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Living the Flourish Question: Positivity as an Orientation for the Preparation of Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

In this article, the authors unpack taken-for-granted elements in a question central to their research and teaching: “What if the primary role of teachers is to learn how to thrive as educators and, in so doing, to continually co-explore and facilitate all means by which everyone in their learning communities flourishes most of the time?” As they explore a positive orientation to teaching and research, they work to understand the potential for generative and positive growth in themselves and school communities. Their article focuses upon seeking to create and sustain personal and professional flourishing at the heart of educational practice and consider how flourishing may be central to what it means to become a teacher.

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Living the Flourish Question: Positivity as an Orientation for the Preparation of Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

In this article, the authors unpack taken-for-granted elements in a question central to their research and teaching: “What if the primary role of teachers is to learn how to thrive as educators and, in so doing, to continually co-explore and facilitate all means by which everyone in their learning communities flourishes most of the time?” As they explore a positive orientation to teaching and research, they work to understand the potential for generative and positive growth in themselves and school communities. Their article focuses upon seeking to create and sustain personal and professional flourishing at the heart of educational practice and consider how flourishing may be central to what it means to become a teacher.

Introduction

Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. (Rainer Maria Rilke)

Recently, teacher educators and educational researchers have been attempting to live a certain kind of question. The question has not been readily taken up in educational research, and yet stepping into this kind of inquiry provides an interesting and fruitful shift in thinking, being, and practicing as scholars and teacher educators. This question, which has prompted this paper, is “What if we imagine that the primary role of teachers is to learn how to thrive as educators and, in so doing, continually co-explore and facilitate all means by which everyone in their learning communities flourishes most of the time?”

This “what if” question appears simple and even attractive. The question makes teachers’ personal and professional well-being the foundation from which educators then figure out, with others, how the well-being of everyone in their communities might, likewise, thrive. Life is hard, it is unfair, it can be ugly, it is unevenly experienced. No amount of “pie-in-the-sky” idealism, wishful thinking, or optimism significantly alters the realities that place us and those we care about on the spectra of happiness and despair or thriving and suffering. Leadership advisor, Max DePree, championed his view that although the first task of a leader may be to define reality, the last task of a leader is to say, “Thank you.” This statement encourages the focus on gratitude, compassion and other human capacities that may have mistakenly been imputed with the reputation of being soft and without substance. In our work, we are aiming to provide teacher candidates with evidence-based and research-attuned exposure to concepts such as compassion, hope and trust. The human spirit is complex and we suggest that fundamental questions of personhood, identity and attention to what gives life (and what depletes it) are crucial to our work as educators. We have endeavored to unpack the taken-for-granted elements that constitute the infrastructure of the question to better understand its potential for generative and positive growth in ourselves

and the school communities that we all seek to create and sustain. In this article, we share how we have been living this question in our research and our teaching. We describe the literature that informs our inquiry, outline a conceptual model that has emerged from this literature and provide several stories of our experiences as teachers in university settings and with our research participants. We aim to shed light on the potential for teacher development that focuses on the use of positive psychology and organizational studies perspectives. Ultimately, we invite readers to think with us about the potential of living attuned and aligned to this provocative question inside and beyond the education domain.

Using Positive Research to Conceptualize Flourishing in Schools

We locate our research in the fields of school development, positive psychology (Carr, 2004; Seligman, 2011) and positive organizational scholarship (Cameron et al., 2003) linked to our ongoing research within learning community theory (Cherkowski, 2012; Cherkowski & Walker, 2011; Sackney & Walker, 2007). We support recent suggestions by established scholars in educational administration (e.g., Hoy & Tartar, 2011) to incorporate dimensions of positive psychology in educational research. Positive psychological practices encourage the development of positive outlooks, habits, and mental models and focuses on describing and building positive qualities in individuals rather than trying to repair the negative and destructive ones (Achor, 2011; Ben-Shahar, 2008; Seligman, 2002). It is the study of the conditions, strengths, and virtue—the study of what goes right in life—that enable individuals and communities to thrive (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Keyes, Frederickson, & Park, 2012). In general, traditional views have focused on “deficit models,” whereas positive psychology applies a “strengths-based” lens (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

