

A Narrative Inquiry of Upper Elementary Teachers' and Students' Experiences with  
Classroom Transformations

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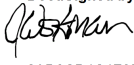
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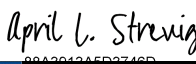
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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study used narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of six upper elementary teachers and focus groups of their students who engaged in classroom transformations. A classroom transformation is an innovative instructional approach that capitalizes on novelty and the classroom's physical environment to create an immersive and engaging learning experience for students. Constructivism and sociocultural theory served as the framework of this study and guided its design. Data were collected through two approximately 90-minute semi-structured interviews with teachers, examining the participants' experiences before, during, and after implementing classroom transformations, as well as the meanings they attached to the practice. Six, approximately 60-minute, student focus groups were conducted to capture the experiences and perspectives of a group of each of the teacher participants' students.

The findings suggest that classroom transformations have positive outcomes for teachers and students by promoting creativity, agency, collaboration, and improved student behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. While challenges such as time, costs, and resources were noted, participants offered solutions and expressed that the benefits they associated with the practice were worth the investments. The implications of this research suggest that classroom transformations are a viable strategy to promote student engagement and teacher agency, while also offering guidance for teachers interested in classroom transformations and suggestions for how administrators and educational leaders can support innovative instructional design.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction to the Study**

Although discredited and criticized, the approaches to teaching and learning remain relatively unchanged from traditional passive learning approaches (Smith & Smith, 2020; Smylie, 2010). Many teachers are provided scripted curriculums, and their voices during the curriculum decision-making processes are often ignored (Walker, 2016). The traditional top-down style of curriculum development and adoption often limits teachers' ability to exercise agency in curriculum decision-making and implementation, leaving many teachers feeling constrained in their ability to innovate and adapt their teaching practices (Biesta et al., 2015). Vangrieken et al. (2017) indicated that when teachers have limited control over curriculum decisions, their motivation and job satisfaction can decline, negatively affecting their teaching effectiveness. Still, teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and values have powerful implications on their motivation to plan and improve their pedagogical approaches (Chia & Goh, 2016). These factors act as a lens through which the educator interprets and navigates instructional decisions, the curriculum planning and implementation process, and how they interact with students. Biesta et al. (2015) asserted that teacher agency is crucial for successfully fostering environments and pedagogy that support student-centered learning.

These curricular decisions are essential because the practices implemented by teachers influence student engagement and consequently affect student learning and behavior (Lekwa et al., 2018). Gallup conducted surveys with grades 5-12 students and

found that about “half of the students who responded to the survey are engaged with school (47%) with approximately one-fourth ‘not engaged’ (29%) and the remainder ‘actively disengaged’ (24%)” (Hodges, 2018, para. 8).

Steenberghs et al. (2021) asserted that disengaged students were likelier to experience poor academic performance, truancy, and behavior issues. The 2023 results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) long-term trend (LTT) assessment indicated a continued drop in academic performance for 8- and 13-year-olds since 2012, with students performing below the 50th percentile showing the most significant declines (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2023). A 2022 Gradient Learning poll of 400 teachers across the United States reported that 80% of teachers were concerned about their students’ engagement (Gradient Learning, 2023). To combat the negative implications associated with disengagement, some teachers are interested in learning more about innovative educational practices but perceive support and availability of resources as insufficient and challenging (Karolčík & Marklová, 2023; Smith & Smith, 2020). The lack of resources and support leaves many teachers feeling constrained in their ability to innovate and adapt their teaching practices (Biesta et al., 2015).

Murphy and Ingram (2023) conducted a literature review and found that despite a considerable amount of research on affective factors (beliefs, motivation, and emotion) in relation to achievement and engagement, issues related to student engagement and participation continue to exist. As a response, the researchers posited that due to limited research on classroom practices, there is a lack of knowledge of specific classroom practices that address students’ affective processes. Sharing effective strategies focused

on engaging students cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively may combat the negative implications associated with disengagement (Benlahcene et al., 2020; Whitson & Consoli, 2009).

Exploring and understanding the experiences of teachers and students with instructional approaches that engage and motivate students has the potential for positive implications for teaching and learning. If upper elementary students experience decreased motivation and engagement, the best way to remedy this problem is to talk directly with teachers and students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

One of many barriers to innovative instructional approaches is the maintenance of the status quo; traditional passive learning approaches continue to dominate teaching and learning, and some teachers are resistant to departing from and are over-reliant on less effective learning approaches (Smith & Smith, 2020; Smylie, 2010). Marks (2000) asserted that instruction that relied on passive student behaviors fostered boredom, and student engagement suffered as a result. Highly engaged students tend to achieve higher grades, invest more effort into learning, and demonstrate greater intellectual competence (Fredricks et al., 2004; Pöysä et al., 2019). In contrast, disengaged students are more likely to face negative consequences that affect both their academic performance and their behavior (Davies et al., 2018).

Student disengagement and lack of motivation will likely continue to impact student learning and behavior negatively. Sharing strategies focused on engaging students cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively may elucidate effective methods to combat the negative implications of disengagement and demotivation (Benlahcene et al., 2020;

Whitson & Consoli, 2009). One strategy that is gaining attention through teacher-focused social media outlets is called *classroom transformations*. Although practitioners have posted about classroom transformations on social media platforms, there is limited scholarly research on this strategy. It remains an emerging area of research because very few empirical studies have been conducted on the topic.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe, share, and learn from the experiences of upper elementary teachers as they conceptualize, plan, implement, and evaluate classroom transformations and the students who experience the transformed learning environment. I hope to inform interested educators about a practice that has the potential to increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning. For this study, I collected stories and descriptions of upper elementary teachers' and students' experiences with an innovative instructional strategy called classroom transformations (CT) or *room transformations*. For this study, upper elementary is defined as third, fourth, or fifth grade. Previous researchers have noted that students' motivation decreased as they aged and progressed through grade levels, and student disengagement levels tended to increase (e.g., fifth grade versus fourth grade) (Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021; Yang et al., 2022). In response, I focused on upper elementary school teachers and students instead of including lower elementary (kindergarten through second grade) teachers and students.

A classroom transformation is the deliberate planning and execution of a temporary, novel, themed, and immersive learning experience that transforms the aesthetics of the routine physical classroom environment to promote student engagement and motivation while engaging in learning academic content (Buczyna, 2022; King &

King, 2017; Pickett, 2020; Seiki & Gray, 2020). Benlahcene et al. (2020) found that novelty positively predicted student engagement and suggested educators implement strategies to address students' novelty satisfaction as a practical implication of their study. Relatedly, in their study, Jung and Shelton (2023) identified novelty as a key factor in differentiating between highly satisfying experiences and less satisfying experiences. Seiki and Gray (2020) posited that nontraditional curricular forms have the potential to elicit emotional responses and bring students closer to the content through engagement with physical immersion.

The goal of studying teachers' and students' experiences with classroom transformations was to provide educators with insights into what classroom transformations are and what implementing a CT might mean in their classrooms. Teachers' experiences included what led them to the practice, what it took to plan and execute, what they did and saw during a classroom transformation, and what they believe results from implementing classroom transformations. Students' experiences included their descriptions of a specific classroom transformation and how they perceived the experience affected them cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively. By providing an opportunity for teachers who implement classroom transformations and the students who engage in classroom transformations to share their experiences, I hoped to share common beliefs, approaches, and wisdom that would be helpful to teachers who are interested in classroom transformations.

Current anecdotal academic conversations on CT point to impacts on classroom culture, student motivation, student engagement, student behaviors, and student achievement (Buczyna, 2022; King & King, 2017; Pickett, 2020). Still, there is a lack of

scholarly research on this topic, with most literature found only on social media and in trade magazines. With its growing popularity, studying teachers' experiences with classroom transformations provides translational research for educators to consider. Students and teachers could ultimately benefit from this research if more teachers plan and implement learning experiences focused on engagement.

### **Research Questions**

To provide insight into the experiences of teachers and students as they engage in transformed learning, the following research questions frame this qualitative research study:

**Research Question 1.** What experiences did upper elementary teachers have socially, educationally, and professionally before, during, and after implementing classroom transformations?

Examining prior experiences included what led teachers to the practice, experiences that influenced their motivation for instructional innovation, personal characteristics, the evolution of their teaching philosophy, and the planning process involved with executing a classroom transformation. Teachers' experiences during the implementation of a classroom transformation included detailed descriptions of the roles of the teacher and students, activities, and classroom environment during a classroom transformation. Teachers were also asked to share successes, challenges, and any experiences that resulted from implementing classroom transformations.

**Research Question 2.** What meanings did the teachers attach to the experience of classroom transformations that influenced their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making?

The second research question focuses on exploring the personal meanings teachers attached to classroom transformation experiences and how these experiences have impacted their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making. Specifically, I aimed to understand how CT impacted their beliefs about teaching and learning, how CT may have influenced their teaching behaviors through instructional practices or interactions with students, and how CT has impacted their decision-making processes, including, but not limited to, curriculum design and instructional strategies.

**Research Questions 3.** What recommendations do teachers implementing classroom transformations have for teachers, teacher educators, and administrators that could enhance the experience of using classroom transformations in school?

This research question focuses on gathering practical recommendations from the study's participants to provide valuable guidance for various stakeholders, potentially enhancing the overall effectiveness of classroom transformations.

**Research Question 4.** What themes emerged from students who experienced transformed learning environments?

Since classroom transformations are designed for students, my goal with this research question was to explore the impact classroom transformations had on students by talking directly to them. Themes were constructed based on the storied experiences told by student focus groups. Answering this question helped report potential factors that influence student engagement during a classroom transformation.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptualization and framing of this study were heavily influenced by my own experiences with classroom transformations. Maxwell (2013) explained experiential

knowledge is often neglected but is “one of the most important conceptual resources” when constructing a framework for a study (p. 44). I was introduced to classroom transformations roughly seven years ago when my co-teacher sent me images of a classroom transformation on social media. In an Instagram post, I saw many colorful and large decorations surrounding the room, and it immediately triggered my attention and engaged my curiosity because of the novelty of an unfamiliar classroom space. Gone were the traditional rows of desks, florescent lighting, and drab cinderblock walls. Instead, tables had been transformed to look like jeeps, safari hats were prepped and waiting on tables for eager students, and backdrops with flora and fauna covered the walls. Just as quickly as I was captivated, I dismissed any prospect of replicating the experience for my students believing it required too much time and money to execute reasonably. In fact, I did not even attempt to execute a classroom transformation until years later. I believe that experiencing two contrasting perspectives on the execution of a classroom transformation—skepticism and embrace—was valuable as I attempted to connect with participants and share their stories. Additionally, engaging in conversations with professors and practitioners of CT served as what Maxwell described as a thought experiment to aid me in identifying possible theories to undergird my study’s conceptual framework. A pilot interview also helped me to “develop an understanding of the concepts and theories” held by my target population (Maxwell, 2013, p. 67).

### **Theoretical Premises**

Developing a theoretical framework was an integral component of the research process. It provided structure and guidance to build my study, served as the lens to conceptualize the study's rationale, problem, purpose, and significance, and guided the

formulation of the research questions (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The two theories that undergird the theoretical framework for this study include constructivism and sociocultural theory. These theories provided structure and served as the foundation for understanding and interpreting the experiences of teachers implementing classroom transformations. Constructivism focuses on the individuals' active role in constructing knowledge, while sociocultural theory extends the construction of meaning within a social and cultural context. I believe the two theories complement each other, and the overlap and connections helped me to explain and understand the experiences of teachers and students engaging in a classroom transformation.

### ***Constructivism***

Rooted in the work of Bruner, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky, the constructivist theory focuses on the knowledge-building process that occurs through experiences, synthesis, and reflection (Olusegun, 2015). Teachers actively construct and accumulate knowledge and meaning through personal interactions with their students, curriculum, instruction, and learning environment (Chuang, 2021). My goal was to collect, understand, learn from, and share upper elementary teachers' narrated experiences and meaning-making processes as they planned, implemented, and reflected on classroom transformations. Constructivism helped define the scope of the data collected to address my study's research questions. Through the theoretical lens of constructivism, I explored the participants' current and previous experiences that impacted their beliefs, decisions, values, and behaviors. According to Chuang (2021) and Olusegun (2015), constructivism has significant applications in the pedagogical approaches utilized by teachers as well as applications in teacher education and professional development.

In relation to classroom transformations, I explored participants' experiences before, during, and after classroom transformations and the meanings they attached to the experience. Accordingly, this allowed me to focus on how teachers and students actively constructed and accumulated knowledge and meaning through their interactions with each other, the curriculum, the instruction, and the learning environment before, during, and after classroom transformations.

### ***Sociocultural Theory***

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provided a framework to approach my study from a classroom culture perspective. Sociocultural theory focuses on how culture and society develop individuals (Main, 2023). Main (2023) explained that according to sociocultural theory, social and cultural events develop people's beliefs and values. For this study, sociocultural theory was applied in the educational setting to highlight how peer and teacher social interactions, within the context of classroom transformations, influenced learning and the development of beliefs and values.

### ***Self-Determination Theory as an Alternative Theory***

A competing theory, self-determination theory (SDT), is a motivational theory developed by Deci and Ryan (2000). The researchers postulated that three basic psychological needs must be satisfied to promote motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Informal academic conversations suggested practitioners of classroom transformations aim to motivate students by designing meaningful learning experiences that align with students' interests and abilities (Buczyna, 2022; King & King, 2017; Pickett, 2020). Focusing on the three basic psychological needs identified by SDT, classroom transformations provide students with *autonomy* through the choices and

decisions made during the activities the teacher has planned, *competence* through the engagement in tasks aligned to students' abilities, and *relatedness* through the opportunity to collaborate with peers and teachers (King & King, 2017).

I initially explored this theory because my personal experiences with classroom transformations led me to speculate that fulfilling the three basic psychological needs is a factor in increasing student motivation. However, I feared that including this theory would be based on assumptions I made about CT and would not necessarily align with my study's purpose of exploring teacher and student experiences with classroom transformations. This theory may be better suited as a theoretical framework for a study on classroom transformations using a quantitative or mixed methods approach.

### ***Methodological Premises***

Creswell and Creswell (2018) asserted that a qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring and understanding a subject with which very little research has been conducted. Despite growing interest in classroom transformations, very few studies have been conducted, leaving us unsure about teachers' and students' experiences, the meanings they attach to these experiences, and their implications. As part of my research design, I aimed to interact directly with teachers and students, allowing them to share their experiences and address these gaps in research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted the importance of stories as a means to understand and communicate experiences. I chose narrative inquiry as the qualitative approach to understand the stories of my participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016) through "in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing" (Seidman, 2019, p. 14). Seidman posited a multipart interview allows context to be established through the reconstruction and

narration of participants' life history and present experiences. My constructivist belief that prior experiences impact current and future experiences solidified my decision to use a modified version of Seidman's three-interview series.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained narrative inquiry as a collaboration of the researcher and participants to understand experiences. The collaboration, conversations, and dialogue indicative of narrative inquiry helped me build rapport with my participants. It also allowed me to fulfill my personal goal of solidifying my position and experiences with classroom transformations in the context of others' experiences. This approach enabled me to achieve my intellectual goal of understanding the meanings that teachers and students constructed and attached to their experiences with classroom transformations, and helped me understand how the practice impacted their beliefs and classroom practices.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is its investigation of a practice that currently has limited scholarly research due to the newness of the strategy. Current research investigating social media's impact on teacher collaboration, physical classroom environments on student satisfaction and engagement, student engagement on academic achievement, and the effect of novelty on learning exists (Heesup et al., 2019; Richter et al., 2022; Vidic, 2021). However, there is a gap in research that explores the specific practice of classroom transformations (CT) in upper elementary classrooms. Classroom transformations potentially impact student achievement, classroom environment, student engagement, and classroom culture, but due to its relatively recent development, there is a lack of research on this specific topic. Coupled with its growing popularity, research

into this phenomenon would provide timely and relevant research. This study offers a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on teacher instructional practices and provides educators with salient information about the benefits and challenges in implementing CT.

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

Assumptions, delimitations, and limitations that influence and shape the design and scope of my research are discussed in this section.

#### ***Assumptions***

Merriam (2002) suggested the disclosure of “assumptions, biases, [and] connection to...the study,” to enhance the study’s reliability (p. 21). My personal experiences with classroom transformations and anecdotal academic conversations about classroom transformations have led me to believe classroom transformations positively impact student engagement and student motivation, and influence classroom culture. I believe my experiential knowledge positively influenced my work by providing me with a foundation for understanding the experiences of other teachers engaging in and experimenting with CT. Although I have personal experiential knowledge on the topic, I actively minimized and addressed researcher biases by acknowledging and consistently reflecting on my subjectivities throughout my study. As argued by Maxwell (2013), it is important to be deliberate and intentional about reflecting on the subjective Is that influence the interpretation of data. Reflecting on when positive or negative feelings and reactions are experienced helped me to identify and monitor subjectivity.

One of my assumptions was that the success of a classroom transformation is much larger than the mere planning and implementation of the experience. Based on the

investment required for a classroom transformation, I assumed that practitioners of classroom transformations were not the type of teachers who clock in and out according to contractual hours. I think teachers who plan and implement classroom transformations believe in the importance of student engagement and motivation, and I believe these teachers are interested in creating a classroom culture that values having fun while learning. These assumptions are based on my personal experiential knowledge and the anecdotal conversations I have had with other classroom transformation practitioners.

A personal connection to a topic of study can present both an advantage and a disadvantage. Participants' experiences may be confounded with the researcher's personal experiences, presenting as bias. However, an insider perspective could also present itself as a strength. A researcher with personal experience may be able to build a rapport with an interviewee quickly and capture the participant's experiences authentically.

Through the reflexivity and subjectivity process, I initially identified my extensive experience in classroom transformations as a concern in the process of understanding and interpreting the experiences of others. There is a potential to project my own experiences and beliefs onto the participant's experiences. However, Maxwell's (2013) text on subjectivities helped me to identify the positive aspects of having a personal experience. My experience in classroom transformations provided the background knowledge required to help interviewees tell their stories in a way that an inexperienced researcher might not be able to. Maxwell explained research does not have to be the sterile, objective experience some claim it should be.

Because I am an advocate of the practice, I was vigilant against projecting my personal beliefs and experiences onto my participants. I acknowledged my subjectivity to actively guard against its influence in data collection. Peshkin (1991) suggested continuous, systematic, and formal monitoring of subjectivities. A continuous reflective and introspective process is one way to address the potential disadvantages of personal beliefs, goals, and experiences.

Another way to address the potential disadvantages of how my experiences may impact my beliefs and assumptions is through robust data collection by using multiple data sources. Using interviews, memos, member checking, and other artifacts to triangulate data helped to cross-check, address, and mitigate the potential disadvantages of my personal beliefs and experiences.

### ***Delimitations***

One of the goals of my study was to provide practitioners with an opportunity to share their experiences with classroom transformations to equip other educators with information to consider what CT might mean in their own classrooms. The study's population, upper elementary teacher practitioners of classroom transformations, is not representative of all teachers who could be impacted by the study. However, I am hopeful the findings will benefit teachers beyond the identified population. Because of my personal experience as an upper elementary teacher and existing research from Raufelder and Kulakow (2021) and Yang et al. (2022), which noted a decrease in students' motivation and an increase in student disengagement levels as students aged and progressed through grade levels, I was particularly interested in upper elementary as the target population.

My practical goal necessitates using key informants who are particularly knowledgeable about CT and “are willing to share their knowledge” (Patton, 2015, p. 284). I used purposeful sampling to recruit individuals for my study because I needed participants with specific characteristics. I used *intensity sampling* to seek “excellent or rich examples” to study and understand “selected cases of special interest” (Patton, 1990, p. 170). I identified these information-rich cases with the help of administrators familiar with the practices employed by their teachers. I recruited upper elementary teachers in grades three through five with at least three years of teaching experience and who have conducted at least three classroom transformations. To reduce the confounding effects of beginning teacher challenges, I established three years of teaching experience as a criterion.

The sample for the study was open to any gender, ethnicity, race, or religion. I recruited teachers from one school district in South Georgia because the proximity allowed me to conduct student focus group interviews in person. Four to six students from each teacher’s class were recruited for the student focus group interviews.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained narratives include one or two individuals, while Kim (2016) reported qualitative theorists do not agree on the optimal sample size and explained the sample size could range between five to 25 participants. However, both Kim and Creswell described saturation as being the desired point at which data no longer elicits new insights. I began data collection by seeking a sample of approximately six to 10 teacher participants for research questions 1 through 3. I believed the approximation to be a realistic projection of the sample size with which I would be able to access, since CT is still a relatively newly shared practice. Six current practitioners of classroom

transformations that fit the established criteria agreed to participate in my study and completed the series of two interviews. The smaller number allowed me to conduct multiple interviews with each participant to get an in-depth understanding of their experiences.

### ***Limitations***

Although this study offers in-depth insight into the experiences of the six teacher participants and the student focus groups as they engaged in classroom transformations, like all qualitative research, it is not generalizable. Qualitative research is not generalizable because it focuses on context-specific experiences from a few participants, making the findings specific to the contexts studied. The findings are specific to the participants and may not be representative of other districts, schools, subjects, or grade levels. Instead, Patton (2015) explored the term *extrapolation* because generalizability isn't possible since phenomena "are too variable and context bound to permit very significant" generalizations (p. 710). Instead, extrapolation identifies the potential application of the findings with the understanding that other contexts will not be identical but could be applicable if there are similar conditions.

Additionally, because the data comes from teacher interviews and student focus groups, the self-reported data can introduce bias. The reliance on participants to share their memories may influence them to be selective, reactive, or socially desirable (Maxwell, 2013).

### **Definitions**

Clarifying definitions relevant to this research establishes a common understanding of the key terms and concepts that are used throughout this study. The

following key terms are salient to the understanding and analysis of classroom transformations and are defined in this section.

### **Student Engagement**

Student engagement is comprised of three dimensions—cognitive, behavioral, and affective involvement of learners (Ali & Hassan, 2018; Marks, 2000). Engagement behaviors that manifest within the three dimensions include high attendance, complying with teacher requests, completing assignments, collaboration, participation in activities, and positive emotions related to teachers, peers, academics, and schools (Ali & Hassan, 2018; Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

### **Classroom Environment**

Classroom environment refers to the “intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn” (Ambrose et al., 2010).

### **Classroom Transformation**

A classroom transformation is the practice of changing the classroom’s physical environment using visuals, props, decorations, costumes, sounds, and smells to create a novel learning environment from what students encounter in the classroom daily.

Classroom transformations typically have themes or settings that may or may not relate to the content being taught. The purpose of a classroom transformation is to promote student engagement by creating a high-interest learning environment that impacts students emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively (Buczyna, 2022; King & King, 2017; Pickett, 2020).

## Chapter Summary

Despite criticism of traditional, passive learning approaches, these methods remain prevalent (Smith & Smith, 2020; Smylie, 2010), often leaving teachers with limited curriculum decision-making, which also affects student engagement and learning outcomes (Biesta et al., 2015; Lekwa et al., 2018; Walker, 2016). Ultimately, my goal was to conduct a study that offered an in-depth look into the experiences of upper elementary teachers and students as they engage in an approach that challenges the prevailing traditional, passive methods—classroom transformations. In the process, I learned how classroom transformations shaped the participants' classroom culture through the values, beliefs, and meanings the teachers and students associated with the practice.

Classroom transformations involve creating an immersive, themed environment that departs from the routine classroom setting to engage students emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively. This study fills a gap in the scholarly research on CT, which has primarily been discussed in social media and trade magazines rather than in academic literature.

The research is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes the active role of individuals in constructing knowledge through experiences, and sociocultural theory, which considers how social and cultural contexts shape learning and development. The study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, focusing on the stories and experiences of teachers and students before, during, and after implementing classroom transformations.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform educators about the benefits and challenges of CT, providing practical insights that could enhance teaching practices and student outcomes. The findings offer valuable recommendations for teachers, teacher educators, and administrators, contributing to the broader discourse on innovative instructional strategies that foster student engagement and motivation.

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study and presented the problem statement, purpose, research questions, and significance of the research. In Chapter 2, I establish a foundation for this study and provide support for the importance of conducting the research through a literature review. Literature on concepts that undergird classroom transformations and research on related innovative instructional practices are analyzed and synthesized in the review of the literature. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the study's methodological approach, including research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the participants through individual narrative profiles. Chapter 5 reports the research findings through the analysis of the collected data, and Chapter 6 includes a discussion of the findings, their implications for educational practices, and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

Twenty-first-century learning emphasizes innovation, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving. As teachers seek to cultivate these qualities within their students, they find themselves as “social innovators who develop creative pedagogies” (Howard et al., 2018, p. 851) while also embracing the role of 21st-century learners by testing and taking risks in their instructional design (Henriksen & Mishra, 2015). Some teachers are exploring and adapting practices that challenge traditional teaching paradigms; however, there are obvious gaps in the literature for these new approaches. For example, classroom transformations have gained attention in popular literature as a method of enhancing student engagement and motivation by eschewing traditional, passive instructional approaches, but scholarly literature on the topic remains lacking. Addressing this gap can contribute valuable information to the academic community to support teachers in their efforts to enhance or shift their pedagogical approaches to instruction.

Due to the scarcity of scholarly literature on the specific topic of classroom transformations, one goal of this study was to review and better understand the literature on the concepts that underpin the purpose of implementing classroom transformations. Additionally, prior research on related innovative instructional strategies with similar driving motivations for implementation was also reviewed to identify common trends, relevant theoretical principles, and key constructs germane to the implementation of innovative instructional approaches. This literature review is organized into four topics

and aims to synthesize previous literature on (1) student engagement and motivation, (2) classroom culture and environment, (3) innovative pedagogical approaches, and (4) teachers' experiences and perceptions of nontraditional teaching approaches.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This section explains the two theories, the *theory of constructivism* and the *sociocultural theory*, that undergird the theoretical framework for this study. These theories provide structure and serve as the foundation for understanding and interpreting the experiences of teachers implementing classroom transformations and students engaging with classroom transformations. Together, these theories explore the construction of meaning on an individual level as well as mediated through social and cultural contexts.

#### ***Constructivism***

Constructivism as a learning theory is generally attributed to Piaget but influenced by the work of Bruner, Dewey, and Vygotsky. Its central tenets include a focus on the knowledge-building process that occurs through experiences and the idea that learning is an active process (Chuang, 2021; Hein, 1991; McLeod, 2024; Olusegun, 2015). As explained by Krahenbuhl (2016), in constructivism, “knowledge is derived in a meaning-making process through which learners construct individual interpretations of their experiences and, thus, construct meaning in their minds” (p. 4). Constructivism is especially salient in educational contexts, as the reflection of experiences facilitates dialogue, organization, generalization, and meaning making, which serve as the “driving force(s) of learning” (Fosnot & Perry, 2005, p. 34). How an individual constructs new knowledge is personal and dependent on how they assimilate or accommodate their

existing knowledge (Applefield et al., 2000; McLeod, 2024; Olusegun, 2015).

Assimilation is the process in which an individual incorporates new experiences into the existing knowledge, while accommodation involves altering previous understanding to include new experiences (Olusegun, 2015).

A significant portion of existing literature on constructivism focuses on teachers exploring and using constructivist methods in their instructional approaches using student-centered learning approaches (Applefield et al., 2000; Mbonane & Mavuru, 2022; McLeod, 2024; Olusegun, 2015). However, constructivism can also be used as a theoretical model in teacher education and professional development to encourage teachers to reflect on their instructional practices to improve their craft (Kumari, 2014). Kumari (2014) asserted that the critical reflection of experiences “continues to be an effective technique for professional development” and can support the growth of teachers (p. 31). In his research on the constructivist perspective, Prawat (1992) asserted that “teachers’ views of teaching and learning influence their classroom practice” (p. 356). Teachers’ prior experiences influence their instructional decisions, their beliefs about teaching and learning, and their expectations for their classroom (Applefield et al., 2000; Prawat, 1992).

In the context of this study, constructivism serves as the framework for exploring the experiences of participants as they planned and executed classroom transformations. Participants were interviewed to understand how their prior experiences influenced their beliefs, values, behaviors, and decision-making, and the meaning they attached to classroom transformations. Using a constructivist worldview, I began to interpret and understand the meaning of classroom transformations from the experiences and views of

the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In terms of my research questions, the theoretical framework of constructivism allowed me to explore teachers' experiences before, during, and after the implementation of classroom transformations, the meanings they have constructed and attached to those experiences, and the implications of those experiences on future beliefs, values, behaviors, and decisions.

### ***Sociocultural Theory***

Sociocultural theory is related to constructivism because of the emphasis on the active role of the learner and the social construction of meaning (Hein, 1991); however, sociocultural theory can be used to specifically explore how social interactions of a classroom community influence students' and teachers' experiences, classroom culture, and learning (Yoon & Kim, 2012). Vygotsky (1978) is credited with the development and expansion of sociocultural theory, and although the theory is based on constructivism, it places a greater emphasis on human interactions and the concept of culture (Yoon & Kim, 2012). "Culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, norms, customs, behaviors, symbols, and practices that characterize a particular group or society" (Bernard, 2024, p. 16). Vygotsky emphasized the role of culture in cognitive development and argued cultural practices, beliefs, and values within a society shape the intellectual tools children use. Sociocultural theory focuses on how culture and society develop individuals (Main, 2023) and has been used as a theoretical framework to research the intentional use of social and cultural factors to influence and support learning in educational approaches such as game-based instruction (Plass et al., 2015). Sociocultural theory was also used as a lens to investigate both student learning and educator professional development in research by Jeong et al. (2022) and John-Steiner and Mahn (1996). Social relationships

significantly influence students' cognitive development, and because using socially motivated instructional approaches improves student learning, understanding the effects of culture on students' cognitive development is essential for educational stakeholders (Bernard, 2024; Goodman, 2014).

A key principle in Vygotsky's (1978) work is the concept of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the range of tasks and understanding a student can achieve with the support and guidance of a more capable individual and highlights the potential for learning through social interactions (Bernard, 2024; Main, 2023; Vygotsky, 1978). Bernard (2024) posited that through social "interactions with peers, adults, and the cultural environment, individuals internalize social and cultural practices, language, and ways of thinking, shaping their cognitive processes," and the transmission of culture occurs "through social interaction, instruction, and participation in...activities" (p. 18). By capitalizing on the principle of the ZPD, educators can design instruction rooted in the tenets of sociocultural theory by using collaborative learning and social interactions to improve learning and build relationships.

Main (2023) explained that according to sociocultural theory, social and cultural events develop people's beliefs and values. For this study, sociocultural theory can be applied in the educational setting to highlight and analyze how peer and teacher interactions influence learning and to explore how the transmission of the classroom culture influences the beliefs and values of individuals through the shared experiences of classroom transformations. Therefore, I aimed to study and understand how teachers' and students' social interactions and shared experiences influenced their individual and

shared beliefs, values, and behaviors, and the implications of the experiences on the classroom culture.

### **Exploring Student Engagement and Motivation in Education**

Researchers have presented considerable knowledge that has contributed to the understanding of student engagement and motivation. These constructs are considered to be of importance because of the desirable outcomes associated with their use and the undesirable outcomes associated with their absence. Teacher and school practices can influence student motivation (Brewster & Fager, 2000), which is a necessary factor in student engagement (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Many teachers seek effective strategies to motivate and engage students cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively because of the known implications of motivation and engagement. Classroom climates lacking student engagement fail to maximally support students to meet their potential. Student motivation, student engagement, the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs, and the implications on teaching and learning are explored to build the background of this dissertation.

#### **Student Motivation**

The construct of motivation has been widely studied in the domain of educational practices. Motivation plays a critical role in students' learning behaviors (Ambrose et al., 2010). A student who is “energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated,” whereas a student “who feels no impetus or inspiration to act” is described as unmotivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 54). Ryan and Deci (2000a), psychologists renowned for their research on motivation, explicated the distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation and its impact on learning and achievement. Intrinsic motivation

refers to a desire to act because it is inherently interesting, and extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because of an external driving force. Intrinsic motivation has generally been characterized as superior because of the high-quality learning and creativity associated with the nature of engaging in inherently interesting experiences, while extrinsic motivation can sometimes present as rudimentary compliance to satisfy an external outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012).

In their qualitative case study, Saeed and Zyngier (2012) examined how intrinsic and extrinsic motivation influenced and impacted student engagement and found their research confirmed intrinsic motivation was associated with authentic student engagement that produced student effort and concentration to understand content as opposed to merely completing tasks. However, for apathetic and disengaged students, extrinsic motivators have acted as a catalyst to help develop intrinsic motivation. Utilizing extrinsic forms of motivation is one way teachers can successfully engage students in tasks and learning that may not be intrinsically motivating (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012; Serin, 2018).

Pekrun (2014), an educational psychologist, focused his research on the influence of emotion on motivation and learning. Emotions in the classroom are significant because “emotions control the students’ attention, influence their motivation to learn, modify their choice of learning strategies, and affect their self-regulation of learning” (Pekrun, 2014, p. 6). In the academic setting, four groups of emotions are relevant to student learning experiences: achievement emotions, epistemic emotions, topic emotions, and social emotions (Pekrun, 2014). Achievement emotions are related to the success or failure of an activity. Epistemic emotions are related to new, non-routine tasks and the curiosity,

surprise, or confusion induced by the task. Topic emotions are positive or negative emotions triggered by the learning material. Social emotions are related to the relationships within the classroom with teachers and peers. Classroom transformations seek to motivate and engage students in learning by creating a new and engaging physical environment students find valuable and connect with emotionally (King & King, 2017). Motivation and engagement are closely related constructs that impact one another (Fredricks et al., 2004; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Thoughtfully designed instruction that integrates relevant, meaningful, and cognitively appropriate tasks can foster student motivation and engagement, ultimately positively impacting student achievement.

### **Student Engagement**

Student engagement is an integral component of successful learning experiences. Davies et al. (2018) asserted the importance of student engagement in producing desirable outcomes such as learning and achievement, while student disengagement resulted in undesirable behaviors. Students who are disengaged are more prone to behavioral problems and low academic achievement (Steenberghs et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022), while their highly engaged peers tend to earn higher grades, show a greater commitment to learning, and exhibit greater cognitive abilities (Fredricks et al., 2004; Pöysä et al., 2019). Student engagement has the potential to address issues of student motivation, achievement, and overall academic success. Many factors contribute to the level and type of student engagement. Providing teachers with the tools and strategies to address the different dimensions of engagement supports them in fostering a classroom culture and environment conducive to academic success (Whitson & Consoli, 2009).

Fredricks et al. (2004) identified student engagement as multidimensional, with interrelated components contributing to the overall level of engagement. They explicated three types of engagement: (1) behavioral engagement includes positive conduct, absence of disruptive behaviors, attendance, and attentiveness; (2) emotional engagement or affective engagement includes levels of interest, happiness, attitude towards learning, and a sense of belonging; and (3) cognitive engagement refers to the investment in learning, self-regulation in learning, putting forth intellectual effort, and flexibility in thinking. Often, behavioral engagement is given more attention than the other two domains of engagement because of the apparent physical signs that are tangible and observable and, consequently, easier to identify and measure (Fisher et al., 2023). However, various factors impact the three facets of student engagement in the classroom.

Pöysä et al. (2019) found emotional support from teachers was associated with higher levels of students' emotional engagement, while classroom organization was associated with students' behavioral and cognitive engagement. Other factors, such as students' perceptions of student autonomy and relatedness of instructional content, also contribute to student engagement (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2023; Shernoff et al., 2003; Yang et al., 2022). Autonomy and relevance are two of the three basic psychological needs identified in previous research on motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). By understanding the importance of these basic needs and providing related support, educators can knowledgeably plan educational experiences that contribute to student engagement.

## **Basic Psychological Needs**

To better understand Ryan and Deci's (2000a) research on motivation, I familiarized myself with the literature on the motivational theory they developed and coined as self-determination theory (SDT). The researchers established three basic psychological needs must be satisfied to promote motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. There is a critical need in education to establish pedagogical practices that prioritize the fulfillment of student's basic needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence because of the implications for student engagement and motivation. In their study of gifted learners, Jung and Shelton (2023) found some students exhibited task avoidance behaviors when instruction lacked value, relevance, and meaning, even if they possessed the capability to perform cognitively. Ryan and Deci (2000b) asserted satisfying the three basic psychological needs promotes motivation, engagement, and well-being—a statement also supported by other researchers (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Yang et al., 2022). Raufelder and Kulakow (2021) noted empirical research showed students' motivation decreased as they age and progress through grade levels. As such, there is a specific need for strategies that address fulfilling the three basic needs of upper elementary and older students to combat this trend. When the three needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are satisfied, mental health and motivation are enhanced, but when thwarted, motivation and well-being decrease (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Autonomy refers to the ability to make choices and have the psychological freedom to self-regulate. Competence relates to students' ability to master challenging activities and experience efficacy. Relatedness refers to the need for meaningful social connection in the classroom environment (Benlahcene et al., 2020).

Educators can enhance instructional plans by deliberately conceptualizing and implementing practices that fulfill these needs through various strategies. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) explained the basic need for autonomy could be satisfied by providing students with choices and explaining the reasoning, relevance, and need for each learning experience to foster student-learner agency. Creating an environment of warmth and respect supports the need for relatedness, and providing relevant feedback and planning appropriately leveled challenges satisfies the need for competence (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In his study, Hattie (2003) found teachers were a significant variable in student achievement, and the knowledge they possessed, the actions they took, and what they valued as priorities were influential components of the type of student learning they facilitated.

Relatedly, anecdotal academic conversations suggested practitioners of classroom transformations aim to motivate students by designing meaningful learning experiences that align with students' interests and abilities (Buczyna, 2022; King & King, 2017; Pickett, 2020). Focusing on the three basic psychological needs identified by Ryan and Deci (2000b), classroom transformations provide students with *autonomy* through the choices and decisions made during the activities the teacher has planned, *competence* through the engagement in tasks aligned to students' abilities, and *relatedness* through the opportunity to collaborate with peers and teachers (King & King, 2017). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the educational setting to promote student motivation and well-being are precursors to student engagement.

## **Implications of Student Engagement and Motivation on Teaching and Learning**

Student motivation has been and continues to be a topic of educational research because of its close relationship to desired student outcomes such as achievement (Al-Said, 2023). Saeed and Zyngier (2012) posited that because of the significance of motivation and engagement on learning, teachers should seek to understand the value of these two constructs and utilize this knowledge in designing work that motivates students and provides opportunities for students to be actively engaged in their learning. Understanding student motivational factors has implications for developing and using methods that have the potential to increase student engagement and consequently increase student learning (Zimmermann et al., 2018). In their study, Singh et al. (2022) aimed to explore the relationship between student motivation and student engagement and found positive and negative motivational factors showed a correlation with engagement. Ryan and Deci (2000b) suggested fulfilling the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness was a precursor to intrinsic motivation. Teachers need to consider student individuality, academic tasks, and the school and classroom environment as important factors in student engagement (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). In Al-Said's (2023) study, interview participants identified the teacher as a significant factor in fostering both positive and negative student motivation. Teachers' experiences with planning, executing, and reflecting on the value of instructional strategies impact their meaning-making process, beliefs, and future instructional decision-making. As teachers explore strategies that motivate and engage students cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively, they reflect on instructional approaches they have deemed valuable, which will consequently impact their behaviors, emotions, beliefs,

values, and decisions in the future. Understanding student motivation, student engagement, and basic psychological needs is critical in designing and implementing effective pedagogical approaches. As a strategy focused on heightening student engagement and motivation for learning, understanding these constructs creates the foundation for the work required to study and examine the practice of classroom transformations.

### **Classroom Culture and Learning Environment**

Teachers are the architects of their classroom's culture and environment. The classroom environment includes the physical environment but also comprises the social, emotional, cultural, and cognitive dimensions of the setting where learning occurs (Ambrose et al., 2010; Closs et al., 2022; Matthews & Lippman, 2020; Nyabando & Evanshen, 2021; Oliveras-Ortiz et al., 2021; Rusticus et al., 2022; Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2020). Classroom culture and learning environment affect student engagement, motivation, behavior, and learning (Cole et al., 2021; Guardino & Fullerton, 2010; Klem & Connell, 2004; Sullivan et al., 2006; Tu, 2021). The beliefs, values, behaviors, and classroom norms shared by teachers and students influence, and are influenced by, learning experiences. Additionally, teachers' experiences, including the meaning teachers have attached to their experiences, influence their beliefs, behaviors, decision-making, and the classroom culture they construct and cultivate (Applefield et al., 2000; Prawat, 1992).

