peer's purpose. These results align with earlier studies examining purpose-centered interventions, which suggest that individual reflection and discussing one's purpose with another are effective approaches to cultivate purpose (Bronk et al., 2019; Bundick et al., 2006).

Despite the positive feedback from several participants, a few teachers had negative reactions to the intervention. In their comments, teachers explained that they were not in a suitable mindset to reflect positively about their purpose, or the topic was not as relevant to the challenges of their current context (schools re-opening, in-person teaching, etc.). Although positive psychology interventions, or an approach to enhance well-being that is consistent with positive psychology theory, have substantial evidence supporting their effectiveness (Carr et al., 2020), research also suggests that they can elicit negative reactions if the intervention does not meet participants' expectations or participants feel the content does not take them or their context seriously (Görge et al., 2020). Therefore, the negative reactions may be due to teachers feeling the session was not relevant to their exceptional circumstances (i.e., global pandemic, online education, returning to in-person, etc). The teachers may have had other expectations of the session, ones that related to learning strategies to overcome their current challenges. Also, for interventions that may require participants to have a certain mindset (i.e., for GIP it was that participants believe they can overcome challenges in their context), assessing for participants' readiness and mindset for reflection beforehand may be a helpful approach to ensure the positive impact of the intervention.

Additionally, a few teachers did not feel comfortable engaging in the Purpose Interview with a teacher they had never met, which was an interesting finding because several teachers enjoyed cultivating a new relationship. Bundick (2011) utilized trained interviewers for his Purpose Interview process, which kept the reflection completely anonymous for the participants. However, the format for GIP was such that teachers switched roles and interviewed each other. Likely, teachers' negative reactions stemmed from reflecting with someone who they had never met but would have the potential of seeing again in the future.

To further examine ECTs' negative reactions, I conducted additional ancillary analyses to assess their sense of purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment. The results indicate that the teachers who shared negative comments had a higher average score of psychological well-being and purpose, but a lower average score of affective commitment compared to teachers who shared no comments or positive comments. Lower affective commitment to the profession may be another explanation for the ECTs' negative reactions, such that ECTs' who do not feel committed to the profession would not find value from participating in a session designed to reflect on why one became a teacher in the first place. Even though ECTs with lower affective commitment to the profession need to see purpose in the profession more than their committed counterparts, they may need to engage in other reflection activities and interventions before they are ready to reflect on purpose in their profession. Therefore, it may be helpful to structure initial purpose-related reflections for the less committed ECTs to be general rather than profession-specific because individuals do find purpose in other domains of life (Damon, 2008).

Overall, findings from Study 2 make a few contributions to the literature. First and foremost, this study adds to the existing research on purpose-centered interventions. Next, the

study builds upon the findings from Study 1 and provides a framework for a one-hour intervention, Grounding in Purpose, to cultivate ECTs' purpose as an approach that may be effective in reducing the rate of ECT attrition. Additionally, the qualitative findings suggest that the one-hour intervention does have a positive influence on ECTs' thoughts and feelings regarding their purpose. Lastly, the results from Study 2 suggest that there is potential for a positive psychology intervention to cause negative reactions and understanding participants' readiness is a critical pre-step before such an intervention.

## **Chapter 5: General Discussion**

Almost half of early career teachers (ECTs) leave the classroom in the first five years, which contributes to the increasing teacher shortage in the United States (Chang, 2009; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sutchter et al., 2019). Therefore, ECTs' attrition and commitment to the profession are critical issues to address. Through the studies in this dissertation, I examined the relationship between ECTs' purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment to the profession, and developed and tested a purpose-centered approach to reinforce ECTs' purpose utilizing Teach for America (TFA) teachers.

Overall, the findings from Study 1 highlighted that purpose contributes to ECTs' affective commitment to the profession and psychological well-being. Therefore, efforts to sustain ECTs in the profession and promote ECTs' psychological well-being should include approaches that cultivate their purpose. Quantitative results from Study 2 did not support the immediate effectiveness of the positive psychology and purpose-centered intervention, Grounding in Purpose (GIP). However, qualitative results indicated GIP may be an effective approach to ground ECTs' in their purpose.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

Thus far, I have mentioned several contributions of my research to the literature. In this section, I specifically highlight a few important theoretical contributions of my research.