As we have said elsewhere (Cherkowski & Walker, in press a), effective schools are characterized as communities of learners where, as Mitchell and Sackney (2009) stated, “real, joyful, human learning is at the centre of educational activity” (p. 2). If we think of schools as living systems that embrace their humanity to become life-enhancing rather than life-destroying, then one way to understand learning communities is as living systems, vibrant and growing communities of learners (Capra, 2002; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009). Where schools are organized around the principles of living systems, the work to increase

capacities results in synergy for new skills and knowledge, enhanced and focused resources, and focused commitments (Sackney, 2007, p. 172). Schools, as learning communities, generate hallmarks that include a sense of belonging, compassion for all, loyalty, trust, mutual attachments, hopefulness and shared concerns (Strike, 2004, 2007). Such communities of learners foster mutual cooperation, emotional support and personal growth, and produce a synergy of effort to improve learning for all (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The re-framing and re-culturing of schools as true communities of flourishing learners forms the foundations for the building of the personal cognitive, psychological, emotional and physical resources that transforms people for the better, enabling them to thrive.

As teacher educators, we want to focus our energies on efforts that foster educators' self-flourishing, as well as helping them to develop life-giving learning communities within which students, their families and the entire learning community will also thrive. Recently, the focus on children's social emotional learning in schools (Cohen, 2001; Elias & Arnold, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2003), moral development through character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005), and even more prescriptively, learning how to develop empathy among school children (c.f., Mary Gordon's Roots of Empathy program) are examples of research and program development which contribute to our understandings. Although the role of teachers is highlighted as a key element that ensures the success of these initiatives for developing students' capacities and capabilities (Zins et al., 2004), research has yet to sufficiently focus on cultivating and nurturing educators' abilities to deepen their own human capacities and capabilities within the learning community model. Given the antecedent role of educators to foster well-being in their students' lives, we think this is a significant gap in our field of study.

A growing discipline of positive psychology is committed to uncovering the varied ways that humans can tap into a greater sense of well-being in their lives through attending to personal strengths and positive growth towards a sense of flourishing (Seligman, 2011). People who flourish experience the opposite of languishing, yearning for more, or feelings of being stuck in a rut (Keyes & Lopez, 2002). People who flourish are more resilient and come closer to self-fulfillment, contentment, and happiness (Haybron, 2008; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Rasmussen, 1999).

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) emerged from the discipline of positive organizational psychology (Carr, 2004) and continues to contribute theory on positive human capacity development in organizations and communities. POS research focuses on “the dynamics leading to the development of human strength, producing resilience and restoration, fostering vitality, and cultivating extraordinary individual and organizational performance” (Cameron & Caza, 2004, p. 3); where an emphasis is placed on the ideas of goodness and human potential, meaningfulness, and high quality relationships for all. In our research we use a positive organization lens to view the learning community and the people within it. This perspective in educational research may offer innovative ways of enhancing the teaching and learning that goes on in schools (Hoy & Tartar, 2011) and offers an alternative to rational technical, high stake performativity models for school improvement and accountability.

We have drawn from the positive psychology and POS fields to develop a tentative conceptual model for flourishing in schools (see Figure 1). The emergent model is underscored by a holistic view of the development of human capacity (Nussbaum, 2011; Scheffler, 1985; Sen, 2009) from a learning community perspective. We posit that the elements of this model have high resonance for teacher candidates, especially as their role is conceived as creating space for their own and others’ flourishing. Three intersecting domains of attention: (1) Subjective well-being; (2) Leaderful mindsets; and (3) Adaptive community provide the foundation for exploring the phenomenon of flourishing. Hosting virtues—compassion, trust, and hope—combine and interact to evoke the nexus of flourishing schools. In the next sections, we describe the three domains and weave stories of our own experiences with teaching and research to reflect on the usefulness of the model for teacher education.