Research on classroom culture and learning environment connects to the overall study of classroom transformations because this pedagogical approach has the potential to serve as a vehicle for teachers to use the physical classroom environment and

innovative pedagogical approaches to their advantage to create a classroom culture that fosters an enthusiasm for learning, an expectation for collaboration, and increased student motivation and engagement.

### **Classroom Culture**

Sullivan et al. (2006) suggested classroom culture plays a role in student engagement or disengagement in the learning environment. The researchers conducted two-hour interviews with over 50 students and found students' attitudes about learning math are not predicted by their achievement. Instead, the researchers postulated that classroom culture may be a determinant of engagement or disengagement in the classroom. Each classroom has its own culture, which has the power to influence engagement and affect. I reviewed related literature on classroom culture because I have established sociocultural theory as the theoretical framework to undergird this study. Teachers can use classroom transformations to influence and establish a shared classroom culture. Classroom culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms that have been established (Bernard, 2024). Classroom culture is closely linked to student engagement; classrooms with a positive culture—characterized by mutual respect, shared goals, values, and a strong sense of community—tend to have higher levels of all three types of engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004; Tu, 2021). Students are more likely to participate actively in class, express their ideas freely, and invest effort into their learning when they feel valued and supported. Squire et al. (2003) and Tu (2021) posited that classroom culture was influenced by teachers' experiences, teaching style, pedagogical approaches, teacher personalities, classroom environment, materials, and relationships. Squire et al. (2003) argued their study on the use of innovative curricula highlights the

importance of school and classroom cultures in the learning process. Emphasizing the impact of classroom culture on instruction and learning, they asserted that “curriculum designers need to acknowledge that their designs are not self-sufficient entities; instead, during implementation, they become assimilated as part of the cultural systems in which they are being realized” (p. 487).

### **Classroom Physical Environment**

The classroom environment can be manipulated to improve engagement in various ways to positively impact student learning (Cole et al., 2021; Guardino & Fullerton, 2010). Guardino and Fullerton (2010) suggested if teachers collected data on student engagement and disruptive behaviors, they could identify physical aspects of the classroom environment to be modified to produce positive effects. Modifying the physical learning environment using flexible seating is one innovation that has gained popularity and attention in social media and research. Cole et al. (2021) found students preferred a variety of seating choices as opposed to traditional classroom seating. This preference was evident in the selection of flexible seating options more frequently than traditional seating in their study of second and fifth-grade classrooms. The researchers also found the flexible seating environment promoted student engagement through collaboration and structuring the room to promote active learning as opposed to passive instruction through teacher-centered lectures. Another approach to utilizing the classroom environment is through the innovative use of the physical classroom space to create high-interest learning environments that engage students’ creativity and produce relatable conceptual understandings (Kellock & Sexton, 2017; Seiki & Gray, 2020). Factors of the physical classroom environment influence student satisfaction as well as teacher

motivation (Heesup et al., 2019; Nyabando & Evanshen, 2021; Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2020). Nyabando and Evanshen (2021) sought to investigate students' perceptions of the physical learning environment and found both physical and emotional factors of the classroom environment contributed to the overall satisfaction of second-grade students, including themes of active learning and social engagement opportunities. The students' perceptions of the learning environment were positively influenced when the classroom's physical environment reflected displays and peripherals aligned with their interests (Nyabando & Evanshen, 2021). In their study, Seiki and Gray (2020) found students' motivation increased by creating a tangible and engaging three-dimensional rainforest classroom installation in their case study on an immersive physical classroom environment.

Traditional learning spaces have encouraged passive learning experiences and have not promoted student engagement behaviors (Prince, 2004; Zimmermann et al., 2018). As a response, educators and researchers have studied factors and practices that influence student engagement and motivation (Jung & Shelton, 2023). Teachers may want to consider the novelty effect and its positive implications during classroom design. A transformed physical space can increase student engagement by creating an embodied and meaningful learning environment (Kalpakis et al., 2018; Seiki & Gray, 2020). Current classroom transformation practitioners have created embodied learning environments utilizing novelty consequences that have positively fostered motivation and student engagement in lessons (Buczyna, 2022; King & King, 2017; Pickett, 2020). Notably, researchers have examined other immersive learning environment strategies utilizing virtual, augmented, and mixed reality (Gautam et al., 2018); however, limited

research exploring transformed *physical* classroom environments exists. Further investigation addressing CT would resolve this knowledge gap and provide a comprehensive analysis.

### **Innovative Pedagogical Approaches to Motivate and Engage Students**

The support for implementing pedagogical approaches that eschew traditional instructional practices has previously been documented in scholarly literature. Scholars including John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner advocated for innovative instructional approaches that engaged students in active learning where the teacher deliberately planned the learning environment to facilitate learning as opposed to passively bestowing knowledge onto students (Olusegun, 2015). Hsieh et al. (2013) found a positive correlation between student experiences and learning performances. Teacher education must incorporate experiences that encourage new ways of teaching (Beyer, 2001) with a focus on innovative curriculum design aimed at engaging previously disengaged students (Seiki & Gray, 2020). Effective teachers understand they must take deliberate action to secure their students' interest and attention to cultivate learning (Wardlow, 2016). Teachers are among the strongest influences on student learning outcomes, and a teacher's intentional practices have the potential to produce above-average effects on student learning (Hattie, 2009). Given the limited scholarly literature on classroom transformations, I have identified various instructional approaches closely related to the underpinnings of classroom transformations and have included related research in this literature review: (1) novel learning experiences, (2) gamification, and (3) simulation-based learning. Literature on these related approaches is discussed before

presenting a section detailing an examination of the literature on classroom transformations.

### **Novel Learning Experiences**

Utilizing novelty to create a memorable experience is a primary component in executing a classroom transformation (King & King, 2017; MacLellan, n.d.). To better understand the implications of novelty using classroom transformation, I reviewed the literature on the study of the implications of novelty on learning. Novelty refers to an experience that deviates from the routine (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; González-Cutre & Sicilia, 2019) and can, in turn, have positive student effects on attention, emotion, memory, and behavior (Mello-Carpes, 2020; Smock & Holt, 1962). In their study of the three basic psychological needs, González-Cutre et al. (2020) found that in addition to autonomy, competence, and relatedness, novelty influenced intrinsic motivation and satisfaction. Deci and Ryan (2000) defined intrinsic motivation as active engagement with tasks characterized as novel and optimally challenging. Similarly, González-Cutre and Sicilia (2019) found novelty positively predicted students' intrinsic motivation, while routine experiences habituated students and caused disengaged learners. As a practical application of González-Cutre and Sicilia's research, the researchers suggested teachers deliberately change elements of instructional content to introduce novelty. In their study of middle and high school students, Jung and Shelton (2023) found novelty was a key factor in students rating a learning experience as satisfying versus unsatisfying. The researchers identified that the students in their study perceived novelty via new academic content and new approaches or delivery of instruction. Novelty can be introduced using different stimuli, such as changing fonts, sounds, and pictures, or through an entirely

different environment, referred to as spatial novelty (Schomaker, 2019). Additionally, the introduction of novelty has been found to have cognitive impacts on learners through improved memory formation and memory persistence (Lorents et al., 2023; Ramirez Butavand et al., 2022; Schomaker et al., 2014). By planning and executing atypical and unfamiliar learning experiences, teachers can foster student interest and increase motivation to support learning (Stoa & Chu, 2023). Although Smock and Holt (1962) explained perceptions of novelty were not always positive, they generally produced positive behaviors such as curiosity motivation.

The novelty effect can be used to explain an increase in student motivation and engagement when implementing unfamiliar and nonroutine experiences (González-Cutre & Sicilia, 2019). Benlahcene et al. (2020) tested the relationship between students' basic psychological needs, including novelty satisfaction, with aspects of student engagement and found novelty was positively related to behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Willis (2010), a board-certified neurologist and classroom teacher, identified practical solutions to incorporate novelty in the classroom through a changed room arrangement, new displays, costumes, or even music; all these suggestions are the basic classroom components changed for a classroom transformation. These changes capitalize on the positive effects of novelty by deviating from the routine classroom experience and routine classroom physical environment.

### **Gamified Instruction**

Research on gamified learning has explored instructional practices that leverage motivation to optimize students' learning experiences. *Gamification* is a term that emerged in the early 2000s and refers to the incorporation of game concepts,

including short-term rewards, problem-solving, specific tasks, and competition to enhance productivity (Dewey, 2024; Plass et al., 2015). Plass et al. (2015) posited one of the most predominant reasons to consider games for learning “is that they allow for a wide range of ways to engage learners” (p. 260). Plass et al. further explained cognitive, affective, motivational, and sociocultural perspectives must be considered when designing learning experiences incorporating game concepts to ensure these concepts effectively influence learning as intended. For instance, although the elements of the gamification of learning can result in multiple types of engagement, if the game does not effectively achieve cognitive engagement, it is less likely to help learners meet learning goals.

The focus of gamification literature varies depending on the prominent perspective of the researcher. For example, research on the sociocultural perspective of games focuses on the interactions and information needed for learning in the context of 21st-century learners (Plass et al., 2015). The concept of *flow* was identified as a reoccurring topic in gamification literature focused on motivation (Admiraal et al., 2011; Plass et al., 2015). Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008) explained a state of flow occurs when an individual reaches a deep level of immersive focus, where motivation to complete tasks is maximized because the task's difficulty is balanced with the individual's skill level. When challenges match abilities, the individual experiences enjoyment and motivation, which drives engagement and performance. This mental state is called flow or *optimal experience*. The balance between skill and task is a crucial component of achieving flow. If students are challenged with a task that underutilizes their abilities, it may result in boredom, but if

the task is above their abilities, it may result in anxiety and frustration (Admiraal et al., 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Researchers Whitson and Consoli (2009) asserted that if educators viewed student engagement through the lens of flow, it would cause a paradigm shift in the planning of instruction and the classroom environment to promote student engagement. Mandhana and Caruso (2023) aimed to examine factors that promoted student flow experiences in the classroom and found flow-inducing activities provided students with clear goals, provided timely feedback, and included optimally challenging activities the teacher closely regulated to challenge or provide support as needed. By leveraging the key aspects of flow, teachers can create learning environments that promote student engagement and motivation (Whitson & Consoli, 2009).

With gamified learning, teachers modify instructional activities to mirror game elements to incentivize student learning and attempt to create a flow state (Oliveira et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2022; Wang, 2021). Admiraal et al. (2011) investigated how game activities integrated into instruction affected student learning outcomes and found learning was positively influenced by students completely engaged in a game-based learning scenario. Likewise, in their quantitative study of gamification, Tsay et al. (2019) found student engagement and performance were positively impacted by incorporating game mechanisms and were significantly higher in the gamified condition ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ) than in the non-gamified condition ( $M = .79$ ,  $SD = .57$ ). Gamification continues to be a growing phenomenon, but Dichev and Dicheva (2017) asserted empirical evidence supporting a reliable gamification structure for use in elementary education is lacking. However, the researchers identified typical game

elements utilized to build a gamified educational experience: dynamics, mechanics, and components. Dynamics describes the rules, story, and structure of the game. Mechanics include the elements of the game that propel the game forward, such as challenges, rewards, competition, and cooperation. Components include specific elements such as levels, points, badges, and achievements. The element of play in gamification connects to the idea of play as a critical element in human cognitive development (Piaget, 1962; Plass et al., 2015). Gamification includes elements of play that align with the stages described by Piaget as children engage in symbolic play through scenarios and games with rules in the concrete operational stage. Because of the significant effects of student engagement and motivation on learning, gamification as an approach to engaging students continues to gain popularity. Additionally, elements of gamified instruction are evident in other instructional approaches, such as simulation-based learning and classroom transformations. These approaches leverage similar principles to gamification, such as collaboration, play, challenges, and rewards to foster engagement and deeper learning.

### **Simulation-based Immersive Learning**

Simulation-based learning experiences can occur using digital or physical methods (Mystakidis & Lympouridis, 2023) and involve behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions of learning (Angne Alfaro, 2022). As with gamification, a flow state can be achieved during an immersive simulation-based learning experience with an appropriate balance of challenge and competency (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Mystakidis & Lympouridis, 2023). With the development and improvement of immersive technology, the effectiveness of these experiences on students' engagement has been

explored (Chen et al., 2024). One variation of immersive technology in education that has gained considerable attention in recent years is the development of virtual reality (VR) systems. Virtual reality is the use of technology tools to generate a digital environment that creates a simulation for its users using fully immersive or partially immersive methods (Chen et al., 2024; Villena-Taranilla et al., 2022). In their meta-analysis of studies that examined the correlation between virtual reality instruction and student engagement, Chen et al. (2024) found VR had a significant positive impact on all types of engagement, with the greatest effects on cognitive and behavioral engagement. With the proliferation of research on the application of virtual reality in the educational setting, Villena-Taranilla et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis focused on the influence of virtual reality in the K-6 context. The researchers concluded VR had a greater positive influence on student learning ( $ES = 0.64$ ) compared to control groups using different pedagogies, such as traditional teaching methods. However, a limitation of the study was the variability in the types of teaching methods with which VR was being compared.

Museums and art galleries have explored the use of immersive and interactive installations and provide a starting platform for teachers to draw from for similarly structured immersive classroom experiences. For example, immersive art exhibition tours, such as Van Gogh Alive, have gained popularity by providing a multisensory experience that integrates images, sound, and lighting to present the artist's work (Beck, 2023). Similarly, a transformed physical classroom environment has the potential to create a multisensory learning space that immerses the students in the learning and simultaneously encourages student engagement and emotional connectedness to the content (Seiki & Gray, 2020). Jorm (2023) asserted “embodied and spatial interactions”

allow “students to be grounded in a physical and sensorial reality” through engaging stories, characters, and environment, and these experiences motivate students to participate (p. 34). Physically immersive learning methods can include simulations, role plays, and games. Similar to research on gamification, these elements of simulations connect to Piaget’s (1962) description of play as an important contributing factor in the cognitive development of children. Acharya et al. (2018) evaluated the effectiveness of role-playing as a strategy to enhance learning by using a pre-test/post-test design comparing the performance of control and experimental groups on an assessment of their knowledge. The researchers found students who participated in the role-playing learning strategy had a greater increase in post-test performance compared to students in the traditional instruction group. Rashid and Qaisar (2017) conducted a similar role-playing experiment with elementary students, and their findings suggested role-playing was a productive pedagogical approach in promoting active learning and critical thinking. A less-researched variation of immersive learning includes immersing students in a simulated physical environment as is done with classroom transformations.

### **Classroom Transformations**

Classroom transformations, also referred to as room transformations, are designed to motivate students through meaningful learning experiences that align with their interests and abilities through transformative curriculum planning that integrates innovative practices such as novelty, gamification, immersive learning, and the use of the physical classroom environment (Buczyna, 2022; King & King, 2017). Prior researchers have established the classroom environment as a key influence on student success and learning experience (Kellock & Sexton, 2017; Oliveras-Ortiz et al., 2021), which is also a

key component of implementing a classroom transformation. Practitioners of classroom transformations create novel learning environments in hopes of ameliorating student engagement and incorporating deliberately designed lessons (Buczyna, 2022; King & King, 2017). The student interest created by providing a new learning environment through a transformed classroom learning space capitalizes on previous research on the novelty effect, where a change from the routine experience positively relates to student engagement (Benlahcene et al., 2020).

Seiki and Gray (2020) defined transformative curriculum design as the process of capitalizing on teacher strengths to provide relevant and embodied learning experiences that engage students cognitively and affectively. As described by King and King (2017), practitioners of classroom transformations, the transformed learning environment immerses students in a novel and simulated learning experience that focuses on providing engagement while supporting instruction. Seiki and Gray (2020) conducted a year-long exploratory case study to examine the effects of immersive science instruction. In the case study, three teachers transformed the regular classroom environment into an “immersive, three-dimensional construction-paper tropical rainforest ecosystem” to engage students’ imaginations and create a relatable learning experience (Seiki & Gray, 2020, p. 93). The transformed physical learning space created a novel multisensory environment that embodied students’ learning experiences and activated multiple learning modalities (Seiki & Gray, 2020). Seiki and Gray (2020) presented physically immersive instruction as a potential solution for making learning accessible to students through improved engagement. The teacher participants in their study perceived increased student engagement and motivation during the transformed

classroom experience through the active participation of students who were previously passive during classroom instruction. The researchers found immersive physical classroom environments enhanced learning enthusiasm, facilitated cognition, established relational learning, and ignited imagination. This curriculum-making concept prioritized integrating students' and teachers' strengths and interests when creating an accessible and relevant disciplinary curriculum (Seiki & Gray, 2020).

The goal of classroom transformations is to motivate students through meaningfully designed learning experiences that align with their interests and abilities through transformative curriculum design. Practitioners of classroom transformations utilize multiple senses, such as sights, sounds, smells, and movement, to modify the classroom's physical environment in hopes of engaging students through novelty and curiosity (Buczyna, 2022; King & King, 2017; Pickett, 2020). As described by King and King (2017), classroom transformations are a way to immerse students in a novel and simulated learning environment focused on providing engagement while supporting instruction. In their year-long case study, Seiki and Gray (2020) aimed to examine the effect of an immersive classroom transformation on student learning and presented transformative curriculum design as a replacement for traditional instructional practices that utilized culturally unresponsive practices such as the rote memorization of facts and assimilation of communication. The researchers presented physically immersive instruction as a potential solution for making learning accessible to students through improved engagement. Seiki and Gray further asserted the importance of teachers as curricular agents; the decisions, values, beliefs, and experiences of teachers impacted instructional design and implementation.

The literature synthesized in this review covered related innovative instructional approaches that support my intended study on classroom transformations. The key concepts of novelty, the modification of the classroom environment, gamification, and simulation-based learning are elements utilized by teachers designing and implementing classroom transformations. Each innovative practice discussed eschews traditional teacher-centered instruction in favor of active learning through physical, social, and emotional factors that influence students' learning experiences.

### **Teacher Experiences and Perceptions**

Ultimately, teachers' lived experiences formulate their instructional philosophy. Teachers' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values have powerful implications on their motivation to plan and improve their pedagogical approaches (Chia & Goh, 2016). These experiences help educators navigate instructional decisions, the curriculum planning and implementation process, and their interactions with students. Karolčík and Marklová (2023) found that teachers frequently discovered innovative practices independently, outside of school-level professional support, demonstrating their willingness to take action to enact new approaches. The agency taken by teachers to experiment with and then share their insights on new methods can lead to the discovery of more effective instructional approaches. Studying the experiences of teachers who work directly with students provides valuable insights into both effective and ineffective practical approaches to instruction. These experiences and perceptions act as a lens through which the educator interprets and navigates instructional decisions, the curriculum planning and implementation process, and how they interact with students. Stakeholders such as educational researchers, professional organizations, college teacher preparation programs,

and policymakers rely on the perspectives and experiences of teachers to provide input to make informed decisions that are in the best interest of the students and educators.

By understanding teachers' positive experiences and the barriers and challenges they face with the use of innovations in the classroom, schools, and districts could provide faculty with valuable training and resources to practice and develop innovative, nontraditional approaches to instruction. Teachers play a critical role in the translation of innovative pedagogical approaches to practical classroom use (Könings et al., 2007). The lived experiences of educators experimenting with and implementing innovative practices provide an opportunity for a deep and rich analysis of positive perceptions that act as a gateway to innovation, as well as the barriers and challenges teachers face.

Avidov-Ungar and Eshet-Alkabay (2011) explained "teachers' perceptions and attitudes play a pivotal role in the success or the failure" of innovation (p. 291). By exploring teachers' perceptions and experiences with innovative instructional practices, such as CT, we can better understand the supports and obstacles of the practice.

### **Gateways to Teacher Innovation**

In education, innovation involves teachers developing novel or improved approaches and instructional practices (Polatcan et al., 2024; Serdyukov, 2017). Polatcan et al. (2024) found a significant positive correlation between teachers' agency and innovativeness. Effective teachers secure their students' interest and attention to cultivate learning (Wardlow, 2016). Teachers are among the most influential factors in student learning; the strategies and practices they develop and implement significantly impact achievement (Hattie, 2009). The concept of teacher agency has rapidly grown as a focus of scholarly inquiry; however, the conceptualization of the construct of agency is

inconsistently articulated across the literature. The concept of agency generally refers to the individual's capacity and willingness to take ownership and action (Deschênes & Parent, 2022; Polatcan et al., 2024; Priestley et al., 2015). Teacher agency is influenced by skills, knowledge, beliefs, and values and is linked to positive attitudes, risk-taking, creativity, and instructional experimentation (Polatcan et al., 2024; Priestley et al., 2015) and is important because there is a desperate need for a “critically engaged teacher workforce that can develop the curriculum in beneficial ways leading to better student outcomes” (Priestley, 2015, para. 5).

Henriksen and Mishra (2015) conducted a qualitative study using in-depth interviews to understand and investigate the creative classroom practices of exceptional teachers and found these teachers actively cultivated creativity. Pedagogies that foster creativity and critical thinking require, and help to develop, a sense of agency in both teachers and students, with the two concepts—creativity and agency—being mutually reinforcing (Cloonan et al., 2019). Henriksen and Mishra warned educational policy focused on high-stakes testing impeded innovation and found highly creative teachers were creative in both their personal and professional lives. As a result, Henriksen and Mishra suggested autonomy be afforded to teachers to embed personal creativity in the curriculum to encourage innovation and risk-taking.

In their study of the assimilation of curriculum in classroom culture, Squire et al. (2003) stressed valuing teachers' adaptations of innovative strategies. The implications of value and trust were similarly explored in Polatcan et al.'s (2024) quantitative study using structural equation modeling to explore the relationship between transformational leadership and individual teacher innovativeness. Polatcan et al. (2024) found high levels

of teacher trust positively influenced teachers' innovativeness. The practical implications of their study include the need for school-level leaders to project a level of trust in their teachers to encourage experimentation in innovative practices. Teachers' positive emotions, which manifest through trust, creativity, and agency, facilitate risk-taking behaviors among teachers (Polatcan et al., 2024).

Another gateway to innovation is the digital platforms available for teachers to create and consume content related to teaching (Richter et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2023). Current educators often find themselves turning to social media as a network to collaborate, share, and find inspiration for their classrooms (Richter et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2023). Research by Richter et al. (2022) asserted teachers with higher levels of enthusiasm for teaching seek information on social media as a means of professional development. The proliferation of shared knowledge on social media serves as a gateway to innovation. This topic connects to this study because much of the current literature on classroom transformations is available through social media and popular literature such as teaching blogs.

### **Barriers and Challenges of Innovation**

A significant obstacle to innovation is the reluctance to deviate from the traditional and familiar, which results in the prevalence of passive learning approaches still dominating instruction despite efforts to promote more active teaching methods (Lomba-Portela et al., 2022; Smith & Smith, 2020). Snyder (2017) identified veteran teachers as a subgroup that showed a greater tendency to be resistant to change, and the researchers aimed to gain insight and understand veteran teachers' perspectives. Könings et al. (2007) asserted "teachers' willingness to learn is a crucial factor for implementing

educational innovations” (p. 5) and organized the challenges of teachers implementing new educational design into four domains: (1) the educational design, (2) the school, (3) the students, and (4) educators’ competencies. Karolčík and Marklová (2023) found teachers frequently discovered innovative practices independently but perceived professional support and availability of resources as insufficient. In their survey of 240 teachers, Smith and Smith (2020) also found teachers perceived support and availability of resources as a challenge in educational innovation. For example, 46% of teachers negatively responded to the availability of monetary support for the implementation of innovation, with only 24% of teachers surveyed agreeing or strongly agreeing the school provided monetary support for innovation. Only 33% of teachers surveyed believed they were provided adequate time to plan and develop innovative instructional practices (Smith & Smith, 2020). Snyder (2017) also identified time constraints as a barrier to innovation identified by resistant veteran teachers. Teachers’ struggle with time constraints, autonomy, and innovation was found to be exacerbated by pressure to cover content due to state requirements and accountability measures such as high-stakes testing (Cloonan et al., 2019; Smith & Smith, 2020; Snyder, 2017). Cochran-Smith (2006) warned that “increasingly, teaching quality and students’ learning are equated with high-stakes test scores” in this era of teacher accountability and “this simplistic equating...is problematic” with ramifications on teacher creativity and autonomy (p. 72). The pressures of time, insufficient resources, curriculum pressures, and inadequate support stifle creativity and inhibit innovation (Henriksen & Mishra, 2015).

Ball (2003) termed another barrier of teacher experience as “the terrors of performativity” (p. 216). Performativity is defined as the value assigned to individual subjects or organizations based on measurements of productivity and quality (Ball, 2003). The pressures of time, insufficient resources, curriculum and testing pressures, and inadequate support stifle creativity and inhibit innovation. Teachers’ struggle with time constraints was found to be exacerbated by pressure to cover content due to state requirements such as high-stakes testing (Smith & Smith, 2017; Snyder, 2017). In their survey, Smith and Smith found 67% of teachers believed they were not provided adequate time to plan and develop innovative instructional practices. To alleviate these challenges of instructional innovation, Henriksen and Mishra (2015) recommended administrators and educational policymakers take action to support teachers in being creative and taking risks in their pedagogical approaches. By identifying and understanding the barriers and challenges of innovative instructional approaches, steps can be taken to mitigate the issues and provide teachers and students with support to combat the concerns and capitalize on the positive effects of innovation.

### **Chapter Summary**

This literature review examined student engagement and motivation research, classroom culture and environment, innovative pedagogical approaches, and teacher experiences and perceptions of innovative instruction. While reviewing the literature, I identified a gap in scholarly research focused on the experiences of upper elementary teachers implementing classroom transformations. In Seiki and Gray’s (2020) exploratory case study, the researchers examined second-grade students' experiences with a transformed learning environment but failed to conduct an in-depth investigation of

teachers' experiences with the process. With this study, I aim to explore teachers' experiences as they conceptualize, plan, implement, and evaluate classroom transformations. Understanding the experiences of educators implementing classroom transformations is necessary because it helped me provide information to teachers interested in implementing the practice in their own classrooms. This research allowed me to provide them with information to consider when thinking about what classroom transformations might mean for them. If more teachers plan and implement learning experiences focused on engagement and motivation, it could provide students with opportunities to benefit from this research.

Ongoing patterns of student disengagement and decreased motivation are expected to continue to affect both learning and behavior adversely. Sharing effective strategies focused on engaging students cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively may combat these negative implications (Benlahcene et al., 2020; Whitson & Consoli, 2009). Through the retelling and meaning-making process supported by phenomenological interviewing, we can better understand the instructional approaches, decision-making, and learning environments teachers associate with transformative learning experiences. For innovation to have an effect, it “requires prompt diffusion and large-scale implementation” (Serdyukov, 2017, p. 8). This research has the potential to disseminate practical recommendations for the implementation of classroom transformations to teachers, teacher educators, and administrators by addressing a gap in scholarly research. In the next chapter, I explain the methodological approach used to conduct the study, the selection of participants, and the data collection process. A discussion of data analyses and the process of ensuring data validity is also offered.

## **Chapter III**

### **Method**

In chapter three, I explain the research design I used to understand, describe, share, and learn from the experiences of upper elementary teachers as they conceptualize and implement classroom transformations (CT) and the stories of the students who engaged with the transformed classroom. Creswell and Creswell (2018) posited qualitative research methods are appropriate for exploring topics with limited research. Although popular literature exists on classroom transformations, very few studies have been conducted on using a novel, temporary, and immersive transformed classroom environment. With this qualitative study, I hoped to address the lack of focus on teachers' and students' experiences with classroom transformations and explore and interpret the meanings the participants attached to the experience. The findings of this research can potentially inform interested teachers about things to consider in their instructional decision-making and what classroom transformations may mean for their classrooms. Four research questions frame this study of teachers' and students' experiences with classroom transformations.

RQ 1. What experiences did upper elementary teachers have socially, educationally, and professionally before, during, and after their implementations of classroom transformations?

By looking at the experiences before, during, and after the implementation of classroom transformations, I addressed the overall purpose of providing an opportunity

for teachers who implement classroom transformations to share their experiences with an instructional strategy that has the potential to impact student engagement and motivation. Including participants' backgrounds helped me examine the continuity of experiences and how "past experiential base leads to an experiential future" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Analyzing prior experiences allowed me to explore different factors that led teachers to adopt classroom transformations. These factors included social influences, prior professional development that shaped their motivation to implement the strategy, their personal traits, aspects of their teaching philosophy, and their planning process for executing a transformative learning experience for their students. By studying the implementation phase, I collected detailed accounts of the roles of students and teachers, activities, and the overall classroom environment. Additionally, describing teachers' experiences after a classroom transformation explored the impact of classroom transformations on their relationships with their students or colleagues, how their philosophy or practices changed as a result of the classroom transformation, and the successes and challenges that influenced future instruction in their classroom.

RQ 2. What meanings did the teachers attach to the experience of classroom transformations that influenced their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making?

Research question two focuses on understanding why teachers implemented classroom transformations and how they believe the practice has impacted their classroom practices through their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making. This research question addresses the problem of limited research on teacher experiences with classroom transformations because it allows teachers an opportunity to share if and how classroom transformations have influenced their classrooms, their instruction, and their beliefs.

Answering this question also has the potential to report factors that teachers believe influence student engagement or motivation during a classroom transformation.

RQ 3. What recommendations do teachers implementing classroom transformations have for teachers, teacher educators, and administrators that could enhance the experience of using classroom transformations in school?

This question addresses the research problem of teachers lacking knowledge of instructional strategies that have the potential to influence student engagement and focuses on providing other educators with information to think about when considering implementing classroom transformations in their own classrooms.

RQ 4. What themes emerged from students who experienced transformed learning environments?

This research question aimed to enable students to share their experiences with classroom transformations. Since classroom transformations are designed for students, I believed it was important to explore their impact by going to schools and talking directly to them. Answering this question revealed how the students in the study made meaning of the transformative classroom experience and helped identify some factors that influence student engagement during a classroom transformation. Using focus group data, I analyzed and identified themes from the experiences told by the students.

In the following sections, I explain the research method, site and participant selection, data collection procedure, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of my study. I justified my design choices by providing a rationale for each decision.

## Research Design

Merriam (2002) explained qualitative “researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences” (pp. 4-5). Kim (2016) asserted that “in recent years, narrative inquiry has made a transformative impact in education and contributed to the advancement of...teaching and learning, and teacher education” (p. 19). This study used narrative inquiry as the methodological approach to understanding the experiences of teachers and students (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016) using “in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing” (Seidman, 2019, p. 14) to collect the stories of my participants. A narrative approach was appropriate because its focus on experience directly aligns with my research questions, research purpose, and research goal. Using interviews as the primary data collection method, I was able to “find out from [participants] those things we cannot directly observe” (Patton, 2015, p. 426). As I gathered stories of teachers’ and students’ experiences with classroom transformations and interpreted the meanings the participants constructed based on their experiences, I aimed to provide other educators details to think about when considering what classroom transformations might mean for their own classrooms.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted “narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience” because “narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (p. 18) and “educational experience should be studied narratively” (p. 19). Kim (2016) expressed similar sentiments and explained that because “telling stories is the primary way we express what we know and who we are,” narrative is “appropriate for understanding the actions of others” (pp. 8-9). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) contended:

Narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study. To preserve this distinction, we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon “story” and the inquiry “narrative.” Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories by those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. (p. 2)

Seidman (2019) explained in-depth interviews enable researchers to establish context by exploring the storied life histories and present experiences of participants. By using a modified Seidman interview series, I hoped to collect narrated stories that would help me to understand the experiences and meanings constructed by the participants. Although Seidman proposed a three-interview series, using a two-interview approach still allowed me to explore prior experiences that influence the subsequent experiences of my participants (Kim, 2016; Seidman, 2019). Additionally, the two-interview series reduced the time commitment needed from participants, which I believe positively impact recruitment and retention.

Humans are complex, and qualitative methods provide the ability to explore the complexity and richness of human experiences quantitative methods fail to address (Kim, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) asserted that a qualitative approach is not a dichotomy to quantitative but rather they are “different ends on a continuum” (p. 3). I believe storytelling provided the nuanced information I was interested in examining, which would not be present if this study were designed using a quantitative method. I was drawn to narrative inquiry because of its approachability, creativity, and relatability, and I

believed it was the best approach to understand the experiences of teachers and students. Notably, I think other teachers, as consumers of research, will find this qualitative approach to analyzing experiences with classroom transformations accessible and non-threatening. In the early 1980s, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) conducted a three-year study of two teachers in which they began pursuing narrative inquiry as “both the phenomena under study and method of study” to understand the role of the teachers’ experiences on their knowledge and classroom practices (p. 4). The researchers’ interest in the experiential knowledge of the teachers, what they referred to as “personal practical knowledge” (p. 4), aligns with my interest in the experiences and meanings constructed by my participants and how the experiences impacted their beliefs, values, behaviors, and decisions. Teachers’ perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values have powerful implications on their motivation to plan and improve their pedagogical approaches (Chia & Goh, 2016). These experiences and perceptions act as a lens through which the educator interprets and navigates instructional decisions, the curriculum planning and implementation process, and how they interact with students. Narrative inquiry also aligns with my theoretical framework of constructivism because I aimed to “understand how the participants construct and interpret their...experience” and collect stories of their “genuine accounts and interpretations” (Kim, 2016, p. 126).

As a practitioner of classroom transformations, I was hopeful my personal experiential knowledge would help me understand the stories that embody the experiences of my participants. I understand my personal experiences influenced how I interpret the stories of my participants. However, I believe my experiences also helped to

drive the collaboration and conversations with my participants, aiding me in collecting rich data during the interview process.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

My practical goal of providing teachers who are interested in classroom transformations with information necessitated using key informants who were particularly knowledgeable about classroom transformations and “are willing to share their knowledge” (Patton, 2015, p. 284). The study's participants, upper elementary teachers who implement classroom transformations, do not fully represent the broader teaching population potentially affected by the study's findings. However, I believe the insights gained through this study are valuable to educators beyond those who fit the selection criteria as participants. I used purposeful sampling to select participants with the specific attributes needed for my research. I used intensity sampling to identify “excellent or rich examples” and examine “selected cases of special interest” (Patton, 1990, p. 170). Social media and internet tools helped me identify elementary schools with teachers who implement classroom transformations. Many schools and districts share the work of their teachers and students on social media platforms, which assisted in identifying potential settings and participants for my study. After establishing a district cooperation agreement, I sent a recruitment email to principals to ask for assistance in identifying potential participants in one school district located in South Georgia (see Appendix A). I sought guidance from administrators familiar with the teaching approaches employed by their faculty, as well as known practitioners of classroom transformations, to aid in identifying potential participants. The recruitment email was sent to administrators to curate a list of individual teachers I could then contact to gain more information. After

individual teachers were identified with the support of administrators and other educators, I sent the potential participants an email (see Appendix B) to introduce myself and my study. I used a brief Qualtrics survey to get basic information from potential participants interested in my research (see Appendix C). Information such as years of experience, grade levels served, subjects taught, number of classroom transformations executed, and a brief description of their experience with classroom transformations was gathered through the survey. I then identified all teachers who met the established criteria for inclusion in the sample and sent them a return email (see Appendix D).

I recruited six upper elementary teachers, ranging from third through fifth grade, with at least three years of teaching experience and who had conducted a minimum of three classroom transformations. The sample was open to include individuals of any gender, ethnicity, race, or religion. I focused on recruiting teachers in one school system in South Georgia, as this proximity enabled me to conduct student focus groups and teacher interviews in person. Patton (2015) reported that focus groups generally have six to 10 individuals. However, for the student focus groups, with the help of the teacher participant, I recruited four to six students from each participating teacher's class using purposeful sampling to deliberately select students that “adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population” in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, and religion (Maxwell, 2013). I intentionally kept the focus groups small because of the age-related developmental characteristics of third through fifth graders. The smaller groups helped to facilitate more effective social interactions between the students and me. I conducted one student-comprised focus group interview with four to six students per teacher participant, resulting in a total of six focus groups. The number of focus groups provided me with

enough data to identify major themes that reoccurred across the different student focus groups.

To reduce the confounding effects of beginning teacher challenges, I established three years of teaching experience as a criterion. I studied upper elementary teachers and students because student disengagement levels tend to increase as students age (fifth grade versus fourth grade), according to prior research by Yang et al. (2022) and Zee and Koomen (2019). My personal experience as an upper elementary teacher also influenced my participant selection choices. I have found that traditional lecture-based content delivery methods are frequently used in upper elementary classrooms and often lack interactive elements. This passive instructional method can seem irrelevant to students. Keeping upper elementary students consistently motivated and engaged, especially over longer periods, can be difficult. Repetitive and monotonous learning activities can also lead to boredom and disengagement among students.

Kim (2016) noted that qualitative researchers' opinions on an ideal sample size range from five to 25 participants. However, data saturation is the ultimate goal (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kim, 2016). For this study, I began by targeting a sample of approximately eight to ten teacher participants for research questions 1 through 3. I believe anticipating a smaller sample was a practical choice, given that employing classroom transformations is an emerging practice and participant accessibility is limited. Teacher recruitment yielded six teacher participants who completed the data collection process. This smaller sample enabled me to conduct multiple interviews with each participant to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

## **Data Collection**

To gather the stories of my participants, I collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers, conducting student-comprised focus groups, collecting visual data (photographs), and maintaining researcher memos. Interviewing is critical in understanding the experiences and meanings constructed by people and “provides a necessary... avenue of inquiry” (Seidman, 2019). I believed conducting semi-structured interviews provided the focus and guidance I needed as a novice researcher while also offering the flexibility to expand the scope of discussion beyond my prepared questions, keeping the interview conversational and free-flowing (Kim, 2016).

Maxwell (2013) explained pilot studies can be used to test methods, plan research, and understand concepts held by the population being studied. For my pilot study, I conducted an interview with a teacher who fits the criteria I used for my participant selection. The pilot participant, Kandice (pseudonym), was a veteran teacher with 11 years of experience, served as a third-grade math teacher, and conducted ten classroom transformations.

Maxwell (2013) explained episodic interviewing produced specific stories about particular events. While I reviewed my pilot interview transcripts, I found much of the interview produced semantic memories that were not storied. As a response, I framed my interviews by explaining to each participant that my goal was to collect and produce storied narratives of their experiences with classroom transformations. I have come to learn in-depth qualitative interviewing is very different from the interviews with which many people are familiar; resorting to generalizations may come automatically because of prior interview experiences. For example, when I asked Kandice to tell me about her

personal educational experience, I was hoping for information about her experience as a student. However, she began listing her professional roles and achievements as one would do in a hiring interview. I found myself giving similar generic responses when I was an interview participant for one of my graduate colleague's pilot interviews. I gave broad answers with little detail, even though I have very significant experiences I could retell in a detailed and storied process. These two experiences helped me realize the importance of clarity and phrasing during the data collection process.

As an alternative to Seidman's (2019) three-series interview, I conducted two approximately 90-minute interviews with each adult participant. During the first interview, I gathered information on life history by discussing educational, social, and professional experiences leading up to implementing classroom transformations. Seidman suggested that a "focused life history" (p. 21) establishes the context of participants' experiences. The second interview gathered data on participants' experiences with implementing classroom transformations, how they made sense of these experiences, and how these transformations impacted their beliefs, values, behaviors, and decisions.

A significant component of executing a classroom transformation is the transformed physical classroom environment, which is novel, immersive, and temporary (King & King, 2017; Seiki & Grey, 2020). Because the physical classroom space and the visual presentation of the space play an important role in classroom transformations, integrating visual methods of inquiry fit the design of this study. Kim (2016) explained "visual data in narrative inquiry is promising" and has "long been adopted as a way to collect...data" (p. 143). Using images can elicit stories that provide a deeper understanding of a specific time and space. *Photovoice* is a visual-based narrative inquiry

method in which participants produce images to “enhance the understandings of participants’ experiences” (Kim, 2016, p. 148). The use of visual data and narrated experiences can enhance an idea that neither can achieve alone (Kim, 2016). After the first interview, participants were asked to provide photographs of classroom transformations they previously executed. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posited that photographs mark memories and act as a catalyst for participants to construct stories. The second interview incorporated the photographs and allowed participants to narrate and reflect on the experiences represented in the visual images.

Additionally, one approximately 60-minute focus group was conducted with each student group. Allowing students to share their experiences on what they did and how CT impacted them provides teachers with information to consider when planning and implementing classroom transformations in their classrooms. I used the photographs collected from teachers to allow the student focus groups an opportunity to use the visual images as a vehicle to reflect and narrate their experiences with the classroom transformation. I hoped the incorporation of images would evoke stories and keep students focused on retelling their experiences with classroom transformations, while also reminding them of subtle details they may have forgotten.