#### ***Extension of Established Relationships***

Primarily, this dissertation theoretically extends the relationship between purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment and affirms the relationships holds in ECTs. The relationship between purpose and turnover intention is well-established in helping professions (Afsar et al., 2019; Esteves & Lopes, 2017). I examined purpose as it relates to

affective commitment to the profession in the context of ECTs and found that ECTs' purpose is a key positive predictor of their affective commitment. Additionally, findings from Study 1 also suggest that purpose is a positive predictor of psychological well-being and a few of its sub-components (self-acceptance, quality relationships, personal growth, and environmental mastery). Although past research shows evidence of this relationship (Bronk, 2012; Bronk, 2014; Ryff, 1989), it was unclear if the relationship applied to ECTs. This finding confirms that the relationship holds in ECTs. Overall, these theoretical contributions provide strong evidence for purpose-centered interventions to be included in approaches focused on ECT retention and highlight the many benefits of cultivating ECTs' purpose.

### ***Purpose in Educators During a Global Pandemic***

An unintended theoretical contribution of this dissertation research is that it assessed ECTs' purpose during a global pandemic. Most of the research on purpose examined populations who are living in stable environments and only a couple of empirical studies have looked at the economic impacts of purpose in youth during a great recession in Greece or from low-income backgrounds (Bronk, et al., 2019; Bronk et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to move to online, remote education overnight, for which they were not prepared. Additionally, the demands of online education continue over a year later (Dickler, 2021). This dissertation is one of the first to study and attempt to cultivate purpose in educators during the coronavirus pandemic, further adding to the theoretical robustness and relevance of purpose as a construct.

### **Practical Implications**

This dissertation also informs several practical implications for those who support, develop, and work with ECTs. I discuss a few key practical implications below.

### ***Purpose in ECT Retention Efforts***

First, current approaches to improve ECTs' retention have focused primarily on alleviating the causes of ECT attrition (enhancing resilience and improving support). In fact, ECTs' purpose has gone unaddressed in these approaches even though it is a key motivator for them to enter the profession (Moran, 2016). However, supported findings from Study 1 suggest that practitioners should include activities/reflections to cultivate ECTs' purpose in their retention efforts because it is a key predictor of their affective commitment. As such, the findings from this dissertation may directly inform TFA's and other entities' development, support, and retention strategies to include a focus on fostering ECTs' purpose. I also suggest that educational leaders encourage ECTs to connect with their purpose in existing development opportunities (mentoring, coaching, and formal professional development) as well as through their other job duties (lesson planning, working with students, and supervising extracurricular activities).

### ***Purpose-Centered Intervention for ECTs***

Next, through this dissertation research, I developed and tested a purpose-centered intervention for ECTs, called Grounding in Purpose (GIP). Earlier purpose-centered interventions focus on a variety of populations (i.e., youth, emerging adults, cancer survivors, etc), but there are no purpose-centered interventions for ECTs, let alone educators. Given the high rate of attrition in ECTs and the increased shortage of teachers (Chang, 2009; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sutcher et al., 2019), there is a great need for a purpose-centered intervention for teachers. Although quantitative findings do not support the effectiveness of GIP, the qualitative findings show promise for the intervention as an approach to help ECTs feel more grounded in their purpose. Lastly, I would like to note that the findings may not be completely generalizable to all ECTs because TFA teachers are a unique sample of nontraditional teachers. Although TFA

teachers are ECTs, they have a vastly different teaching experience given that they are teaching in underserved populations and also connect to the movement of educational equity.

However, thorough pilot testing and careful implementation are necessary to further develop a brief and cost-effective intervention to cultivate ECTs' purpose. To begin, I would design and modify activities (similar to the ones I pilot tested) that teachers could complete in a few minutes. The activities will incorporate individual and group discussion elements as well as touch on each dimension of purpose (meaningfulness, goal orientation, and beyond-the-self dimension). I would suggest that educational leaders embed the most effective and relevant activities and reflections in formal professional development sessions, coaching and mentoring conversations, and performance management. In addition to utilizing the purpose related activities in all aspects of ECTs' development, I suggest that educational leaders encourage teachers to reconnect with their purpose through lesson planning, working with students, and other job duties.