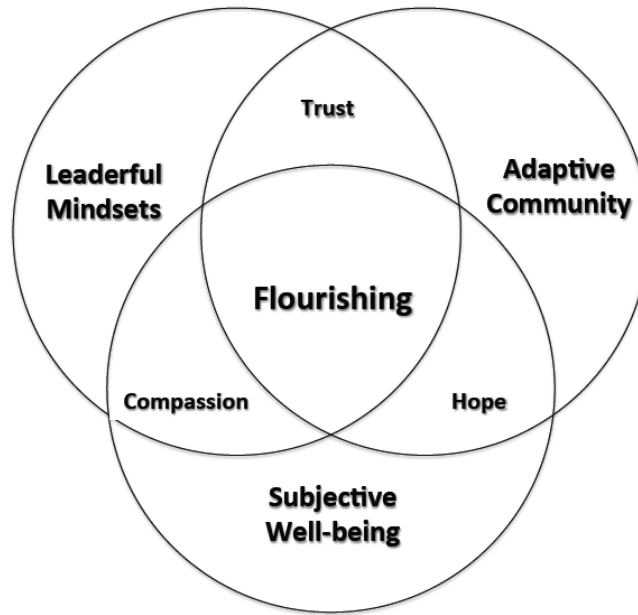


Figure 1. Model for Flourishing in Schools

In this figure, we suggest that: if teacher candidates could be encouraged to attenuate to the presence or absence, and actualization of subjective well-being, leaderful mindsets and adaptive community leanings, together with increasing their own, and others', capacities to reinforce and privilege the hosting virtues of compassion, trust and hope, then, flourishing in schools of people is more likely to be realized as a way of life. We see the development of trust as hosting or mediating between teachers, leaders and their learning communities. Interpersonal trust-brokering is a key hosting virtue of leaders, followers and the community. We think that the opposite of good is not “bad” but rather apathy or unloving disaffection. As leaders and followers reciprocate love, charity, and compassion in relationships then subjective well-being and leadership excellence is shared, accelerated, sustained, transformed and multiplied. The dreams, visions, and aspirations of communities are mediated by hope, which sees human purpose, potential and teleological attentions realized. The greatest good, happiness or well-being, is the cause towards which a community must adapt, shift, and support itself in order to attain. The higher good of well-being is for the common good and commonwealth. We believe that, as teacher candidates,

and subsequently, professional educators, it is the primary role of these trustworthy, compassionate and hope-purveying persons to promote flourishing in themselves and in their schools.

Subjective Well-being

Diener and Seligman (2004) described well-being as “peoples’ positive evaluation of their lives, which includes positive emotion, engagement, satisfaction, and meaning” (p. 1). Experiences that increase peoples’ feelings of positive emotion will improve their well-being by buttressing their physical, social, mental, and psychological resources (Diener, 2000; Frederickson, 2008; Frederickson & Losada, 2005). Of course, the capacity to access these resources is highly beneficial to learning processes (Achor, 2011). We see rich potential in adapting these research findings for schools, for uncovering ways of nurturing neophyte and cultivating veteran educators’ abilities to deepen their own human capacities, and in so doing, facilitate the enhancement of capacities and capabilities within the learning community.

The stories and experiences described to us by our students and by our research participants when prompted to talk about the importance of flourishing in their work encourages us to continue to think about ways of engaging teachers and teacher-candidates in thinking about well-being as a central aspect of their work. Recently we carried out an online Delphi survey of school principals in a rural district in British Columbia (Cherkowski & Walker, 2013). We aimed to get a better understanding of the concept of flourishing in schools through their stories, experiences and insights on how they describe, notice, cultivate, imagine and aspire to flourishing in their work with teachers, students and community members. As a survey instrument, a Delphi consists of progressive iterations of rounds of questions in which data is synthesized after each iteration, and then further elaborations, interpretations or extensional insights are requested from original participants (Dillman, 2007). The use of this instrument to gather an iterative understanding of the concept of flourishing through an electronic means enabled us to gather a maximum number of individual opinions on a topic, without bringing participants together to discuss the topic—a seemingly worthwhile methodology in an increasingly time-deficient education system. In essence, this method

allowed for the collective wisdom of the group to surface through the various iterations of the survey.