### **Data Collection Procedures and Instruments**

Data collection procedures for research questions 1, 2, and 3 followed the same steps:

Step 1: Obtain informed consent from each teacher participant. Explain the study’s purpose and procedures and ensure confidentiality (see Appendix E).

Step 2: Conduct and record semi-structured interviews with each participant.

Interviews were conducted in person based on the proximity and availability of the participant or virtually using Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams was the primary digital audio and video recording instrument, and the Apple Voice Memo application served as a secondary digital audio recording instrument. An interview guide was developed to assist me in eliciting responses pertinent to my research questions while still providing me the freedom to explore unique topics that emerged during each conversation (see Appendix F and Appendix G).

Step 3: Verify the accuracy of Microsoft Teams transcriptions of the audio recordings.

Step 4: Member checking of transcripts to allow the participants to verify that their interview data accurately reflects their experiences.

After the first interview, but before the second interview, teacher participants were asked to produce images of a classroom transformation they recently executed. As the researcher, I memoed my interpretations of the visual artifact and documented any questions. In the second interview with each teacher, participants were asked to narrate the experience captured in the images and the meanings they constructed as a result of their experience.

Research question 4 involves student focus groups. Data collection procedures changed accordingly:

Step 1: Obtain informed consent from the students' parents or guardians (Appendix H) and assent from the students (Appendix I). Explain the study's purpose and procedures and ensure confidentiality.

Step 2: Conduct and record focus group interviews. I moderated the discussions for the student participants using a focus group interview guide with open-ended questions to elicit storied reconstructions of students' experiences with a classroom transformation (see Appendix J). I focused on how students described their experience with a recent classroom transformation and their views about the experience. Microsoft Teams was the primary digital audio recording instrument, while the Apple Voice Memo application served as a secondary tool. Photographs collected from teachers were used to elicit specific stories about their time in a transformed classroom.

Step 3: Verify the accuracy of Microsoft Teams transcriptions of the audio recordings.

### **Data Analysis**

Once interview transcriptions were completed, I began data analysis procedures, including first-round and second-round coding. Saldaña (2021) asserted coding is interpretive, and "researchers' identities...will influence and affect" the process (p. 11). As a practitioner of classroom transformations, I have experienced positive impacts on the classroom culture, student and teacher relationships, and student engagement. I realize my firsthand experience with this practice impacts my subjectivity on this topic. I know what classroom transformations mean for me and my students; however, I did not yet know what they meant for others. I was interested in understanding the perspectives of other educators who utilize this strategy, and I was excited about the potential of contributing to the research on this topic since very little research currently exists.

I used a combination of manual coding and digital coding using word processing software. During the initial round of coding, in vivo coding and descriptive coding were

used to code the transcript data. Saldaña (2021) explained in vivo coding uses the collaborators' actual words to condense the data with “salient, essence-capturing” code to construct deeper meanings (p. 5). This approach to coding prioritizes the participant’s words over the researcher’s words and captures the voice of participants as each code is rooted in the participant’s own language. Descriptive coding attaches a word or phrase that identifies the basic topic of the data and “is essential groundwork for second cycle coding” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 135). Coding data descriptively indexes topics for cross-reference and can assist with answering general questions such as “What is going on here?” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 134). Additional analysis procedures for each question are detailed as follows:

RQ1. What experiences did upper elementary teachers have socially, educationally, and professionally before, during, and after implementing classroom transformations?

Values coding allowed me to focus on teachers' values, attitudes, and beliefs. According to Saldaña (2021), values coding enables researchers to “explore cultural values and belief systems, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (p. 168).

RQ2. What meanings did the teachers attach to the experience of classroom transformations that influenced their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making?

Values coding was also employed to address research question 2. By focusing on the values, attitudes, and beliefs attached to classroom transformations, values coding played a critical role in understanding the meanings teachers attach to their experiences.

RQ3. What recommendations do teachers implementing classroom transformations have for teachers, teacher educators, and administrators that could enhance the experience of using classroom transformations in school?

I used descriptive coding to code and categorize commonalities and differences between the successes and challenges described by the participants and their recommended solutions. Because the goal of research question 3 is to report any approaches and wisdom participants recommend to others to enhance the implementation of classroom transformations, I organized successful or unsuccessful techniques using pattern coding. Pattern coding helped me identify patterns among the recommendations, enabling me to categorize and summarize the major themes.

RQ 4. What themes emerged from students who experienced transformed learning environments?

I used in vivo and descriptive coding to focus on the dynamics of the story being shared by the students. Emotion coding was also an affective coding method used to explore the emotions experienced by students during a classroom transformation, given the implications of positive and negative emotions on overall student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Saldaña (2021) explained that after the coding process, codes are synthesized to create categories. Pattern coding was employed as a second-cycle coding method. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that themes are used to construct the findings sections of a dissertation. Using patterns coding, I condensed related codes into categories, and then constructed themes to reflect the tacit meaning of the group of codes. As Maxwell (2013) and Saldaña (2021) recommended, I maintained a research journal to

memo during the data analysis process to facilitate analytical thinking. The research memos also allowed me to document patterns of interest as I was coding data.

The research questions guided my data collection and analysis, as well as the presentation of the data. I integrated the individual participant stories, student focus group stories, and the photographs with their accompanying narratives to construct both the narrative profiles and vignettes. The purpose of the narrative profiles was to give a holistic account of each participant by presenting their background, prior experiences, and general experiences with classroom transformations. Meanwhile, I used creative non-fiction vignettes to focus on storying the implementation of a specific classroom transformation. I believe using both approaches helped me to interpret and present the data in a way that addressed my research questions and theoretical framework.

### **Trustworthiness**

Stahl and King (2020) argued the importance of trust in qualitative research and stated trustworthiness is the “sense of confidence in what the researcher has reported” (p. 26). Maxwell (2013) asserted it is impossible to eliminate the “researcher’s theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens” (p. 124) and argued it is the researcher's responsibility to be transparent and reflexive and discuss how these values may influence the study. To address the potential disadvantages of how researchers’ experiences may impact their beliefs and assumptions, Maxwell suggested robust data collection using multiple data sources. A multimodal approach to data collection using teacher interviews, student focus groups, researcher memos, and photographs helped me cross-check through triangulation to reduce the risk of biases and promote credibility (Kim, 2016; Stahl & King, 2020).

Using open-ended interview questions minimized research bias by allowing the participant to dictate the direction of the discussion without being restricted by my views (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, respondent validation, also referred to as member checks, allowed teachers to review transcripts to solicit feedback on the accuracy of the interview data and provide an opportunity for clarification. All participants also verified my interpretations of their narrated experiences by reviewing their participant profiles and the associated vignettes (Stahl & King, 2020).

Based on my personal experiences with classroom transformations, anecdotal conversations with other practitioners, and the related literature I reviewed, I acknowledge that I have some preconceptions of teachers' and students' experiences with classroom transformations. Awareness and reflection on my subjectivities and acknowledging the impact the researcher's subjectivities have on data analysis were critical as I planned, conducted, and reported on my study. My experiences and identity contribute to my subjectivity. The awareness and incorporation of my identity and experience bring transparency and basis to how I interpret and analyze data (Maxwell, 2013).

It is my personal teaching philosophy that student engagement is key to academic success, and engagement comes from a genuine enthusiasm for learning. I believe this enthusiasm can be created intentionally by the actions of the teacher. As one of the greatest influences on student learning, I admire teachers who take initiative and seek out opportunities to grow as educators and add to their repertoire of instructional strategies. Specifically, as an elementary educator, I believe it is my role to set the tone for the rest of my students' educational careers. I was compelled to integrate classroom

transformations into my instructional practice in hopes of promoting student engagement and a positive classroom environment. However, I also understand not all educators are as enthusiastic about challenging themselves with new strategies, and many rely solely on professional learning provided at the school level.

My experience as a parent of two neuro-divergent children who have struggled academically also impacts my subjectivity. I know increased student engagement correlates to positive student learning outcomes, and as a parent, I hope my children's teachers actively seek instructional practices to enhance student engagement. Being aware of these subjectivities helped me to acknowledge how these beliefs shaped my research decisions and interpretations.

Peshkin (1991) suggested continuous, systematic, and formal monitoring of subjectivities. Awareness of potential bias toward the perspectives of like-minded educators who implement classroom transformations was important to acknowledge, given my own valuing of the approach. At the elementary level, I tend to associate lecture-dependent instruction with lower student engagement; having students sit through long durations of teacher-led instruction does not align with developmental theories such as Piaget's (1962) theory of cognitive development, in which he postulated that students learn best through active discovery and exploration. I liken my subjectivity to Maxwell's (2013) description of Peshkin's ethnographic study of Mansfield. I feel protective towards the practice of classroom transformations because I value my experiences with them. However, I also believe my personal experience with implementing classroom transformations may provide me with the insight and the ability to translate the experiences of fellow teachers in a valuable and accessible manner. Because I am a

practitioner, I must be vigilant against projecting my personal beliefs and experiences onto my participants. I needed to acknowledge my subjectivity to actively guard against its influence in data collection. Importantly, although I have personal experiences and successes with classroom transformations, I also have a genuine interest in the experiences of other educators who practice classroom transformations. As suggested by Maxwell (2013), I employed a continuous reflexive and introspective process to address the potential disadvantages of personal beliefs, goals, and experiences on my research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I received approval from Valdosta State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix K) and at the local level for the school district where I conducted research. Since the student focus groups were comprised of children under the age of 18, this study was subject to an expedited review by the IRB. I completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training and certification, and I maintained its validity during the course of the study. I completed an additional CITI module, *research with children*. Prior to the start of each interview, the consent statement was read aloud to participants; they were presented with the consent document and were asked to verbally confirm their understanding. For the student focus groups, I obtain informed consent from each student's parents or guardians, as well as verbal assent from each student. To safeguard confidentiality, I stored all data on a password-protected computer and a secure hard drive. Participants were assigned a pseudonym, I removed identifying features from the research, and I maintained confidentiality by ensuring I was the only individual with access to the data. Recordings and consent/permission forms will be retained for three years and then destroyed according to university policy.

## **Chapter Summary**

The nature of my research questions guided the process of selecting a research method and my research design decisions. In this chapter, I outlined the research design, site and participant selection, and data collection and analysis procedures that guided my investigation of the experiences of upper elementary teachers and students engaging with a transformed classroom. In the next chapter, I present the experiences of the participants through their stories.

## Chapter IV

### Participant Profiles and Vignettes

There is a spectrum of studies that focus on innovative instructional practices (Chen et al., 2024; Mystakidis & Lympouridis, 2023; Oliveira et al., 2021; Plass et al., 2015; Tsay et al., 2019); however, very few focus on classroom transformations (Seiki & Gray, 2020). What this study offers is a specific focus on teachers' and students' experiences with classroom transformations. This section presents narrative profiles of the six participants to provide context and insight into their social, educational, and professional experiences. By investigating their backgrounds, teaching identities, classrooms, and experiences with the planning and implementation of classroom transformations, I was able to answer my first three research questions:

**RQ1.** What experiences did upper elementary teachers have socially, educationally, and professionally before, during, and after implementing classroom transformations?

**RQ2.** What meanings did the teachers attach to the experience of classroom transformations that influenced their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making?

**RQ3.** What recommendations do teachers implementing classroom transformations have for teachers, teacher educators, and administrators that could enhance the experience of using classroom transformations in school?

My participant recruitment yielded six teachers who implement classroom transformations—Melody, Arthur, Michelle, Ruby, Reese, and Silvia—along with a

focus group of four to six students from each of their classrooms. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and school to maintain confidentiality. For organizational purposes, each teacher participant was assigned a letter corresponding to the subject they teach, and a pseudonym beginning with that letter was selected in collaboration with the participant. When beginning the participant recruitment process, I hoped to form a sample that reflected diversity in subject matter taught and grade level to include a broad range of experiences across participants. The resulting sample meets my goal, offering a variety of experience levels, subject matter, and grade levels (see Table 1). Individual participant profiles were created from data collected during a series of two in-depth teacher interviews and one student focus group.

**Table 1**

*Participant Chart*

Participant	Years of Experience	Grade Level	Subject Taught	Classroom Transformations Conducted
Melody	13	4	Math	25
Arthur	10	K-5	Art	18
Michelle	12	3	Math	16
Ruby	4	5	Reading	12
Reese	14	4	Reading	5
Silvia	18	5	Science	4

*Note.* The number of *classroom transformations conducted* includes iterations of the same transformation conducted over multiple years in grades 3 through 5.

A vignette accompanies each profile to illustrate a specific classroom transformation that was designed by the teacher participant, but restoried to recount the experiences of the teacher and the focus group of students in a way that provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the classroom transformation’s context and impact.

I aimed to use each vignette to “reveal surprising or intriguing facets and intangible moments...and reduce the distance between the researcher and the researched” (Agostini et al., 2024).

As the students recount their time in the transformed classroom, their voices revealed recurring themes that provided insight into their experiences, which helped me to answer my last research question:

**RQ4.** What themes emerged from students who experienced transformed learning environments?

The profiles in this chapter carry the reader through each participant’s life history, beginning with their childhood, through their decision to enter teaching as a profession, their introduction to classroom transformations, and their personal experience with executing classroom transformations. As the participants recount their experiences and reflect on the meanings they attached to them, it provides insight into the connection between their beliefs, values, attitudes and their instructional practices.

### **Melody Michaels**

Ms. Melody Michaels has a sparkle in her eyes and radiates an energy of warmth and joy. A heartfelt hug and a wide, easy smile immediately make you feel welcome in her presence. She has never met a stranger, and even the first interaction feels more like a reunion than an introduction. Her fourth-grade math students insist that she always has a smile on her face, but if she doesn’t, as her student, Matthew, explained in his best Scooby Doo impression, “Ruh roh! You know something is wrong.”

Even as a young child, she was charming. “Everybody always commented on [her] smile” and called her the “Gerber baby” or likened her to “a sack of potatoes” that

would fall comfortably from one person's lap to another without a care in the world. In elementary school, her teachers often noted that she loved to "talk and be social and goofy." She smiled as she recalled reading her mother's responses to the teachers' comments and explained that her mom "knew from a very young age that [Melody] was going to be a very social person, very bubbly." Despite the sometimes-questionable report card remarks from teachers in elementary school, she "always loved school...did well in school, and...enjoyed being there," but as she got older, she found it difficult to escape "the shadow of [her] sister in everything." Her mama called it "middle child syndrome," and it started to affect her "in a way that wasn't positive." Melody's sister, Miranda, was "the complete opposite." "A rule follower. Very straight-laced. She was valedictorian of her high school class. She was just the perfect kid. The kid that everybody wanted in their class. She was easy, and she made them look good." Growing up in a small town made the comparisons that much more difficult. Following in her older sister's footsteps in school, band, dance, and youth group riddled her with comparisons and comments like "you sure don't act like your sister", "you're not Miranda," or "man, you're not what I expected."

Melody was less polished, although equally bright, but louder, spirited, and wildly creative. Her creativity was all her own, something that set her apart and that she didn't share with Miranda. In her childhood, creativity emerged through activities that allowed her to craft with her hands. She would design hair bows, make crafts, bake using her Easy-Bake Oven, or play with her Spirograph. Still, it's evident her creativity also manifests in a less tactile manner—her ability to reflect and share her experiences through stories. She's a storyteller at heart, and despite being a math teacher for the past

nine years, she has a gift for painting memories with words. It's clear where she got this gift because her "mama was a storyteller," too. Part of her mother's legacy is a book she published, but "she wrote lots of stories," especially about her three children, and Melody grew up listening to her mama's stories. She would capture her children's life moments and turn them into meaningful narratives. Melody's mom even wrote a story about the pivotal moment that started Melody's journey to becoming a teacher—the profound "impact that a teacher had in [her] life. One teacher." For Melody, this story began with Mr. Moore, a middle school band director in her small town, who was the first educator to see Melody beyond *just* Miranda's little sister:

*When I was in middle school, I had a band director. His name was Mr. Moore. Clarinet was a very popular instrument. So, it was probably 15 to 20 clarinets. When I got into middle school, my first year in middle school, I remember them testing. I was last chair. It was bad. I came in last chair clarinet. It was awful. And I wasn't trying to be good at this instrument. I just did it because my parents told me I needed to be in the band. I needed to do something. I needed to learn how to read music. And they just thought it would make me a well-rounded person. So, I did it. Didn't care anything about it.*

*But Mr. Moore took an interest in me for some reason. I have no idea what sparked this interest in me, but I remember him looking at me, and he made the connection. I don't think he had made the connection prior to me being in his class, most people, you get your roster and you think, you look at who their siblings were, yada, yada, yada. Maybe because he was a band director and he taught all the students, he just didn't do that. Or maybe he didn't want any*

*preconceived notions. I'm not really sure. But after I'd been in his class for a few weeks, I remember I was back there goofing off with the last row of clarinets.*

*And anyway, he pinpointed to me, like, pointed me out in front of class. And he looked at me, and he said, Melody. Melody Michaels. And he just gave me a funny look, and he said, "are you related to Miranda Michaels?" And I said, "Yes, sir". I said, "She's my sister." And he said, "I remember Miranda." And he said, "You're not like Miranda, are you?" And I said, "No, sir." And he said, "I can tell. [pause] You're Melody. And I think I'm going to like Melody." And just that comment right there, it just triggered something or changed something in me. I was like, okay, this is the first time someone has acted interested in me because I'm Melody. I'm not Miranda's sister. So anyway, him making that comment to me made me feel special, like I stood out. And anyway, I started taking more of an interest in what I was doing in his class. I quit talking so much. I started listening, I started focusing, because he noticed me, and he saw something in me, and he pointed it out, he was the first teacher that had ever done that. And anyway, I started practicing gradually over the years, or gradually over that year.*

*And slowly, every time that they retested us to see what chair we are, I slowly made my way up the line. I remember when I got off the back row and got the middle row, and I met all those people, because I've been on the back row with those people. You know, in elementary school, we were all goofy and goofballs, but slowly I was working my way up. And when I was on the middle row, I was not first chair. I guess I was seventh or eighth or ninth chair. I can't even remember now. But he had to assign a clarinet solo to one person. It was for*

*our winter concert, and out of all the clarinetists, everybody assumed that it was going to go to first or second chair, because that's normally what happened when there was a solo. He picked me, and again, I was like, oh, my goodness. Okay, all right, I'm gonna do this. And I didn't know why he picked me. He didn't tell me why he picked me. But I don't know if he saw the growth and the effort that I was putting forth because of his interest in me.*

*I don't know why he chose me, but he chose me. And I did that. And I just remember for the first time, I felt like a shining star. Like, I felt good at something. I felt noticed, I felt loved. I felt. I don't know, I just. I'd never felt that before. I was always kind of just. I guess if you were thinking of a concert, I was a background singer. I was in the background. But for that moment, I wasn't in the background. And it was special. And he became very special to me. And he started taking an interest in things that I liked. And he. I just realized that he really saw me as more than just a student. I was a person. So, the next year, I remember, tryouts came. This was eighth grade. I tried out, and I made second chair. And I was so proud of myself.*

*And he was so proud of me and me getting to be on the first row. I was right up underneath Mr. Moore's nose. And I remember that little baton constantly tap, tap, tapping, you know, at me. And anyway, I hadn't just realized how far I had made it. And it was not. It was all because he ignited a flame of interest and support. And he just. Something started brewing inside of me to be good at something. And it was all just because of that first comment. I don't know, it was crazy. But then, by my eighth-grade year, I had made it to first chair. And I*

*remember my parents being so proud of me. And Mr. Moore approached my parents about buying me a wooden clarinet. Which is a pretty big investment because he saw so much potential in me. That was a word I'd never heard me described as having [pause] potential. The impression that he left on me was so profound.*

Because of Mr. Moore, Melody began to see her own worth beyond the shadow of her older sister, and he made an instrumental impact on her decision to become an educator. When choosing a career path, her thoughts drifted to teaching and the impact that Mr. Moore had on her life. Questions swirled in her mind, “What if I could do that for someone? What if I could be that in someone’s life? Just change the complete perspective a child has about themselves?”

Years later, Melody sent him a message saying: “I developed my philosophy of education because of you—believing in a child can make them a lifelong believer in themselves.” He replied with warmth and pride, shortly before passing away during the COVID-19 Pandemic. That message, sent just in time, became a full-circle moment—teacher to student, student to teacher. Melody continues to be steadfast in her core philosophy of validating her students, helping them to believe in themselves, and making them feel special. These beliefs continue to define her as a teacher.

Now 13 years into her teaching career, many “wonderful people along the way” have helped to build her up and have shaped who she is as an educator. As she reflected on the “little acts of validation and affirmation,” she explained that it’s these moments that drive her to strive to be more, push to be better, “not get into the rut of daily life and career”, and “to always be better, still try every year to do things differently, and

improve.” Every year, she makes it a goal to be more than a fleeting memory for her students and to make a lasting impact. And as Melody recalled her dad’s perspective on teaching, another facet of her teaching philosophy revealed itself:

*One time, my daddy said you got to edutain, not just educate. You got to edutain them. You got to entertain and educate. So, he just put it together and said, you got to be an edutainer. So, I truly believe in that. You've got to keep these kids' interest. I mean, they're at home playing video games and doing all of this stuff that's, you know, fun. And they have so much more now than we had growing up. You have to entertain them while you're up there, or they're not gonna listen to you. So, I get up there and I act like a goon. But apparently it works because they go home and they want to tell [their families] ...they want to sing the songs and do all the things that we do in my classroom at home because it's fun. So, I just believe in making it an atmosphere that is conducive to learning, and that's fun and exciting and engaging and happy.*

Of course, she wants her students to learn, but “more importantly,” she yearns for her students to understand the type of validation and affirmation she received from Mr. Moore and to capture and captivate her students as an edutainer like her dad suggested. More than just a deliverer of content, more than just a memory, but the ability and “opportunity to ignite and spark something...by believing in them and making them feel special.” She finds value in establishing a classroom environment that is safe, affirming, and filled with joy. Her students describe her as bubbly, always smiling, and deeply committed to their success. Her enthusiasm is infectious, and her students feed off the energy she brings to the classroom each day.

Her creative nature, love for storytelling, and desire to make school unforgettable are some of the driving motivations behind one of Melody’s most notable teaching practices—classroom transformations. While seeking new ways to increase engagement, Melody encountered classroom transformations through teacher blogs and social media, and she began experimenting with classroom transformations to connect and captivate her students. She explains that “luckily,” she had a teaching partner who was also very interested in having engaging lessons and wanted to work on constructing classroom transformations together. The work in planning and executing classroom transformations can be “a lot to take on by yourself.” However, Melody remarks that “it is amazing what can happen when you put two people together who are excited about the same thing.”

For Melody, transforming her classroom is about more than decorations. This instructional approach is deeply connected to her core values as a teacher—it is about “creating moments and feelings within children they won’t forget...unforgettable moments.” They are immersive experiences designed to pull students into a new world of learning by creating a “unique experience where they’re able to apply what they’ve learned in a non-monotonous way...Creating a novel experience for children that they won’t forget.” For her students, “the room has actually transformed into a coffee shop or into a boot camp,” jumpstarting their imagination and “pulling out a different side” of them. Whether her room becomes a detective training office for a problem-solving lesson or a busy bakery for a geometry review, her goal is to make learning “unforgettable” and to deliver that “wow factor.” On these days, the students and teacher aren’t mere executors of learning, but as they step into the classroom, they take on a new persona and are “in the lesson” or, as her students described, they are “in the vibe.”

Still, her passion goes deeper than just novelty. Melody views these transformations as a way to build stronger relationships with her students, foster a sense of community, and create a genuine excitement for learning. She explains:

*They see how much effort I put in for them, and they respond. They see time, work, they see love, they see your dedication to them, and for your desire to show, to give them this experience, to show off what they've learned in a very captivating and exciting way. You can incorporate their names, their interests, whatever video games are in...whatever children are interested [in,] and make it something special and unique...it's better than just giving them a review that you created five years ago that has nothing to do with them.*

*It is expensive and it's time consuming and it takes a lot of effort. But look at the imprint that it leaves on your students. It's worth it. It's worth the time, it's worth the effort, it's worth the engagement, it's worth the effects it has on them. They usually do better. They collaborate better because it's fun, and it just creates a memory and makes them love learning and what they've done. It's just fun. Fun for me. It's fun for them.*

Melody found that not only do classroom transformations get her students excited to learn, but the newness and change also “fuels [her] fire” and gets her “out of a rut” with the day-to-day monotony. Admittedly, she refers to the process as “a labor of love” and explains classroom transformations “take a lot of energy...[but] the return is more than the investment,” and believes that the effort is returned “tenfold” by creating a memory and experience for both the students and the teacher. “The kids are magnified. Their excitement and their enthusiasm. The outcome of the day is tenfold what you

would normally experience.” Melody explained that these “moments as a teacher are affirming” and led her to believe the choices and actions she makes as a teacher align with what she is attempting to create in her classroom. Providing these experiences for her students excites her and motivates her to continue to create and implement classroom transformations.

Reflecting on what advice she would give other educators, Melody emphasized the importance of personalization and suggested that teachers interested in classroom transformations “take an interest that you see in your classroom and run with it. The students are going to get into it and get excited about it.” She was candid in sharing that she’s had some transformations “just be a flop,” and emphasized the importance of “reflecting and learning from it and saying, okay, how can I do this better next time so that it’s more successful.” In her first year of experimenting with classroom transformations, she learned that to execute successfully, the teacher must “lay the footwork and let [students] know the expectations.” During one of her first attempts, she “threw [the scenario and work] at the students and just thought that it was going to be magic.” She admits her students had fun but was unsure if the experience accomplished what she had set out to do. Melody has since learned that the more organized and prepared she is, the better the execution. She has to be “100% Jonny on the spot the day of” and “it’s not something that you can just wing.” Each year, she refines previously executed classroom transformations to improve them while brainstorming other ideas that she may add to her repertoire of lessons. To help with the cost of execution, she reuses items and distributes purchases over several iterations of the transformations. Melody adds a few decorations, props, and backdrops each year to help set the stage for learning

and elevate the experience of being immersed in whatever scenario and environment she plans to create. Often, she is able to offset her personal financial investment with the help of grant money or donations from students' parents.

Melody believes these experiences leave lasting emotional imprints on students and shift how they view themselves as learners. She recalled moments when reluctant or disconnected students lit up during transformation days—she remembered one specific student who typically disliked collaboration but thrived when paired with a classmate during a classroom transformation day. “Everything is magnified on those days,” she explained, emphasizing how the energy, engagement, and relationship-building amplify when students are immersed in the new, yet familiar, environment.

### **The Buzz**

As students walk past Ms. Michael's classroom, the relaxing sounds of jazz melodies pour into the hallway. Lights are dim, and the aroma of brewing coffee wafts from Ms. Michael's classroom, “igniting all the senses.” There is a buzz of excitement down the fourth-grade hall of Milton Elementary. That excitement? That's where the learning begins.

Ms. Michaels dons a red apron, hair slicked back in a ponytail and cap, and stands next to a cart piled high with cups and a coffee maker. A large backdrop depicting a brick wall is fastened on stands behind her as she enthusiastically greets her students with a chipper tone, “Welcome to The Buzz!” (see Figure 1).

### **Figure 1**

*Melody Michael's Coffee Shop Transformation*



“Oh, my gosh! What is going on?” Marley, known for being a “ball of energy,” questions as she notices the changes to Ms. Michael’s classroom that seem to have miraculously appeared overnight. Gone is her fourth-grade classroom, which is now replaced with a local coffee shop, managed and run by a barista who looks curiously similar to her math teacher, Ms. Michaels (see Figure 1). Marley’s “eyes got ginormous.” “I woke up this morning and I just knew it was going to be a good day, but man! Ms. Michaels, I already love math. It’s my favorite subject, but you make it so much better!” It’s clear this sentiment is shared by her peers, as many begin murmuring in excitement that they can’t wait for math class and that their “mind is blown!”

The buzz of excitement continues as math class begins and students start filing into the room. The barista informs them they may sit at any available café table. The students are no longer fourth graders but patrons of Milton Elementary’s newest hot spot,

The Buzz, where their specialty is serving hot chocolate in exchange for completed math problems.

As customers begin filling the room, they are presented with a series of coffee shop-themed math problems that interestingly reflect the area and perimeter unit the students had just completed. The barista explains the goal and expectations for the day while the customers begin flipping through their tasks. She encourages them to talk and collaborate, but there is an air of calm in the room as jazz continues to filter through the café's speakers.

Ms. Michaels notices that students who were typically disengaged are working harder than ever before; the students notice it, too. Mitchell, typically withdrawn and reluctant to collaborate, was intentionally paired with a high-energy partner. Ms. Michaels watches as his demeanor shifts—he lights up with excitement and engages fully in the activity.

Nearly an hour passes, and students continue to chat about math, leaning in to help each other, and then quickly pop up to meet the barista at her coffee stand. She asks, “What can I get for you?” as she checks their work for accuracy and serves her patron with items noted as the reward for accurately completing each task: a cup, hot water, hot chocolate mix, and marshmallows. With a coffee cup in hand, each student returns to their table, smiling, and is seemingly unaware of how much math they are actually completing in preparation for their upcoming unit test.

After class, one of Ms. Michael's students, Matthew, referred to the day as a *blue pencil*. His friends looked at him quizzically. He went on to explain:

*If you have a whole bunch of normal pencils in a box, but then there's one blue pencil, you're not going to remember that one normal pencil in the bottom of the box. You'll say there's a lot of pencils there and one blue pencil. You're going to remember the one blue pencil, the one thing that made it different than all the other classes you had. I feel like Ms. Michaels and her room transformations was that one blue pencil for me.*

On the surface, it may look like a makeshift café. But inside Ms. Michael's four walls, something far more meaningful is being created and fostered—collaboration, conversation, confidence, community, and lasting memories.

### **Arthur Adams**

In the halls of Ashford Elementary School, everyone knows Arthur Adams. He is responsible for making art come alive for the roughly 800 students who walk through his classroom door. At any given moment, you might spot him enthusiastically teaching from atop a table or dressed up, roaming the halls, sparking excitement amongst students while wearing an inflatable dinosaur costume. The students treat him like a local celebrity, shouting his name and trying to get his attention when they spot him in the halls. It's evident why he earned district-wide recognition as Ashford's Teacher of the Year after only six years in the classroom. In our talks, it is clear that an immense amount of creativity and energy courses through his body. He quickly pinged from one idea to the next, barely giving me enough time to take notes and keeping me on the edge of my seat as he passionately explained his life history and his experience with classroom transformations. He is constantly pushing his teaching and students to the limit, and his willingness to step out of his comfort zone offers valuable insights into how other

educators can begin to embrace innovation. For Arthur, teaching is not a task—it is a performance and an opportunity to create an unforgettable experience while igniting a genuine love for art.

He is a self-proclaimed “90s young’un,” “country folk,” and “preacher’s kid,” and his road to teaching has humble, small-town beginnings. He explained that his strong religious roots shaped how he conducted himself and instilled a deep sense of discipline, respect, and integrity. He admitted that although he liked to “cut up and was goofy and silly” as a child, his parents had high expectations for behavior, and he was never considered a behavior problem. He credits his “several” meetings with Jesus to “get straightened out.” He smirked as he recalled that “there were several times where [he] had to step out of church real quick and then meet Jesus and come back inside” once he remembered to model the strict standards his parents upheld.

His grandmother, the ruling matriarch of his tight-knit family, hosted the shenanigans of the family’s youth. Arthur, his younger sister Alice, and a lively crew of cousins filled their time inventing their own games and twisting the rules just enough to keep things exciting while their parents were at work. One of his “fondest memories” is of playing “pinecone wars” with his cousins—building forts out of barrels and wire, and spending “sunup to sundown outside.” He laughed as he admitted they “didn’t break anything, but definitely had some scratches” from launching pinecones during their epic backyard battles. It’s within these childhood experiences of “playing in the woods and cutting up” that imagination, creativity, and resourcefulness were cultivated and foreshadowed the type of educator he would become.

While his parents always supported his creativity, it was Mrs. Ansley, his high school art teacher, who helped him recognize his own potential and heavily influenced his path into education. “She definitely saw something that I didn’t see before,” he reflected, noting that Mrs. Ansley’s encouragement stood out because it wasn’t something she had to do. Their connection stayed strong throughout his high school career, but it was during his senior year that her investment in Arthur made a lasting impression on him.

That fall, Arthur’s mother became critically ill with Wegener’s disease, a rare and aggressive autoimmune disorder. The diagnosis came just as school was beginning, and Arthur was stepping into a demanding academic load with Advanced Placement classes. The illness progressed rapidly. “We were in the emergency room, and I remember overhearing conversations of not knowing if she was going to live another 24 hours,” he recalled. The disease began attacking her kidneys and lungs, and eventually required her to be airlifted to another hospital for intensive treatment.

As the oldest sibling, Arthur felt a responsibility to hold things together. “I was trying to make sure we were all good,” he said. He felt the pressure of having to balance school and support his sister, all while facing the uncertainty of whether his mother would survive. With both parents absent for weeks, Arthur stayed with extended family, navigating a period of instability in which support from others was critical. It was during this turbulent time that his art teacher also stepped in as a trusted adult, checking in regularly and offering stability. “She didn’t have to,” he noted, “but she wanted to make sure I was in a good headspace.”

He credits this experience as one of the reasons he works so intentionally now to connect with his own students. “You never know what’s going on outside [the classroom]. I’ve been that kid. I’ve seen how that happens and how that works and how it can take just one person to make sure you stay on the right path,” he explained. By the second semester of his senior year, things at home began to stabilize. His mother returned home, and the family began to find normalcy again. Arthur, meanwhile, had become a fixture in the art room. He smiled as he recalled that he “was in the art room even when [he] wasn’t supposed to be in the art room,” and laughed remembering how Mrs. Ansley would write him passes so he could get to class after arriving “a little bit late”—punctuality was not his forte. His art teacher had become a steady influence, offering him space, encouragement, and even helping him stay accountable. Arthur shared that Mrs. Ansley stepped into a role she didn’t have to take on and “made sure she knew all the other stuff that was going on” beyond the academics. The impact she made continues to influence how Arthur builds relationships with his own students.

By the time he graduated, Arthur knew he wanted to continue his passion in art and wanted a profession where he could build relationships and help people. His experience taught him that a teacher's presence can be life-changing and that teaching is more than delivering content. The mentorship he received, coupled with the safe space that art class provided during one of the most uncertain times in his life, shaped not only his career path but his approach to education, one centered on connection and showing up for students.

Arthur explained that he has come far from his “quiet church mouse” days. He has since found his voice and confidence and developed a bold and engaging teaching

style that is all his own. However, at the beginning of his career, he struggled with blazing his own path and found himself emulating the rigid, “strict disciplinarian” teaching methods that had been modeled for him during his student teaching experience by his mentor. Although he possessed the content knowledge and his students’ products appropriately reflected the art theory he was teaching, he recalled feeling a disconnect between how he was teaching and how he wanted to feel as an educator. The authoritarian style that had been modeled for him and that he defaulted to misaligned with his values and made him uneasy and unfulfilled. He admitted he “didn’t have a firm understanding of who [he] was as a teacher at that point in time.”

A turning point came when a colleague’s reassurance gave him the affirmation and confidence he needed to deviate from his mentor teacher’s philosophies when she told him that no one expected him “to be her.” With that simple reassurance, he began experimenting and refining his teaching style and philosophy. This advice—still ingrained in his memory 10 years later—continues to shape his instructional decisions today as he leans into practices that feel more joyful, relational, and true to himself.

He candidly admitted that although from the outside it had seemed like he had hit his stride early in his teaching career with the title of “teacher of the year,” he felt that he “hit a little bit of a stalemate.” He found himself “doing the same thing over and over and over again.” He explained he often feels like he “is on an island” because he is the only art teacher in the building, which makes collaboration with content-specific educators challenging. However, despite the barriers, Arthur remains driven by a personal desire to be “the best art teacher [he] can be.”

With the title of teacher of the year, he experienced another pivotal moment that changed his perspective and beliefs about teaching. Each teacher of the year was afforded the opportunity to visit the Ron Clark Academy—a world-renowned school known for its innovative instructional practices. He explained that the experience was transformative and “started a huge shift in how [he] operated the classroom.” It wasn’t just the visit that sparked change—it was that experience coupled with shifts happening in his own school. As new teachers joined the faculty, Arthur began to observe fresh approaches to instruction, ones that challenged the traditional models he had inherited. Up to that point, his teaching reflected what the art teachers in his district did: assign the same project, follow a standard routine, and do their best with what they had. But now, surrounded by colleagues who brought in new philosophies and practices, Arthur began to see possibilities he hadn’t considered before. Exposure to these new ways of thinking—both at the Ron Clark Academy and within his own school—opened the door for him to reimagine what his classroom could be. The experience pushed him to “try and embody what [he] was seeing from other teachers and at the Ron Clark Academy.” He sought out opportunities to develop his craft and embraced continuous growth and innovation—an approach that reflects his “be better and do better” philosophy of life. Soon, he found himself teaching from tables and with an energy and vigor that he hadn’t experienced before. Still, there was an opportunity for more growth when he was introduced to another practice—classroom transformations.

Arthur’s journey with classroom transformations began with curiosity, a drive to improve, and his interest in student engagement. He explained that although he was initially unfamiliar with the concept, “seeing the kids' excitement and...the mystery

behind them and [students] wanting to be involved and engaged” piqued his interest and pulled him in. He recalled that one of his first experiences with classroom transformations was when he noticed his students’ elevated enthusiasm in returning to their general education class after his art class:

*I had started noticing that some of the other teachers were doing what was called a classroom transformation with their stuff. As I'm dropping kids off, I had noticed.*

*I mean, it's cool. I thought it was awesome that in one night, you changed the whole environment, the whole classroom changed.*

*Started noticing my [students in] line. I think it was supposed to be quiet in the hallway, but they're super excited once again to go into that classroom. That was the situation. I was like, Okay, maybe I can level up. I liked what I was seeing there. I wanted to try it. That year, I ended up toying around with [the idea] for a while. I didn't know how to do it. I asked questions and stuff like that every once in a while, but I was just trying to figure out what avenue would work for me to introduce that to 800, or at that point, about 700 kids. That year, that spring, I decided, okay, I'm going to try.*

Classroom transformations gave Arthur the means to get his students to “feel and experience ...versus just...talking about it the entire time” and allowed him to exercise his own “creativity, problem solving, and...personality.” He explained how he used an ocean classroom transformation to integrate third-grade science standards on pollution and go beyond just talking about pollution, but creating an immersive experience where they understood the impact of pollution:

*I transformed the classroom, made everything look like water. We got stuff hanging from the ceilings, animals floating all around. You look up, and it looks like the lights are covered with blue plastic, and then it's got the animal. You can see the silhouette. It looks like the animals swimming above you. The waves were going across the top of the cabinets. The floor, however, when they first walked in, it was covered with trash. I mean, it was cleaned, of course, but bottles, plastic, trash was everywhere all over the floor. When they first walked in, they're looking up. They're looking at what was going on on the door, and they're all in awe. And then, they kick the piece of trash.*

*I could sit here and say it and talk about it all day long, but [the students] needed to know what it was actually like [in a polluted environment]. They might walk past the wrapper and be like, "Oh, that's somebody that's being nasty. They should have thrown that in trash can." But it was not the same. I had already started collecting garbage and trash and everything. Stuff that was technically clean, but it still would give the same vibe. When those grade levels came through, [the garbage] was all over the floors when they came into the classroom. It would be on their tables and chairs, and they were having to actually walk through and move and try and be in an environment that was now polluted. It allowed us to be able to take in during that class period, have that discussion of, "Oh, okay, well, what is it? How do you feel at this point? You're super excited. You were at the door thinking that you were fixing to go under the ocean and see all these really cool animals, but you just walked in and found garbage*

*everywhere.” It gave them that real-life experience of, “Oh, okay, no, I don't like sitting in this environment.”*

Beyond an innovative way to deliver content, Arthur explained that “transformations build relationships. [Students] talk about them. They remember them.” He wants students to “be in love with art and coming to [his classroom].” He recognizes the ability to use his instructional practices to not only teach the content but also cultivate a classroom culture that values creativity, connection, and an enthusiasm for learning. With each execution of a classroom transformation, Arthur has “a chance to make sure that [students] are falling in love with the art room over and over and over again.” Students know his classroom is different. They remember it. They look forward to it. And so does he. “I was always excited to be an art teacher,” he said, “but this brought in a whole different ballpark.” He went on to explain that a teacher “can throw up decorations, but it’s more than just that,” emphasizing that classroom transformations helped to transform his teaching. The meaning he attached to the practice goes beyond the mere changing of the aesthetics of the classroom; for Arthur, transformations are about creating an immersive experience that captivates, “boosts the content,” fosters genuine excitement for learning, and “builds bonds” through the greatest performing art—teaching.