### ***Negative Reactions to Positive Psychology Interventions***

Lastly, Study 2's qualitative results suggest that participants may react negatively to positive psychology interventions. Even though the goal of positive psychology interventions is to enhance well-being in a way that is consistent with positive psychology theory (Carr et al., 2020), there is a possibility that it can harm participants. Therefore, practitioners must ensure that the positive psychology intervention meets participants' expectations and takes participants' context seriously (Görges et al., 2020). Additionally, participants may need to fulfill some criteria related to mindset for the intervention to have a positive impact. Practitioners should keep in mind participants' context and mindset and assess for readiness before offering such interventions.

## **Limitations**

Although this dissertation yielded important findings related to ECTs' purpose, psychological well-being, and affective commitment to the profession, it is not without limitations. To focus on ECTs, who are particularly susceptible to attrition, this research does not offer insight to improve the attrition of middle-career and veteran teachers. In addition, the sample of ECTs only consisted of TFA teachers who experience a vastly different approach to preparation (Kopp, 2012) and they may already have a heightened understanding of their purpose by choosing to teach with TFA, which may have influenced some of the findings. Next, all the measures in the studies are self-report in nature, which may have led to participants responding in a socially desirable way and contributed to the supported relationships. Additionally, I encountered ceiling effects when testing the effectiveness of Grounding in Purpose (GIP) due to only having complete data from teachers who were committed to and interested in the topic. Finally, a major limitation of this study is that I was not able to sufficiently pilot test the individual activities due to recruitment challenges.

## **Directions for Future Research**

Despite the limitations, the topics covered in this dissertation provide fruitful opportunities for research. Beyond mitigating the abovementioned limitations, and further refining and testing the purpose-centered intervention for ECTs (Grounding in Purpose), I would like to offer a few other key areas for future research. Overall, there is a lack of research on ECT well-being and purpose in general, thus any research that furthers the knowledge about these topics would be beneficial to the field.

## ***Upward Spiral of Purpose and Psychological Well-being***



Just as ECTs' purpose promotes aspects of their psychological well-being, research suggests that psychological well-being and its sub-components are also necessary for individuals to keep working towards their purpose (Bronk, 2012; Bronk, 2014). For example, quality relationships in the form of mentors and key supporters help guide individuals as they work towards their purpose (Bronk, 2014). Therefore, the more an individual engages in activities aligned to their purpose, the more they may perceive psychological well-being (and related sub-components), which may support them in further developing their purpose, thereby creating a positive, upward spiral. Future research should strive to examine this phenomenon in ECTs as well as other populations.

### ***Readiness for Positive Psychology Interventions***

There is a huge gap in the research on positive psychology interventions regarding participant's readiness. The findings from this dissertation suggest that a positive psychology intervention may not work if participants are not ready to engage in the activities. Thus, practitioners should assess participants' mindset and readiness before the positive psychology intervention. However, it is unclear what is the individual criteria for readiness. The literature on Appreciative Inquiry (AI), an organizational-level positive psychology intervention, and Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) may offer some guidance because both these concepts have specific criteria associated with their experience. Hammond (2013) and Ludema and Mohr (2003) explain that for an AI summit to be effective, organizational members must believe that something is going well, have an unconditional focus on the positive, and have healthy relationships amongst themselves. Additionally, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests that individuals experience flow when the task is engaging in some way. Extrapolating from these this information, readiness criteria for positive psychology interventions could be that individuals

should believe that something is going well in their lives, be able to focus on the positive components in their lives despite challenges, have a healthy relationship with themselves, and feel engaged in the topic of the intervention. However, these criteria discount the use of positive psychology interventions for treatment in clinical populations, who may not fulfill all these criteria (Carr et al., 1990). As such, future research should aim to uncover inclusive readiness criteria for all individuals to undergo positive psychology interventions.

### ***Other Data Collection Approaches***

As evidenced by my Study 2 results, quantitative data may not be as informative as qualitative data. Qualitative methods, such as a short, bi-weekly check-ins, may offer greater insights on the impact of a purpose-centered intervention over time. However, these methods should also strive to minimize the time burden on teachers as much as possible. Future research should develop rigorous, yet creative methods to collect data from teachers.