We used a video clip of Shawn Achor's TED Talk¹ highlighting the findings from research on positive psychology and learning as the prompt for the second round of questions for the Delphi. Many of the participants responded that they found value in watching and learning from the video as part of the survey and that learning about some of the science of positive thinking from the short video affirmed for them that gratitude, joy, compassion and hope, for example, can be cultivated in schools and are often the precursors to establishing meaningful learning opportunities for students and teachers. An interesting outcome of including the video clip as the prompt for this round of questions was that one principal responded that he was so excited about the content of the video that he was going to show it to the teachers at the next staff meeting in hopes of generating conversation about the importance of well-being in their work in the school. Keith has had similar experiences of eliciting generative conversations about flourishing when using learning materials from positive psychology such as Shawn Achor's TED Talk in his classes with teacher candidates.

Before showing or assigning the TED Talk, Keith gives the teacher candidates an opportunity to consider their own state of well-being, using the Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2006) or the commonly used (i.e., Gallup) Cantril Self-anchoring Striving Scale (Cantril, 1965). Students arrive at their own self-assessed determination of well-being and experience facilitated conversations around this. Another example of an exercise is where students are provided with the well-being results from a learning community of about 500 respondents (parents, students, and staff) with the challenge to interpret the data (Cantril scores for various groups) and consider what the leverage points and challenges for school development might be.

¹ There are many TED Talks that serve as wonderful discussion primers for teacher candidates, including: ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work.html

Leaderful Mindsets

We have observed that positive role modeling throughout a school can lead to a vibrancy and a school full of leaders (Sackney & Walker, 2007). We link the concept of mindsets (Dweck, 2006; Kaser & Halbert, 2009), or a shift in thinking, to the need for broadening leadership capacity in schools (Eaker & Keating, 2009; Fullan, 2006; Slater, 2008).

Increasingly, professional learning is becoming connected to concepts of teacher leadership (Muijs & Harris, 2006; Timperley, 2005) and together these are seen as a foundation for successful school improvement (Donaldson, 2008; Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Mayrowetz et al., 2007; Gabriel, 2005; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). Ensuring capacity for sustainable school improvement means that formal leaders must develop leadership capacity at many levels of the school (Elmore, 2000; Slater, 2008). We have seen in our teaching the benefits of creating opportunities for students and teachers to develop a sense of ownership for developing a positive and caring climate in the university classroom and for creating this capacity for leadership mindsets in our classroom communities.

Frederickson's (2009) "broaden and build" theory of positive emotions informs us that persons who experience positive emotions enable their further resources for intellectual, physical, social, and psychological capabilities. We therefore assume that students' experiences of positive emotions in the university classroom will enable their further resources for intellectual, physical, social and psychological capabilities such as those we attribute to our notion of leadership mindsets.

In the undergraduate policy and leadership class that Sabre teaches for elementary education teacher candidates, she initiated a classroom practice that aimed to bring awareness of individual and collective agency to create positive spaces for learning. At the beginning of the semester, after talking about the theory of learning communities, she invited the students to brainstorm the values that they believed to be important for creating a positive learning community. She developed this idea after reading Frederickson's (2008, 2009) research and Peterson and Seligman's (2004) research on character strengths that has resulted in a list of 24 values and virtues, such as compassion, love of learning, appreciation of beauty. Peterson and Seligman found that when individuals intentionally included and honoured these strengths throughout the various aspects of their lives (at work, in

relationships, in their hobbies and volunteering) these individuals reported a greater sense of overall well-being.

In her class, she and the students listed values such as honesty, honouring diversity, compassion, the need for giving and receiving constructive and respectful feedback as well as the value of laughter and play as important to building and sustaining their learning environment. They then decided as a group which of the list could be held as shared values. With the students, she established a routine for inviting students to set positive intentions as a way of signalling individual and communal agency in creating a climate for well-being in the classroom community. These moments enabled the students and her to reflect on their personal and collective positive agency—or what we might recognize as leaderful mindsets—in their classroom community. Near the end of the semester, she rearranged the routine during one class to allow for a guest speaker. One of the students waited patiently for her to introduce the speaker and then asked, “are we going to set our intention today? I’ve been looking forward to this today. I’ve had a crazy day and I really need that time to set my intention.”