Arthur explained that he never received school-level professional learning on classroom transformations, nor was the concept introduced by any of his professors in teacher education. Instead, he had to rely on his own sense of agency and feedback from his students to drive his planning and instruction. When he initially began experimenting with classroom transformations, he sought out inspiration on his own, talked to

colleagues, and tested ideas with hundreds of students. This initiative is a hallmark of his teaching style—creative, reflective, and grounded in student experience. He recalled seeing an art teacher post a glow-themed classroom transformation on social media where a teacher used black lights and fluorescent paints to create a novel learning experience. He viewed the concept as a simple and accessible way for him to “get his feet wet” and begin experimenting with the practice. As he reflected on this first experience, he described it as “the surface level of what it could be and how it could be taken a lot farther.” He explained that his first transformation was rudimentary compared to the elaborate and detailed classroom transformations he currently implements. However, it “did generate a lot of excitement.” Aligned with his “be better and do better” philosophy, he adds and elevates his classroom transformations with each year and each iteration. He commented that learning about classroom transformations has allowed him to “continue to bring that excitement” for his students, while the challenge of planning and implementation also sparks excitement for himself, in turn increasing his motivation and satisfaction.

Arthur does warn that sometimes students get “a little too excited,” and having effective classroom management strategies established prior to a transformation is important. While the energy and enthusiasm are great, he strives for a balance between maintaining structure and being sure not to “squash” their excitement. He explained, “The kids are excited. I’m excited. We want to all stay excited.” When operating a classroom transformation, he suggested teachers “meet [students] where they’re at” by getting into character, but also explicitly sharing the goals and success criteria so that the lesson remains focused and productive.

Because he is the only art teacher in his building and the only art teacher in his system executing classroom transformations, he admitted that it “was very difficult in the very beginning.” He lacked an outlet to collaborate and share ideas, but he was willing to take instructional risks on his own, and being “on an island” has become less of an issue with experience. He takes initiative in learning from teachers outside his content area and adapts the methods to fit his content and classroom. He suggested finding “like-minded folks” who are excited and motivated to experiment with classroom transformations and to “start small, see and feel what it's like, and then make it work for you.” His positive experience and passion have also garnered the interest of other art teachers, who are now intent on exploring what classroom transformations might mean in their practice.

Additionally, since he sees “all the kids throughout the building,” there is an added challenge of making sure the theme and tasks appeal and align to students at every grade level. However, for Arthur, the challenge is part of the reward, and he enjoys “trying to figure out the solution” to the hurdles he encounters along the way. Arthur acknowledges the “investment” that classroom transformations require—not just in terms of time, money, and materials, but in energy, creativity, and commitment. He suggested that interested teachers focus on student experience over perfection and explained that the impact of a classroom transformation comes from the feeling students walk away with, not necessarily the complexity of the setup. “It needs to have that wow factor when they first walk in,” he explained, but the real magic happens through crafting an experience students will remember. Arthur views this investment as worthwhile because it prioritizes memory-making, relationship building, and redefining what school can feel like.

## Jurassic World

“Welcome to Jurassic Park,” Mr. Adams, the lead scientist of Jurassic Park’s research facility, announces while standing at the newly constructed entrance to the art room (see Figure 2). The iconic film score to the blockbuster streams from the classroom speakers into the hallway. Giant stone pillars flank the door, and tissue paper torches illuminate the halls leading into the transformed classroom. Large palm fronds cascade down from the ceiling, dinosaur eggs are perched precariously on the edges of shelves and tables, and vines creep across the room. An inflatable Tyrannosaurus rex is spotted in the corner, looming ominously over the classroom tables. Lined up outside, the students’ eyes swell, and shrieks of excitement escape their mouths. Their jaws drop as they see Mr. Adams with what looks to be a baby T-rex in his arms. It wriggles around, lets out a roar, and makes a quick snap. It’s clear something extraordinary is about to unfold.

### Figure 2

*Arthur Adam’s Jurassic Park Entrance*



A third grader excitedly turns to a classmate and asks what’s going on. “A classroom transformation! It’s where teachers think of something that might entertain the kids and then transform the whole entire class!” Abby enthusiastically replies to the question. Ann adds, “It makes me feel like I’m in a new classroom. They add a lot of decorations and turn it into something different and new!”

As students follow a set of dinosaur prints through the stone archway, Mr. Adams hands them a yellow badge emblazoned with the Jurassic Park emblem. Today, the students are no longer third graders at Ashford Elementary. Now, they are scientists tasked with splicing DNA to create a new type of dinosaur. As each student clips on the badge, they earn the clearance to enter the genetics lab hidden deep within the park (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Arthur Adam’s Jurassic Park Transformation*



Mr. Adams welcomes the scientists with a solemn nod. With this classroom transformation, he has reimagined what art education can look like using a fully

immersive storyline where students take on the roles of DNA scientists to learn complementary and analogous color theory. Tasked with correctly puzzling together two strands to create the double helix structure of DNA, the scientists quickly begin collaborating. Little hands swiftly begin sorting and combining the color strands on a paper-printed vial template to identify three sets of complementary colors. Mr. Adams races around the room, monitoring the lab and offering guidance or celebrating discoveries as the scientists collaborate, experiment, and problem solve. As each set of complementary or analogous colors is identified, a new dinosaur exhibit at Jurassic Park is announced. Students dive deeper into the experience by learning about dinosaurs, sketching anatomical features, and putting their knowledge of the DNA sequenced color combinations to work in their own artwork. Their final product is evidence of their learning—a one-of-a-kind painting of a velociraptor brought to life through the convergence of science and art (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Velociraptor Painting*



At the end of the day, Mr. Adams begins dismantling the decorations and props that he spent hours preparing just days before. A colleague pops their head in his room in astonishment and questions if the effort was worth it. He simply replies:

*In the long run, 30 years from now, I know as an art teacher, are they necessarily going to remember complementary colors? Maybe not. But they're going to remember the transformation. They're going to remember that they were in art. They're going to have that appreciation for art. If I can create excitement and engagement through a classroom transformation, I'm showing up and I'm going to do it.*

As the last strands of vines are pulled down and the final backdrop is folded away, the excitement of the transformation lingers in the air. The feeling is electric, and Arthur's mind is already reeling with ideas to make his next transformation even better. For Mr. Adams, the transformation isn't just about what the students saw—it's about what they felt and the connections they made. The joy, the excitement, and the spark of curiosity that was ignited within them are the real goals and what motivates him to continue. He believes the true legacy of a teacher is not the content remembered, but the experience that remains in students' memories long after they leave the classroom.

### **Michelle Mitchell**

Michelle Mitchell is the embodiment of Ms. Frizzle from The Magic School Bus. She's wildly creative and a little unpredictable. Whether she's transforming her classroom into a dinosaur fossil dig site or a replica of the Titanic, Michelle creates immersive lessons focused on engagement and bringing joy to learning. It's evident that,

just like Ms. Frizzle’s class, students are encouraged to take chances, make mistakes, and get messy!

Though Michelle described herself as “very calm,” she admitted that “chaos just finds [her].” Busy is her baseline, and multitasking is her default mode of operation. She laughed as she explained that she always has to have “something playing in the background” when she works and functions best when she has multiple things going on at once. She thrives in busy, hands-on environments where learning is active and meaningful. She identified herself as “type C”—a mix between type A and type B—someone who craves structure and organization but often gets sidetracked by creative ideas and bursts of inspiration. She admitted that with piles stacked on piles, her desk may look a mess to an outsider, but it’s an effective filing system for her, and she knows just where everything is and could find any given item within minutes. Her classroom isn’t about perfection; it’s about engagement, purpose, and fun. Her patience and commitment to understanding why students make mistakes, not just correcting them, help her create a learning environment where students feel safe to take risks and grow. Valuing mistakes is a hallmark of her teaching philosophy:

*We talk all the time in my classroom. You can make mistakes. We all make mistakes. We learn from our mistakes. And that's the conversation we have, it's good to make mistakes because we learn from them. We don't learn as much if we're always getting the correct answer.*

Michelle has served in many different capacities as an educator during her 12-year career, but currently teaches third-grade math at one of her city’s elementary schools. Although she now calls Georgia home, she is proud of her Midwest roots. Her

father's job moved her and her family quite a bit while growing up, but when asked about her upbringing, she speaks fondly of her Midwestern beginnings and considers it where she "grew up the most." When she was 14, her dad's job required another move, but this time, they were moving much farther and landed in the South. Leaving her two best friends to make yet another move was tough at such an impressionable age, and she remembers being "not happy about that move at all." She admitted that she "was not a huge fan [of the South] originally." Her mother endured the grunt of her emotions as Michelle cried "over eight hours" during their drive to their new home. In the moment, Michelle felt her whole world falling apart, but some things just seem more amusing in hindsight. She laughed as she recalled the road trip:

*My poor mom. We moved on her birthday, and she heard me crying the entire way...as well as the cat in the back seat that she's allergic to and the bird! The bird was next to the cat. So, the cat was trying to get the bird the whole time. I felt so bad for her.*

Michelle's mother, Mary, was a steadfast and nurturing presence throughout her childhood—a woman who modeled many of the qualities Michelle would later bring into her own classroom. Though she and Michelle clashed at times while living under the same roof—something they "joke about pretty regularly"—they now share a close bond built on mutual respect and admiration. After one of the family's moves, Mary became a stay-at-home mom and threw herself into her children's world. She served as PTO president and worked as a substitute teacher. She promptly had her children at every practice, event, game, and appointment. She even found herself sitting in Michelle's brother's classes when teachers informed her of his difficulty staying on task. Mary's

presence, involvement, and influence in the school community helped ensure that Michelle always “had the best teachers” who kept her engaged. As a substitute teacher, Mary didn’t just show up—she cared about the quality of education. Michelle recalls her mother’s frustration with being handed busywork as a substitute, because she genuinely wanted to teach and connect with students. Her mother’s creativity, warmth, and willingness to step in—whether as a parent or an educator—left a lasting impression. “She was always very helpful, very creative.” Michelle sweetly reflected, “She really would have enjoyed being a teacher had she had the chance to go to college.” Neither Michelle’s mother nor father was able to complete college, and they desperately wanted that opportunity and experience for their children:

*My parents were very big supporters of school. They had said from when we were really little, they wanted us going to college. That was always in the plan. It was talked about... I remember being real little talking about going to college...They just always said they had to work so hard to get where they were and had to work so hard to get the income they had. Their push was that you need to have a good career, and college will get you there...They didn't care what I did as long as it was something useful.*

Michelle’s love of learning and her positive educational experiences eventually guided her to a career in education, although in college, she “switched majors quite a few times.” She found herself unhappy with the majors she was pursuing, and “hearing...how miserable people were in the program” deterred her from completing a major in sports medicine, chemistry, and pre-pharmacy. For Michelle, simply earning a degree wasn’t enough—finding fulfillment and joy in the process of earning her degree was important

to her, and she “did not want to be miserable just to earn a degree.” When she decided to change her major yet again, she approached the decision differently—this time reflecting on her past experiences and passions to help her find a path that felt both meaningful and sustainable. As she considered what had truly brought her joy, she “came back to [her experience at] Montessori preschool,” a memory that sparked a realization about the kind of learning environment she valued and the role she might play in creating it for others.

With that realization came a plan. She “decided to do a major in early childhood and then also a major in business management.” As a small child, Michelle began her schooling in a Montessori preschool. She credits this experience with creating an appreciation for hands-on learning. “I really enjoyed it,” she recalled, noting how it sparked a dream to one day open her own Montessori school. That dream would evolve over time, but her value in creating meaningful, experiential learning remained. During second grade, Michelle yet again experienced a pivotal classroom moment that stuck with her. Though she was only in that class for two months before her family moved, her teacher, Mrs. Martin, made a lasting impression. She incorporated themes, travel, and even passports into her lessons. One week, they “traveled” to Australia—a place the teacher had visited—and it began Michelle’s fascination with international travel. A fascination she would later capitalize on when she decided to double major in business with a concentration on international business. The experience planted a seed that learning didn’t have to be static or confined to worksheets; it could be imaginative, personal, and extend beyond the confines of a classroom’s four walls:

*I remember at one point we would be on an airplane...we were passengers pretending we were flying to our destination. Whenever we visited different*

*countries, we read passages about them. For social studies, we'd look at a map and we'd find the country on the map. And so we had to...color it in on our maps where we were traveling. And she just really made it very fun...She was a very, very kind person. Very, very sweet, very soft spoken.*

Although Ms. Martin initially introduced Michelle to the idea of themed instruction as a student, her first exposure to classroom transformations as an educator came through social media posts. What started as mindless “scrolling at the end of the day just trying to get [her] brain off” became thoughts of possibilities as she saw a post with pictures of what a teacher referred to as a classroom transformation. She explained she was intrigued and thought, “Well, that looks like fun. I want to have fun. Let’s do fun!” She was tired of the “everyday routine” that seemed to monopolize the plans of her colleagues:

*You know, we do this, then we do this, and we do this. But it was the same thing every single day. And there was never really change. If there was a change, it was because there was like a quiz or a test. And I don't like that. Yes, I like to have routine. We do have a routine. Like, my kids know we're gonna open with number talk. We're gonna do something whole group, then we're gonna do small groups. But that doesn't mean that it can't be different each day.*

*I always liked and remembered the learning when we had fun when I was growing up. I always want to make sure that I'm doing that with my kids. I figured if we could get some good learning in, if we could make it something that they're going to remember, I always want experiences for my kids that they're going to remember. I know when I think back to certain grades, I really don't have many*

*memories of them. I know I spent a year there, but I don't really remember anything. So, I want [my students] to have some different things that they would definitely remember...I thought a classroom transformation would be that.*

She found herself wondering what it would actually take to pull something like that off and what it entailed aside from the physical transformation of the learning environment. She admitted at first, she “couldn’t wrap [her] brain around [the idea]” because aside from seeing the pictures on social media, she had “never seen it” done before. However, she knew there was something powerful behind it—something that could energize learning in a way traditional methods didn’t. Despite her uncertainty, she was intrigued by the possibilities and began researching, asking questions, observing, and envisioning how she might make it her own. Once committed, she turned her attention to logistics. To simplify the planning process, she chose Halloween as the theme for her first transformation, knowing she already had decorations on hand or could easily borrow from others. As she recalled her thoughts, she laughed, “Halloween is always absolutely insane in elementary school anyways. So, it's not like it can get any worse.” Discovering online resources created by another third-grade teacher made the process feel less daunting and provided her with a helpful starting point and a bit of guidance. She felt less burdened by the task and less intimidated by the magnitude of work that the transformation required.

After executing the Halloween-themed transformation—one she described as a chaotic day made meaningful—she saw firsthand how engaged and motivated her students became:

*When I first started, I remember feeling really nervous. There's a lot of movement around the room. [The kids] are constantly moving and doing different tasks. A lot of my coworkers got scared. I remember thinking I was really nervous about being able to keep track of who's doing what. And if the kids would stay on task. Are they going to be playing, getting in trouble? I convinced [one of my friends] to come to my class that day to help...[and] I tried it out with my kids.*

*So, after the first 15-20 minutes, we [thought], okay, this is working. This is going great...Everybody was on task, everybody was working. Everybody was just so excited...Then, when it got done, I just remember thinking my kids were so motivated...Including my kids that don't want to do anything... I thought, okay, I've got to do some more of these.*

From that point forward, she was hooked. She explained, "It's so cool to see the kids' transformation more than the actual room transforming." Kids who typically were disconnected and withdrawn "were smiling. They were engaged." She noted that kids who were previously completely content to "not participate or do anything" worked. And this effort and motivation extended beyond the confines of the classroom transformations. From her experience, she observed that "once [she gets] that buy-in, [students] are more open to all areas of content. It even carries over into [other classes]." Beyond engagement, Michelle noticed that students genuinely appreciated the effort she put into creating these experiences for them. They "really appreciate that it's special. They feel special", and they notice that not all classrooms and teachers are "taking the time to do something just for them" that's out of the ordinary and focused on fun.

Michelle remarked that the increasing pressure around state testing, especially in upper elementary, often leads teachers to focus narrowly on content and deters many teachers from deviating from traditional methods or exercising creativity. But for Michelle, classroom transformations have “helped [her] to remember to keep things fun...especially when [there is] testing and there is so much going on.” She knows she “can accomplish a ton in an hour and a half room transformation,” and can still “hit so many different skills to review” and prepare for testing. Michelle uses classroom transformations to keep academics at the forefront while establishing a classroom culture that values making learning fun. What started as curiosity grew into a passion for crafting unforgettable learning experiences that students talk about long after the lesson ends.

At her school, teachers began noticing the decorations as they passed by her room and responded with the same intrigue she had just years before when she first learned about the practice. She collaborated with her colleagues in her grade level, spread the use of classroom transformations to other teachers at her school, and even presented on the topic at a conference. After conducting over 10 classroom transformations, Michelle was confident in her experience and recognized that there were opportunities to share her knowledge with others and pass along what she learned. As more and more teachers around her consider experimenting with classroom transformations, she heeded the same advice:

*Just go for it...the worst thing that can happen is it doesn't go well, and guess what? It ends, and you do something else the next day...It's always going to not go exactly the way you were thinking. Just go with the flow as it's happening. It's not going to be super structured... It's all about free choice of choosing...who you*

*want to work with and where you want to sit. Just you need to embrace that. If it's going to bother you that kids are laying on the floor working on problems, then you might need to think ahead of time where they need to sit. Just to make sure you have your expectations [clear] and don't get overwhelmed with the thought of it.*

With her experience, Michelle found that her initial investment returns each year. She stores the tasks and decorations for reuse, and what originally took her hours now takes her 30 minutes to set up, depending on the theme and extent of decorations. Through her conversations with colleagues, she noticed “the decorations scare everybody trying to do it” because they are worried about the effort and costs of gathering the supplies needed to transform the physical classroom environment. And according to Michelle’s students, this concern is justified because they emphasized the importance of the decorations, explaining that the changed physical classroom environment “gets you in the mood” and is a “big deal.” Michelle shared similar sentiments about the significance of the physical transformation of the classroom:

*Let me explain the decorations. That’s like your attention getter. So, what are you doing at the beginning of your lesson to get your kids’ attention? Well, I’ve decorated the room. That’s getting their attention. The room is transformed, it’s decorated. So, when the kids walk up, they know something fun is going to happen... And now they want to know why is it decorated, and what is the task that we have to do that relates to this.*

*I think [teachers] need to know that it's not about just having pretty decorations and...a coloring a sheet. The decorations get them excited about the*

*task, but you are embedding a lot of learning, a lot of practice. And [the students] are so motivated.*

*In my experience, I haven't had to deal with hardly any behaviors ever because they're motivated and they want to learn. So, I'm not having to deal with classroom management stuff. And if I just handed them a stack of, you know, 10 worksheets and said, I need you to do this, they would take forever. But since this is engaging and motivating, they're wanting to go through it. And then it also gives me a lot of time to work with my kids one-on-one.*

Michelle explained that there are “tons of people who want to help.” She’s shared that her administrators, her school’s PTO, and students’ families have been incredibly supportive and “they’re always willing to donate things” or share decorations. She encouraged teachers to ask for help and not get “super overwhelmed with the setup and the decorations.” For Michelle, the magic of a classroom transformation doesn’t come from having a Pinterest-perfect classroom—it comes from the energy, intention, and creativity that go into making learning memorable. “Don’t let [the setup] be a deal breaker.”

### **Trick or Treat**

It’s Halloween, a day renowned in the teaching community as one of the most chaotic and unpredictable days of the year. Even at Maxwell Elementary, sugar-fueled gremlins roam the halls dressed in costumes, and completing worksheets is about as likely as a calm classroom during a full moon.

“Do we actually have to do work on Halloween?” a third grader groaned as he trudged down the hallway. However, while many of her colleagues braced themselves

with dread, Ms. Mitchell has been counting down the days, eagerly preparing for Halloween. Her litany of tasks—printing task cards for stations, prepping props, assembling mystery bags, and collecting skeleton bones, werewolf teeth, and ghost poop—has all led to this moment. For Ms. Mitchell, today is a chance to “embrace the chaos” and turn it into engagement and transform learning into magic. As her students begin walking down the hallway, they spot black and orange streamers hanging from the door frame of Ms. Mitchell’s third-grade math class.

Mandy, one of Ms. Mitchell’s students, shrieks, “It’s not going to be a boring worksheet!” A third grader standing nearby asks her about the decorations she spotted while peeking through Ms. Mitchell’s classroom door. “You can’t have a classroom transformation and then not transform the room!” Mandy quickly replies, “Fun things are to come.”

As students enter the classroom, the familiar creaks and howls of Halloween echo through the computer speakers. Caution tape stretches across the counter, skeleton-print tablecloths drape over the students’ tables, pumpkins adorn the walls, and the lights are dimmed, casting eerie shadows across the room (see Figure 5). Plastic spiders cling to the whiteboard, and along the back counter is a series of paper sacks with orange signs attached: ZOMBIE HAND, WITCH WARTS, GHOST POOP, SKELETON BONES. The air hums with excitement as students tiptoe in, wide-eyed and grinning, unsure of what spooky surprise awaits them next. Ms. Mitchell quickly announces, “Happy Halloween! Today, we are trick-or-treating in math!” As she has learned from past executions of classroom transformations, setting the scenario and the expectations is paramount, but so is embracing the role enthusiastically. While Ms. Mitchell lets out a

witchy cackle, Mandy whispers to her neighbor, “I love it when she gets into character! It just adds to the magic...If the teacher has fun, the kids will have fun also!”

**Figure 5**

*Michelle Mitchell’s Halloween Transformation*



What Ms. Mitchell’s students lovingly label as “organized chaos” ensues. There are students with clipboards spread across the room, kids chatting, and a cluster of students surrounding Ms. Mitchell. As students move around the classroom, they find signs with ghosts, pumpkins, and Frankensteins, noting different stations with task cards. Students notice the smiles and giggles from their peers, and they are thankful for this reprieve from seatwork to be “silly but still learn.” Without hesitation, they partner up with classmates, eager to tackle each task. It’s evident that collaboration and communication are the expectation, not just today, but every day. As partners agree on an answer, they dash to Ms. Mitchell for approval and to test their luck. Each student reaches into the crinkled paper sack to reveal their fate—a slip that reads either “trick” or “treat,” adding a playful element of surprise to their hard work.

Mandy gives Ms. Mitchell a quick grin as her eyes fix on the word “trick” on the orange slip she retrieved. Ms. Mitchell laughs and points to the mystery bags on the counter. Mandy settles on a bag marked “zombie hand.” She scrunches her nose, closes her eyes, and reaches in. Her fingers brush something squishy and cold, and she lets out a shriek that sends her classmates into laughter. Zombie hand or old banana peel? Mandy is convinced it’s the former. Around the room, students continue to bounce from station to station, laughing, learning, and keeping the spooky energy of the day alive for the remainder of Ms. Mitchell’s math class. Amongst the movement, one thing is clear: learning is alive here, and it’s filled with smiles and joy along the way.

As the eventful day closes, Ms. Mitchell sits and reflects on her use of classroom transformations:

*The more [classroom transformations] I do, the more I want to do them. You get addicted to the way the kids react. I mean, I do all kinds of engaging activities. I never wanted to just stand there and talk and have them listen. But classroom transformations are always the days when they're most engaged...I feel like my job as a teacher is to get [students] excited and get them wanting to participate and wanting to learn.*

Ms. Mitchell surveys the now-quiet room—plastic spiders askew, candy wrappers tucked in desks, and the faint sound of Halloween music lingering in the background. The remnants of the day may look like chaos to an outsider, but to her, they represent her purpose and goal: to create a memorable experience that ties learning to fun. She explains that she is “hitting not only their academic needs, but their social-emotional needs.” And

in that quiet moment, surrounded by the aftermath of a math lesson disguised as trick-or-treating, she's already dreaming up the next transformation.

### **Ruby Reed**

Ruby Reed is the type of teacher whose energy multiples when she goes the extra mile. She doesn't hesitate to be "extra" or "over the top" if it means capturing her students' attention and bringing a lesson to life. Although her students sometimes roll their eyes and label some of her dance moves or use of current slang as "cringey," they say it with a smile. There is a sense of admiration because they know the lengths Ruby is willing to go to make their experience in her class memorable. She has the unique ability to draw inspiration from simple, everyday items. She runs with her wild ideas, creating memorable lessons like using a Little Debbie cupcake to help students understand a story's theme or finding a costume on Facebook Marketplace and deciding to create a reading lesson that revolves around it. Even if it means staying late, cutting construction paper to resemble pizza toppings, transforming her classroom into a hospital, or dressing up as an astronaut, Ruby does it. The time, energy, and resources needed for this extra effort are not a burden because she views creating these moments of excitement and connection as "gifts" she can give to her students to show her investment and love for them.

As a child, Ruby's upbringing was marked by numerous challenges, but instead of inhibiting her, it shaped her independence and drive. Her teen parents divorced when Ruby was just seven months old, and after a series of failed marriages, her mother, Raina, was primarily a single mom raising six kids in a two-bedroom trailer. Ruby's mom experienced a childhood of instability and was "shuffled from house to house" and "fell

into that cycle of becoming a young mom.” However, she broke her family’s generational patterns of abandonment by raising her children with devotion and love. “She really changed how she was going to be as a parent,” Ruby said. “And she always was a very loving mom.” Even with the hardships, her mom embodied selflessness—Raina “is the kind of person who would literally do anything for anybody. If you need anything, she’s gonna be the first person there.” It’s evident that Ruby inherited her mother’s sense of altruism. Her students shared how Ruby makes time to come support them during their after-school games and performances on a regular basis. She aims to show up for her students and make them feel safe, seen, and loved beyond the 90 minutes in her classroom.

Ruby described Raina as someone who “always worked really hard” and “worked several jobs” to provide just enough for her family to make ends meet. Ruby watched Raina work at an egg farm by day and then head to Walmart’s deli for a night shift. Raina’s unparalleled work ethic left a lasting impression, and Ruby explained that she believed she had inherited “a lot of [her] work ethic from [her] mom” and found herself working hard from a young age. Being the oldest of six siblings, Ruby assumed the role of a caregiver and nurturer early, and she “grew up helping take care of [her] family because [her mom] worked.” In an environment where her mother’s primary focus was to provide the necessities to survive, Raina found it difficult to be present at Ruby’s soccer games, band performances, or school events. Looking back, Ruby understands it wasn’t because of a lack of interest, but out of sacrifice:

*I never had to question if my mom loved me. That was never a question in my life.*

*She had to be at work. It wasn’t, ‘Oh, man, I’m gonna miss the soccer game.’*

*Because having power in our house was a little bit more important than that.*

*Priorities were arranged differently... The priority was to make sure the bills were paid.*

With Ruby's growing responsibilities at home, school became an outlet—an opportunity to be a kid and not a caregiver. “I was a talker. I was one of those kids who could not sit by anybody. I would talk to anybody and everybody, and I'm still like that,” she said with a laugh, reflecting on her high school years. Ruby recalled, she “was involved in everything”—from band to soccer to every club she could join. Always “very outgoing,” she was the kind of student who lived at the center of the action. She admits she's always loved being “in the mix,” and that thread of involvement and enthusiasm carries into her role as a teacher.

As a student, Ruby did well in school, but it didn't come effortlessly. She “had to work a little bit for [her] grades.” She explained she wasn't the “kind of kid that could just not care and still make good grades. [She] had to study and try.” Ruby's motivation for success in school was entirely “intrinsic.” With a mother focused on providing for the family financially, and a father who “was kind of in and out of [her] life,” there wasn't a strong push to excel in school. Ruby's discipline, effort, and commitment came from within. She explained:

*I did not get [academic] support from my family. I don't feel like I was very pushed. My parents did not check my grades. No one stayed on top of that kind of stuff. I was kind of on my own as far as that goes. Neither one of my parents graduated high school, and definitely not their parents either. But, the way I felt whenever I achieved [success in school], those things were my motivation. It felt*

*good. I'm the only one out of my family that graduated high school...graduated college...and for sure the only one that has a master's degree.*

When Ruby Reed reflected on her time as a student, two teachers stood out because of how they made learning feel. One was a reading teacher, Mr. Roberts, who didn't rely on lecturing from the front of the room. Instead, his classroom felt more like a "hangout spot." It was a relaxed atmosphere where understanding literature centered on rich, engaging conversations. He didn't position himself as an authority figure, and Ruby described him as feeling like "one of us." He would join the conversation and share "so much insight on different ways of thinking." "He had a gift to be able to explain it to the common folk," she said. In Mr. Roberts' class, Ruby "grew a really good, deep love for reading"—a love that has stuck with her into adulthood and now shapes her practice as a fifth-grade reading teacher. Ruby encourages discussion, a love for literature, and teaches students to take accountability for their ideas and growth as learners.

The second teacher, a history teacher named Mr. Richards, was the kind of teacher who understood that learning didn't always happen from behind a desk. "We got to have a lot of cool experiences," she remembered. His class was filled with real-world connections and hands-on experiences—two values that are evident in Ruby's teaching philosophy. Ruby joined the Young Democrats Club under his guidance, attended a speech by President Obama, and participated in mock trial competitions. Each moment left such a strong impression that it sparked an interest in pursuing a career in law as an adult; each moment showed her the value of the type of experiences teachers construct and the lasting impact they have on their students.

However, a turning point came in her senior year when she learned she was pregnant soon after graduation and became a teen mom. “All [her] plans were completely tangled up,” and she found herself having to shift her plans for her future. Ruby didn’t always see herself becoming a teacher, but finding a position at a respected local daycare grew into something meaningful. In addition to falling in love with early childhood education, the experience “opened so many doors.” But most importantly, her job allowed her to be close to her own children while working. For eight years, she thrived in that space, surrounded by preschoolers learning their letters, parents praising their growth, and developing a passion for creating meaningful learning experiences for her students. Ruby remembered feeling fulfilled when “hearing parents say how great their kid was doing.” “It was just amazing,” she recalled, knowing she had helped shape their earliest experiences with learning. That sense of purpose stuck. Ruby recalled thinking, “From that point on, I knew I wanted to be a teacher.” She returned to school with a clear goal: to become a certified teacher. But above all else, she had a vision for the type of role model she wanted to be for her own children:

*I kind of did a lot of things in my life in reverse order of what society deems appropriate. I did not have a huge support system, but I think my kids were motivation for me because I want them to have somebody that they can look up to. My kids got to actually see me go through college because they were old enough to know that I was still in school. They saw the work I put in, the time I spent, my self-discipline, and the sacrifices I made. There were days when I would have class from eight to five online on Saturdays, and I would be at my kid’s game and in class at the same time, on my iPad. Looking back, I wouldn’t change a thing*

*about that because I think that my kids getting to see how hard I worked to graduate is actually really cool.*

Despite the challenges of being a young mother and coming from a family history of limited opportunities, Ruby remained determined to create a better future for herself and her children. Although she admitted that “getting [her] master’s was the hardest thing [she’s] ever done,” the experience of having her children able to witness her as the first college graduate in their family made her proud, and the sacrifices worthwhile. While completing her coursework, Ruby began substitute teaching and eventually secured a job as a paraprofessional. She hoped this opportunity would get her “foot in the door” and eventually lead to a permanent position as a certified teacher once she graduated. It was as a paraprofessional that she was first introduced to classroom transformations.

Ruby remembered walking into a first-grade classroom that had been transformed into a campsite with desks arranged in a circle around a faux campfire. Cloths draped over the desks resembled simple A-frame tents, and “kids brought blankets and pillows to put under their desks to feel like they were camping.” Ruby explained, “I remember thinking I could see myself doing that,” but didn’t yet realize “all the other possibilities.” As a first-year teacher, Ruby was reintroduced to the concept of classroom transformations when she “witnessed it being used in a different context and being used to teach actual standards and skills.” She remembered being captivated by the students who were fully bought into the experience, seemingly “on top of the world” with excitement, and how the classroom environment could shift so dramatically. “Hearing students talk about it the whole rest of the day, how much fun they had, and all the different parts and elements of it. Things that they remembered. It’s truly magical,” Ruby

shared. She realized it could be more than just a “cute” experience, but one that sparked genuine engagement, was deeply tied to instruction, and created connections between the teacher, student, and content. Observing these experiences planted a seed for Ruby. She “wanted to be able to give that experience to [her students], too,” and became determined to execute a transformation.

With the support of a veteran mentor, Ruby attempted her first classroom transformation in her first year as a certified teacher—a pizzeria-themed lesson on character traits. The theme is one she had seen before on a Facebook group she joined dedicated to teachers sharing classroom transformation ideas. She explained, “Sometimes I’ll go on there and scroll to get ideas from other teachers. Not every single idea works exactly the same way for every teacher. So, I’ll take the ideas and make them my own.” The experience was made less daunting because her mentor “knew all the reading standards so well, it made the prep easier and it made the teaching easier because [Ruby] had so much guidance.” The relationship ultimately proved to be mutually beneficial because Ruby’s “fresh-minded” perspective as a new teacher energized their collaboration. The two “were able to feed off each other really well because it got [her mentor] excited to do new things, too.”

Ruby reflected on her thoughts after her first classroom transformation and recalled that her students’ reactions affirmed her practice. “To see the kids come in and be so excited and leave so excited and knowing I was able to give that to them was the most rewarding feeling,” Ruby shared. She believes the power of the experience lies in its memorability—“It’s the kind of stuff that I feel like they’re not going to forget what they learned, because you’re making it unforgettable for them.” By embedding academic

content into an engaging and imaginative context, Ruby gives her students something concrete to refer to in their thinking. “They have something to reflect back on, an experience to pull from.” One example she gave was on ‘inferencing’: “When they think about ‘inferencing,’ I can almost guarantee they’re thinking about some mushrooms from the pizza [we made during the transformation].” Because of the classroom transformation, her students “are able to recall the experience and use that background knowledge in the future.”

Now, with her growing experience after having planned and executed six different themed transformations ranging from recreating a pizzeria to a surgical room, Ruby explained that preparation is key in implementing classroom transformations. She shared her experience and offered advice:

*There’s a lot of planning that goes into it...First, creating the materials, like the passages and the questions that go along with the theme, the actual assignment that they’re going to do. Planning also involves getting the different materials that you’re going to need. I reach out to the community. I’ve gotten face masks, gloves, and some surgical caps. I’ve actually purchased surgery gowns that I keep and reuse every year. Because I do spend a lot of my own money. I think of it as an investment. I’m investing. However, I know many people aren’t into spending money, but there’s stuff that can be reused, for sure.*

For Ruby, the creative process involves “taking some inspiration from other people... and just making it your own.” Whether working solo or bouncing ideas off a colleague, Ruby sees planning transformations as an opportunity to “brainstorm,” be creative, and have fun. There’s not a rigid formula—Ruby explained, “There’s no right or

wrong way.” Not only are the experiences meaningful to the students, but Ruby finds herself inspired as well. She shared:

*I feel like [classroom transformations] really opens up the gates to being imaginative and creative and all these things that as adults we forget about. But we still need that stuff, too. We get to use a different part of our brain that we don't get to use every single day. We get so wrapped up in our routines. And as exhausted as you are after a day of room transformations, it sparks other things. As soon I finish one, it's so rewarding that I cannot wait until I get to do the next one. I'm already on Amazon and Pinterest trying to figure out things that I can do for the next time.*

Although “the decorations and theme play a big role in the imagination part,” Ruby explained, “the bigger part of the experience is being able to play a different role.” “I have scrubs and a lab coat, and a stethoscope. I dress the part because being able to play that role is a huge part of it,” Ruby explained. She emphasized, “A teacher can have all the decorations and not have a successful room transformation.” Ruby finds that the teacher’s enthusiasm and participation are just as important as the changed environment. “I like to play a different role. We role-play so we really get into it,” she shared. For teachers considering transformations, she shared some advice: “Make sure you are willing and ready. You have to put yourself out there and play the part of someone else. It’s a huge part of it.” Her fifth graders embrace the excitement and “are willing to play that role also,” and she finds joy “getting to see their reactions and their willingness to kind of play pretend.” For Ruby, the transformation “means being able to take these kids out of the ordinary classroom, out of their ordinary day, and giving them a place where

they can learn, where they can transform into someone else.” She found “especially for those kids who might not always be successful, they can come in and play a role, be involved, and really take something away from it.” This was particularly true for one student, Rowan. Ruby fondly recalled:

*I had a kid my first year, [Rowan], who I feel like the way he grew up was similar to the way that I grew up. I think you kind of get attached to kids who you feel have had similar experiences to you. I think he had it tougher than I did, but when I looked at him and when I talked with his parents, it felt familiar. I got close to him.*

Rowan was “academically low, but wise, far beyond his years,” shaped by experiences no child should have to endure. Ruby was sure “he did not feel like a little kid” because he “did not live his life as a child. He was doing things, experiencing things, and seeing things that kids shouldn’t.” One of the most meaningful memories she holds is seeing Rowan engage in classroom transformations. “He got to kind of go back to actually be a child,” she reflected. For a boy who had spent so much of his life being forced to grow up too quickly, stepping into a world of pretend gave him the rare chance to “just be a kid.” Ruby believes she made a meaningful difference in his life, and though she doesn’t know where he is now, she hopes he still carries the impact of their connection and her role in providing a space for him to escape “his normal.”

The classroom transformation’s theme provides an entry point—something fun and unexpected that invites curiosity, elicits excitement, and engagement. “[Students] are engaged in ways they wouldn’t be in a normal lesson...It’s like a field trip,” she explained, “but you don’t have to go anywhere.” Ruby’s student, Ryker, echoed this

belief, saying classroom transformations are “fun because [the students] get to do something unique that’s not a normal day thing.” However, more than just a memorable experience, Ruby uses classroom transformations as a way to build connections with her students. Reflecting on the impact classroom transformations have on her relationships and the value she places on building connections with her students, she shared:

*During classroom transformations, the kids want to have more conversations with me. They’ll call me over, they want to show me stuff, they want to ask questions about it. They are more willing to ask questions. I see more of that.*

*I feel like naturally as humans, we all want to be somebody that the kids are going to gravitate towards and like. Teachers can say all day that they don't care if kids like them, but we do. We want our kids to like us. We want our kids to love us, and I want them to leave knowing that they were loved. I know from experience how much it creates a different connection with the teacher. If you can get them to love you like that, then it's easier to teach them. And providing these experiences for my students is one way I'm able to show them that I love them. When I do this, I'm giving them a gift. I'm doing something just for them. They are worth the effort I'm putting in, and the kids see that, and they know it, and I know they appreciate it. They are thankful and say 'thank you.' I don't think they would say that just on a normal day of teaching them, but on classroom transformation days, they are more thankful...They're so grateful and complimentary. Probably the most common thing that they say is 'this was the best day ever.'*

Although they are merely 10 and 11 years old, her efforts don't go unnoticed by her students. Ruby's student, Remy, explained that classroom transformations make her "feel like [her] teacher cares about [the students] a lot because she puts all her time and work into the classroom." Another student, Riley, shared that she noticed and appreciated "how much time [Ms. Reed] put into doing [classroom transformations]." Whether she's turning her classroom into a pizzeria, inserting "cringe" phrases into her instruction, busting out her funniest dance moves, or showing up after school to cheer on a student, Ruby brings joy to her role and her students. Her creative spirit and her belief in student connection are rooted in her lessons and daily instruction. In every transformation, Ruby isn't just teaching content—she's building a classroom culture where students associate fun with learning, are encouraged to take risks and ask questions, and are inspired to grow.

### **Super Bowl School Day**

It's the Friday before Super Bowl LIX, and the students in Ms. Ruby Reed's class begin to shuffle into River Elementary School, sporting jerseys like badges of honor. They know today is a special day because of a simple request Ms. Reed announced the day before—"wear any jersey tomorrow to school." The tiny clue did exactly what Ms. Reed had planned; it "builds the anticipation to come" to class. "Students try to guess what the classroom transformation is," as they grab breakfast and begin heading down the fifth-grade hall.

Ms. Reed greets the students at her door, football cradled under her arm, eye black smeared on each cheek, and sporting a bright red football jersey. "Are you ready for some football?" she shouts above the "game day, hype music" pumping in the

background. A banner hanging from the ceiling, and tables adorned with football centerpieces, draped with green tablecloths resembling football fields and football skins set the stage for the day's lesson (see Figure 6). As students walk in, their wide eyes darting from table to table, the energy in the classroom "feels different."