### **Lessons Learned**

Ironically or not, this dissertation research is deeply purposeful for me. My vision for this dissertation was to produce and offer knowledge that would make a real impact for ECTs. Thus, before concluding, I would like to share a few key lessons that I learned throughout my research process.

### ***Context Matters***

The nature of this research was very applied, which meant I had to work within the constraints of real-life and understand the impact of the external environment on the ECTs (Morgan, 2006). About half of the teachers in my sample had one year of in-person teaching under their belt while the others were completely new, first-year teachers. Due to the pandemic, these first-year teachers were only able to tutor three to four students online for a few hours a

week, which was completely different than what they experienced when the school year started. The other teachers had to adapt their all lessons to fit the online environment. Also, a few weeks before the date of the intervention, the Massachusetts government announced that schools would be re-opening and teachers would go back to teaching in-person. The teachers were anxious about the change, which could have impacted their focus and presence during the intervention. Knowing my participants' situation and their current context was important for me to frame the session to be as relevant as possible. Additionally, I spent time working with the TFA staff members to ensure the language and framing of the intervention was consistent with their culture. The lessons learned here are that it is critical to spend time learning about the context of the population before developing an intervention (especially as an outsider), recognize that it could be a barrier, ensure the content of the intervention aligns with the organizational culture, and be ready to pivot if needed.

### ***Timing***

In addition to the context, consideration of when teachers receive a purpose-centered intervention in the school year is important. The TFA teachers participated in the intervention at the end of the third quarter (towards the end of March). From anecdotal experience, teachers tend to be more optimistic, hopeful, and excited at the beginning of the school year. As the year progresses, teachers may experience challenges that may reduce their enthusiasm to reflect on their purpose. The lesson learned here is that I should offer the purpose-centered intervention before the school year begins because teachers may be more receptive and open to the reflection and subsequent sessions should aim to reinforce the reflections.

### ***Activities***

The activities of the intervention also play a role in the effectiveness of the intervention. Research suggests that activities in an intervention may not align with the interest of all participants (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Aside from pilot testing activities thoroughly with the target population before picking the intervention activities to ensure engagement, it would be beneficial to take time to learn more about the activities that have worked well in the past for teachers and use that information to design activities accordingly. In addition, differentiating the activities such that teachers have the choice to choose in which activity they participate is another way to meet the varying interests of teachers. For example, as evidenced in my research findings, some teachers enjoyed building a connection with a new teacher, while other teachers did not appreciate that opportunity. The lesson learned here is that a “one size fits all” approach may not be suitable for positive psychology intervention activities.

### *Assessing for Readiness*

I have mentioned readiness for positive psychology interventions a few times throughout this chapter because it had not crossed my mind until I engaged in this research. Those for whom I had complete data did not necessarily need the intervention because they already had a high sense of purpose. The teachers who need the support and help the most are those that had negative reactions to the intervention. This leads me to think that they were not ready for the intervention. It did not occur to me until I conducted this research that there may be certain criteria (mentioned above) that an individual needs to fulfill to be ready to engage in deep reflection. Also, I was incredibly surprised to learn that positive psychology interventions, whose sole purpose is to enhance individuals’ well-being, can provoke negative reactions from participants. The lesson learned here is that for some people, in some situations, a positive psychology intervention could do more harm than good. Assessing participants’ needs,

expectations, and readiness (using the criteria discussed above as a starting point) is critical. If individuals are not ready, we need to meet them where they are at and help them move closer to readiness.

### **Conclusion**

The rate of ECT attrition is high, and the number of prospective teachers is in decline. The early years of teachers' careers are critical in ensuring their commitment to the profession. ECTs have a clear purpose when they enter the classroom; however, their context does not support commitment to their purpose, often resulting in their attrition. The purpose of this dissertation research was to examine ECTs' purpose as a mechanism to sustain ECTs in the profession. The findings suggest that ECTs' purpose predicts their affective commitment to the profession, and a purpose-centered intervention may help ECTs feel more grounded in their purpose. There is no better time than now to focus on fostering ECTs' purpose and, in doing so, enable ECTs to remain in the profession to inspire young people, make a difference, and shape the future.