Keith has vivid early recollections of a sage faculty mentor advising him that teacher education is best conceived of as leadership education and development. The mentor was a 30+ year veteran working in a First Nations and Metis teacher education program. This viewpoint held that an exclusively rational-technical approach with teacher candidates was woefully inadequate, short-sighted and even cruel. Yes, excellence in classroom-level leadership and authentic pedagogic practice were required and fundamental competency sets but there was a pattern of feedback, expressed as gratitude, received from this mentor’s former students who thanked him for the way he had built up their dispositions and vision to engage staff, students, families and communities in healthy patterns of living, gathering, mutual support, and decision making. The number of chief and council members who had their leader qualities and visions initially forged and inspired under the relational influence of this strategic influencer was astounding. He had held their well-being and his pastoral care for them and their families as his primary interest. The outcomes and impacts were profound and had been multiplied many times over in the lives of graduates. Yes, the mechanics of curriculum, instruction and assessment, with all the associated competencies

and dispositions were highly regarded, but the reality for this mentor's teacher candidates was that when they had been teaching in their communities for a short while, they would succeed to significant places of influence and were attitudinally equipped for the accompanying stewardship and fostering of the well-being of their constituents (including, but not limited to, their students). As a practical exercise in bringing the leaderful mindset into focus, Keith has, for a number of years, offered the development of a template-based leadership portfolio or a narrative-based leadership portfolio as a part of the course learning contract.

Adaptive Community

The concept of community has been well-researched in education framed within perspectives of ethics, professionalism, inquiry, inclusion, among others (Brouwer et al, 2012; Furman, 2004; Little, 1990; Louis & Marks, 1998; Redding & Thomas, 2001; Strike, 2007; Wenger, 1998). From a sociological perspective, researchers indicate that we often build community in schools because we are drawn to work and live together in ways that help us to make deeper meaning of our lives (Block, 2009; Brown & Hannic, 2008; Rifkin, 2011; Vanier, 2003). Developmental psychology applied to research in leadership in organizations (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, 2009) and schools (Drago-Severson, 2009) highlights the importance of supporting adults through a challenging and caring community for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1998). We establish the construct—adaptive community—linked to ideas of resiliency (Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Seligman, 1998; Werner & Smith, 2001; Wolin & Wolin, 1993) and self-aware, context-sensitive, emergent systems (Capra, 2002; Heifetz et al., 2009; Senge, 2006).

We know that students (and teachers) do their best learning in supportive, compassionate, and caring environments (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007) and have thought about how to develop new ways of thinking about community from a positive perspective in education (Cherkowski & Walker, in press b).

If a community of learners is framed as a setting or space where people congregate to flourish together, then teachers are the primary hosts or leaders of such communities. Leadership might be described as the hyphen between host and hosted, between leader and

follower, between mentor and protégé, or between teacher and learner. Like the word “relationship,” leadership describes the chemistry or nature of community connection between and amongst people rather than something that is inherent within the person or persons, themselves. An excellent relationship speaks to the quality of connections between two or more persons (the hyphen); and so, leadership speaks to the intentional effort of connected persons to strive towards creating more flourishing within a setting and within the members of the community. Flourishing people will naturally, out of their own thriving, influence others to flourish. What emerges from this way of framing learning communities is a vision that sees everyone as a teacher, every member as a leader and all participants as learners. Our contention is that teacher candidates are benefited when they understand and assume their role as animators and hosts within leaderful, resilient, reciprocal, and learningful settings.

Raelin (2003) offered the view that leaderful and adaptive learning communities will have concurrent, collective, collaborative and compassionate features. He said that in leaderful practice, followership and leadership are in essence part of the same process “. . . [where] leaders and followers are the interchangeable parts in the conduct of leadership” (p. 36) for the accomplishment of some greater and higher common purpose (we suggest this is fostering flourishing).

One of our participants in the Delphi study gave us an imagined story of flourishing that resonates with the ideas of resilience, connectedness, hope and joy at work:

The scene: a crowded staffroom after a rigorous debate and discussion about a student/learning related matter. The crowd: is inclusive, administrators, teachers, support staff. What do you see? People mingling. One sign on the whiteboard reminds folks that next Tuesday is "Soup Day" and who will be bringing the food. Another sign reminds everyone of a future staff party (organized by the school custodian) is going to be a cross-country ski event followed by a wine and cheese at a teacher's cabin.

What do you hear? Engaged, respectful conversation. Laughter—lot of it.