**Figure 6**

*Ruby Reed's Super Bowl Transformation*



Inspiration for this classroom transformation struck in the most unexpected place—while scrolling Instagram in the bathtub. “I have never had a Super Bowl party,” she quietly thought to herself, but the idea grew. Within minutes, she was texting her teaching partner, and the two began excitedly exchanging ideas, and their efforts came together to create this moment. Parents showed involvement by fulfilling an Amazon Wishlist that Ms. Reed created and shared in the week leading up to the lesson.

On these special days, Ms. Reed finds herself as a facilitator, rather than the center of attention, with student collaboration at the forefront of the experience. Prior lessons have built to this point, and students “already have what they need to be able to be successful independently or with a group.” “The very first thing you got to do at the

Super Bowl is you got to have a team,” she announces to her students, who were deliberately grouped into mixed-ability teams to ensure peer support and collaboration (see Figure 7). A scoreboard sits at the front of the room—empty at first, but is soon filled with creative team names as students collaborate to name their groups and design custom paper jerseys to represent them. Ms. Reed breaks the class period into quarters to mirror game day, and “each quarter focuses on a different skill,” where students work together to complete activities based on reading proficiencies they have been practicing, like inferencing, main idea, and text structure.

**Figure 7**

*Super Bowl Collaborative Group*



With instructions given, it’s evident the kids are ready for some friendly competition, and the energy is at an all-time high. Ms. Reed blows into a whistle, letting out a sharp blast which signals the start of the quarter. A large countdown clock is projected on the classroom’s digital display at the front of the room, and students quickly huddle together. The hum of student collaboration and conversations begins. The excitement continues to build as the timer goes off, and Ms. Reed calls for “pencils down.” Time seems to be moving more quickly today, while students fall into a state of

intense interest and concentration. Between each 10-minute challenge, Ms. Reed quickly grades and awards points that are then displayed on a scoreboard.

During the first quarter, Ms. Reed takes notice of a particularly challenging student, Rodrick, and the change she sees in his engagement during this classroom transformation. Rodrick is a student who, on a typical day, struggles to stay focused in class, not because of a lack of ability, but because of his desire for attention. His performance and behavior are heavily influenced by his interest in the content. Ms. Reed sometimes catches him slouching with his head in his shirt, often a cue that he is seeking attention. He may echo her reading or make distracting noises just to make sure Ms. Reed notices him. Most days, he requires frequent reminders to stay seated or engaged. However, during the Super Bowl team challenges, everything is different. Rodrick, a huge football fan, is completely immersed. He is decked out in his favorite team's jersey and enthusiastically sticks on the eye black supplied by Ms. Reed to each cheek. "His head is in the game," and he is eager to participate. He steps up as a leader in his group and begins to answer questions and read aloud with his team—behaviors seldom seen on a typical day. Ms. Reed knows she's made a breakthrough as Rodrick compliments her jersey, shares football facts throughout the class period, and even thanks her for the transformation.

Scores are updated for the first and second quarters as students identify the text structure of the football-themed reading passages enclosed in the large manila envelopes that are dispersed amongst the student teams. However, in true Super Bowl fashion, Ms. Reed has planned a halftime show. The performers? The students! The class erupts with

energy, and Ms. Reed can hardly contain her laughter as she joins the students in DJ Casper's Cha Cha Slide dance.

The whistle blows once more, and with game faces on, Ms. Reed's students compete in the last two tasks hidden in the remaining manila envelopes. With a slim margin lead in points, Rodrick's team manages to come out on top in the final quarter, and each teammate is awarded a small golden trophy. Students begin wildly clapping and cheering for the winning team, showing genuine excitement, which hints at the type of classroom culture Ms. Reed has established. As Rodrick walks out the door, he announces, "Today was the best day ever!" Ms. Reed hears this familiar phrase frequently on transformation days, but it seems to stick out a little more because of who uttered the words.

As she leaves class "literally exhausted" from the day's events and the cleanup that followed the transformation, she is still left satisfied knowing her students were fully engaged, challenged, and excited about learning. She sees their enthusiasm and responses as evidence that the "investment" of her time, effort, and money was well worth it, and she knows she's created a "core memory" for her students.

### **Reese Robinson**

Amid the many elementary classrooms that utilize popular call-and-response routines to energize students, Reese Robinson's classroom deviates from the norm. Instead, her fourth-grade classroom is full of inside jokes and unspoken understandings. One of their favorite running jokes is about Reese's essential morning coffee. The students know that "they can relax" only once Ms. Robinson's coffee is brewed, but not a moment sooner. There's no need for a formal call-and-response; her students know her

looks, her tone, and the way she stands when it's time to refocus. In this room, routines are built together—like when a student asks a tough question, Reese simply says, “I don’t know,” prompting the class to chime back, “So let’s Google it!” They stop what they are doing, pull up the search engine, and dive into inquiry. “I’ve taught science and social studies for years,” she tells them, “But I don’t know everything about the Civil War.” What follows isn’t just fact-checking; it’s embedding an understanding that curiosity is valuable, questioning is the expectation, not knowing is normal, and learning is a process that takes initiative.

Reese comes from a legacy of educators. As a “teacher’s kid,” Reese spent many hours in her mother’s third-grade classroom and countless afternoons helping to grade papers. Her mother, Rebecca, and step-grandmother, Rena, were both teachers. Both women played a decisive role in Reese’s path into education; “I am like I am because of my step-grandmother and my mom,” she shared. Just like her mother and grandmother before her, Reese is thoughtful, reflective, and intentional about the kind of person and educator she wants to be.

Raised in a loving and structured home in a small town, Reese described her childhood as “ideal”—marked by meaningful family connections, hard work, and an early immersion in the world of education. She would spend every summer “going somewhere educational for a family vacation...everything was based on education.” Although Reese didn’t grow up in a “touchy-feely” household, she never questioned if she was loved and, in turn, learned to love fiercely. Reese is the kind of person who would do anything for anyone at the drop of a hat.

Her dad, Randy, was a “hard worker...From the time he was a young boy, he worked in the fields.” “He had a really hard life growing up,” and was brought up in a time when men were expected to be the “provider.” After graduating from high school, her dad started “working a nighttime position at a fabrics company in [their] small town.” “He believed in getting a good education and working,” and expected the same from his children. Instead of afternoons spent at ballparks and practices, Reese and her brother learned how to hold down jobs and embrace the responsibilities that come with being a dependable employee.

But to know Reese is to know her mother, Rebecca. While age, health issues, and grandchildren have softened Randy’s tough exterior, it is Rebecca who offers the clearest picture of who Reese is. Reese has a deep connection with her mother, and although her brother pokes fun at her for it, she finds herself still calling her mom “three or four times a day.” As she talked about her mom, the love and admiration Reese has is undeniable:

*She is the nurturer. She is the one who we go to when we have problems. A wonderful teacher. She got Teacher of the Year several times. She taught third grade forever...She has beautiful Zaner-Bloser cursive handwriting. I mean, it is straight out of the book. She's the ultimate third-grade teacher. She's very strict, but she knows her content, and she knows what to do to get the kids to learn and to love her...That's my mom. Great mom. Ultimate teacher.*

Reese laughed as she recalled how many of her mother’s former students—some who had been known for their challenging behavior—would later approach Reese and express how much they loved her mom. Her mother was known for her “tough love.” Reese would often reply in surprise, “I thought she wrote you up!” “But they liked her

because they knew where they stood.” Rebecca’s expectations were high—not just academically, but personally. She pushed them to be “good people, productive citizens,” but her “tough love” approach was always underpinned by a deep and unmistakable sense of care. And the expectation was the same for Reese and her brother. Reese shared that her mother had once told her that “the highlight of her life [was] seeing [her] brother and [her] become good, productive citizens.”

Rebecca’s philosophy of “tough love” left an impression not only on her students but also on Reese, who now channels that same balance of structure and care in her own teaching. It’s evident in Reese’s teaching philosophy that her mother’s beliefs and values have made an impact, but so have her positive and negative personal experiences throughout her school career.

Reese noted that preferential teacher choice was “one of the few teacher privileges teachers’ kids have,” and for most of her elementary years, she “had really good teachers at [her] school.” She smiled as she recalled her “very artistic” and “out-of-the-box” kindergarten teacher who had “a really unusual room” that deviated from all the other kindergarten classes. There were bean bag chairs, a treehouse, and different areas where “she would let [students] go and sit while [the teacher] read stories.” Reese perceived that her kindergarten teacher’s creativity made some other teachers feel threatened, “but as a kid, [Reese] was obsessed with her classroom.”

Another year, Rebecca had “handpicked” a colleague, Ms. Reid, to be Reese’s second-grade teacher. Reese fondly remembered the simple yet powerful gestures that made Ms. Reid so memorable and made Reese feel valued. Reese recalled:

*[Ms. Reid] was really warm, motherly, strict, but you knew that you were loved. She would do special things like hand you a peppermint when she read a story. I can still remember to this day, getting a peppermint and sitting in her class. She would call me 'Her Reese', like you're my Reese or my girl. And that just made me feel special. And I knew that even if I got in trouble, she still loved me, and she would not shun me for that or push me away because I got in trouble...I would go to her classroom after school, and she would never act like I got on her nerves or that I annoyed her. She would let me come in in the mornings and help clean up her room. She just was very inviting. She had a warm classroom environment.*

Her time with Ms. Reid continues to influence Reese, and she makes it a point to create a classroom environment where her students feel welcomed and comfortable.

While Reese enjoyed her lower elementary school years, her academic confidence took a hit in third grade. She explained:

*I loved school until I got to third grade. I had a horrible teacher that year. She was sick a lot, and now I see that absences do make a difference. She was absent a lot. We had a lot of subs. I had a really bad year in math, and I have a real fear of math. I mean, that is still to this day, one of my biggest fears. I think it's just because it's uncomfortable for me. It's hard. It doesn't come natural. But that year, something happened with me in math. I don't know if it's because she wasn't there a lot. I started to hate math. I still liked school, but really did not like math, and became really insecure. That led into middle school and high school. I actually failed an algebra class. Even in college, I didn't do well in math. Every time I go to a job interview, I'll do anything but teach upper-grade math.*

Her negative experience instilled a lasting insecurity about math but created a profound empathy for students who struggle with learning. She connects with students on a level that others may not be able to because she understands their struggles and recognizes the effort it takes to keep trying. This shared vulnerability allows her to build trust, offer support, and create a safe space for students. She is thoughtful about her students' feelings and sensitive to the lasting impact an experience has beyond the classroom.

Unfortunately, in Reese's journey, middle school was even more turbulent, shaped by bullying, anxiety, and a sense of not belonging. Separated from her mother for the first time in her educational experience, Reese felt a loss of identity. She was no longer the "teacher's kid," but now "just like every other kid," and "a lot of the teachers there...just did not act like they loved their job." The absence of a trusted adult at middle school, coupled with ruthless bullying from a group of "mean girls," led Reese to turn inward, and she struggled with academic engagement. She candidly explained, "I would bite my nails till they bled. I would sit up and cry all night about what people would think about me." She described herself as just "drifting along," and she "really started to question [herself] as a student." Still, these experiences have deeply informed her teaching today. She is hyper-attuned to the emotional climate of her classroom and the social dynamics that can positively or negatively impact a child's spirit. Her students see her as a "kind" and "helpful" teacher who "really cares," gives them "warnings before she really gets mad," and encourages second chances. She explained, "Now, as a teacher, I'm very cognizant of how other children are being treated and reading the body language of the kids that are being bullied or feel insecure."

Fortunately, things began to shift for Reese in high school. Although academics were far from her focus, high school was a time of self-discovery. She “found a really great group of friends...and felt more secure.” She admitted she “loved high school,” calling it “the best four years of [her] life.” But her priorities leaned more toward friendship and fun than grades. “C’s get degrees” became her mantra, and she often played the “dumb blonde” stereotype to mask her lingering insecurities, particularly in subjects like math and foreign language, which she found especially challenging. She laughed as she recalled getting in trouble for bringing magazines into math and hiding them in her textbook. Years later, she ran into that same math teacher, and much to the teacher’s disbelief, Reese shared that she was now a teacher. Reese laughed as she recalled her former teacher exclaiming, “Reese, you used to bring magazines to my class! I emailed your mom all the time!” The teacher couldn’t help but laugh, shaking her head and saying, “That’s what you get,” knowing that Reese would also encounter many magazine-hiding students during her own career. Reese found that it was a “full-circle” moment—proof that even a seemingly disengaged student can grow into the kind of teacher who sees the potential in every student, including those hiding behind a magazine.

Although her struggles in math continued, her love for literature and history continued to flourish in high school. She remembered “several ELA teachers that [she] really loved” who would create immersive and engaging learning experiences. She recalled lessons on Greek mythology, poetry, and even tastings from the countries that inspired the stories and explained that her teachers “made you feel like you were there.” Those experiences left a lasting impression on Reese. This immersive approach is a

hallmark of her planning as she tries to create similar experiences for her students by embedding “virtual tours of places” and pulling up images as opposed to just “getting them through a textbook.” After graduating from high school, Reese stayed close to home, attending a local community college before transferring to a state university. It was during this time that she solidified her path in education. Teaching came “naturally” and felt “comfortable” and “safe.” “I never really considered anything else,” she explained. Surrounded by educators her whole life, Reese embraced the calling.

It wasn't until her tenth year of teaching that Reese experimented with her first classroom transformation after witnessing a colleague from her school conducting them. She shared that she “would hear [students] talk about how excited they were, how fun it was, and how they felt like they were going to remember it forever,” and those students' conversations “really resonated with [her].” That year, she planned and executed her first transformation—a Boston Tea Party-themed day. Though the practice aligned with her values on immersive and engaging learning experiences, she initially doubted whether the setup was worth the effort. She admitted that when she was setting up, she thought, “I'm never going to do this again. This is not worth it.” However, watching her students walk into the transformed space “changed it all.” Seeing their “faces light up” as they sipped tea and immersed themselves in Revolutionary history convinced her that transformations had the power to make learning stick and make a lasting impression. She explained:

*The kids get so excited about it. Yes, it's exhausting. Yes, it's a lot of extra work, but to see the look on their faces and to hear them talk about it over and over again, I know it's made an impact on them. It makes the lesson more exciting,*

*more hands on...tangible. It's a memorable experience and a lot of fun. It makes learning fun.*

Seeing her students' reactions, "gave [her] confidence" that classroom transformations had a valuable place in her instruction and solidified her decision to continue the practice. Reese credited her colleagues, saying she was most "influenced by...coworkers," and admitted she likely wouldn't have attempted her first transformation had it not been for seeing and watching her colleagues embracing the approach firsthand. She refined subsequent executions, adding details each year to strengthen the transformation. "I get a little bit better every year," Reese shared. In hindsight, she admits her "first [transformation] was probably [her] worst because [she] was going in blind." Although she had spoken to the "other teacher who had been established," executing the transformation revealed unique challenges that didn't present themselves through their discussions. She candidly explained that her first execution was "probably a little chaotic," but jotted down the issues she noticed so she could "prepare better for next time." Now, after several iterations of the same transformations, she stated that she's "got it down to a science." She shared that "talking to other teachers that have implemented them really helps," but most importantly, she believes teachers "have to go through it and [embrace] the growing pains...and figure out what [they] can do better the next time."

More recently, she and her ELA teaching partner co-created a café transformation "to motivate" students during their poetry unit. Reese laughed as she remembered being asked if she was interested in the café lesson and thinking, "Oh, yeah, I'm there. I love coffee. My kids know I love coffee." But what started as a casual invitation to collaborate

on executing a simple poetry café “just grew...and started to take shape” through conversations and “bouncing ideas off of each other.” Soon, it became a full-fledged transformation where the teachers turned their classrooms into cozy coffeehouses complete with moody lighting, jazz music, tablecloths, menus, and an open mic where students recited original poetry. Reese described the experience as “immersive.” “Instead of just learning about poetry, [the students] were the poets”; they were creating it, performing it, and witnessing it come to life through the creativity of their peers’ work. She shared that even to her, the “room didn’t feel like a classroom anymore.” Her students shared similar sentiments, explaining that they felt like they “were in a real café” and the experience “just sticks” because “fun times” have a habit of making a lasting impact. Another one of Reese’s students, wise beyond her years, shared that she’s noticed that when students have fun, “they’ll participate more, and they’ll want to learn more, too.”

Interestingly, Reese found that classroom transformations have benefited not only her students but also positively impacted her as well. Transformation days “shake things up in a good way.” She explained that teachers are expected to “teach the same stuff all the time...it’s the same routine,” but the deviation from the routine gets her “out of that slump of doing the same thing every day.” Although classroom transformations provide an opportunity to “really change things up” and escape the “same routine,” Reese explains that it is about more than novelty. They are carefully crafted experiences that help shape her classroom culture, deepen content connections, and make learning fun. “It’s the application moment,” she explained. “All my legwork happens before and then cleaning up afterwards.” During the transformation, Reese is able to “take a backseat”

and act as “a facilitator,” allowing her students to “take the lead.” However, she admitted that in her first experiences, she felt “a little overwhelmed at times” because she’s not one to ask for help. Regardless, she was excited about creating a memorable experience for her students that many of them wouldn’t have had otherwise. She explained that her students were able to “make connections that are not made” when relying only on a teacher-centered, didactic approach. In her most recent transformations, she has learned to accept help, albeit with some reluctance, and found that having “a lot of [parent] support...really helped.” Reese explained that to combat the challenges of prep work and purchasing supplies, she learned to “ask for more help,” emphasizing, “You really just have to learn to ask.”

Though the planning is extensive, and parent support varies, Reese is quick to say it’s worth the effort. She prides herself on being a “lifelong learner.” She extends this mindset into her practice by experimenting with innovative pedagogy to refine her approach, and she urges other teachers to do the same. She believes every teacher, regardless of grade or content area, should try a classroom transformation at least once:

*Throw all your reservations away. Yes, you’ll be tired. Yes, you’ll spend some money. Yes, you’re going to have to ask for parent support, but it’s worth it. It’s something you, and your kids, will never forget. It’s something that I will continue to do every year. The kids love it. I think [other teachers] would love it, too.*

Rooted in a legacy of strong, caring educators and shaped by her personal educational experiences, Reese Robinson values the opportunity to “create relationships with [her] students.” Not only does she view classroom transformations as an opportunity to build a positive rapport with her students, but she also uses the transformations as a

means to foster a “positive relationship with that child and learning.” She prioritizes crafting lessons that make her students “excited, happy, and think learning is fun.” Through her deliberate classroom practices, she has created a space where students feel seen, where learning is immersive, and where rigor and fun coexist.

### **Poetry Slam Café**

A large brown banner printed with images of coffee beans hangs above Ms. Reese Robinson’s fourth-grade classroom door. The words “Welcome to Robinson’s Roasts” are printed in bold white lettering, which hints at the surprise inside. A small café is set up outside her door, complete with a bookshelf, end table, bistro chair, and coffee mugs (see Figure 7). However, inside, the lights are off, and the lamps surrounding the room give a subtle glow that envelops the space with a sense of calm. Without direction or a word, students begin whispering as they enter the room, seeming to understand the unspoken expectation that the transformed classroom projected. One of Ms. Robinson’s students, Riley, leans over to a classmate and whispers, “This is the best day ever!”

### **Figure 8**

*Reese Robinson’s Cafe Transformation*



Tables are draped with white tablecloths, centerpieces of flowers sit in glass vases, and soft jazz plays in the background. It feels less like a classroom and more like a neighborhood café. Displayed on a table usually reserved for small group lessons, pink lemonade, chocolate milk, whipped cream, syrup, and cookies are ready for students to sip and enjoy as they settle into the café atmosphere. “Setting the scene,” the environment is as much a part of the pedagogy as the poems themselves. Her students note that the decorations “bring it all together” and “set the mood” for the experience. “She really makes her ideas come to life,” one of her students murmurs as she scans the classroom. Unlike her other transformations, Ms. Robinson’s students were acutely aware of this special event, and some even dressed the part. They weren’t sure what to expect, but were motivated to work diligently on their poetry, knowing this day was coming. A mixture of excitement and nerves hangs in the air as students anticipate taking the stage to perform original pieces that they developed over the weeks leading up to the transformation.

Ms. Robinson prepares her students by first teaching them the proper etiquette for listening and responding. She explains the importance of being an attentive audience and

teaches students about the iconic snaps that show appreciation during a poetry slam. Compared to the routine of a typical day, transformation days feel like entering a new environment, and with this new environment comes a newfound confidence. Students who are typically shy find their voice; reluctant learners embrace the experience. Ms. Robinson asks, “The stage is open for anyone comfortable enough and ready to share.” To her astonishment, she “instantly [has] hands shooting up, like everybody wants to share.” As more students begin to share, the amount of support grows as the simple snaps of appreciation become full-on ovations. The students’ confidence mounts with each performance until one student, Renee, known for rarely participating, musters the courage to read her poem and volunteers to take the stage. Renee settles into the director’s chair, and Ms. Robinson casts her words onto the classroom’s interactive whiteboard display (see Figure 8). Renee’s peers take notice of her attempts to “come out of [her] shell,” and respond with applause and words of encouragement. This moment is more powerful than anything Ms. Robinson could have planned, and it will stay with her long after the day ends.

**Figure 9**

*Poetry Slam Performance*



A great deal of planning and preparation went into making this day a success.

With a to-do list in hand, Ms. Robinson first researched poetry etiquette and the structure of poetry slams to ensure an authentic experience. Parents volunteered their time to help set up and decorate, while others donated items. Ms. Robinson spent the previous evening putting up posters, laying out tablecloths, arranging flower centerpieces, and organizing the student desks into pods that resembled the tables typically found in coffee shops. To her, the extra effort was worth it as she heard a student explain that she will remember this day because “it was so creative and different from what [they] usually do.” One of Ms. Robinson’s students, Riley, was included in the planning and immersed herself in preparations. Riley spent hours designing and making a class set of menus. In those special moments of creativity and trust, one can imagine Riley feels similarly to how Ms. Robinson’s favorite teacher, Ms. Reid, made Reese feel when she let Reese spend extra time in her second-grade classroom all those years ago.

Beyond the visual appeal and novelty of her transformations, Ms. Robinson has a greater intention in planning and executing these special days. She is invested in

cultivating a positive classroom culture. She values participation, nurtures emotional safety, and celebrates learning as an active, fun, and shared experience. On transformation days, students feel empowered to lead, take risks, collaborate, and support one another. This environment is about “more than the decorations. It’s an experience” where learning becomes less about compliance and more about connection, joy, and having fun while learning.

### **Silvia Sharper**

When Silvia Sharper started teaching, she knew exactly the type of educator she wanted to be. She wanted to be just like Ms. Smith. Ms. Smith was her son’s third-grade teacher, and she was soft-spoken, “the sweetest, sweetest lady,” and somehow able to command a room with nothing more than a look from her “puppy dog eyes.” Silvia was in awe of how this quiet woman could gently hush a room of rowdy eight-year-olds without raising her voice. There was no yelling, no power struggle, just a presence that made students want to listen. She wanted to be “just like her.” Ms. Smith had shown her that quiet could be powerful, and it fascinated Silvia. But the reality was that Silvia is “the complete opposite.”

Animated. Theatrical. Extroverted. Silvia fills a room with energy the moment she walks in. “I’m very loud,” she laughed. “Loud Sicilians on one side, loud Jewish people on the other!” Exaggerated expressions and over-the-top enthusiasm are the norm in her classroom. With wild hand gestures, a booming laugh, and the dramatics of someone born for the stage, she is the kind of teacher who turns lessons into performances. Naturally, she comes from a family history of entertainers—not on a stage, but “on the midway.” “My dad was a carny!” she explained:

*My dad had a fifth-grade education. He dropped out of school early, ran away from home, and joined the fair...[My sisters and I] would go join him for the summers, and we would travel wherever he was working at fairs...He owned the games, like the basketball, the dart, the balloons, and the bushel basket games...We traveled, and we got to ride the rides...I was the gopher for his employees. That was when everybody kept an eye on everybody else's kid on the midway...I would go get them lunch or dinner, and they'd give me five bucks to go get them something, and they'd tip me... I wouldn't trade that [experience] for the world!*

Her summers filled with flashing lights and traveling showmen made an impression. Silvia brought that same energy into the classroom. Her lessons aren't quiet or reserved. They are loud. She joked, "If I'm not exhausted by the end of the day, I did something wrong." She attributed her "great work ethic" to her upbringing and her parents' high expectations. Working on the carnival circuit required "a lot of manual labor," and her parents didn't shy away from the demands of their profession and passed that mindset on to their children. "They expected [their kids] to get good grades and do good at whatever job" they chose. Silvia's dad worked hard to support the family while "on the road," and made sure his daughters had access to a strong academic foundation, putting Silvia through private school through her fifth-grade year.

In a sense, Silvia was living a double life—the glitz and glam of being on the road during the summer, contrasted with the regimented structure and routine of the school year. Silvia's mother, Sonia, stayed home during the school year and ensured that Silvia and her sisters stayed the course at school and focused on their education. "She was one

of those old-fashioned moms... A very loud Sicilian mom...like, throw a shoe at you...You duck, type of mom..." Silvia inherited many traits from her mother; Sonia was witty, smart, beautiful, and driven. Silvia smiled as she recalled finding a "layout of Elizabeth Taylor in the *National Enquirer* when [she] was 12" and realizing her mother's repeated claims of being mistaken for the celebrity were actually true. Growing up, Silvia and her sisters "were always close to [her] family," and they "got Sunday dinner, spaghetti, homemade sauce, meatballs every week at [her] grandparents" during the school year. Although she doesn't talk to her extended family frequently now, she knows that one phone call is all it would take, and no matter what was needed, they would be there. They might not "know each other's intricate personal lives and details," but the importance they place on family is undeniable.

Neither of her parents went to college, and although they didn't insist that their children had to attend college, working hard and doing well at whatever job they chose was always the expectation. Silvia took heed of her parents' guidance and strived to excel in all her endeavors, but especially in school:

*I (Silvia) always liked school. I always asked a lot of questions. I drove people crazy. I was constantly listening and intently listening because I always just felt like education would get me to wherever I needed to go, no matter what. If you're educated, you can do anything.*

Silvia continued to focus on school despite "a lot of drama" caused by her parents' difficult divorce and the messy aftermath. Now more than ever, she viewed education as her lifeline. Education could offer her a future beyond the chaos at home and was the key to creating a different kind of life:

*I think during all of that, my whole thing was whatever I do... I'm not ever going to depend on a man, and I'm going to be educated. I'm going to be educated because, to me...going to college was going to lift me up out of that really terrible family situation.*

It was this time of turmoil that helped Silvia first set her sights on her future career. She decided she “was going to be a lawyer and...was going to go into family law.” She believed a legal career would allow her to help and protect children, which was something she deeply longed for in her own life. She wanted to become the kind of person she wished had been there to advocate for her during the “emotional stuff” her parents “were going through with each other” during their painful divorce. It wasn’t until years later that she realized teaching could serve the same goal of helping children. As a testament to her drive and incredible work ethic, Silvia “put herself through school as a single mom to get [her] bachelor’s in legal studies, and then...was going to apply to law school.” However, life had other plans.

She reconnected with a childhood friend, fell in love, and chose to put her dreams on hold so he could attend physician assistant school. The two relocated for his program, marking a turning point that eventually led Silvia down a different professional path. Finding it difficult to secure a job as a paralegal, she “started substitute teaching while [her] kids were in school...and ended up really liking it.” Silvia appreciated that subbing fit her lifestyle and schedule as a devoted mother. She could be present and available to her four children with the same holidays and days off. However, what began as a temporary solution quickly evolved into something more meaningful. Not only did she have an affinity for it, but she also had a gift for it. She rapidly became a staple in the

classroom as a substitute and was frequently requested to cover classes. The affirmations she received from teachers “built [her] up” and helped her to decide to go back to college to earn a teaching certification in early childhood education. Although it hadn’t been part of her original plan, she’s now “grateful for making the decision to become a teacher,” knowing she’s fulfilling her ultimate calling to “help kids.” She sometimes wonders what a career in law would have looked like, but she is happy with where life has taken her, and she knows she’s where she’s meant to be.

Silvia is now sixteen years into her teaching career, with experience in multiple grade levels from pre-K to fifth grade, and she recently started experimenting with classroom transformations. It was a fifth-grade teaching partner who introduced her to the strategy and encouraged her to execute a classroom transformation. However, Silvia noticed a sense of familiarity in the practice. Although the term “classroom transformation” was new, it reminded her of the themed units and dramatic play she used as a pre-K teacher. Imaginative and immersive role-playing was standard in early elementary grades. She recalled creating a pizzeria to bring a story about pizza to life and setting up a hairdressing station for her 4-year-olds. She laughed as she remembered how much her students loved pretending to give her a haircut.

While the grade level and content had changed, the heart of it hadn’t—immersive experiences designed to engage students and make learning feel meaningful, playful, and unforgettable. Although these opportunities for dramatic play were the norm in her pre-K classroom, Silvia noticed that similar experiences rarely extended to upper elementary classrooms. She recalled that when she was teaching third grade, one of her previous students candidly told his mother, “Third grade is where fun goes to die.” His comment

stuck with her, highlighting that even children notice the stark shift in instructional approaches as they move through the grades, and Silvia made it a point to make his experience different. Like dramatic play for her four-year-olds, classroom transformations made it possible for older students to learn through experience, imagination, and purposeful play, but in a more immersive, lesson-specific, and novel format designed to target academic content.

Silvia admitted that she first met the idea with apprehension, thinking, “Oh, that sounds like a lot of work,” and expressed concerns about the energy, time, and money required to execute the lesson. But her curiosity was piqued, and she wanted to do it to be a “good teacher”. She agreed to participate and quickly discovered transformations could be a powerful tool for student engagement. She “learned from that first official [transformation] how to make it better,” and what started as a one-time experiment became a new outlet for her creativity and a powerful tool for student engagement. “Each time I do it, I get better,” she said, seeing classroom transformations not as a trend, but as a natural extension of what she’d always known—kids learn best when they’re *in* it.

Ultimately, Silvia’s goal is “to get students engaged in the activity to gain a deeper understanding of the content in a fun, exciting way”. She aims to provide instruction that makes “the kids’ light bulbs go off” and “get excited about learning”. She shared:

*I always want to be engaging or the content I'm teaching to be engaging or somehow make it engaging for the kids to want to do it. Engaging students gives them the chance to make more connections and get a deeper understanding of content.*

Silvia explained that the transformed environment immediately engages students, and “that’s the hook.” “It’s not the same old thing every day. It’s something different and new and exciting.” But Silvia understands that the practice of using classroom transformations extends beyond merely the aesthetics and novelty of the classroom. Although the props and decorations initially garner interest, “the teacher has to keep [students] engaged” by creating a memorable, content-driven experience. For Silvia, the importance lies in designing lessons that hold academic value and make learning stick after the decorations come down.

Although she wishes “that [she] had more time, funds, and help to do more classroom transformations,” Silvia learned that teachers “don’t have to go completely all out.” She shared that a colleague cited the cost of classroom transformations as a major barrier because they simply “can’t afford it.” However, although the reality of the burden of cost isn’t lost on her, she suggested to “start out small” and explained that “kids are easily impressed.” Silvia added that purchasing non-consumable items to be reused each year and exploring grant options have helped her. She openly admitted that while the room’s aesthetics matter in a classroom transformation, she isn’t the “Martha Stewart of decorations” and is okay with that. She admitted decorating the room for the transformation was “an intimidating thing”:

*I thought, I’m not going to be able to transform this room to be what I want it to be in my mind. I’m creative with writing...That’s my creativity and humor, not room transformations. I want it to be where [students] are like ‘oh, oh, wow!’ But you know what? You put a little effort in. They notice. Maybe just [change] one area of the room, or on each of the tables that you don’t normally do. It’s*

*different. Right then, they're engaged. [Decorating] is not my strength, but I'm going to go ahead and try it.*

But Ms. Silvia Sharper's students saw things differently. They noticed her creativity beyond just her writing and her sense of humor. They described her and her instructional approaches as creative, and her classroom transformations became an exercise of creativity for both her and her students. One of her students, Samantha, likened classroom transformations to Broadway. She explained, "You know how Broadway changes the setting and stuff? That's what I think when I think of a classroom transformation." Classroom transformations, in a sense, became performances where students got to step into a role and immerse themselves in another setting that transcended the familiar confines of the classroom space. Her students described that the nonroutine "sticks to your mind" and made them feel "just happy."

For Ms. Sharper, success is not measured by the perfect decorations, but instead it's measured by her students' reactions and enjoyment. Students aren't looking for perfection. They're looking for connection, energy, and fun, and from Silvia's experience, "[teachers] don't have to go completely all out, but the more [teachers] put into it, the more fun [students] have." She added, "If [teachers] show excitement and...put a little effort in... [the students are] engaged." Her students shared similar sentiments as they discussed the importance of changing the physical classroom environment but explained that although the decorations helped make them feel "in the moment," it was the teacher's delivery that mattered the most.

Silvia's students were lucky to have multiple content teachers on their team who experimented with classroom transformations during the year and identified elements that

they found valuable. They expressed appreciation for their teachers who “stayed in character,” explaining that when the teachers dressed the part or really leaned into portraying a different persona, it added to making the experience feel immersive. Students noted that “the teachers are also a key element...[and the teacher] being in character just made it a fun time.” The fifth graders also suggested that there was “power” in changing simple elements like lighting to “set the mood,” playing background music, or having a digital backdrop displayed on the interactive whiteboard. Additionally, the students were excited when costumes or props were available to help them dress the part and get into character, citing the importance of creating these moments because “[students] can definitely remember fun things that [they] did.”

Silvia mentioned that researching ideas and exploring how other teachers execute transformations would help alleviate some of the initial overwhelm and provide ideas to spark creativity. With her first transformation, she had a veteran practitioner guide her through the planning and execution and found “it was very helpful...to have another teacher that’s done it before.” Seeing examples and gathering inspiration from others could make the process feel more manageable and spark ideas that hadn’t been considered. For teachers new to the practice, she believes that having access to resources, photos, and lesson breakdowns could “help them through...and make [them] more confident.”

Even when the first run doesn’t go as planned, Silvia isn’t discouraged. She explained that “the first time...felt like more of a classroom management” focus. Going into the experience, she questioned, “How am I going to manage this?” She knew the kids would be excited, and although she had a pre-established classroom management

plan and strategies, she recognized “it’s different because it’s the first time the kids are doing that, and they are excited.” Flexibility to handle any unwanted student behaviors or unexpected problems became a necessity and a natural part of ensuring the experience’s success and maintaining the flow of learning.

With each iteration, Silvia’s confidence grows, not because it’s perfect, but because she’s always pushing herself to improve. She recalled that although her students were engaged and excited, she “didn’t feel like the [first] classroom transformation...was really effective,” but she saw “that there was value in the idea even though [her] implementation...wasn’t as effective as [she] wanted it to be.” To her, the value was in the effect the transformations had on her students:

*[Students] get less and less interested and engaged as the kids get older. How can [teachers] get them engaged or interested? Room transformations are one of the few different ways to do that....You could always use technology, but [classroom transformations] don’t necessarily involve technology, and I like that, too, because we’re so technology-driven that this way they can see it physically and touch it. There is something to be said for the excitement, the newness, the difference. Rather than just doing the same thing day after day. I mean, they like structure, and they like to know what’s expected, but you have to give them a surprise here and there.*

After her first transformation, she immediately began planning how to improve her execution and strengthen the connection to the content. Her inner voice pushed her forward: “I can do better. I can make it better.” She sees each attempt as a learning opportunity and a chance to adjust, refine, and grow. Incremental growth motivates her,

reminding her that every transformation is a chance to engage students more deeply and bring learning to life in a new way. “I want to improve every year,” she said, knowing that refinement is part of the reward. Silvia doesn’t just repeat a transformation; after each experience, she mentally rewinds the day, identifying what sparked engagement and what fell flat. “If you’re a good teacher, you’re going to constantly reflect and say, ‘How can I make this better?’” she explained. “You self-analyze...and see what doesn’t work and then get better.” She knows growth comes from trial and error, not perfection.

### **CSI: Crime Scene Investigation**

“There's been a crime!” Ms. Sharper’s voice booms as her students begin filing into her classroom. Yellow caution tape stretches across the walls, and a detective board backdrop depicts a tangled web of clues. Photos of suspects pinned beside sticky notes, red string connecting pieces of evidence, and fingerprints printed onto the corkboard backdrop set the stage for the day’s science lesson. The fifth graders immediately start scanning the room and spot fedora hats and badges laid out on their desks. “There’s been a murder, and your job as the detectives on this crime scene is to identify who committed the heinous crime!” she announces. In the corner of the room, a black plastic tablecloth has the outline of a body printed on it. Students quickly clip on their badges, toss on their detective hats and glasses, and step into character. Ms. Sharper pauses, looks around the room, squints, and continues as her voice crescendos, “You need to examine the evidence and determine which suspect the clues point to. The crime scene department is counting on you!”

### **Figure 10**

*Silvia Sharper’s Crime Scene Transformation*



Ms. Sharper takes command and briefs the detectives about the two suspects who have been identified—Chem Chemical and Phil Physical. She continues with directions, explaining her expectations and the details of the task at hand. With evidence planted throughout the room—a rotten banana peel, a demonstration involving baking soda and vinegar, playdough, a burned candle, ripped paper, a moldy apple, and a broken sugar cube — the students grab their clipboards and quickly move to each station. Applying what they learned about physical and chemical changes, the students put their knowledge to work. Ms. Sharper’s students collaborate at each evidence investigation station to determine whether the clues point to Phil, through evidence of a physical change, or to Chem, by demonstrating a chemical change. Did Chem Chemical alter the evidence through irreversible reactions, or was Phil Physical simply changing the form? The students record the classifications on their clipboards once they come to an agreement. Each discovery strengthens the detectives’ case and brings them one step closer to solving the ultimate whodunit mystery.

Ms. Sharper roams the room, eavesdropping on conversations and probing students with open-ended questions: “Why do you think that? Tell me what you noticed.” She’s available to “lead and guide [students] if they are off track” and uses these conversations and observations to gain insight into their understanding. Close to the end of class, Ms. Sharper encourages her students to begin reviewing their findings to determine which suspect the clues point to. However, the discourse between students begins to escalate; there seems to be a problem. Seven clues point to Phil, and seven clues point to Chem. The room hums with debate as students revisit evidence, reconsider their reasoning, and try to break the tie. Ms. Sharper steps back, letting the uncertainty fuel deeper thinking, and doesn’t rush to give them an answer. She has carefully crafted this moment in the lesson, planning for it and patiently waiting. The meaning behind this lesson isn’t about who “did it,” but about watching students apply knowledge, defend their thinking, and collaborate to solve a real academic puzzle. Suddenly, it dawns on them—Phil and Chem have been in cahoots. Students light up with realization, and as the mystery unravels, Ms. Sharper finds satisfaction in knowing that she has created a memorable experience for her and her students.

Aligned with her reflective nature, Ms. Sharper soon begins thinking about how to refine the execution of this classroom transformation. Ideas begin flooding into her mind. In her classroom after school, she sits with a colleague, and they begin throwing suggestions back and forth. Ideas pour in—more props, changes to the classroom lighting, flashlights, recruiting adults in the building to play along, background music, clearer connections to the content, deeper storyline, and more movement and collaboration. She appreciates the opportunity to debrief with a fellow like-minded

teacher interested in classroom transformations and comments that she needs more opportunities like this one and a platform to share these experiences and knowledge. The discourse between the teachers flows effortlessly, and excitement for the subsequent execution of the classroom transformation already begins to build.

She admits the events of the day have left her “exhausted. So exhausted.” But “it’s for the students,” and “seeing that [her] students enjoyed it” affirms that she “didn’t do too bad” and gives her the motivation to keep going. She wants “to have fun in [her] job, and [she wants her] kids to have fun learning,” and classroom transformations have proven to be an outlet that fulfills both those desires. Although she is relatively new to the practice in upper elementary, Ms. Sharper is committed to continually improving her practice to ensure she does everything possible to engage her students. She believes that when students are excited to learn, they remember the content better and more deeply. Even though she sometimes feels “tired, exhausted, and broke,” the effort it takes is always worth it because creating joy in the classroom means creating lasting learning.

### **Chapter Summary**

Through analyzing transcripts, coding, and crafting narrative profiles and vignettes, I was able to begin identifying common beliefs, values, approaches, and wisdom among the participants. Each participant graciously shared their life history, their experiences with classroom transformations, and the meanings that they have attached to the practice. Although the participants’ backgrounds, personalities, and experiences varied, patterns were prevalent across their stories. These consistencies provided the foundation to develop the broader themes I explored in Chapter 5. These themes represent the collective experience from this group of six teachers who have embraced

classroom transformations as a pedagogical approach to deliver instruction, interact with students, and create learning experiences.