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## Appendix A

### Grounding in Purpose (GIP) Activity Script

#### Introduction of Purpose:

- Will occur at the beginning of each activity during the pilot testing and the integrated intervention.
- **Research support:** Content presentation orients participants to the topic and ensures they have knowledge to engage in the activity (Bronk et al., 2019; Radomski et al., 2019)
- **Script**
  - Purpose definition (Damon et al., 2003): Purpose is a 1) self-motivated aim of which the individual is the primary driving force, 2) individuals actively dedicate time, energy, and personal resources to work towards their purpose, and 3) purpose constitutes a “beyond the self” goal that serves to impact the world beyond the individual (herein lies the difference between purpose and meaning).
  - Purpose contributes to happiness, creativity, and flow
  - Purpose forms the backbone of teachers’ motivation to enter the profession
  - If ECTs have a stronger sense of purpose, it may act as a buffer to reduce burnout and increase resilience. Similarly, ECTs who focus on their purpose may be better equipped to weather the disillusionment and feelings of purposelessness resulting from the inability to make purposeful contributions in the classroom. ECTs are unable to sustain a commitment to their purpose because their personal experiences and external contexts do not reinforce their sense of purpose. As a result, ECTs’ sense purpose deteriorates over time, contributing to their attrition.
- Time spent: 5 minutes

#### Activity 1: Reflected Best-Self Exercise – Individual Reflection

- **Research evidence:** The reflected best-self exercise (RBSE) is a well-known self-developmental activity in the field of positive organizational scholarship and helps participants develop positive relational, emotional, and agentic resources (Spreitzer et al., 2009). Developing these resources will motivate individuals to continue to work towards their purpose.
- **Script**
  - Message to teachers one week before activity: Hello teachers! As pre-work to the upcoming session, I would like you to choose five people in your personal and/or professional network who know you really well. Send them an email with the questions indicated below and ask them to respond to the three questions in no more than five minutes. As you receive the responses compile them on a document or print them out (try not to read the responses). We will use the responses during our session.
  - Questions:
    - As a teacher, what do you think I am particularly good at?
    - As a teacher, what do you think I really enjoy doing?
    - How do you think I will leave my mark?
  - During Activity: Purpose of this activity is to explore what our purpose by way of seeing what others believe to be your purpose. Please pull out your email

responses. Read the responses and write down any common themes that emerged.  
What do the responses tell you about what others believe to be your purpose?  
Take seven minutes to individually reflect and write your thoughts. (2 minutes)

- Time in activity: 10 minutes

### Activity 2: Teaching-Related Purpose Quote - Individual Reflection

- **Research evidence:** Individual activities such as reflection may help ECTs stay self-motivated in pursuing their purpose (Bronk, 2014; Bronk et al., 2019).
- **Script**
  - o Here is a quote about purpose: “Teaching is a calling too. And I’ve always thought that teachers in their way are...angels leading their flocks out of darkness.” – Jeannette Walls (30 sec)
  - o Please take 10 minutes to individually reflect on what the quote means to you, specifically why you chose this profession and why you got into this field in the first place.
- **Responses expected:** Research findings affirm that many schoolteachers enter the profession not just to serve themselves, but also to contribute to positive youth and societal development (Ballantyne & Zhukhov, 2017; Schaefer, 2013).
- Time in activity: 11 minutes

### Activity 3: Your Mark – Individual Reflection

- **Research evidence:** Individual activities such as reflection may help ECTs stay self-motivated in pursuing their purpose (Bronk, 2014; Bronk et al., 2019). This activity gives teachers the opportunity to reflect on their gifts, passions, and identities that will aid them in manifesting their purpose (Bronk et al., 2019).
- **Script**
  - o Now we’re going to walk through a series of questions that will prompt you to see the intersections of your identities, passions, and gifts in order to clarify the make you hope to make on education. For this exercise you will fill in each space of the overlapping circles. [Venn diagram of 3 circles] (30 sec)
  - o Identities: Who are you? Take a moment to share who you are in the top circle. How do you describe yourself to others? How do you self-identify? What identity gives you the most pride? The most strength? The most challenge? Who are you with your friends, with your family, and in the world that feels most comfortable to you? Who are you in other spaces? Who are you at work? At TFA? (2 min)
  - o Gifts: What have others told you that you’re good at? For what have you received recognition? What comes really easily to you? What are people always asking you to do? At work? Among friends? With your family? What are your gifts? Unique wells of knowledge? Abilities? Skills? What unique ideas do you have? (2 min)
  - o Passions: What do you care most about? What fuels your indignation? What gets you out of bed and makes you stay up late? What forces you to comment when you see it mentioned on social media? What books and articles do you read? What breaks your heart? What gives you hope? (2 min)
  - o Now look inside each circle – given your identities, gifts, and passions, what could be true about the mark you want to leave? What are the connections between them? Where do they naturally seem to overlap? Synthesize your

thoughts to write words and themes that spanned multiple circles in the center. (5 min)