What do you taste? Plates of homemade chocolate chip cookies brought by the PAC [parent advisory committee] with a note, “thanks for caring so much about our kids.”

Hosting Virtues: Compassion, Trust and Hope

Whether fostering leaderful mindsets, adaptive community or subjective well-being, our aim with teacher candidates has been to engage them in what might be conveyed as the vitamin C's of teacher candidate development. We want them to increase in consciousness, competence, commitment and courage with respect to flourishing. Our facilitation of teacher candidates' learning aspires to provide some sense-making and conceptual clarity with respect to human flourishing. We think that if teachers are sensitive to and aware of the vital place of flourishing and its antecedents then this is a great start for them (consciousness of place of flourishing in schools). Secondly, if we can put beginning teachers in touch with what gives them life and enhances their own thriving (or to become aware of entropic or energy zapping patterns), then developing the competence to move beyond suffering and struggling to thriving will provide them with a base from which to develop the same with others. Finally, we have sought to encourage teacher candidates to adopt, habituate and foster flourishing as a key professional commitment and to understand that to consistently make this promise of focus a priority will take much courage and persistence.

We think that conversation about the practices and challenges associated with trust-brokering, championing compassion, and instilling hope are key aspects of professional virtue development. As indicated, we believe that compassion and hope are vital hosting or teaching virtues for those who want to see more flourishing in schools. For teacher candidates to custom-create their own vision of the future with a co-sense of what their own and others' flourishing will and ought to look like, gives rise to passion and this passion held with others is compassion. We would like them to say, “we are here at this level but we need to be there!” as they reflect on their lives and the lives of others in the learning community. Or, “we know what well-being looks like and we want more of it for ourselves and especially for those who experience its lift less than do others.” Teacher candidates

need to be able to define reality and to assess current states of well-being relative to preferred and desirable states. Whether the learning community is losing steam and in a slump or is sleepy and plateaued in its energy levels or perhaps it is making great and dynamic headway, the teacher needs to have a sense for this. Teachers are tasked with the great challenge of sustaining the engagement of all members of their learning community. Of course there are culture busters and culture builders. We believe that teachers hold the key placements in schools to foster generative and synergistic settings of trust and hope which are anchored in their love for the people entrusted to them. Compassion is a big deal in schools; teacher candidates will learn by experience that sowing compassion will result in harvests of compassion. The same reciprocity principle applies in the case of other hosting virtues: hope and trust.

Concluding Thoughts: Teacher Education as Learning to Flourish

Based on research, we know that attending to strengths and positive outlooks, as opposed to a deficit-model of thinking, can increase resilience, vitality, and happiness and can decrease stress, anxiety, and depression (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). We see how we can use the findings from research in the science of positive psychology in service of greater flourishing in schools. Social-emotional learning is linked to increased academic achievement (Elias, 1997, Cohen, others) and is recognized as an important element for student development and success in school and in life (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007). From a positive psychological perspective, increasing or maximizing social-emotional learning is an essential element in establishing habits for lifelong learning, but also for lifelong well-being. Moreover, being happy and feeling good are often necessary precursors to meaningful learning and development, so attending to feeling good at school is a necessary step in establishing school climates where children and their teachers can thrive (Achor, 2011).

There is also a growing awareness that learning is a social process and that much of what goes on in schools happens in a social context. Students do not learn alone, but in collaboration with their peers, their teachers, and with others in their learning community. Attending to emotions and social processes is an essential element in creating positive and caring learning climates where students can thrive. We suggest that teachers also need

similar learning climates in the school organization in order to take risks in their practice, make mistakes, open their private practice to collaborative inquiry, to pursue their passion, engage in meaningful relationships with their colleagues and create moments of play in their work—flourishing learning climates. Knowing that meaningful learning happens when we feel cared for, feel good and are generally happy (Knoop, 2011), we consider well-being as an integral element of a positive learning climate where students and teachers can flourish. As we continue to live the questions, in our teaching and our research, that open us to the complexity of the human spirit and awaken us to the crucial work as educators of exploring how we host and are hosted by the professional virtues of compassion, trust and hope, we sense that developing a personal understanding of flourishing may be central to learning what it means to become a teacher.

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