## **Chapter V**

### **Results**

In this chapter, I present four themes that emerged from the participant data, which respond to the research questions either directly or across multiple areas: personal foundations behind professional practice, teachers' return on investment, creating a classroom culture of student engagement, and the wisdom of veteran practitioners. I constructed these themes through an iterative process beginning with immersing myself in the participant data to gain familiarity with their stories. I coded the interview data first using descriptive, in vivo, and values coding (Saldaña, 2021). During this process, I began to notice patterns of interest and recorded them in my researcher memos. However, before organizing and identifying larger categories from the first cycle codes, I crafted the individual participant profiles. I wanted my focus to be on the participants' individual stories to get a deep understanding of their experiences before beginning to collapse the data into themes during second cycle patterns coding. My aim with the narratives was to create a holistic and temporal story of each participant using the early life histories they shared, their professional experience prior to classroom transformations, and finally, the discovery and implementation of classroom transformations.

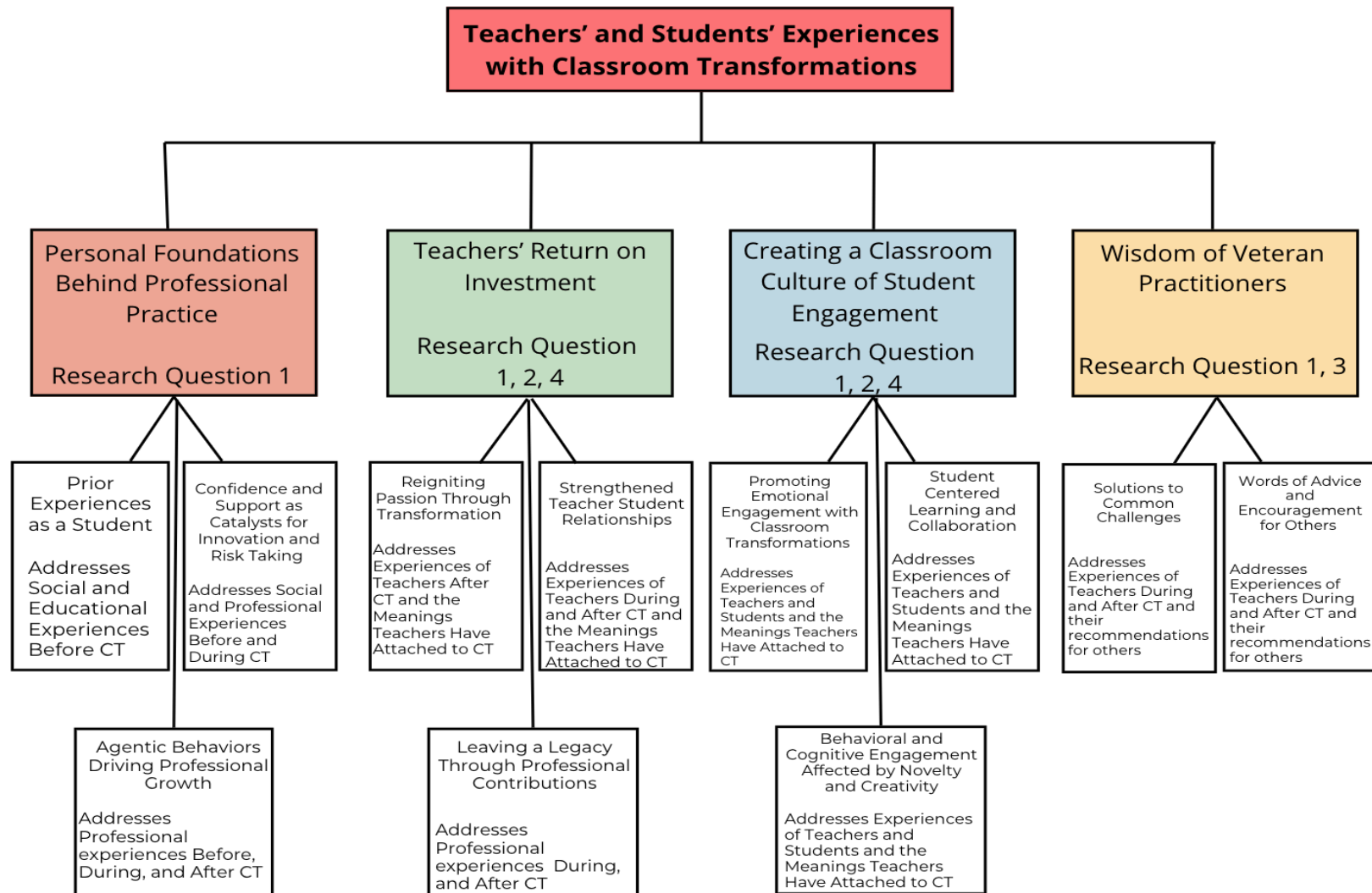
Shaped by childhood, educational, and professional experiences, participants shared insights that helped to reveal the development of their teaching identities and philosophies. By examining these early influences, I gained insight into how the participants' social, educational, and professional experiences shaped their instructional

decision-making and fostered creativity, curiosity, and risk-taking through innovative practices. With a continued commitment to transformative instruction, the participants have constructed and attached meaning to classroom transformations as a valuable pedagogical approach, identifying consequences they believe are worth the effort. For the teacher participants, classroom transformations have served as a vehicle to help establish a classroom culture rooted in engagement—also evidenced by the experiences shared by the student focus groups. Finally, repeated recommendations and reflections offer practical insights for educators considering the integration of classroom transformation as an approach to their instruction.

Although the findings are organized into four separate major themes, the process of organizing, defining, and refining these themes revealed links between them. To help illustrate the organization of the themes and subthemes, as well as their connection to the research questions, I have created a thematic map (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11**

*Thematic Map of Teachers' and Students' Experiences with Classroom Transformations*



What follows is an in-depth explanation of each theme, supported by direct participant quotes and aligned with the study's research questions.

### **Personal Foundations Behind Professional Practice**

Using constructivism as a theoretical framework, the first 90-minute in-depth interview with each participant was designed to encourage participants to share their life histories before implementing classroom transformations. Constructivist theorists posited that individuals actively construct knowledge through experiences, reflection, and meaning-making (Krahenbuhl, 2016). Prior experiences play a critical role in the development of teaching identity and instructional decision-making due to the influence on an individual's beliefs, values, and behaviors (Kraft et al., 2024). I have identified three subthemes that fall under the overarching theme of personal foundations: the participants' prior experiences as students, agentic behaviors driving professional growth, and confidence and support as catalysts for innovation and risk-taking. These subthemes explain how social, educational, and professional experiences shaped the teaching identities and professional practices of the six participants. The narratives revealed that classroom transformations were not an impromptu instructional choice, but rather a natural progression of the participants as educators through the system of values and beliefs that were constructed based on their prior experiences.

#### **Prior Experiences as a Student**

The six teacher participants in this study shared formative prior experiences that significantly influenced their development as teachers. Each participant entered teaching with a unique personal history. Yet, patterns that connected their experiences, including

teacher-student relationships and an early exposure to creativity, were influential in shaping the type of educator they would become.

### ***Teacher-Student Relationships***

Both positive and negative experiences in school influenced how the participants approached teaching and their connections with students. For Melody, her band director was one of the most influential people in her life. She recalled that he was the first teacher to see her as an individual rather than “the younger sister,” always in the shadow of her sister. Her band director's recognition changed the way she saw herself. That moment sparked her desire to become a teacher who prioritized “believing in [her students] and making them feel special.” She shared:

The impression that he left on me was so profound... he changed [a] little girl's life...It was all because he ignited a flame of interest and support...It made me realize...just how important our words are and affirming people...all of these people that affirmed me in my life helped to transform me into the teacher I am today.

Alternatively, Arthur recalled a former middle school teacher who “took all the fun and creativity out” of one of his favorite subjects, helping him realize the power of a teacher's approach to either inspire or discourage student motivation and engagement. Although he learned the content that the middle school teacher was presenting, the delivery made a difference in how Arthur felt as a student. He works hard to craft lessons that engage his students and provide positive experiences that they connect with art. Reese's experience as a student also revealed the influence of a teacher in shaping a student's relationship with learning. After a tumultuous year with an absent third-grade

teacher, Reese developed an insecurity and “fear of math” that has followed her into adulthood. Her struggles as a student have helped her understand and connect with learners who face similar challenges. She is deliberate in her attempts to think about how students perceive her and is “concerned about how [students] feel.” She shared that her experiences as a student “helped [her] become a better teacher” who values “building relationships.”

Luckily, both Arthur and Reese were also met with supportive educators who positively influenced and modeled the type of educators they wanted to become. It was through a meaningful and supportive relationship with his high school art teacher, Ms. Ansley, during a trying time that Arthur realized the importance of a teacher who “stepped in” even when “she didn’t have to.” This experience shaped his teaching philosophy of showing up and stepping up for his students. He was candid in admitting that although teachers spend a significant amount of time with students, educators “don’t always know what [students] are going through at home or outside of school, and that can play a big role in how they act or perform in class.” This belief influences how Arthur continues to navigate his relationships with his students and the efforts he puts into “showing up” as a trusted adult, but also as a teacher who considers his teaching efforts as an “investment.”

Reese’s inspiration was closer to home, with her mother as one of the model teachers she grew up admiring. Reese found herself gravitating towards teachers like her mother and her second-grade teacher, Ms. Reid. They were “really warm and motherly,” “strict”, but students “knew that [they] were loved.” With her mother and Ms. Reid as role models, Reese’s belief of what it means to be a good teacher developed. She focuses

on creating a welcoming and supportive classroom environment where students feel seen and loved. Reese also shared that later on in her education, she was inspired by ELA teachers who made lessons feel immersive and alive—instructional choices she now makes to create similarly engaging environments for her students. Ruby described a similar experience in which two inspirational high school teachers transformed her educational experience. With the mounting responsibilities of her homelife, school became a haven where she felt freedom from adult responsibilities and could be a kid. Mr. Roberts, created a comfortable and welcoming classroom environment that Ruby described as a “hangout spot” where students “would have conversations about literature.” The deviation from the traditional didactic approach of instruction that Mr. Roberts provided helped Ruby develop a “deep love for reading...across a bunch of different genres...[that] provided...insight on different ways of thinking.” The second teacher, Mr. Richards, a history teacher, utilized simulation-based learning to create “a lot of cool experiences like... a mock trial, which was really cool being a part of...and [provided] a real-life experience.” These experiences are reflected in the type of instruction Ruby plans for her students and the relationships she attempts to build. She wants her students to be immersed in the experiences that take them “out of the ordinary classroom, [and] out of their ordinary day.”

With an incredibly present and involved mother who seemed to have some influence on rostering decisions as PTO president, Michelle “had the best teachers.” However, one teacher in particular, Mrs. Martin, made a lasting impression that carried into Michelle’s professional career. As a second grader, Michelle described an experience that closely resembled a classroom transformation. “We had passports and...we were

traveling to different countries...She transformed our room. I remember at one point we would be on an airplane...we were passengers pretending we were flying to our destination,” she recalled. Michelle attributes her efforts in “integrating that kind of stuff that you like into your classroom” to her experience in Mrs. Martin’s room. Her former teacher’s creativity and ability to design engaging experiences made a lasting impact on who she became as an educator.

### ***Creativity as a Personal Foundation***

Creativity as an early personal foundation also emerged during the analysis of participant data. Although creativity was fostered in different ways for each participant, the underlying behaviors of imagination, originality, and resourcefulness can be traced back to the participants’ early life experiences. These personal attributes facilitated participants’ embrace of classroom transformations as teachers.

Although all six teacher participants demonstrated creativity as adults through the planning of the themed and novel experiences during a classroom transformation, Silvia, Melody, Arthur, Michelle, and Ruby shared specific stories from their childhood that reflected an early foundation of creativity. For example, while met with initial hesitation because of the perceived effort required to implement classroom transformations, Silvia found that transformations aligned with her flair for the dramatic. Coming from a legacy of performers, she’s a natural entertainer to the core. She spent summers traveling with her dad, whom she described as a “carny,” surrounded by carnival games, amusement rides, and entertainment. The showmanship that was present in her youth each summer is reflected in her teaching style as an adult. Silvia is a “loud” and “extroverted” teacher and treats her classroom like a stage:

I always want to be engaging or the content I'm teaching to be engaging or somehow make it engaging for the kids to want to do it. Engaging students gives them the chance to make more connections and get a deeper understanding of content.

Creativity serves as a foundation for her professional practice as she strives to create excitement and moments of discovery. She shared, "I like when the kids' light bulbs go off and they get something or they're excited about learning something." For Silvia and the other participants, creativity in teaching serves as a means of generating enthusiasm and understanding in the classroom.

Melody described herself as "very creative" from an early age, and as a child, she immersed herself in activities that would let her be creative. She enjoyed making things "with [her] hands" and enjoyed crafting products she could look back on and feel a sense of accomplishment. She associated classroom transformations as a practice that activates "that creative part of [her] brain" and is "fun for [her]" because it provides an opportunity for her to create, describing it as "personally fulfilling." Drawing on her sense of accomplishment from finished products, classroom transformations offered Melody an opportunity to craft a product and exercise her creative nature. This feeling of success fueled her to continue to create products and lessons that were unforgettable experiences for her students. Melody pointed out, after designing a classroom transformation, "you have a product that you're super proud of...it's definitely something that is in your teaching portfolio that you've invested in, so it's important."

As an art teacher, it's intuitive to connect Arthur with creativity. However, his creativity developed long before he stepped into the classroom. Creativity runs in his

family, and as an artist himself, his father “was always constantly pushing [Arthur]...[and] creativity was really fostered,” starting at home. As a child, Arthur excelled in his ability to generate original ideas, and he recognized that “having to create your own games and being that creative individual...ended up continuing on throughout the rest of [his] life.” Arthur noted that his personal foundation of “having a creative background” helped “spark” his interest in classroom transformations. “Classroom transformations gave me the means to get my students to feel and experience...versus just...talking about it the entire time and allowed me to use my creativity, problem solving, and...personality,” Arthur shared.

Michelle also emphasized creativity and “outside the box” thinking as defining personal traits. During the interview process, Michelle often highlighted the impact that her time in a Montessori pre-school had on her and how it shaped her view of what she believed education should be—hands-on, student-centered, and designed to address academic, emotional, and social skills. Although she didn’t mention a specific pre-school teacher, perhaps because of her young age, the experience made a lasting impact that “helped [her] develop a love of learning and hands-on” experiences. She explained, “In my classroom, I’m always trying to be very creative about what I can do to get kids engaged.” Michelle pointed out that as a student, she “did well in classes where the teacher kept [students] engaged and kept [students] interested.” As a teacher, she prioritizes designing “hands-on learning experiences,” building a classroom culture that normalizes making “mistakes...[and] learning from the mistakes,” and embracing opportunities to exercise creativity.

Ruby's creativity was cultivated early on by her "deep love" of literature—a love that she credits to her English teacher, Mr. Roberts. She has long been an "avid reader," and her interests are expansive as she reads "across...different genres." Her early love of fiction established a foundation of creativity that now informs her instruction. Ruby works hard to cultivate an appreciation for reading among her students, but also takes steps to ignite their imaginations, making the stories come alive. Her love of stories and storytelling manifests in the scenarios and roles she creates for her students to engage in while learning. While describing what an onlooker would see during one of Ruby's classroom transformations, she explained, "when you come in, you would see me playing [a] role. I'm not the teacher at that point. I'm whatever I'm dressed up as...for the room transformation." In this way, classroom transformations enable Ruby to bring her love of storytelling to life, utilizing teaching as a form of performing art.

Although creativity and agency do not necessarily exist in tandem, the participants' creativity became an expression of agency as they reimaged what instruction could look and feel like for themselves and their students. This theme of agentic behaviors emerged as another thread that ran through all the participants' stories.

### **Agentic Behaviors Driving Professional Growth**

Agentic behaviors such as initiative, ownership, and reflection were consistent behaviors exhibited across the six participants' interview data. Teachers' capacity to take action is grounded in the beliefs and values constructed from prior experiences. Many of these foundations can be traced back to their early life, where their experiences with family, schooling, and teachers shaped the confidence and initiative that later translated into agentic behaviors in their professional practice. The participants' stories showed how

early experiences of encouragement directly influenced professional agency. These early foundations later translated into their professional careers as educators.

For example, Arthur's early successes and recognition in school and from his teachers helped him develop a desire to be successful, affirmed, and intrinsically motivated—values that are reflected in his “be better and do better” philosophy. He continued to strive for excellence and translated it to his professional career by making it a goal to “be the best art teacher that [he] can be.” The validation and support he received as a student also became a model for the validation and support he now aims to provide his own students.

As a band student, Melody gave little effort to improve, and “goofing off” landed her as the “last chair clarinet.” However, it was when she felt seen, encouraged, and affirmed by a subsequent band director that her trajectory as a student began to change. Melody credited her teaching philosophy, “believing in a child can make them a lifelong believer in themselves,” to her middle school band teacher. The “little acts of validation and affirmation” she received as a student gave her the confidence to embrace challenges and established a personal value in always striving “to...be better...and improve.” She recalled how she “started listening...started focusing” and began to take ownership of her growth—an early sign of her developing agency as a learner and teacher. Reflection remains central to her practice today. “It’s not perfect, but that’s okay. I think the reflection piece is what makes me better the next time,” she explained. “I always think about what I would do differently...Every single time I do one, I leave with ideas for how I could make it better.”

Silvia also demonstrated agentic behaviors early on by taking ownership and control of her education and life despite the adversity she faced during her unstable childhood. She recalled:

[As a student], I always asked a lot of questions. I drove people crazy. I was constantly listening and intently listening because I always just felt like education would get me to wherever I needed to go, no matter what. If you're educated, you can do anything.

Her actions of initiative and ownership as a child foreshadowed the professional agency that is a staple of her identity as a teacher.

Unlike Melody, Arthur, Silvia, Reese, and Michelle—who all grew up in homes where education was strongly supported—Ruby’s experience was markedly different. She explained that she was “on [her] own...[and] did not get that support from [her] family” when it came to school. Instead, the encouragement and affirmation she received from teachers became her “motivation” to value academics and push herself forward, even without support at home. Coupled with the strong work ethic she inherited from her mother, Ruby developed a sense of agency that formed a personal foundation of prioritizing effort and dedication.

Over time, these early expressions of agency developed into central aspects of the participants’ teaching identities. Rather than waiting for direction or relying solely on school-provided professional development, they actively created their own opportunities and took the initiative to shape and extend their practice. For Melody, Arthur, Michelle, Reese, and Silvia, agency was expressed through taking steps to modify their practice after years of routine, while Ruby exercised agency by experimenting with classroom

transformations early on in her career. None of the participants were formally trained in classroom transformations yet, as Arthur described, he “went looking for it” because he “saw somebody doing [something] better” and “had to do it.” When describing his desire for autonomy and ownership in instructional decisions, Arthur explained:

Some folks like to be told what to do. I don't...I like finding my own path, my own way...I like having that autonomy of being able...to teach...my standards, but [in] a way I can choose...that I want.

Melody echoed this experience and explained, “There’s no training manual. You figure it out as you go.” Melody independently sought opportunities for professional growth beyond the monotony of past approaches. While seeking new ways to increase engagement, Melody began experimenting with classroom transformations to connect and captivate her students. She emphasized that “no one told [her] to do [transformations. [She] chose to,” and explained that she wanted “something different for my kids...something [to] be proud of.” She demonstrated intrinsic motivation and professional ownership, noting her commitment to “try every year to do things differently, and improve.”

Not only were agentic behaviors demonstrated before participants engaged in implementing transformations, but they also played a role after. Every participant described a process of evaluating their own practice, making adjustments, and learning from experience. Melody shared, “I reflect after every transformation... every year I add more and more to it.” Silvia similarly noted, “You self-analyze and you reflect on your teaching and see what doesn't work and then get better each day”—a sentiment that aligned with comments about reflection and growth that Ruby, Reese, and Arthur also

shared. This cycle of action and evaluation demonstrates that the participants' professional agency made an ongoing impact on their growth as professionals. Through initiative, ownership, and reflection, the participants continued to gain confidence in their practice, empowering them to take risks as instructional innovators.

### **Confidence and Collaboration as Catalysts for Innovation and Risk-Taking**

In addition to the agentic tendencies that shaped how the participants approached their work, the participants began experimenting with classroom transformations through various avenues of collaboration. Arthur, Melody, and Michelle reported feeling competent in their subject and content, which empowered them to take risks in their instruction and begin experimenting with innovative strategies. In contrast, Ruby, Silvia, and Reese reported feeling supported by their more experienced colleagues, which similarly empowered them to take risks. The encouragement and affirmation from colleagues, administrators, families, and even students validated their innovation with classroom transformations, making them more willing to continue, adapt, and grow. This pattern of cooperation and support highlights the power of professional communities in inspiring, encouraging, and supporting innovation and risk-taking.

Melody and Michelle encountered classroom transformations through teacher blogs and social media, while Ruby, Reese, Arthur, and Silvia learned about classroom transformations firsthand after witnessing their colleagues implement them. Each participant expressed receiving support in varying degrees from colleagues, practitioners of classroom transformations, and other stakeholders, including administration and parents. All six participants noted that the confidence and support they experienced through various sources gave them the security and freedom to innovate. This drive for

professional growth connects to the previous subtheme of agentic behaviors, illustrating how the themes overlap and reinforce one another—also reflecting the complexity and depth of the participants’ experiences.

Melody, Arthur, and Michelle described how years of experience teaching the same subject or grade level established confidence to take risks and innovate. Comfort with the content and curriculum allowed them to shift their attention from simply teaching the standards to focusing on how to make their instruction memorable, engaging, and impactful. “After being in the same grade and subject for years... the curriculum is already developed, and it just gives you a way to do more,” Melody commented. Arthur shared a similar experience where, after several years in his position, he “had already gotten to a point where [he] was doing many of the things that the other art teachers [from other schools] were doing” and craved a challenge and change, asking himself, “okay...what can I do now?” These three participants illustrated that for them, risk-taking and innovation came once their curriculum and content felt solid and familiar, giving them the confidence to begin exploring alternative methods of instruction.

In contrast, Ruby, Reese, and Silvia attributed support from colleagues for the confidence to take instructional risks. Although these three participants were new to the grade and content they were teaching when they began experimenting with classroom transformations, it was the support and encouragement from veteran teachers who had started experimenting with classroom transformations that empowered them to follow suit. Reese highlighted the importance of professional dialogue and collaboration, sharing that “just talking to other teachers who have implemented [classroom transformations] really helped [her] get set up.” Ruby echoed the importance of teacher collaboration and

explained that being “under very good mentorship” and having “so much guidance” gave her the support she needed to take risks with instructional choices that deviated from traditional methods. Similar to Ruby and Reese, Silvia credited encouragement from a fellow teacher who had already embraced classroom transformations for the push to try the innovative instructional approach in her own classroom.

Notably, regardless of years of experience in their content, professional collaboration—through online platforms and direct support from colleagues—emerged as a catalyst for risk-taking and innovation. The participants consistently emphasized that professional collaboration was central in fostering innovation.

### **Teachers’ Return on Investment**

Classroom transformations require significant investments of time, energy, and often financial resources. Many participants described them as “exhausting,” acknowledging the physical and mental load required for such a temporary experience. Reese and Silvia initially questioned whether the investment was justified given the short-lived nature of the transformation. Silvia candidly stated her first thought when approached by a colleague about executing a transformation was “Oh, that sounds like a lot of work.” Aside from the investment of time and energy, the financial investment of classroom transformations was not lost on the participants. Silvia shared that one of her colleagues did not execute “any [transformations] because [she couldn’t] afford it.” Silvia agreed, saying, “That’s a big thing...the cost.” Yet, despite the investments, the participants in this study consistently described the returns on their efforts as worthwhile. “The return is greater than the investment... I’m creating a memory and experience for these children and for myself,” Melody explained—a sentiment that captures the impact

these experiences had on both teachers and students shared across multiple participant experiences. Each participant expressed stories of how classroom transformations positively impacted themselves as teachers, in addition to the effects they were trying to create for their students. This theme, Teachers' Return on Investment, focuses on the personal and professional outcomes that teachers have associated with implementing classroom transformations, particularly through the subthemes of reigniting passion for the profession and strengthening teacher–student relationships.

### **Reigniting Passion Through Transformation**

Although classroom transformations require additional planning, effort, and time, all the participants in the study expressed a renewed sense of motivation, creativity, and ownership as a result of implementing classroom transformations. Not only did the participants associate classroom transformations with positive student effects, but they also associated the practice with positive teacher effects. The participants embraced the pedagogical approach as an opportunity to evolve their teaching practice, exercise creativity, and drive ownership in instructional design. Many of the participants expressed that the excitement contributed to overall job satisfaction.

Arthur shared that after finding himself in “a little bit of a stalemate” with teaching, classroom transformations “changed the way [he would] teach...even on a non-transformation day, [he would] perform for [students].” He explained:

It is very addicting...Seeing [students'] excitement makes me want to continue to take and have that every single time... There's more fun opportunities for me and for them through classroom transformations...I want to keep going back and doing it over and over and over again... I was always excited to be an art teacher,

but this brought in a whole different ballpark...It [allowed me] to use my creativity, problem-solving, and just overall personality.

Likewise, Melody found herself stuck in a routine that began to feel “monotonous...after being in the same grade [and] same subject for years.” She explained that classroom transformations got her “out of [a] rut, and fuels [her] fire,” giving her “something exciting to work toward.” She found that engaging in classroom transformations helped her maintain professional motivation by providing a break from “the same old, same old” and “gets [her] out of that role of having to be structured” and reconnects her to the joy of learning, making her “feel like a kid.”

Ruby also acknowledged the tendency of getting “wrapped up in...routines” and offered classroom transformations as a way to “get to use a different part of [the] brain that [teachers] don’t get to use every single day.” Ruby explained that classroom transformations “really [opened] up the gates to being imaginative and creative...things that...adults...forget about” but emphasized that teachers “still need that stuff.” “As exhausted as you are after a day of room transformations, it sparks other things,” she remarked, explaining how, despite being tiring, the experience inspires creativity and excitement for the profession.

Even though Silvia’s first attempt felt more like a classroom management challenge, she found value in the excitement and novelty it created for students, which in turn energized her to try again and improve. “It’s not the same old thing every day. It’s something different and new and exciting,” Silvia shared—emphasizing that the novelty of the classroom transformations not only impacted students, but also the teacher. She explained that the transformations gave her “a high,” describing the intense satisfaction

and joy she felt in witnessing her students' excitement but also finding a reprieve from the routines of the everyday.

Reese and Michelle both emphasized student reactions as a personal motivator to continue classroom transformations after their initial experience. "The more [classroom transformations] I do, the more I want to do them. You get addicted to the way the kids react," Michelle reflected, highlighting the personal excitement and fulfillment she began to associate with transformations. Reese mirrored this experience, explaining that "when [she] saw [students'] excitement and how much they were talking about it afterward, [she] knew [she] had to do it again. That reaction made it worth the work."

These accounts illustrate how classroom transformations extend beyond student outcomes and also provide returns on investment for the teachers. By breaking the monotony of routine, transformations influenced participants' excitement for teaching and provided a platform for them to exercise creativity.

### **Leaving a Legacy through Professional Contributions**

Professionally, the participants experienced returns on their investment through external validation from students, families, colleagues, and their administration. Recognition reinforced their efforts and positively impacted their motivation to continue to take risks, exercise creativity, and explore innovative instructional practices. For Michelle, Melody, Ruby, and Arthur, their work also positioned them as leaders within their schools, and the teachers emphasized the professional growth that emerged from engaging in classroom transformations. They expressed a greater sense of agency while they grappled with problem-solving and reflective practices to refine and develop their execution of classroom transformations. However, a notable long-lasting effect was the

impact and changes these teachers enacted in their schools. Their work didn't stop at the threshold of their classroom doors; it influenced colleagues' approaches. The participants' work with classroom transformations became a form of professional contribution to the growth of colleagues through risk-taking, collaboration, and innovation. By modeling classroom transformations and sharing the impact the practice made on them personally and in their classrooms, the practitioners became agents of change in their professional communities.

Ruby emphasized the ripple effect of innovation by explaining that "It inspires other teachers...when one does it, it sparks interest for other teachers and sets off a domino effect." She pointed out, "That's essentially what happened with [her]. Seeing a colleague doing it inspired [her]." In turn, she has also become an influencer herself, encouraging colleagues to experiment with classroom transformations as well.

Likewise, both Arthur and Melody described the momentum for innovation that extended beyond their classrooms. Arthur explained how other art teachers in his district began showing interest in transformations, and Melody shared that one of her grade-level partners recently started planning her own transformation. Also, Melody explained she intentionally takes steps to use classroom transformations as a professional outlet to inspire other teachers through social media. She reflected, "They see pictures online, I share it...It is an outlet for being able to make more...share with more and reach out to more teachers."

For Michelle, classroom transformations also opened up opportunities to share her practice in a larger professional setting—positioning her as a teacher leader outside of her grade level. Michelle modeled a classroom transformation for teachers at her school and

provided advice to others on implementing immersive strategies within their own classrooms:

There were a lot of people that came in... I took my Titanic [transformation] and set up a Titanic for the professional learning. So many people were slipping in. They're like, 'We have to hear this. What is this? What are you doing?' Every single person in there was like, 'Okay, this is something I could do.'

This “domino effect,” as described by the participants, ensures that their work will continue and have an impact on others beyond their four classroom walls. The transformations, although specifically designed to be a temporary experience, had lasting impacts on colleagues and students. The effect of contributing to the profession through the transformative approaches taken in their classrooms is part of the participants’ legacy. Through their work, the participants promoted professional growth within their school communities. This highlighted how classroom transformations are not only memorable learning experiences that achieve personal payoffs but also positive professional outcomes.

### **Strengthened Teacher-Student Relationships**

The teacher participants also described classroom transformations as powerful tools for strengthening their relationships with students. By investing the extra time and effort required for these experiences, they signaled to students that they were valued and worth the investment, which in turn deepened connections and strengthened the classroom community. Melody described classroom transformations as an opportunity to “get to know [students]” and to “incorporate things that let them know that you’re

interested in who they are.” She designed classroom transformations that incorporated their interests and used these connections to create genuine excitement for learning.

For example, Melody viewed this instructional approach as more than the mere transformation of the physical classroom, but rather the deliberate planning and execution of experiences designed to “ignite and spark something” and make her students “feel special.” Melody emphasized that her aim was “not...to impress anyone” but rather refers to the practice as a “labor of love” undertaken “because it matters to her students.” She explained:

I just think back to all the teachers that I’ve had my whole life that stand out to me, and that’s the type of teacher that I hope and aim to be...The only teachers that I remember are the ones that invested in me... I feel like me giving them special experiences where I have to invest in with my time and my money and my energy...I hope that it will make them know that I’m invested in them and make them remember me and the time that they had in my class and how I made them feel...I feel like the return is more than the investment. I’m creating a memory and experience for these children and for myself.

She described her approach to classroom transformations as rooted in what she calls a “servant’s heart.” Her goal is for students to know she genuinely cares for them. She noted that long after the lessons fade, “[the students will] remember the way I made them feel.”

Arthur also believes that “transformations build relationships.” He emphasized the lasting impact they have on his students, and he noticed that “they talk about them [and] they remember them.” He leverages the excitement surrounding classroom

transformations to “build those relationships between [the students] and art, and [the students] and [the teacher].” “You can throw up decoration, but it’s more than just that...[it] transformed the way I teach overall... Those transformations build relationships.”

Ruby referred to the work she put into designing and executing classroom transformations as a “gift.” She explained, “When someone does something for you, it shows you [their] love. When [teachers execute a classroom transformation], we are giving [students] a gift...it’s an act of love.” She described classroom transformations as both exhausting and rewarding, emphasizing that the effort she put in was more than just instructional. Ruby reflected:

I feel like naturally as humans, we all want to be somebody that the kids are going to gravitate towards and like... We want our kids to love us, and I want them to leave knowing that they were loved... I know from experience how much it creates a different connection with the teacher... When I think of what kind of teacher I want to be, I want to be the person that they need... I value that relationship that I have with them.

She explained that these experiences foster a “different connection with the teacher,” making it “easier to teach them.” During classroom transformations, the “kids want to have more conversations with [her]. They’ll call [her] over, they want to show [her] stuff, they want to ask questions about [the content]. They are more willing to ask questions.” Transformations have become a way Ruby shows love and commitment to students. She explained, “When I do [a classroom transformation], I’m doing something just for them. They are worth the effort I’m putting in, and the kids see that, and they

know it, and I know they appreciate it.” The impact of this effort was visible in the way students responded, often expressing gratitude and joy:

They are thankful and say ‘thank you.’ I don’t think they would say that just on a normal day of teaching them, but on classroom transformation days, they are more thankful... They’re so grateful and complimentary. Probably the most common thing that they say is ‘this was the best day ever.’...I know they appreciate it.

Notably, the impact of classroom transformations on student-teacher relationships was not limited to the teacher participants’ perspective but was also reflected in the student focus groups. Students shared that they knew “how much time [the] teacher spent” planning the classroom transformation, and they were “grateful.” “It shows us how much [the teacher] cares about us”—a specific remark made by one of Melody’s students, but an idea that was also reflected in Ruby, Michelle, Arthur, and Reese’s student focus groups. Another student explained, “I will always remember [my teacher] for helping us do...special things. It just feels like most teachers aren't going to do [the extra work], but [my teacher] does.” As reflected in their prior experiences as students, strong student–teacher relationships were valued among the teacher participants. As educators, building those types of relationships continued to be a priority as they intentionally sought to foster connections through classroom transformations. Not only did the teachers in this study use classroom transformations to support their value for positive student-teacher relationships, but classroom transformations were also used to foster another participant value—student engagement.

## **Creating a Classroom Culture of Student Engagement**

On the surface, classroom transformations may appear to be merely a few decorations, props, and costumes used to enhance a lesson; however, participants repeatedly expressed that reducing the practice to decorations overlooks the broader construct of what they are trying to build—a classroom culture focused on student engagement. The physical classroom environment plays a significant role in student engagement, with focus group students saying, without the decorations, the experience “wouldn’t be quite as memorable and fun.” The six teacher participants viewed the transformed physical classroom environment as a tool to spark curiosity and connect students emotionally to the learning, attaching value and meaning to the practice.

Alongside the physical transformation of the classroom environment, the teachers designed and used activities and strategies to engage students in the instructional content. The teachers made efforts to craft memorable experiences that deviated from the regular school day routines through modifying elements such as the physical classroom environment, the delivery of instruction, and the tasks that students completed during the lesson. Students in the focus groups repeatedly emphasized the positive impact the decorations had on “the vibe” of the classroom environment—explaining that the “decorations are important” and “make [the experience] more realistic...[and] fun.” However, the students also expressed that other elements of the day, such as their teacher’s enthusiasm and the opportunity to collaborate with peers, equally impacted the experience. As a result, the transformations helped to support the type of classroom culture the teachers aimed to create—one that encouraged behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

The decision to implement classroom transformations was not just about implementing an instructional strategy; it was a choice to align the participants' values and beliefs about what they want school to feel like for their students. Their decision to experiment with classroom transformations was grounded in their belief that learning should be memorable and fun. While the previous theme highlighted the teachers' return on investment, the following theme shifts the focus to student outcomes and the effects classroom transformations had on creating a classroom culture of engagement.

### **Promoting Emotional Engagement with Classroom Transformations**

Transformations created emotionally charged learning experiences that students remembered. Students used words like 'special,' 'different,' 'exciting,' 'engaging,' 'fun,' and 'cool' to describe the classroom transformations and emphasized how transformation days stood out in their memory and connected feelings of joy and excitement to the experience. Arthur articulated his drive to foster emotional engagement by saying, "I know that [if students are] super excited about it...they're going to latch on to what we're doing, what we're learning a little bit more"—a belief also shared by the other participants.

One of Ruby's students described transformations as an "unexpected adventure" that motivated them to "always come to school" because the students never knew when they would occur. Michelle's student observed that "when [she] realized it was a classroom transformation day, it would change [her] mood and attitude about the day." Another student shared that "all the activities [they] do are very original and unique, and they make learning fun."

The teachers described a desire to create memorable moments as one of the goals behind their instructional choices. They prioritized planning memorable experiences through immersive, physical changes that helped students connect emotionally with the content. As indicated by both the teachers and students, the changed physical classroom environment played an important role in getting students excited.

Both Arthur and Melody described using the physical classroom environment to create a “wow factor,” while Michelle described it as the “attention getter” that would immediately engage students emotionally. While the students viewed the decorations as “fun” and “memorable,” the teachers utilized the transformed environment as a tool to foster a positive emotional connection between the experience and learning, thereby motivating and engaging the students. As explained by Michelle, “I feel like my job as a teacher is to get [students] excited and get them wanting to participate and wanting to learn.” She went on to say, “classroom transformations are always the days when they're most engaged”—an observation also expressed by the other teacher participants.

In addition to the changed physical environment, the delivery of content also had an emotional impact on students. Melody, Ruby, Arthur, and Michelle’s students expressed feeling excitement and joy when their teacher got into character. During the student focus group, students recommended that teachers “get into character,” saying it “just adds to the magic” of a transformation. “I noticed that all the energy that [my teacher] gives,” Melody’s student shared. Another student explained that transformation days make her “feel different. [Her teacher] is pulling out a different side of [her].” Ruby and Silvia’s students pointed out how their teacher’s playfulness and participation in role-playing added to the positive experience of classroom transformations. Arthur’s students

also echoed this belief, explaining that without Arthur dressing up as a Jurassic Park character, “it would not be as fun.”

Melody’s student, Matthew, explained his experience with classroom transformations through an analogy, describing transformation days as a “blue pencil” in a box full of normal pencils, which highlights how the novelty of classroom transformation fostered emotional engagement. He explained that Melody’s classroom transformations provided unforgettable “blue pencil” memories because her class felt “different than all the other classes” he had. Matthew added, “I really like the idea of changing the room into something new, and once you walk in, your mind is blown.” By creating experiences that stand apart from the everyday, Melody ensured that her students not only remembered the content but also attached positive emotions to the learning process. Both Arthur and Reese repeated this sentiment.

Reese discussed the importance of creating a classroom where her students associate learning with joy, thereby helping her students construct a positive attitude about school and the belief that learning can be fun and different from the structured routines they may have previously experienced. She believed that this connection between enjoyment and academic engagement would encourage students to “participate more...want to learn more” and be willing to take risks, while also fostering a lasting enthusiasm for learning. Arthur also made meaning of classroom transformations as a conduit to connect learning with joy, saying that although students may not remember all the nuances of the art theory that he teaches in his lesson, “they're going to remember the transformation. They're going to remember that they were in art,” and the students are going to associate the positive experiences in his class directly with the content—positive

emotional connections that he and the other participants hope carry with the students long after the transformations end.

### **Behavioral and Cognitive Engagement Affected by Novelty and Creativity**

As reflected in the teachers' and students' experiences with classroom transformations, novelty and creativity influenced student behavioral and cognitive engagement, leading to positive effects on learning. This subtheme reflects how the novelty and creativity embedded within classroom transformations influenced students' behavior and cognitive engagement. As described by Melody, but also reflected in the conversations with the other five participants, classroom transformations provide a "unique experience where [students are] able to apply what they've learned in a non-monotonous way...Creating a novel experience for children that they won't forget." Students echoed this belief, with Reese's student explaining that the novelty of the experience made it more memorable—"I remember it because we only do it one time... it sticks in my head."

On a behavioral level, students demonstrated heightened participation, attentiveness, and willingness to take risks. Reese noticed an increase in participation from some of her most reluctant learners, saying, "even the kids who usually don't raise their hand were eager to share when the room was transformed"—a pattern of student behavioral engagement also observed by Melody, Michelle, and Ruby. Michelle recalled, "I just remember thinking my kids were so motivated...including my kids who don't want to do anything... I thought, okay, I've got to do some more of these because this is the best my kids have done." Melody observed the same and commented, "It's something special. It's not the same routine you constantly have... it's something different. It's

more engaging. So many of [the students] that normally might not work as diligently...were working very diligently. They were working together so that everyone could accomplish this task.” This pattern of behavioral and cognitive engagement was also noticed by students who expressed that “more kids participate during room transformations.” Focus group students from Ruby, Silvia, Melody, Michelle, and Reese’s classes all noted a similar trend in an increase in their classmates’ participation on transformation days.