- Time in activity: 12 minutes

#### Activity 4: Q-sort – Small Group Discussion

- **Research Evidence:** This activity is modified from Bronk and colleagues' (2019) Purpose Toolkit, which has been found to cultivate purpose. Reflecting the statements in this activity will help teachers further understand what gives their life and work purpose.
- **Script**
  - o This activity is called a Q-sort. During this activity you will sort a series of statements into 3 categories. The categories include: most like me, somewhat like me, and not like me. You will sort 5 statements into the most like me and not like me categories, and 10 statements into the somewhat like me category. I have sent a link in the chat with the document so you can open it on your own computer and complete the sort. You have five minutes to sort the statements. (6 min)
  - o Now that you have sorted your statements, I am going to put you into small groups for seven minutes to share out your most like me statements. After you share your statements I encourage you to discuss the values that are most important to teaching and common themes that emerged across the group. (7 min)
- **Expected Responses:** Will vary based on teacher. All statements will reflect some value of teaching.
- Time spent in activity: 13 minutes

#### Activity 5: Purpose Interview – Pair Discussion

- **Research Evidence:** This activity is based on the in-depth purpose interview by Bundick (2011) and Malin et al. (2014). Simply being asked about goals and purpose related components by an active listener encourages purpose development.
- **Script**
  - o In this activity, I will pair you up and you will interview your partner for 10-15 minutes. The questions for the interview are in the file I just sent in the chat. Each of you will take turns interviewing each other. As the interviewer, I encourage you to actively listen and probe (ask follow ups) as deeply as you feel comfortable. Once 15 minutes is up, I will send a message for you to switch roles. (1 min)
  - o Questions:
    - Tell me a little about yourself as a teacher. What are some of the things that you care about? What is really important to you? What kind of teacher are you? What do you do really well?
    - If you could change anything about the field of education, what would you change?
    - Picture yourself in 15-20 years. What will you be doing? Who will be in your life? What will be important to you?
    - What does purpose as a teacher mean to you? Do you think it will remain the same for the rest of your life?
- Time in activity: 30 minutes

### Activity 6: Final Reflection – Large Group Discussion

- **Research Evidence:** As suggested by Radomski et al. (2019), discussing one's purpose and hearing others' purpose helps individuals solidify their understanding of their own purpose and helps to build a support network that is crucial in progressing towards one's purpose.
- **Script**
  - After hearing about purpose and the components of purpose, I would like you to take 3-4 minutes to reflect individually about your sense of purpose. Write down your thoughts about what you believe to be your purpose. (3-4 minutes).
  - Now, I am going to put you into breakout groups of seven to 10 for 15 minutes to share with each other your reflections and discuss how you plan to use your work as a way to make a personally meaningful difference in the broader world. (15 minutes)
  - I hope you all had a great discussion with your group members. To close the session, I would like to assign you some homework. I want you to share your emerging thoughts about your purpose with at least 2-3 people in your personal and professional network. (30 sec)
- Time in activity: 20 minutes

Pilot Study Recruitment Flyer

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Workshop designed & facilitated by: Neesha Daulat, PhD Candidate  
(neesha.daulat@cgu.edu)  
Research is certified as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Claremont  
Graduate University