One of the clearest examples of the effect classroom transformations have on student behavioral and cognitive engagement was described by Ruby. Ruby described a student, Rodrick, as typically disengaged, often putting his head down or seeking attention in disruptive ways. During a Super Bowl–themed transformation, however, his entire demeanor shifted. Dressed in his football jersey and wearing eye black, he was “all up in the Kool-Aid,” volunteering to read, answering questions, and leading his team to victory. Ruby reflected that on an ordinary day, she would have had to beg him to participate, but that day, “his head was in the game.”

Students also explained that the novelty of the lesson helped them better remember and engage with the lessons. On a cognitive level, novelty functioned as a catalyst for learning. Students described transformation days as “unique” and “special,” highlighting how the creative presentation of content made lessons more memorable, and the teachers observed that the students showed a greater willingness to engage in the instruction. By planning academic tasks within creative and novel contexts, the teachers were able to sustain students’ attention for longer periods while also engaging them in higher-order thinking processes. Novelty initially captured their interest, but also

supported a lasting recall of the concepts. A student from Melody’s class remarked that they believed they would remember the classroom transformation and the content more effectively because of the teacher’s efforts in “involving something fun with the work.” Ruby’s student, Ryker, explained that classroom transformations provided “something unique that’s not a normal day thing” and believed the experience was more memorable and increased his motivation to participate. Another focus group student explained, “I feel like I’m learning a lot... I’m pumped up...It’s a fun way to show what you know. And kids are more entertained because it’s interactive.” This student’s comment about classroom transformations being “interactive” highlights another subtheme that emerged during data analysis—the teachers’ deliberate use of collaboration and student-centered instructional approaches to foster cognitive engagement.

### **Cognitive Engagement through Student-Centered Learning and Collaboration**

The teacher participants designed their transformations to promote student-centered learning and increased collaboration, where learners were not passive recipients but active participants. When describing the planning process of their lessons, each teacher emphasized incorporating collaboration as a foundation to the design of the lesson. Students either worked in pairs or teams of students when completing the designed activities. Both teacher and student participants expressed sentiments that transformations provided more opportunities to work together in fun and interactive ways. The emphasis on collaboration helped teachers build a sense of classroom community and foster a culture of engagement through collaboration. Rather than relying on teacher-directed instruction, participants designed transformations that put students at the center of the activities, requiring them to apply skills and concepts they had

previously learned in class. Arthur's students explained that his Jurassic Park transformation was fun because they could "do it together," making the activity less intimidating and more exciting. Silvia noted that the way she designed classroom transformations provided students "the chance to make more connections and get a deeper understanding of content" compared to a more traditional and passive approach to instruction.

Reese described how classroom transformations shifted her role from "leader" to "facilitator"—a sentiment echoed by all the teacher participants. "Once I give them the lowdown, they take the lead, and I take a back seat... I just want to watch, make sure they have what they need," Reese said. Another participant, Ruby, explained:

Classroom transformations aren't where you just sit down and fill something out.

[Students] are working together, collaborating, and they really get to play a different role. My intention is for these kids to come in and gain a new experience...it has a lot to do with them working as teams.

Ruby emphasized that one of her "favorite parts" was seeing her students "help each other figure things out instead of waiting on [the teacher] to give the answer." Students echoed this experience, saying, "On a normal day, there might be a lot of independent work, but on a classroom transformation day, there's a lot more collaboration." Michelle's students also explained that the activities on transformation days are "not like a boring worksheet...it's different from a typical day because you're not just sitting in a chair looking at the board...we get to work as a team." In this environment, learning extended beyond individual effort; students practiced and developed skills in collaboration, learning from one another, and supporting each other

throughout the tasks. These collaborative opportunities made cognitive and behavioral engagement the shared expectation, promoting a classroom culture that values student engagement.

### **Wisdom of Veteran Practitioners**

Providing insightful information for others to think about when considering classroom transformations remained a practical goal throughout the planning and data collection phases of this study. The second in-depth interview with the six teacher participants was designed with this goal in mind. The data collection process revealed some common beliefs, approaches, and wisdom. This theme captures the challenges and advice of veteran practitioners developed through several implementations of classroom transformations. The wisdom they shared is not theoretical, but experience-based and intended to help other educators anticipate challenges, maximize student engagement, and validate common experiences and feelings. The participants stressed the need for flexibility, working through challenges, problem-solving, and reflection.

### **Solutions to Common Challenges**

Planning and prep, sourcing affordable materials, and managing students were topics participants noted as potential challenges during the data collection process. However, experience helped participants develop solutions to help with setbacks in implementing classroom transformations. The participants acknowledged that transformations can be “exhausting” but explained that the payoff of student engagement on multiple levels justified the investment. For teachers considering this practice, the participants’ experiences and insights serve as both encouragement and guidance.

## *Planning*

The planning process was revealed as an initial challenge for all of the participants in different ways. Notably, collaboration, research, and observation were highlighted by the participants as helpful entry points into planning a classroom transformation. Silvia, Michelle, and Reese initially expressed hesitation to take on planning a transformation due to the overwhelming amount of work that needed to be done. Silvia shared that at first it “sounded like a lot of work” and admitted that the process felt “intimidating” because she worried that she couldn’t create what she envisioned. Reese also candidly explained that when she began planning, she first thought, “I’m never going to do this again. This is not worth it.” However, when she observed her students’ reactions, it “changed it all for [her].” Reese cautioned against letting elaborate setups become overwhelming, reminding teachers that the most important outcome is student engagement, not a flawless execution. She described her own growth by saying, “Talking to other teachers who have implemented [classroom transformation] really helped...I think you just have to go through it and [embrace] the growing pains...and figure out what you can do better the next time.” Ruby, Michelle, Melody, and Silvia also discussed the role of colleagues in supporting the planning process and suggested finding and collaborating with other like-minded teachers. Melody shared that having the “right partner that...encouraged that type of creativity” helped her commit to implementing her first transformation. Having a colleague with the same goals helped distribute the workload and made planning more manageable.

Arthur suggested that new practitioners start by “doing the research, looking it up, looking at what others have done, talking with people who have done classroom

transformations,” but most importantly, he urged interested teachers to “go and observe somebody who is actually doing them.” He explained, “You can look at pictures online all day long, but without actually going and seeing it, it can feel a little overwhelming.” Arthur shared that it “was a struggle...in the very beginning” because although he witnessed other teachers conduct transformations, he wasn’t sure how to integrate it into his art classroom. “It took a lot of game plan beforehand, talking with other colleagues...and seeing it in person in order to be able to build it,” Arthur explained. Arthur recommends that other teachers interested in classroom transformations “start off small. Don’t overwhelm yourself with all the bells and whistles and things like that. Keep the mindset that you’re trying to create that excitement, that engagement, so that whatever it is...you’re teaching is hopefully retained afterwards.”

Michelle echoed Arthur’s concern about the potential for overwhelm in the planning process with classroom transformations and suggested researching and using already-created materials as a starting point to make the planning process less daunting. Arthur and Michelle recommended selecting a theme and time to implement transformations so that both the preparation process and the experience remain manageable. For example, Michelle chose a Halloween-themed transformation because she already had many of the decorations needed on hand, and it fit the season. Likewise, one of Arthur’s first transformations, a glow-themed art day, required minimal preparation and supplies and served as a manageable starting point, allowing him to experiment and gain confidence without being overwhelmed by preparation.

Additionally, Melody, Ruby, and Arthur stressed the importance of considering student interests during the planning process. Arthur designed a Jurassic Park-themed

transformation to coincide with the movie's release, while Reese created a Super Bowl-themed transformation to match the excitement surrounding the actual Super Bowl.

Melody encouraged teachers to tailor transformations to what matters to their students and fully immerse them in the experience:

Take your children's interests into consideration...It's not just changing the room... you have to set the vibe... If you can create any smell or sound, music in the background. You want to ignite all of their senses... Whatever your kids are into, that's what you need to try to use.

The participants' experiences illustrated that the planning of transformations was frequently a collaborative process. Observing colleagues, sharing ideas and resources, and supporting one another helped the teachers become better prepared. Interaction with others can spark new ideas and refine thinking through feedback and discussion. The participants recognized that planning transformations must be manageable, offering solutions such as leveraging available resources, simplifying setup, and fostering collaboration to combat common challenges when initially experimenting with classroom transformations.

### ***Resources***

One of the most frequently acknowledged challenges in implementing classroom transformations was the availability of resources. However, the participants offered practical strategies for overcoming these barriers. All the participants emphasized starting small as a sustainable solution. Silvia explained that even small efforts—such as “changing one area of the room”—were enough to engage students and suggested that “it doesn't have to be the whole room” that is transformed. The participants also emphasized

the importance of reusable resources. Teachers suggested investing in props and decorations that could be used repeatedly or repurposed across multiple transformations. Silvia, Reese, and Michelle also suggested collaborating with colleagues to share resources as one way to offset the burden of cost and acquisition of resources.

All of the participants admitted to spending for “stuff out of pocket,” but shared that there were external supports to offset costs. Ruby, Silvia, Melody, and Arthur suggested seeking and applying for grant opportunities, sharing that they each applied for and received grants to fund their projects in the past. Ruby and Melody also suggested reaching out to community businesses. Melody explained, “You can get donations from them. It...bridges a gap between the community partners and the school. It brings them into it. It gets them involved...[and] it's great publicity for them”—highlighting a mutually beneficial relationship that can be established between schools and the community. Reese admitted that she was initially hesitant, but urged others to “learn to ask for help” when gathering resources for transformations. Michelle also echoed this advice and explained that her students’ families, administration, and the parent-teacher organization at school were all eager and happy to help; they just needed to know how to help.

Ruby emphasized that although extra measures were required to secure resources for her transformations, she was steadfast in explaining that the student outcomes were “worth every penny...every minute...just to see the kids come in and be so excited and leave so excited and knowing that you were able to give that to them...[it] was the most rewarding feeling.” In line with Ruby’s reflection, the other participants agreed that while resource challenges were real, the outcomes made the effort worthwhile—emphasis

remained on creating excitement and memories rather than the difficulty in acquiring resources. While cost was “a big thing,” creative sourcing of resources made it manageable for the participants.

### ***Classroom Management***

While classroom transformations were designed to create excitement and engagement, participants acknowledged that the nonroutine experience brought unique classroom management situations. Melody openly admitted that some of her first classroom transformations were her weakest because she assumed students would naturally know what to do, and she did not effectively establish her expectations. Arthur, Ruby, Silvia, and Melody explained that there is a delicate balance between wanting structure and not wanting to stifle excitement. Arthur indicated, “There has to be structure because [students] need that, but you can’t be so rigid that it kills the fun. You want the excitement to be there, but you also want them to know there’s still expectations.” As a solution, participants described providing up clear directions before beginning the transformation.

Notably, Reese and Michelle’s philosophies on classroom management during transformations took differing approaches, highlighting the range of effective strategies teachers can use to manage student excitement. Reese believed transformations depend on firm foundations. She shared, “It has a lot to do with classroom management... I’ve always been big on procedures, procedures, procedures. Once I get my kids there, I know I can trust them to be able to handle moving around the room.” She also noted that timing mattered, reflecting on how waiting until later in the year helped her students navigate the transformation more smoothly because she had solidly established her expectations.

In contrast, Michelle took a looser approach, reminding others not to worry if things became a little noisier than usual:

Just go with the flow as it's happening. It's not going to be super structured... It's all about free choice of choosing...who you want to work with and where you want to sit. Just you need to embrace that. If it's going to bother you that kids are laying on the floor working on problems, then you might need to think ahead of time where they need to sit. Just to make sure you have your expectations [clear] and don't get overwhelmed with the thought of it.

Although the participants differed in how they managed the energy of classroom transformations, they agreed that the key was to channel students' excitement rather than suppress it. This approach allowed teachers to maintain order while also preserving the excitement that makes transformations valuable.

### **Words of Advice and Encouragement for Others**

A recurring theme across participants' experiences was their desire to offer guidance and encouragement to fellow educators who might consider implementing classroom transformations. The teachers recognized both the rewards and the challenges of classroom transformations, and they shared advice drawn from their lived experiences to encourage others. The advice provided by the participants was grounded in trial and error. Across the study, participants consistently emphasized that classroom transformations, albeit rewarding, require deliberate planning and additional effort to achieve the outcomes that the teachers aimed to create. Their advice reflects practical guidance and encouragement, drawn from the lessons they have learned through their own experiences.

### ***Take Risks and Be Flexible***

Participants encouraged others to step outside of their comfort zones, and remaining flexible. Participants explained that the execution of their transformations was not always predictable and emphasized the importance of flexibility. Reese shared, “It’s not going to be perfect. There’s things that are going to happen, and you can make notes and do better next year.” Across participants, a consistent piece of advice emerged—“just go for it.” Reese echoed this encouragement of risk-taking and flexibility:

I just thought, I’m just going to give it a shot and just try it and see if I like it...You need to go into it with an open mind that things are going to happen that are not going to go your way, and that’s okay...It’s not going to be perfect. There’s things that are going to happen, and you can make notes and do better next year...throw all your reservations away...Yes, you’re going to be tired...Yes, you’re going to spend some money...but it’s worth it...It’s something I will continue to do every year. The kids love it.

Michelle similarly encouraged teachers to adopt a bold but realistic mindset. She remarked that failure was not final, and advised, “The worst thing that can happen is it doesn’t go well, and guess what? It ends, and you do something else the next day.”

A willingness to take risks and be flexible emerged as a pattern in the participants’ approaches, highlighting how teachers thrived when they adapted to challenges and reflected on their practices.

### ***Reflect***

Another pattern of participant wisdom and advice was the message that outcomes are strengthened through reflection. Each teacher emphasized the importance of engaging

in reflection. The participants' words of advice reveal that classroom transformations should be approached with a willingness to reflect and learn. For the participants, reflection was not only a tool for improvement but also an opportunity to exercise agency—a personal foundation that influenced their professional practices.

Reese shared, "The reflection piece is what makes me better the next time." Silvia also voiced the importance of reflection as a part of her practice, explaining, "You self-analyze and you reflect on your teaching and see what doesn't work and then get better each day." For Silvia, this reflective practice is a sign of effective teaching. She asserted, "If you're a good teacher, you're going to constantly reflect and say, 'how can I make this better?'" Similarly, Melody revealed her experience with reflection:

I reflect after every transformation—what worked, what didn't, and how I can make it better next time...I feel like every year that I do one, it just gets better and better, and I can add more and more to it... You just kind of learn from each one. You figure out what worked, what didn't, and then you tweak it the next time.

The perspectives presented by Reese, Silvia, and Melody align closely with those of Arthur, Ruby, and Michelle. Reflection was not described as an isolated activity, but as an iterative cycle that influenced how teachers approached subsequent transformations. Through the willingness to innovate, teachers positioned themselves as learners, willing to take risks, make adjustments, and continually improve. In this way, classroom transformations became not only memorable experiences for students but also an opportunity for the participants to grow as professionals.

## **Conclusion**

Undergirding the teacher participants' experiences was the message that perfection is not the goal; rather, it is connection, student engagement, and professional growth that are the positive outcomes of the efforts the participants have put into the planning and execution of classroom transformations. The themes revealed that participants found classroom transformations to be meaningful practices that enabled them to express creativity, exercise agency, and design learning experiences and a classroom culture that aligned with their beliefs and values. What emerged from the participants' stories is that when they embraced innovation and remained focused on building connections with students, teaching and learning became more effective.

## **Chapter VI**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of upper elementary teachers and students who engaged in classroom transformations. Although popular literature and practitioner resources on classroom transformations are available, there are limited empirical studies and scholarly literature on the topic. Using narrative inquiry as the qualitative approach, I sought to understand the experiences of the six teacher participants and focus groups of their students as they reflected on their experiences and attached meanings to classroom transformations. This chapter connects and compares the findings of this study to existing research. In doing so, I highlighted how this study is situated among existing research on teacher agency, innovative pedagogy, and student engagement.

Constructivism and social cultural theory served as the framework for the design of this study. Constructivism provided the foundation for understanding how prior experiences influence future decision-making and behavior (Kraft et al., 2024) and guided my research design. Constructivist theorists assert that individuals actively construct knowledge and meaning through experiences and reflection (Krahenbuhl, 2016). Using sociocultural theory as a complementary theory, I was able to focus on how shared experiences, collaboration, and classroom culture influenced the meanings teachers and students attached to classroom transformations. According to sociocultural theory, social and cultural events shape beliefs, values, and behaviors (Main, 2023). For

this study, I used the lens of sociocultural theory to help me understand how collegial, peer, and teacher interactions and relationships influenced learning. Additionally, I sought to understand how the classroom culture influenced the teacher and student participants' beliefs and values through the shared experiences of classroom transformations.

Together, these theories helped me understand the participants' experiences with classroom transformations. This study also allowed me to create a platform to share the experiences of the students with whom these transformations were designed to impact.

The following research questions served to guide this study:

RQ 1. What experiences did upper elementary teachers have socially, educationally, and professionally before, during, and after their implementations of classroom transformations?

RQ 2. What meanings did the teachers attach to the experience of classroom transformations that influenced their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making?

RQ 3. What recommendations do teachers implementing classroom transformations have for teachers, teacher educators, and administrators that could enhance the experience of using classroom transformations in school?

RQ 4. What themes emerged from students who experienced transformed learning environments?

What follows is a discussion of the findings and the relationship to the existing body of research and scholarly literature. In addition, this chapter includes the implications of this study and offers recommendations for future research. The discussion is organized around the four major themes identified in Chapter 5: personal foundations

behind professional practice, teachers' return on investment, creating a classroom culture of student engagement, and the wisdom of veteran practitioners.

### **Discussion of Findings**

It became apparent during my conversations with the six participants that classroom transformations were more than a temporarily engaging lesson that they executed. The transformations were driven by the outcomes the teachers aimed to achieve. They served as opportunities to exercise teacher agency, heighten personal and professional fulfillment, and influence student engagement within the classrooms. Viewed through the lens of constructivist theory, teachers and students constructed their own understanding of what instruction in a transformed classroom was like and attached meaning to those experiences. Meanwhile, a sociocultural perspective helped frame the impact of peer and teacher interactions and collaborative learning during transformations. Participants highlighted how their practices influenced not only their own classrooms and relationships with their students, but also those of their colleagues and professional communities. These social and cultural influences repeatedly emerged through the stories of the participants, affirming the sociocultural perspective that learning does not occur in isolation, but is inherently social (Main, 2023; Yoon & Kim, 2012). This next section revisits and discusses each theme and connects the findings to existing research.

### **Personal Foundations Behind Professional Practice**

The findings suggest that teachers' prior experiences and personal characteristics shaped participants' teaching identities and professional practices. Kraft et al. (2024) explained that prior experiences play an important role in teachers' instructional decisions. Factors such as past experiences as students and individual's beliefs and values

influence teachers' instructional decision-making. This study extends Kraft et al.'s findings by examining how the participants' personal foundations, such as relationships with prior teachers, inherent creativity, and agentic behaviors, contributed to the development of their teaching identity and willingness to engage in classroom transformations.

### **Prior Experiences as a Student**

Using constructivism as the conceptual framework, I designed the data collection process to first examine the life histories of the participants during an approximately 90-minute interview. My goal was to explore and understand how prior experiences informed the construction of their teacher identities. The findings indicated that the participants' previous experiences as students made lasting impacts. For example, Ruby's memories of immersive history lessons, Melody's connection with her band teacher, Michelle's love for the hands-on learning, and Arthur's meaningful relationship with his high school art teacher highlight how early experiences with impactful teachers became the models for their own practice. The participants' experiences support the constructivist research of Applefield et al. (2000), which posited that teachers' personal experiences, beliefs, and values influence "virtually all...decisions about instruction" (p. 35). Likewise, Chia and Goh's (2016) review of literature on teachers' perceptions, experience, and learning highlighted the implications of teachers' beliefs and values on student learning, professional growth, school culture, and teacher identity. The impact of prior experiences on the beliefs and values of the participants of this study emerged as a major theme and offers to extend and affirm the existing research by scholars such as Chia and Goh (2016), Kraft et al. (2024), and Applefield et al. (2000).

The teachers in this study valued creating engaging and memorable learning experiences that emotionally connected students to the content—similar to the beliefs that were cultivated when they were students. Ruby reflected on how there were specific experiences in school that she knew she was “never going to forget”—like when she participated in mock trials or attended a presidential speech by Obama. It was the novel, unique lessons she experienced as a student that made the most impact and later shaped her drive to create these “never going to forget this” moments for her students using classroom transformations. Melody also explained that, due to her memorable experiences as a student, she values creating experiences where her students are “not just doing schoolwork—they’re feeling the lesson.” Arthur emphasized how he used classroom transformations as a tool to “build...relationships between [students] and [the content] and ...the teacher.” These values established through prior experiences as students acted as a framework to navigate instructional decisions and the relationships they built with students.

Aligning with constructivist theory, these findings reinforce the idea that teachers, like their students, construct new beliefs and values that influence their behaviors by drawing on prior experiences (Chuang, 2021; Olusegun, 2015). From a sociocultural lens, the findings of this study also affirm that social interactions shape beliefs and values. As explained by Main (2023), teachers’ practices are shaped by past teachers, mentors, and colleagues. The novel, immersive experiences that the participants’ former teachers created for them as students stood out and shaped the type of learning experiences the participants valued when creating lessons for their own students.

## **Creativity as a Personal Foundation**

Creativity in different expressions also emerged as a commonality and shared personal foundation among the participants. For example, Silvia and Ruby expressed creativity through their love of performance and role-playing— shaping the ways they engaged with students during classroom transformations. Meanwhile, Arthur, Michelle, Melody, and Reese found themselves exercising creativity through their love of creating a product. They took pride in the design and production of tangible materials and in deviating from the routine. Melody explained classroom transformations are “something [she] can be proud of...[and] definitely something that is in your teaching portfolio.”

In Henriksen and Mishra (2015) qualitative study using in-depth interviews to understand and investigate the creative classroom practices of exceptional teachers, the researchers found that highly creative teachers were creative in their professional capacity but also in their personal lives. The findings of this study support the work of Henriksen and Mishra in which the researchers asserted that the participants' personal foundations of creativity influenced their instructional choices. Cloonan et al. (2019) proposed that pedagogies that foster creativity and critical thinking require and develop a sense of agency in both teachers and students.

The results of this study align with existing research that emphasizes the role of past experiences in the development of teacher identity (Applefield et al., 2000; Prawat; 1992), while also extending the literature by demonstrating how personal foundations can serve as catalysts for transformative instructional practices.

## **Agentic Behaviors Driving Professional Growth**

During data analysis, I noted that creativity and agency consistently appeared as personal foundations for each of my six participants. This study's findings connecting creativity and agency, affirm the work of Cloonan et al. (2019). Based on their findings, the researchers postulated that the two concepts of creativity and agency reinforced one another. In their study exploring the relationship between transformational leadership and teacher innovativeness, Polatcan et al. (2024) also established a positive correlation between teachers' agency and innovativeness and asserted that agency mediated innovation. Teachers with higher agency were more likely to engage in innovative practices—a finding mirrored by the experiences of the participants in this study.

The concept of teacher agency is a growing area of scholarly research and refers to a teacher's capacity and willingness to take ownership and action of their practice and instructional decisions (Deschênes & Parent, 2022; Polatcan et al., 2024; Priestley et al., 2015). Biesta et al. (2015) claimed that agency is dependent on personal beliefs and impacts teachers' instructional decisions. The teachers further asserted that teacher agency is essential in creating environments and pedagogy that support student-centered learning—another theme that emerged in this study's findings.

A major finding of this study was the role of agentic behaviors in motivating participants to take initiative in embracing classroom transformations, independent of any formal directive from school-level instructional leadership. Melody explained, “I don't do classroom transformations because I'm told to—I do them because I want to.” Arthur shared that classroom transformations allowed him to “use [his] creativity [and] problem solving” and helped him grow as an educator after feeling somewhat stagnant in his

growth. This active contribution to shaping the instruction that occurs in their classroom supports Biesta et al.'s (2015) definition of teachers' agency. Arthur, Michelle, Ruby, and Melody explained that they took the initiative and ownership by researching and implementing classroom transformations on their own time and under their own direction.

Another element of agentic behavior is reflection, a process discussed by Bandura (2001) as central to agency. The emphasis on reflection and improvement was a major theme in the experiences of every participant in this study. While Melody explained that she believes she has "grown a lot" since her first transformation, it is the iterative process of reflection and improvement—a practice also described by the other five participants—that is the foundation of her "get better and better" attitude. Melody explained that the "reflection piece is what makes [her] better the next time," noting that each transformation pushed her to evaluate her practice and refine her approach. Silvia shared the same belief about reflection, explaining that effective teachers "consistently reflect and say, 'how can I make this better?'"

The participants' experiences with reflection affirm Kumari's (2014) assertion that the critical reflection of experiences "continues to be an effective technique for professional development" and can support the growth of teachers (p. 31). In his research on using a constructivist approach in teacher education, he establishes reflection as an important practice in teacher education and professional development to encourage teachers to improve their craft. The existing research supports the findings that agentic behaviors influenced the implementation of classroom transformations but also fueled the participants' ongoing professional growth.

## **Confidence and Collaboration as Catalysts for Innovation and Risk-Taking**

I found that the participants' confidence and collaboration impacted their willingness to implement classroom transformations. Sociocultural theorists posit that the beliefs and values of individuals are not constructed in isolation, but rather through their experiences and social interactions with others (Main, 2023; Yoon & Kim, 2012). As in the case of Reese, Ruby, and Silvia, collaboration with veteran practitioners guided their beliefs as they began planning their first classroom transformation. Reese stated that observing her colleague "really resonated with [her]." She explained she "was influenced by [her] coworkers," and her willingness to experiment with classroom transformations was a direct result of her "coworkers and watching them do it," and observing their students' reactions.

The tenets of sociocultural theory help to understand and explain the impact of collaboration, as each of the six teacher participants in this study found themselves in positions where collaboration with colleagues played a critical role in helping them start experimenting with classroom transformations.

Another pattern of interest emerged through the experiences of Melody, Arthur, and Michelle. These participants expressed a desire to grow and challenge themselves because they had reached a crossroads in their careers, where they were confident with their content and curriculum and believed they had the capacity to take on new challenges. This finding supports the work of Anderson et al. (2022), who asserted that before teachers take risks with innovative strategies, they need to feel confident and comfortable. The findings also affirm Polatcan et al.'s (2024) claim that teachers who feel empowered are more likely to be innovative.

Similar to the teachers in Polatcan et al.'s (2024) study, the participants in Howard et al.'s (2018) study embraced creativity as a tool for student engagement through collaboration. The researchers described teachers as “social innovators of creative pedagogies” that inspire cultural shifts within their schools and classrooms, such as risk-taking (p. 851). The findings of this current study address Howard et al.'s call for more research on teacher risk-taking, noting that if we want learners to take risks, be resilient, and confident, then teachers must model these behaviors.

Henriksen and Mishra (2015) also asserted that teachers embody the role of 21st-century learners when they test new strategies and take risks in instructional design. They added that pedagogical innovation requires teachers to take risks through trying new practices without the certainty of success. The participants in this study extended this claim by describing classroom transformations as both demanding and sometimes unpredictable, yet rewarding due to student excitement and personal fulfillment. Michelle commented that sometimes things do not go as planned, but “the worst thing that can happen is it doesn't go well, and guess what? It ends.” She offered reassurance, saying, “It's always going to not go exactly the way you were thinking” but to “Just go with the flow as it's happening.”

Lasky's (2005) research revealed that risk-taking behaviors relate to teacher identity and agency. The findings of this study also support this important theme, as the participants' early experiences as students influenced their teaching identities, and their personal foundations of creativity and agency influenced the participants' motivations to reframe what instruction can look like in their classrooms. Interestingly, a 2017 study by Snyder identified veteran teachers as a subgroup of teachers who demonstrated a greater

tendency to resist change in instructional practices. While Snyder’s finding may illustrate a larger pattern, it did not extend to the experiences of the veteran teachers in this study. In contrast, the participants of this study—who were all veteran teachers—embraced classroom transformations as opportunities for risk-taking, growth, innovation, and student engagement. These findings may suggest that resistance to change is not necessarily connected to years of experience and may be more closely tied to levels of agency and willingness to engage in risk-taking in instruction.

### **Teachers’ Return on Investment**

While the participants acknowledged the significant time, energy, and resources required to design and implement transformations, they also emphasized the "payoffs" their efforts generated. These returns included renewed enthusiasm, opportunities for instructional leadership and growth, and stronger teacher-student relationships.

These findings suggest that classroom transformations do not simply impact students’ learning and experiences but also reshaped teachers’ professional and personal experiences. By breaking away from “the monotony of [their] everyday lives”, the teachers were able to reignite excitement for teaching, challenge themselves to grow as professionals, and strengthen their relationships with their students.

### **Reigniting Passion Through Transformation**

In addition to the student outcomes the participants associated with classroom transformations, the findings revealed that classroom transformations were also linked to positive teacher outcomes, such as excitement for instruction. Michelle described being “addicted to the way kids react,” while Silvia’s “high” reflects the energy and joy she received when executing transformations. Ruby’s eagerness and anticipation for the next

transformation began nearly immediately after she concluded a transformation. She explained, “As soon as I finish one...[it] was so rewarding that I cannot wait till I get to do the next one.”

A mixed-methods study by Anderson et al. (2022) found that opportunities for creativity positioned teachers to show “more resilience and joy and less stress” (p. 1). Anderson further postulated that “creative development could...provide new pathways for joy and wellbeing in [teachers’] work” (p. 4). The findings of Anderson’s study were supported by the experiences of each of the six participants in this study, who expressed a renewed sense of energy and excitement when executing transformations. The participants in this study shared that their students’ reactions and the opportunity to exercise creativity energized them. Transformation days differed from the “same old, same old” and renewed the participants’ excitement and enthusiasm for teaching. Michelle explained that prior to implementing classroom transformations, she experienced a growing discontent with her scripted curriculum materials. She shared, “I don't like just everyday routine...it's the same thing every single day...there was never really...change...I don't like that.” She further shared that when she was first introduced to the idea of classroom transformations, she immediately recognized the potential and thought, “Well, that looks like fun...I want to have fun. Let's do fun!” The findings of this study build on Anderson’s conclusion that creativity fosters teacher joy and resilience by demonstrating that classroom transformations specifically created opportunities for *joy* among participants.

The participants’ renewed excitement for teaching and motivation to engage in classroom transformations can be further understood through the work of Deci and Ryan

(2000). The researchers established that the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness serve as precursors to the promotion of motivation—factors the participants described as being met as they shared their stories. Although the conversations of Buczyna (2022), King and King (2017), and Pickett (2020) focus on student motivation as the payoff of implementing classroom transformations, the findings of this study extend this conversation on motivation by demonstrating that teacher motivation is a potential outcome for teachers engaging in this approach.

### **Leaving a Legacy through Professional Contributions**

The experiences of the participants suggested that classroom transformations extended beyond single classrooms and led to professional contributions that influenced colleagues, their schools, and a larger professional community. This “domino effect,” coined by Ruby but also expressed by Arthur, Melody, and Michelle, reflects the chain reaction of innovation also observed by prior researchers. Risk-taking by one teacher can influence a shift in the beliefs and values of fellow teachers (Anderson et al., 2022). For example, Silvia explained she initially thought classroom transformations “[sounded] like a lot of work.” However, while initially hesitant about the demands of conducting a classroom transformation, both Silvia and Reese found themselves willing to take on the challenge after observing their colleagues’ successes with the practice, a pattern validating the findings of Anderson et al.

Meanwhile, Arthur, Melody, Michelle, and Ruby found themselves positioned as leaders within their schools and their district, inspiring colleagues to take an interest in classroom transformations while establishing themselves as innovators. Michelle described how her journey with classroom transformations first started after seeing a post

on social media, but soon spread beyond her classroom to her grade-level colleagues, to other teachers at her school, and eventually reached educators outside her school community through a professional learning presentation she offered. The recognition they received from colleagues, students, families, and administrators validated the participants' practice and motivated them to continue—a pattern consistent with Biesta et al.'s (2015) argument that agency is affected by external influences.

In each of the participants' experiences, the teachers discovered or adopted the use of classroom transformations outside of formal, school-level professional learning. Arthur and Ruby first observed colleagues implementing transformations at their schools, Michelle and Melody learned about the practice online, and veteran practitioners on their teams approached Reese and Silvia to participate in planning their first transformation. The participants' experiences align with Karolčík and Marklová's (2023) findings that teachers frequently discover innovative approaches independently of school-level professional learning. This pattern connects back to the theme of agency, as the participants demonstrated their willingness to take initiative and action to implement new strategies.

The participants' experiences with the broadening reach of their practices echo the "peer effects on innovation adoption" studied by McConnell et al. (2020, p. 1). Since their work focused on how peer interactions shape, reinforce, and change practices in higher education, the findings of this study extend the conversation on peer influence to elementary education. Classroom transformations not only impacted the participants' own instructional approaches but also served as professional contributions, leaving a legacy that reached a larger learning community.

## **Strengthened Teacher-Student Relationships**

A recurring theme that emerged from the students' experiences with classroom transformations was the appreciation the students had for their teacher's efforts. The students recognized the work their teachers invested and expressed gratitude—deepening teacher-student relationships. One of Melody's students explained, "I notice that she takes a lot of time and effort into hanging all the stuff up... It shows us how much she cares about us." While Arthur's student echoed the same sentiment, saying, "It makes us feel happy... he puts effort into doing this stuff for us." The same student keenly observed that the payoff for students was also rewarding for the teacher, explaining that "It's like they make themselves happy that they're making children happy."

The teachers' experiences also supported the strengthening of teacher-student relationships as another payoff of classroom transformations. However, this outcome seemed very intentional and well thought out, based on the explanations provided by the teachers. Ruby affirmed the students' experiences by sharing, "I'm doing something just for [my students]. I'm putting in the effort, and they see that, and they know it, and I know they appreciate it." Melody shared that "giving [students] special experiences" let her students know that she was "invested in them." Arthur explained that his efforts were driven by the goal of building "relationships between [students] and art and [students] and...the teacher."

Biesta et al. (2015) suggested that teacher-student relationships were critical to establishing conditions necessary for learning. The findings of this study affirm the work of Biesta et al. through the experiences shared by the participants, as the students consistently recognized and valued the effort their teachers invested in classroom

transformations. The efforts of the teachers nurtured feelings of caring, gratitude, and connection, which deepened relationships and supported Biesta's assertion that meaningful relationships create a foundation for learning. Also, although the teachers in this study may not be familiar with the tenets of sociocultural theory, their actions were rooted in the use of social interactions to improve learning and build relationships. Consistent with sociocultural theory, the findings of this study support the claim that learning is enhanced through social interaction (Yoon & Kim, 2012). Hattie's (2009) meta-analysis of learning effects ranked teacher-student relationships among the most impactful influences on student achievement, with an effect size of 0.72. By providing qualitative evidence of how students notice and appreciate their teachers' efforts during classroom transformations, this study extends the research of Hattie by focusing on the experiences that contributed to strengthened teacher-student relationships.

### **Creating a Classroom Culture of Student Engagement**

Another recurring theme in the participants' experiences was the deliberate attempt to create classroom cultures that fostered student engagement. Classroom transformation practitioners Buczyna (2022), King and King (2017), and Pickett (2020) explained that the purpose of classroom transformations is to promote student engagement by creating a high-interest learning environment that impacts students emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively.

Tu (2021) highlighted the importance of positive emotions in promoting active, long-term student participation and linked the classroom to student engagement in his review of how classroom culture and psychological safety influenced student engagement in the context of English language learners. Further, Lekwa et al. (2018) employed

correlational and multiple linear regression analyses to investigate the relationship between teacher practices and student academic engagement, finding that instructional practices were both associated with and predicted student academic engagement. Zimmermann et al. (2018) asserted that understanding student motivation has implications for the development and use of methods that can impact student engagement. Ambrose et al. (2010) emphasized that motivation plays a critical role in student learning and behavior. While their work focuses on connecting empirical research with practical advice for teachers—also a goal of this study—the findings extend their research by illustrating how the specific practice of classroom transformations serves as a strategy that can motivate and engage students.

The findings of this study extend the work of Lekwa et al. (2018), Tu (2021), and Zimmermann et al. (2018) by providing qualitative data to support the connection between teachers' instructional decisions and student engagement. Both Squire et al. (2003) and Tu (2021) posited that classroom culture was influenced by teachers' experiences, teaching style, pedagogical approaches, teacher personalities, classroom environment, materials, and relationships. The interconnected factors of prior experiences and teacher identities were also identified in this study as influential in the construction of the participants' classroom cultures.

### **Promoting Emotional Engagement**

In the participants' classrooms, learning was not limited to completing scripted curriculum lessons and acquiring facts; the participants prioritized and worked hard to create a classroom culture and environment that promoted student engagement. Aligned with the foundations of the sociocultural theory, the teachers used the transformations as

tools to create a community with shared values, beliefs, and behaviors. While a couple of participants noted anecdotal conversations suggesting that some of their colleagues perceive classroom transformations as merely superficial ‘fun days,’ the participants in this study described them as opportunities to build classroom culture, professional growth, and instill beliefs that connect learning with excitement and fun for their students.

King and King (2017) defined classroom transformations as a practice used to motivate and engage students in learning by creating a new and engaging physical environment that students find valuable and connect with emotionally. Students in the focus groups affirmed the statements of King and King and shared that they believed the physical classroom environment was important in their overall experience with classroom transformations. Ryker, one of Ruby’s students, explained that the transformed physical environment and theme were “very important” in getting students excited to participate in “something unique that’s not a normal day thing.” These experiences shared by the focus groups of students mirror the findings of Nyabando and Evanshen (2021) in their multiple case study, which found that the physical classroom environment influenced student satisfaction as well as teacher motivation. Nyabando and Evanshen suggested that young children’s perceptions of the environment can be influenced by their experiences. The results of this current study extend their research by presenting classroom transformations as an approach in which teachers can affect engagement and answer the researchers’ challenge to teachers to design physical learning environments that support the diverse needs of students.

The novel learning environments created by the participants in this study were deliberately designed to evoke emotions from the students. Arthur explained how he used the physical classroom environment to leverage emotions to connect his students to art, explaining that he used classroom transformations “to boost...excitement and engagement.” A door covered by bricks or sea creatures swimming in the lights piqued his students’ curiosity and motivated them to engage in the instruction. Similarly, Melody ensured that her students not only remembered the content but also attached positive emotions to the learning process, saying:

I...try every year to...be that teacher that's memorable, that creates moments and feelings within my children that they won't forget. I want to have those unforgettable moments with them... I want them to remember how [the experiences] make them feel.

In both these ways, classroom transformations functioned as emotionally stimulating experiences. Pekrun (2014) referred to the surprise and curiosity of new, non-routine learning experiences as epistemic emotions and explained that emotions play a significant role in the classroom with implications on student behavior and motivation. The participants and their students affirmed Pekrun’s assertions, sharing that the students’ emotional engagement through feelings of joy, excitement, and curiosity from the “wow factor” of classroom transformations increased students’ willingness to engage behaviorally and cognitively.

Notably, the findings challenge some of Biesta et al.’s (2015) conclusions, in which the researchers noted that teachers are often driven by short-term goals “rather than longer-term significance and impact” (p. 636). The findings of this study suggest

that transformations provided both immediate benefits, such as excitement through novelty, but also had long-term significance, including professional growth, relationship building, enhanced student engagement, and an impact on teachers' and students' beliefs and values about school and learning.

From a constructivist perspective, during a classroom transformation, the learning environment is not a backdrop but a variable in the construction of knowledge through experience. Students and teachers build meaning through their interactions with both the physical and emotional aspects of classroom transformations, and these experiences have a lasting impact on future experiences. From a constructivist perspective, during a classroom transformation, the learning environment is not a backdrop but a variable in the construction of knowledge through experience. Students and teachers build meaning through their interactions with both the physical and emotional aspects of classroom transformations, and these experiences have a lasting impact on future experiences.

### **Behavioral and Cognitive Engagement Affected by Novelty and Creativity**

Novelty and creativity played a powerful role in both the behavioral and cognitive engagement of the focus groups of students. Classroom transformations broke from routine through relevant themes, novel tasks, and interactive design. The students were more likely to participate and invest effort in the learning process on these special days—a pattern even noticed by the focus groups of students. Reese's student explained, "Usually...there's some people...[that] don't really pay attention. But [during a transformation], they wanted to pay attention because it seemed so cool, and it made them participate and actually understand." The teachers observed that novelty and creativity sparked curiosity and excitement, manifesting in student behaviors that

reflected both behavioral and cognitive engagement. The teachers noticed students following directions better, paying greater attention, applying information, making connections, and asking questions. For example, Ruby shared a story about Rodrick, a normally disengaged and apathetic student who often put his head down in class. However, Rodrick lit up with excitement during a football-themed transformation, showing that the novelty and design of the environment created an emotional connection that drew him into learning and positively impacted his behavioral and cognitive engagement. The other teachers also noted an increase in behavioral engagement through on-task behaviors and cognitive engagement through questioning and persistence through the learning tasks.