## Appendix C

### Grounding in Purpose Session Plan

<b>O P E N I N G</b>  5	<p>Today we are grounding in purpose. In positive psychology, having a clear purpose is defined as a self-motivated aim in which the individual is the primary driving force. This means that the individuals actively dedicate time, energy, and personal resources to work towards their purpose. The purpose being a “beyond the self” goal that serves to impact the world beyond the individual (Damon et al., 2003).</p> <p><b><i>Facilitator explains their purpose.</i></b></p> <p>As educators, purpose forms the backbone of teachers’ motivation to enter the profession.</p> <p>As we enter the last quarter of the year, we want to ground in purpose. It is true that teaching is a difficult profession, and yet this year has brought and emphasized challenges - beyond the typical concern and exhaustion - we are also living through a pandemic, balancing new or deepened student needs, and for some of us transition to a new version of school - whether that be hybrid or in person. With all of those challenges, it is critical that we take time to pause, and ground ourselves in the bigger picture, for without it we cannot weather the disillusionment and feelings of purposelessness that can sometimes result from a feeling that we are unable to make the contributions we want to our classroom or school.</p> <p>In our time together today, we’re going to walk through a series of questions that will prompt you to see the intersections of your identities, passions, and gifts in order to further clarify the mark you hope to make the rest of this year. The greater purpose you will use to ground your priorities and actions in this last quarter.</p>
<b>M Y M A R K</b>  13	<p><b><u>My Mark</u></b></p> <p>We’re going to walk through a series of questions that will prompt you to see the intersections of your identities, passions, and gifts in order to clarify the mark you hope to make on education. For this exercise you will fill in each space of the overlapping circles. This reflection is intentionally meant to be quick. While you can use this soft copy - I recommend you draw this 3-way venn diagram and do this reflection by hand if possible. (2 min)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b><u>Identities:</u></b> Who are you? Take a moment to share who you are in the top circle. How do you describe yourself to others? How do you self-identify? What identity gives you the most pride? The most strength? The biggest challenge? Who are you with your friends, with your family, and in the world that feels most comfortable to you? Who are you in other spaces? Who are you at work? At TFA? (2 min)</li> <li>● <b><u>Gifts:</u></b> What have others told you that you’re good at? For what have you received recognition? What comes really easily to you? What are people always asking you to do? At work? Among friends? With your family? What are your gifts? Unique wells of knowledge? Abilities? Skills? What unique ideas do you have? (2 min)</li> <li>● <b><u>Passions:</u></b> What do you care most about? What fuels your indignation? What gets you out of bed and makes you stay up late? What forces you to comment when you see it mentioned on social media? What books and articles do you read? What breaks your heart? What gives you hope? (2 min)</li> </ul> <p>Now look inside each circle – given your identities, gifts, and passions, what could be true about the mark you want to leave? What are the connections between them? Where do they naturally seem to overlap? What goals could you drive towards based on the overlaps? Synthesize your thoughts to write words and themes that spanned multiple circles in the center. (5 min)</p>



<p style="text-align: center;">P A R T N E R</p> <p style="text-align: center;">24</p>	<p><b><u>Partner Reflection</u></b></p> <p><u>Framing</u> (2 mins) In partners, you will have a chance to take turns sharing and learning more about each other’s mark and how it relates to purpose.</p> <p>The format is as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Partner A interviews Partner B with outlined questions (11)</li> <li>● Partner B interviews Partner A with outlined questions (11)</li> </ul> <p>As the interviewer, I encourage you to actively listen and probe (ask follow ups) as deeply as you feel comfortable. Once the full 12 minutes is up, I will send a message for you to switch roles.</p> <p><i>Interview Questions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Using your mark venn diagram as a starting point, tell me a little about yourself as a teacher. What are some of the things that you care about? What is really important to you? What kind of teacher are you? What do you do really well?</li> <li>● If you could change anything about the field of education, what would you change? How is that related to your passions, gifts, and/or identities?</li> <li>● What does purpose as a teacher mean to you? Do you think it will remain the same for the rest of your time in the classroom?</li> <li>● Picture yourself in 15-20 years. What will you be doing? Who will be in your life? What will be important to you?</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;">C L O S I N G</p> <p style="text-align: center;">15</p>	<p><b><u>Individual Reflection (5)</u></b></p> <p>In the morning a change that you want to see in your classroom or school. In this session you engaged in reflection connected to your purpose. How is your purpose connected to the change you want to see? How is the change you want to see connected to your purpose?</p> <p>What additional support will you need - from your fellow CMs, school colleagues, MTL, etc?</p> <p>What will be your first next step? Recognizing that it is the first of many - examples can be additional reflection, connecting with fellow CMs, sharing your mark reflection with your MTL, colleagues, friends, etc.</p> <p><b>Survey (10)</b></p>