Seiki and Gray (2020) reported a similar finding in their year-long exploratory case study, which examined the effects of immersive science instruction. The teacher participants in their study observed increased student engagement and motivation during the transformed classroom experience. The teachers in their study also witnessed increased engagement behaviors from students who were previously passive during classroom instruction. In their case study, three teachers transformed a second-grade classroom into a rainforest which created a novel, multisensory environment that the researchers explained embodied the students' learning. The researchers asserted that the transformed environment facilitated learning by crafting a novel and creative experience that sparked students' imagination. The effects reported by the teachers included increased student engagement and motivation. The researchers also concluded that the increase in engagement and motivation resulted in improved learning and proposed physically immersive instruction as a potential solution to student disengagement. The

findings of this study both affirm and extend the work of Seiki and Gray, demonstrating how classroom transformations, as a form of physically immersive learning, created environments that engaged upper elementary students in diverse content areas through novelty and creativity. For apathetic and disengaged students, previous research has established extrinsic motivators as a potential stimulus to help develop intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012; Serin, 2018). The findings of this study extend existing research by presenting classroom transformations as an option to utilize extrinsic forms of motivation, such as novelty and creativity, as one method teachers can use to engage students behaviorally and cognitively in learning.

In addition to designing immersive physical environments, the teacher participants integrated other approaches, such as role-playing, thereby broadening the scope of existing research. For example, Acharya et al. (2018) use a pre-test/post-test design to evaluate the effectiveness of role-playing as a strategy to enhance learning. The researchers found that students who participated in the role-playing exhibited greater post-test scores in comparison to the control group. Rashid and Qaisar (2017) also conducted a study on role-playing with elementary students, and their findings suggested that role-playing was a productive pedagogical approach in promoting active learning and critical thinking.

In the context of this study, all the participants shared that role-playing helped immerse students in the theme and scenario of the classroom transformation. Ruby explained that she believed role-playing was a “huge part” of classroom transformations, allowing her students to connect with the lesson emotionally and making the experience more memorable and enjoyable. Consequently, this led to an increase in both behavioral

and cognitive engagement. She explained, “[The students] get to be creative, they get to be imaginative, they get to be somebody different when they’re in here. They’re not a student sitting at the desk listening to the teacher talk.” Michelle’s student shared her experience with role-playing during transformations and remarked, “You have to get in the character. I feel like it just adds to the magic of the room transformation,” demonstrating the influence of role-playing on student engagement.

These elements of role-playing connect to Piaget’s (1962) description of play as an important contributing factor in the cognitive development of children. However, while role-playing can foster multiple forms of engagement, Plass et al. (2015) cautioned that without achieving cognitive engagement, such approaches are less likely to support learners in meeting their academic goals. Interestingly, the participants in this study leveraged other instructional strategies, such as student-centered learning and collaboration, to bolster cognitive engagement in addition to the novelty and creativity offered by role-playing.

### **Student Centered Learning and Collaboration**

Student-centered learning and collaboration emerged as a repeating theme in the design of classroom transformations as described by the six participants. The goal of student-centered learning is to shift the focus from the teacher to the student, thereby deepening cognitive engagement by making students responsible for their own learning. This approach also aligns with constructivist theory, which argues that learners build knowledge through active exploration. Additionally, sociocultural theory supports the idea that collaboration and social interaction mediate learning. As asserted by Bernard

(2024) and Goodman (2014), social interactions influence cognitive development, and using collaborative instructional approaches improves student learning.

The six participants viewed the tasks the students engaged in during classroom transformations as way to apply and extend the skills and strategies they had already learned. Ruby explained, “It creates a different relationship between the material and their understanding.” The participants integrated student-centered, collaborative learning opportunities into the design of their classroom transformations. The participants noted that the teachers acted more as “facilitators” who “take a back seat,” allowing students to “take the lead.” These findings extend the research of Prawat (1992), in which he suggested that teachers intentionally design learning opportunities that situate learning in contexts of application and problem-solving. As described by the six participants, using classroom transformations is an instructional approach designed to provide students with opportunities to apply skills while engaging in collaborative opportunities.

In their research, Sun et al. (2022) found that “children were three times more likely to be cognitively and behaviorally engaged and one-and-a-half times more likely to be emotionally engaged during collaborative groups than direct instruction” (p. 1). Sun et al.’s research reinforces the experiences of the teacher participants in this current study, who described that collaboration during classroom transformations boosted cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement. The findings affirm and extend the work of Sun et al. by providing qualitative evidence that suggests classroom transformations are a practical instructional approach for delivering student-centered and collaborative instruction.

## Wisdom of Veteran Practitioners

With years of experience using classroom transformations, common challenges and solutions emerged from the experiences shared by the participants. The willingness and transparency of the participants to share their experiences helped me construct the final theme, *wisdom of veteran practitioners*. The teachers were candid in sharing their struggles and provided practical insight that other teachers can apply to their own transformations. As Könings et al. (2007) noted, teachers play an important role in the application of innovative pedagogical approaches. The study's findings have the potential to inform other educators about the benefits and challenges of classroom transformations while also offering practical advice and solutions that could enhance teaching practices and student outcomes.

Although there is limited scholarly research on classroom transformations, the findings of this theme connect to generalized research on teachers' experiences with innovation. For example, Biesta et al. (2015) found that limited time and resources can negatively impact the agency of teachers. All the participants of this study shared that time, energy, resources, and monetary costs created obstacles. Every participant noted that the costs of transformations are one of the most pressing challenges. Melody shared that "the biggest challenge is the financial burden of [classroom transformations]," but offered "writing grants [as] the best way...to grow [her] collection of things." One of Melody's students even recognized the financial costs, saying, "To be honest, those things are expensive. She spent her time and money on that for her classroom." Ruby also expressed the pressures of time as another challenge faced by all of the participants, sharing, "just making sure that they have enough time for the things" is a "huge issue."

In their qualitative study of accomplished teachers, Henriksen and Mishra (2015) also noted that the pressures of time, curricular demands, and inadequate support impede creativity and innovation. Smith and Smith (2020) found that teachers perceived support and availability of resources as a challenge in educational innovation. The findings of this study extend the work of Smith and Smith, offering the insights and solutions provided by the participants. Grant writing, collaboration with colleagues, and seeking support from students' families, the school's PTO, administration, and community businesses were all presented as potential solutions to alleviate the financial costs associated with classroom transformations.

Another recurring theme was the participants' encouragement to fellow educators to take risks, remain flexible, engage in reflection, and avoid chasing perfection. Avidov-Ungar and Eshet-Alkay (2011) explained that teachers' perceptions and attitudes are critical in the success or failure of innovation. Anderson et al. (2022) suggested that teachers seek ways to maintain joy in challenging circumstances through creative efforts and resilience in the face of struggles with new approaches. The researchers' claims and suggestions were supported by the participants' experiences in this study. Despite the challenges and apprehension expressed by some participants, they exhibited an unwillingness to abandon classroom transformations or let difficulties discourage them. Many participants suggested starting on a smaller scale, while all participants expressed that perfection is not the goal; instead, the focus is on reflection and improvement. Arthur recommended, "Start off small. Don't overwhelm yourself with all the bells and whistles and things...Keep the mindset that you're trying to create excitement, engagement, so that whatever it is that you're teaching is hopefully retained afterwards." The findings

align with Anderson et al.'s (2022) recommendation to begin with routines before moving on to more complex instructional design. In this way, teachers can experience small successes to support their agency in instructional design.

The participants' differing approaches demonstrated that there is no single formula for managing classroom transformations. For example, Reese emphasized structure and routine, while Michelle embraced a looser management style. However, both approaches emphasized that implementing classroom transformations focused on motivating students while channeling excitement. In this way, the design of classroom transformations aligns with Deci and Ryan's (2000) research on student motivation, which emphasized the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in creating and sustaining motivation. Building on the work of Deci and Ryan, this study's findings present classroom transformations as an approach that addresses the three constructs of motivation, which the participants described as elements intentionally incorporated into the design of classroom transformations. For example, Reese explained that she affords student autonomy by giving students control and ownership. She explained, "I give them the low down, they take the lead, and I take a back seat...I...want to watch, make sure they have what they need. I can assist them, but I want them to take the lead." Still, transformations reinforced students' competence by allowing them to connect content to meaningful experiences where they are applying the skills they learned in previous instruction. Melody shared that students are "able to make a connection with an experience that was more real for them and then connect that [to prior] knowledge." The teachers' efforts strengthened teacher-student relationships with an emphasis on caring and gratitude. While students experienced a deeper emotional connection with their

teachers, they felt a sense of belonging and connection, fulfilling the construct of relatedness as described by Deci and Ryan. By balancing structure with freedom, the teachers ensured that student enthusiasm translated into engagement and learning by capitalizing on elements of instructional design that made the experiences motivating and impactful.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study carry implications for teachers, professional learning communities, administrators, teacher educators, and other stakeholders concerned with classroom practices and professional learning. While the study was situated in the experiences of the six teacher participants and the focus groups of their students, patterns emerged from the data, revealing practices and suggestions that can facilitate and support innovative instructional practices. Additionally, with teacher well-being recognized as a growing concern (Anderson et al., 2022), this study offers options for a broad range of stakeholders to improve conditions that promote professional growth, foster innovative instruction, and support agentic behaviors that enhance emotional well-being and sustain teacher motivation.

### **Implications for Teachers**

The teachers' personal foundations, professional collaboration, and their beliefs and values about instruction played a critical role in motivating them to plan and implement instruction with a focus on student engagement. In his study, Hattie (2003) noted that the actions teachers took and what they valued were influential components of the type of student learning they facilitated. For teachers interested in enhancing student engagement, classroom transformations can serve as a tool to spark student engagement

and create memorable and motivating learning experiences. These findings are particularly significant because prior research by Raufelder and Kulakow (2021) noted that students' motivation tends to decrease as they grow older. Priestley (2015) asserted a need for teachers to develop curriculum in ways that lead to better student outcomes. As a potential strategy to combat this trend and address this need, the findings of this study suggest that classroom transformations can be an effective approach for upper elementary teachers to integrate, thereby enhancing student engagement.

Another significant finding of this study was that the teachers expressed that their satisfaction and enjoyment in instruction were positively affected by the incorporation of classroom transformations into their teaching repertoire. Anderson et al. (2022) suggested that teachers seek ways to maintain joy in challenging circumstances through creative efforts and resilience in the face of struggles with new approaches. For Arthur, Melody, and Michelle, classroom transformations provided an outlet that helped them reestablish joy during a time when they felt thwarted by the prescribed curriculum. The experiences of the participants suggest that classroom transformations may serve as a valuable professional practice for reinvigorating teachers' creativity, joy, and agency. This study, along with prior research by Biesta et al. (2015), affirms that teachers exercise greater agency when they have autonomy, supportive structures, and collegial environments. Participants emphasized that their willingness to engage in transformations stemmed from the personal fulfillment they gained through the opportunity to be creative while also deviating from routine instruction—the novelty of classroom transformations positively impacted both the students and the teachers. Their motivation was also fueled by students' excitement and reactions, as well as the confidence and support they

received from various sources. These findings suggest that teachers should draw upon their interests and beliefs about teaching and learning when designing learning experiences. In another study on transformative curriculum design, Seiki and Gray (2020) similarly suggested that teachers capitalize on their strengths to provide students with relevant and immersive learning experiences that engage them.

Many times, the participants highlighted the importance of collaboration in the conceptualization, planning, and execution of classroom transformations. Professional collaboration—whether online or in-person—and the ability to exercise agency were foundational to risk-taking and innovation. Participants consistently emphasized that professional collaboration was essential in classroom transformations. The advice of the participants suggests that teachers should seek platforms to collaborate, making the process of planning and executing classroom transformations less daunting. All the participants reported that sharing ideas and collaborating with colleagues validated their efforts, and the discourse between like-minded teachers sparked new ideas.

The findings also emphasize the importance of reflection as a crucial step in personal growth. Participants repeatedly described how evaluating what worked, what did not, and how lessons could be improved had a positive impact on each subsequent classroom transformation. Teachers implementing transformations—or other innovative practices—can benefit from deliberately engaging reflection and adjustment. By embracing agency, collaboration, and reflection, teachers may find that classroom transformations not only enhance student engagement but also positively impact their own beliefs and emotions on teaching.

## **Implications for Leadership**

The findings of this study suggest that leadership plays a role in teacher motivation and professional growth. The teacher participants reported that supportive administrators validated their practices and encouraged them to continue innovating and taking risks. In their two-year study of teacher agency, Biesta et al. (2015) also found that “teacher agency does not just rely on the beliefs that individual teachers bring to their practice, but also requires collective development and consideration” (p. 624). To encourage creativity, risk-taking, and innovation in the classroom, leadership can promote these types of behaviors by affirming, celebrating, and supporting teachers. However, Biesta et al. (2015) found that even in trusting environments, limited time and resources can have a negative impact on the agency of teachers. As a response to the findings of this study and the research of Biesta et al., suggestions for supportive actions include assisting funding efforts for classroom transformation materials, protecting planning time, and making efforts to build a school culture of trust.

Ensuring teachers feel trusted and providing autonomy in instructional decision-making may foster innovation and lead teachers to feel safe to try new approaches. In contrast, well-intentioned paternalistic policies that prescribe and micromanage planning and instructional practices can thwart creativity and inhibit agentic behaviors (Henriksen & Mishra, 2015). Henriksen and Mishra warned against educational policies focused on high-stakes testing, which impede innovation. The findings of both this study and the work of Henriksen and Mishra suggest that autonomy be afforded to teachers to embed opportunities for creativity in instructional design, thereby promoting innovation and risk-taking.

Administrators who prioritize trust and empowerment, have the potential to build school cultures that foster innovation and creativity. Leadership support could also include providing time for professional learning opportunities that highlight teacher-led practices, cultivating a collaborative culture among teachers, and establishing professional learning communities where educators can share and reflect. Additionally, leadership support could involve recognizing and affirming teachers who engage in creative instructional practices.

Importantly, if administrators do not understand or value the practices of teachers, they may fail to provide the support necessary to cultivate agency and innovation at their schools. As a response, professional learning opportunities designed for administrators could help leadership recognize the value of approaches such as classroom transformations, enabling them to better support their teachers.

Leadership and school policies that balance district and state expectations while supporting individual teachers and fostering a culture of trust can lead to long-term benefits through instructional risk-taking, teacher satisfaction, and enhanced student engagement through innovative practices.

### **Implications for Teacher Education and Development**

In addition to its implications for teachers and administrators, this study has important implications for a broader reach through teacher education and development. The findings of this study suggest that the personal foundations and practices that support classroom transformations—such as creativity, agency, collaboration, and reflection—are salient to instructional innovation. Teacher preparation programs for aspiring teachers

and professional learning opportunities for in-service teachers can gear courses to cultivate these types of behaviors.

Biesta et al. (2015) contended that there is an “absence of a robust professional discourse,” and “access to wider discourses about teaching and education” would provide a greater perspective to begin evaluating one’s practices (p. 638). In Anderson et al.’s (2022) mixed-methods study, teachers reported feeling more supported in their creativity after being provided with professional development experiences. Anderson et al. asserted that “a new path needs to be charted in teacher preparation and in-service professional development...to reinvigorate educators’ desire and joy for teaching” and highlighted creative agency as one solution (p. 1). As previously discussed in the findings, classroom transformations positively impacted the participants’ enthusiasm for instructional design. The findings of this study can be leveraged to provide targeted teacher preparation and professional learning opportunities that highlight innovative approaches, including classroom transformations.

The participants at different stages of experience with classroom transformations benefited from collaboration in diverse ways. The less experienced participants, Reese and Silvia, relied on mentoring and peer modeling, while experienced teachers used collaboration to exchange ideas and extend their practice. Arthur, Michelle, and Melody cited blogs, social media, and teacher-created platforms as influential in inspiring their interest and ideas in classroom transformations. Teacher educators and instructional leaders can highlight these novel, innovative approaches by presenting and encouraging engagement with digital platforms that share and provide access to information otherwise not accessible at the school level. Instructional leaders can provide structures using peer

observations, platforms for discourse through professional learning communities, and collaborative planning time to facilitate both mentorship and collaboration.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that, for topics with limited prior research, a qualitative approach was particularly appropriate. As guided by the researchers' assertions, I chose a qualitative approach for this study on classroom transformations, which allowed me to explore and understand a subject that has received little scholarly attention. Using narrative inquiry for this study yielded rich data that provided depth and insight into the participants' experiences with classroom transformations. This study was designed to focus on the experiences of upper elementary teachers and students in part because prior research identified a decline in student engagement as students progress through school (Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021), but also because of my professional connection as an upper elementary teacher. Future research could expand the scope beyond upper elementary to include primary and secondary grade levels, which could provide insight into how classroom transformations differ across grade levels.

While this study emphasized teacher and student experiences with classroom transformations, it was limited to one school system. Further research could expand the population to include other school districts, other grade bands, or different experience levels. For example, a focus on novice practitioners of classroom transformations or those who have abandoned the practice. This further research would also contribute to understanding whether the motivations and experiences of teachers vary across contexts, further revealing the impact of classroom transformations.

Because this study emphasized qualitative, narrative data, future research could take a mixed methods or quantitative approach to quantify some of the findings of this study, such as student engagement or achievement, to further support the claims of effectiveness. Expanding research across grade levels, districts, and methodological approaches could deepen the understanding of the practice but also strengthen the evidence for classroom transformations as a practical instructional approach to engage students.

### **Chapter Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the findings of this study and situated them within the context of existing research, presented implications for practice, and offered recommendations for future research. Although four distinct themes emerged from the data, I found the overlap between the themes intriguing. The interconnections highlighted the complexity of the participants' experiences, suggesting that the themes are not separate categories but are interdependent.

For example, the participants' personal foundation of creativity seemed closely tied to their motivation and interest in engaging in classroom transformations, as it provided teachers with an outlet to exercise their creativity. The early exposure as students to engaging instruction and teacher relationships seemed to shape the values, beliefs, and the participants' identities as teachers who strive to create a classroom culture that establishes engagement and relationships as primary values.

For the teachers, the payoffs of the work were twofold—positively impacting students, but also benefiting themselves. The participants' personal foundations of agency were cultivated through individual-level factors during their youth, including familial

support, prior affirmations, and academic successes. These individual foundations influenced their later practice as teachers, as they took ownership of their instructional decisions, leading them to take instructional risks and design innovative learning experiences. Similarly, reflection was not an isolated practice, but an agentic behavior driven by the desire for improvement. The teachers collaborated in order to grow professionally, refine their practices, and spark motivation to continue implementing transformations. The desire for professional growth emerged as a common theme among all participants, with Arthur's "be better and do better" philosophy reflected in the behaviors of many of the other participants.

This study contributes to research on innovative instructional approaches by highlighting the experiences of teachers and students who engaged in classroom transformations. The teachers designed and implemented transformations, but the students' responses and engagement impacted the participants' motivation, beliefs, and professional growth. The findings illustrate that the values of the participants and the meanings they have attached to classroom transformations make the efforts, time, cost, and challenges worthwhile.

This study also adds to the growing body of knowledge on innovative practices by supporting, extending, and sometimes challenging prior findings. While there is limited scholarly research on classroom transformations, studies on other innovative instructional approaches have shared similar findings regarding the impact of instructional decisions on student engagement. On a personal level, designing and executing a study on a topic I am interested in helped me fulfill my goal of understanding how others view this novel and labor-intensive teaching approach outside of my own practice. I hope this study helps

others understand how these six participants used classroom transformations as a viable means to enhance student engagement, exercise agency, and encourage teacher creativity. Further, I hope this study provided insight into how the participants used the novelty, immersion, and environment of the transformed classroom to shape their classroom culture.

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**Appendix A:**  
**Recruitment Email to Principals**

Dear [Principal Name],

My name is Shila Heeter, and I am a doctoral candidate at Valdosta State University preparing to undertake a research study as part of the requirements for an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. My dissertation, titled “A Narrative Inquiry of Upper Elementary Teachers’ and Students’ Experiences with Classroom Transformations,” requires the recruitment of teacher practitioners of classroom transformations and focus groups comprised of their students.

I am contacting you for assistance in recruiting third, fourth, or fifth-grade teachers who utilize classroom transformations. Their knowledge and experience would provide valuable insight into understanding this pedagogical approach. Participants of this study will be asked to complete two 90-minute interviews, provide at least one picture of a classroom transformation they conducted, and will assist in composing a focus group of four to six students from their class for an approximately 60-minute student focus group interview.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and I will maintain strict confidentiality to protect participants’ identities. Participants may withdraw from participation at any time during the study without any repercussions.

If there are any teachers you believe to fit the criteria for this study, please contact me by email ([slstadvold@valdosta.edu](mailto:slstadvold@valdosta.edu)). Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Best Regards,

Shila Heeter  
[slstadvold@valdosta.edu](mailto:slstadvold@valdosta.edu)  
229-251-2700

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Shila Heeter at [slstadvold@valdosta.edu](mailto:slstadvold@valdosta.edu). This study (IRB- 04573-2025) has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu).

**Appendix B:**  
**Recruitment Email to Teachers**

Dear [Teacher Name],

My name is Shila Heeter, and I am a doctoral candidate at Valdosta State University preparing to undertake a research study as part of the requirements for an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. My dissertation, titled “A Narrative Inquiry of Upper Elementary Teachers’ and Students’ Experiences with Classroom Transformations,” requires the recruitment of teacher practitioners of classroom transformations and focus groups comprised of their students.

I am contacting you because you have been identified as a teacher who implements classroom transformations. Your experiences would provide valuable information, and I would like to invite you to participate. Participant criteria include at least three years of teaching experience, must teach third, fourth, or fifth grade, and must have conducted at least three classroom transformations. Participants of this study will be asked to complete two approximately 90-minute interviews, provide at least one picture of a classroom transformation they conducted, and they will assist in composing a focus group of four to six students from their class for an approximately 60-minute student focus group interview.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and I will maintain strict confidentiality to protect participants’ identities. Participants may withdraw from participation at any time during the study without any repercussions. If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete this brief Qualtrics survey: [https://valdosta.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_dnJbMjr1yQZzgoK](https://valdosta.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_dnJbMjr1yQZzgoK). Thank you for your time, and I hope to hear from you.

Sincerely,  
Shila Heeter  
[slstadvold@valdosta.edu](mailto:slstadvold@valdosta.edu)  
229-251-2700

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Shila Heeter at [slstadvold@valdosta.edu](mailto:slstadvold@valdosta.edu). This study (IRB- 04573-2025) has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu).

**Appendix C:**  
**Qualtrics Survey**



You are being asked to participate in a survey research project entitled "A Narrative Inquiry of Upper Elementary Teachers' and Students' Experiences with Classroom Transformations," which is being conducted by Shila Heeter, a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to provide teachers and students an opportunity to share their experiences with implementing classroom transformations and the meanings they associate with the experience. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn about teachers' experiences with the planning, execution, and results of classroom transformations. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. This survey is confidential. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records. Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Shila Heeter at slstadsvoid@valdosta.edu. This study (IRB- 04573-2025) has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.



You are receiving this survey because you are amongst individuals who volunteered for a study on teachers' and students' experiences with classroom transformations. To ensure you meet the criteria established for the participant sample, I would like to gather the following information. Response to this survey remains confidential and will be password-protected.

Name:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

Years of teaching experience:

Current grade level(s) taught:

Current subject(s) taught:

Estimated number of classroom transformations executed:

Provide a brief description of your experience with classroom transformations:



**Appendix D:**  
**Return Email to Teachers**

Dear [Teacher Name],

Thank you for your interest in sharing your experiences with classroom transformations. I am interested in hearing stories about what led you to the practice of classroom transformations and the planning, implementation, and results of the practice through two approximately 90-minute interviews. We can meet in a private room at a location of your choice or virtually through Microsoft Teams.

I hope to provide other educators with practical information that they can use in their own classrooms. I will also need your assistance in providing a few pictures of a classroom transformation you conducted and in composing a focus group of four to six students from your class for an approximately 60-minute student focus group.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and I will maintain strict confidentiality to protect participants' identities. Participants may withdraw from participation at any time during the study without any repercussions.

Please let me know what dates and times you are available, and we will set up a schedule that works for you. Thank you for your time, and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Shila Heeter  
[slstadvold@valdosta.edu](mailto:slstadvold@valdosta.edu)  
229-251-2700

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Shila Heeter at [slstadvold@valdosta.edu](mailto:slstadvold@valdosta.edu). This study (IRB- 04573-2025) has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu).

**Appendix E:**

**Research Statement - Interview (pseudonym & recorded)**

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**VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
**Interview Research Statement**

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Read aloud prior to each interview:

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled “A Narrative Inquiry of Upper Elementary Teachers’ and Students’ Experiences with Classroom Transformations”, which is being conducted by Shila Heeter, a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at Valdosta State University. The purpose of this study is to provide teachers and students an opportunity to share their experiences with implementing classroom transformations and the meanings they associate with the experience. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about teachers’ experiences with the planning, execution, and results of classroom transformations and provide practical knowledge for other teachers to think about what the practice might mean and how they could translate to their classroom. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 90 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded to capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the interview recording has been transcribed, the recording will be deleted from recording devices. This research study and your participation will be kept confidential. Your identifiable information will be replaced with a pseudonym in publications or presentations. No one, including the researcher, will associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding, or to skip questions you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older. Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Shila Heeter at [slstadvold@valdosta.edu](mailto:slstadvold@valdosta.edu). This study (IRB- 04573-2025) has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu).

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**Appendix F:**  
**Interview 1 Guide**

## Life History and Experiences with Classroom Transformations

### **1. Introduction**

- Tell me about yourself.

### **2. Background**

- Thinking back as far as you can remember, tell me about your background.
  - Family
  - School
- Support systems you had growing up.
- Positive and negative experiences in school.
- Describe how you were as a student.
- Tell me what it was like when you were a student.
- Share a particular experience you remember from school.

### **3. Family's Educational Background**

- What is your family's educational background?
- Parents' and siblings' education levels.
- Your family's educational expectations for you.

### **4. Teaching Career**

- What led to your decision to become a teacher? Share a story about what led you to pursue a career in teaching.
- Tell me about your professional experience.
- What motivated your decision to become a teacher?
- How has your teaching philosophy evolved over the course of your career?

- What experiences do you believe have had the most significant influence on you as a teacher?

**Appendix G:**  
**Interview 2 Guide**

## Experiences with Classroom Transformations and Reflection on Meaning

### **RQ1:**

#### **1. Experiences with Classroom Transformations**

- Clarifying question: Define ‘classroom transformation.’
- How far in your career did you start implementing CT?
- Before:
  - Can you recall the exact moment you discovered CT. Tell me a story.
  - What thinking or feelings sparked your interest in implementing CT?
  - What aspects of your teaching experience compelled you to experiment with classroom transformations?
  - What gave you the confidence and freedom to experiment with classroom transformations?
- What prior experiences have influenced you most in your classroom practices to be the teacher you are?
- What personal characteristics do you believe contribute to your interest in classroom transformations?
- What is your intention behind using classroom transformations?

#### **2. During and After Implementation**

- What educational experiences helped you prepare for the implementation of CT?
- Walk me through the entire process before, during after- from the inception of the idea
- Describe the similarities and differences between a typical day and a classroom transformation day.
- How does using classroom transformations compare to your previous (or other) teaching practices?

- Using the photographs provided, tell me a story about the experience from the inception of the idea, planning, preparation, execution, and aftermath as if I was a beginning teacher interested in CT. Walk me through it step by step.
- In what ways have your interactions with students been impacted as a result of classroom transformations?
- How do students respond to classroom transformations? Share a story that illustrates your students' reactions or engagement.

**RQ2:**

**3. Meaning Making-**

Reflect on your experiences with classroom transformations and think about the meanings you've attached to the practice. Explain what CT mean to you. How have they impacted your beliefs? Behaviors? Decision-making?

- What prior experiences have influenced you most in your classroom practices to be the teacher you are?
- What do you believe CT achieve? What is your goal with implementing classroom transformations?
- How have transformations reaffirmed or challenged your pre-existing educational philosophies? What are those beliefs?
  - How has implementing classroom transformations impacted your beliefs about teaching and learning?
- How has your planning and instruction changed as a result of classroom transformations?
- Describe your best and worst experiences with a classroom transformation.

- What keeps you interested in conducting classroom transformations?
- What do I expect to see as I entered one of your transformed classroom? What do you believe are the most valuable components of a classroom transformation?
- If I followed you through a day of classroom transformation, what would I observe?
- What personal traits do you have that lend itself to a classroom transformation?
- How does a classroom transformation affect: (beliefs, values, behaviors)
  - Students? Share a story... How do you think classroom transformations affect students? What about them specifically?
  - You, as a teacher? Share a story...
  - How do classroom transformations impact your relationships with colleagues, admin, parents/families? Share a story...
- How have colleagues and administration responded to the transformation? Share a story...
- What do classroom transformations mean to your student?

### **RQ3:**

#### **4. Challenges and Overcoming Them**

- What significant challenges have you faced with classroom transformations BEFORE, DURING, AFTER, and how did you overcome them? Share a story...
- Describe your positive and negative experiences with classroom transformations.

#### **5. Advice and Support**

- What advice would you give to other teachers considering classroom transformations?

- What resources or support are most helpful to you?
- What are the most critical elements of a classroom transformation?
- What personal traits aid in the execution of classroom transformations?
- How have professional colleagues responded to classroom transformations?

#### **6. Positive Outcomes and Influences**

- What positive outcomes have you observed as a result of classroom transformations? Share a story of a specific positive outcome.

**Appendix H:**  
**Parental Permission Form**

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**VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
Parent/Guardian Permission for Child's/Ward's Participation in Research

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You are being asked to allow your child (or ward) to participate in a research study entitled "A Narrative Inquiry of Upper Elementary Teachers' and Students' Experiences with Classroom Transformations." This research study is being conducted by Shila Heeter, a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at Valdosta State University. The purpose of this research is to provide teachers and students an opportunity to share their experiences with implementing classroom transformations and the meanings they associate with the experience. Your child's participation in this study is entirely voluntary. From this point on in this form, the term "child" is used for either a child or a ward.

As described in more detail below, we will ask your child to participate in a recorded student focus group comprised of four to six students from their class. A focus group is an organized discussion where a small group of people share their thoughts and experiences about a specific topic. I will guide the discussion by asking questions to encourage conversation to gain insight into students' experiences with classroom transformations. Your child and the other members of the student focus group will be asked about their experiences with classroom transformations. Your child's participation will last for approximately 60 minutes. Someone in your position might be interested in allowing your child to participate because it may help provide information to educators interested in implementing innovative teaching practices that impact student engagement and motivation. There are minimal risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered every day. It is important for you to know that you or your child may discontinue participation at any time during this study.

Participants in this study will not be identified by name. I will assign a pseudonym to each participant, the school, and the county, and I will not disclose other personally identifiable information. Audio and video recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer and secure hard drive that is only accessible to me. Interview transcriptions will have identifiers removed and will also be stored on a password-protected computer and secure hard drive. Physical documents, such as the consent forms, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. All data will be destroyed after the required three-year period.

This form includes detailed information to help you decide whether to participate in this study. Please read it carefully and ask any questions that you have before you agree to participate. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

---

**Procedures:**

Your child's participation will involve one recorded focus group interview which should take approximately 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio-taped in order to accurately capture concerns, opinions, and ideas. I will be the only person with access to the

recordings. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. All direct interaction with your child will occur at school during regular school hours.

You or your child may discontinue participation at any time during this study, regardless of the reason. This study involves research. There are no alternatives to the experimental procedures in this study. The only alternative is for you to choose not to allow your child to participate.

**Possible Risks or Discomfort:**

This is a minimal-risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. Although there are no known risks to your child associated with the research procedures, it is not always possible to identify all potential risks of participating in a research study. However, the University has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize potential but unknown risks.

By agreeing to participate in this research project, you are not waiving any rights that you or your child may have against Valdosta State University for injury resulting from negligence of the University or its researchers. Although there are no known risks associated with these research procedures, it is not always possible to identify all potential risks of participating in a research study. However, the University has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize potential but unknown risks.

**Potential Benefits:**

Although you may not benefit directly from this research, your participation will help the researcher gain an additional understanding of students' experiences with classroom transformations. Knowledge gained may contribute to addressing a lack of research on classroom transformations and will help teachers interested in implementing the strategy in their own classroom.

**Costs and Compensation:**

There are no costs to you, and there is no compensation for your participation in this research project.

**Assurance of Confidentiality:**

Valdosta State University and the researcher will keep your child's information confidential to the extent allowed by law. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a university committee charged with reviewing research to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, may be given access to your child's confidential information.

To safeguard confidentiality, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and a secure hard drive. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym, and I will remove identifying features from the research.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your decision to allow your child to participate in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree now to allow your child to participate and you change your mind later, you are free to withdraw your child from the study at that time. By not allowing your child to participate in this study or by withdrawing him/her from the study before the research is complete, you are not giving up any rights that you or your child have or any services to which you or your child are otherwise entitled to from Valdosta State University. If you decide to withdraw your child from the study after data collection is complete, your child’s information will be deleted from the database and will not be included in research results.

**Information Contacts:**

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Shila Heeter at slstadvold@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu).

**Agreement to Participate:**

The research project and my child’s (or ward’s) role in it have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I grant permission for my child to participate in this study. By signing this form, I am indicating that I am either the custodial parent or legal guardian of the child. I have received a copy of this permission form.

**I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study:**     Yes  No

Mailing Address:

\_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Child/Ward

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Parent/Guardian

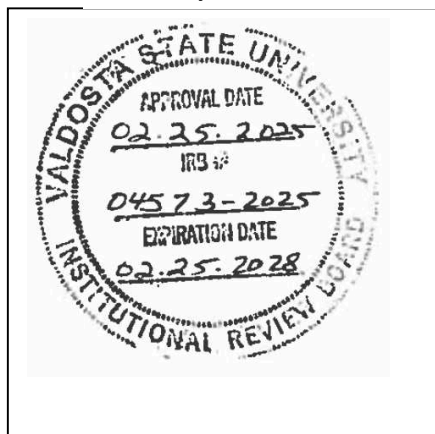
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**This research project has been  
approved by the Valdosta State  
University Institutional Review**



**Appendix I:**  
**Verbal Child Assent Script**

Hi. My name is Shila Heeter. I'm a student at a college called Valdosta State University. Right now, I'm doing a research study about classroom transformations. I would like to ask you to help me by being in a study, but before I do, I want to explain what will happen if you decide to help me.

I will ask you to talk to me about your experience during a classroom transformation with a group of other students called a focus group. A focus group is a small group of people who come together to talk about a specific topic. I will ask questions and carefully listen to what each student says to help me understand your experience with classroom transformations. The focus group will last for about 60 minutes. There are no right or wrong answers. I will record the interview to help me remember what we talked about, but no one will have access to it but me. By being in the study, you will help me understand what classroom transformations are like for students. This information will help other teachers learn more about classroom transformations.

Your parents and teacher will not know what you have said. When I tell other people about my study, I will not use your name, and no one will be able to tell who I'm talking about.

Your parent(s) have said that it is okay for you to be in my study. However, if you don't want to be in the study, you don't have to be. What you decide won't make any difference to your grades or how people think about you. I won't be upset, and no one else will be upset if you don't want to be in the study. If you want to be in the study now but change your mind later, that's okay. You can stop at any time. If there is anything you don't understand, you should tell me so I can explain it to you.

You can ask me questions about the study. If you have a question later that you don't think of now, you can ask your parents or teacher to call me or send me an email. Do you have any questions for me now? Would you like to be in my study and talk to me?

**NOTES TO RESEARCHER:** The child (under age 18) must answer "Yes" or "No." Only a definite "Yes" may be taken as assent to participate.

---

**Name of Student:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Parental Permission on File:**    " Yes    " No

*(If "No," do not proceed with assent or research procedures.)*

**Student's Voluntary Response to Participation:**    " Yes    " No

**Signature of Researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix J:**  
**Focus Group Interview Guide**

## **Welcome**

I want to hear about what it's like for you to be \_\_\_\_\_'s classroom. You all have stories and memories, and I'd love to hear what you think and feel about learning here. There aren't any right or wrong answers—just share whatever feels true to you!

## **Icebreaker**

To start, think of one word to describe this classroom. What's the first word that comes to your mind? Why did you pick that word?

Describe your teacher.

## **Classroom Transformations**

The reason your class has been selected for my research is because you participate in classroom transformations. What is a classroom transformation?

Is there a favorite transformation you've done in this classroom? What happened?

Your teacher shared some pictures with me from a classroom transformation that you experienced. \*show students pictures\* Describe what happened during the classroom transformation. Tell me about your experience like I was watching a movie. What was it like?

If I were a student in your class, what would I see, hear, and feel during a classroom transformation?

What stands out to you about classroom transformations?

What are some things you get to do here that are different from other classrooms?

Describe your thoughts when you first encountered a classroom transformation.

How do classroom transformations make you feel?

Tell me about a particular classroom transformation activity you thought was especially exciting. Tell me about it. What made it exciting?

Tell me about a time when you faced a challenge during a classroom transformation.

How did you deal with it?

Compare your experience during a classroom transformation to your previous experiences during a regular day or in a regular classroom.

How do you believe classroom transformations affect you as a student?

Do you feel like you learn differently in this classroom? How is it different or the same as other classrooms you've been in?

Is there something about classroom transformations that makes learning more fun or interesting? Tell me more.

How does this classroom make you feel when you're here? How do classroom transformations make you feel? Explain.

**Comparing to other classrooms:**

If you think about your other classes or your previous classes, what's the biggest difference you notice with this one?

Is there a story that shows why this classroom feels different from others?

**Closing Questions**

What's one thing you think you'll remember about this classroom for a long time?

If you could change or add anything to make this classroom even better, what would it be?

### **Final Thoughts**

Is there anything else you'd like to share about what it's like learning here?

### **Wrap-Up**

Thank you all for sharing! Your stories are so helpful, and I loved getting to know what this classroom is like for you.

### **Probing Questions**

Use these questions to help students explain their stories:

- Can you tell me more about that?
- What do you remember most about that time?
- How did that make you feel?
- Why do you think that was special?

**Appendix K:**  
**IRB Expedited Protocol Approval Report**



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
for the Protection of Human Research Participants**

**EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL REPORT**

**Protocol Number:** 04573-2025

**Responsible Researcher:** Shila Heeter

**Supervising Faculty:** Dr. Jaimie Workman

**Dissertation Research Member:** Dr. April Strevig

**Project Title:** *A Narrative Inquiry of Upper Elementary Teachers' and Students' Experiences with Classroom Transformations.*

**Level of Risk:**  Minimal  More than Minimal  
**Type of Review:**  Expedited  Convened (Full Board)  
**Approval Category:** 6 & 7  
**Approval Date:** 02.25.2025  
**Expiration Date:** 02.25.2028

- Consent Requirements:**
- Adult Participants – Written informed consent with documentation (signature)
  - Adult Participants – Written informed consent with waiver of documentation (signature)
  - Adult Participants – Verbal informed consent (research statement) – interview**
  - Adult Participants – Research consent statement – online survey**
  - Adult Participants – Waiver of informed consent
  - Minor Participants – Written parent/guardian permission with documentation (signature)**
  - Minor Participants – Written parent/guardian permission with waiver of documentation (signature)
  - Minor Participants – Verbal parent/guardian permission
  - Minor Participants – Waiver of parent/guardian permission
  - Minor Participants – Written assent with documentation (signature)
  - Minor Participants – Written assent with waiver of documentation (signature)**
  - Minor Participants – Verbal assent
  - Minor Participants – Waiver of assent
  - Waiver of some elements of consent/permission/assent

**Comments:** IRB approval must be received before altering the scope of the project, the research protocol, or implementing changes to the approved consent process/forms.

**Approval:** This research protocol is **approved** as presented. The approved consent form, bearing the IRB approval stamp and protocol expiration date is attached. If you prefer the original stamped consent, please email [tmwright@valdosta.edu](mailto:tmwright@valdosta.edu), and the form will be sent via inter-office mail, or you may come by the OSPRA office to obtain the original.

*Elizabeth Ann Olphie* 02.25.2025  
 Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator Date