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Nefeli Karousatou

Alexios Brailas

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APPRECIATIVE QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AS A RESEARCH METHOD FOR EMPOWERING EDUCATORS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, which was grounded in the appreciative inquiry and social constructionist methodological frameworks, we examined the factors that empower educators in Greek schools, focusing on how these educators navigate professional challenges and experience job satisfaction and meaning. During the appreciative semi-structured qualitative interviews that included drawing activities, we invited our six participants to talk about what works well for them, share moments of pride, and illustrate the type of school in which they would like to work. Participants shared stories about their relationships with students, the pressure and challenges that they face, and the support they often receive from peers. Additionally, their ideal school illustrations gave us visual insights into their professional hopes. We analyzed the interviews using inductive thematic analysis, whereby several key themes were identified: a strong commitment to student development, emotional investment in educator–student relationships, administrative challenges, the value of supportive collegial environments, and adaptability in teaching methods. These findings show that intrinsic motivations, such as commitment to student growth and emotional fulfillment from meaningful educator–student interactions, serve as primary sources of resilience and satisfaction for educators. Despite systemic constraints such as administrative burdens, limited resources, and rigid top-down educational policies, participants demonstrated strong professional commitment to and creativity in addressing diverse classroom needs. Overall, our findings show the potential of appreciative inquiry as both a research method and an intervention since it offers educators space to reflect on their achievements and imagine alternative futures, thereby offering a deeper understanding of how educators view their roles and what sustains them, even when the system seems immutable. Our findings also suggest the need for educational policies that align with educators' values, prioritize students' social-emotional learning, and foster conditions that support both educator well-being and student development.

Keywords

Appreciative inquiry; Educator satisfaction; Qualitative methods; Educator resilience; Visual data.

1. Introduction

In this study, we aim to investigate the factors that empower educators in Greek schools and the resources that they use to navigate professional challenges. Central to this research is the concept of *job satisfaction*, defined as the positive emotional state derived from one's work or its outcomes (Locke, 1976). Recent research has shown that satisfied educators help students achieve better educational results (Borchers & Cunha, 2025; Hascher & Waber, 2021), while dissatisfied educators often struggle in their roles (Hascher & Waber, 2021). Nevertheless, educational administrators often underestimate the importance of educator satisfaction, focusing more on measured learning outcomes such as students' performance on standardized exams and less on educators' well-being and growth (Jerrim et al., 2024; Smith & Holloway, 2020; Stockard & Lehman, 2004). Qualitative research has suggested that even during COVID-19, educator policies tended to prioritize outcomes-based evaluation over psychological support for educators (Napitupulu et al., 2023). To address this gap, we examine educators' perspectives and lived experiences.

Using a qualitative approach, we conduct a series of multimodal, semi-structured interviews based on the appreciative inquiry (AI) model (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000) to answer our key research questions: (a) How do educators achieve job satisfaction, allowing them to cope with challenges at work? (b) Which professional experiences give educators a sense of pride? (c) What does an ideal school environment look like to educators? Additionally, in line with social constructionism, we aim to make participation in the study a generative experience (Gergen, 1978), raising educators' awareness of the positive and enabling aspects of their profession, as well as their personal achievements and strengths.

2. Literature Review

In this section, we review the theoretical and empirical foundations relevant to our study. In Section 2.1, we introduce AI as a strength-based methodological framework, briefly outlining its philosophical underpinnings, core principles, and applications for education. In Section 2.2, we examine the literature on educators' job satisfaction, focusing on the relational, organizational, and motivational factors that influence educators' professional well-being.

2.1 Appreciative Inquiry

AI is a strength-based research and change methodology grounded in social constructionism that views knowledge as co-created through dialogue rather than discovered as objective truth. Instead of focusing on problems, AI focuses on "what gives life" to human systems through generative questions aimed at uncovering successes, values, and aspirations (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Tan, 2017; Clark, 2017). Central to AI is the *simultaneity principle*, which stipulates that research itself is a type of intervention (Koliba & Lathrop, 2007; Reed, 2007).

AI operates in a four-dimensional cycle: *Discovery* involves identifying what works well within the system; *dreaming* involves encouraging the envisioning of an ideal future; *design* allows for collaboratively planning for change; *destiny* involves taking action to effect these changes (Bushe, 2012). Despite the critique that it overlooks challenges, leading to a toxic positivity mentality, AI acknowledges difficulties and uses empowering experiences as a foundation for discussion and personal insight (Brailas, 2025). Much literature has substantiated the effectiveness of AI in fostering cultural transformation and advancement within educational institutions (Calabrese et al., 2010; Dickerson & Helm-Stevens, 2011; Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006; McAdam & Lang, 2009; McAdam & Mirza, 2009; Sweetman, 2009). In this study, we use AI to inspire and facilitate educators' personal and professional development (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Jonhson et al. 2012).

2.2 Educators and Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction can be defined as the degree to which an individual's job meets their needs and expectations, creating a sense of pleasure and fulfillment (Sypniewska et al., 2023; Wicaksono et al., 2024). Job satisfaction in teaching often relies on intrinsic factors such as autonomy and meaning, while dissatisfaction arises from external factors such as workload and institutional pressure (Zhou et al., 2024). For example, positive relationships with students significantly enhance educator satisfaction (Nwoko et al., 2025; Pedditz et al., 2021), with recognition from students as a key driver (Fatima et al., 2025). Developing these relationships requires educators to balance care and boundary-setting (Veldman et al., 2013). However, a negative classroom atmosphere can lead to emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction (Chang, 2009). While close, meaningful student–educator relationships contribute to educator stress (Chang, 2009; Spilt et al., 2011), they also provide moral rewards that mitigate mental strain (Wang et al., 2016). Another determinant of educators' job satisfaction is their self-efficacy. Educators' perceived ability to manage student behavior effectively has been shown to positively influence their overall job satisfaction (Fang & Qi, 2023; Poloni et al., 2025; Xiao, 2025).

Beyond classroom interactions, school-wide support is crucial. Principals' support in dealing with classroom problems has been linked to higher job satisfaction (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Olsen & Huang, 2019), as have a positive work environment and educator freedom (Ari & Sipal, 2009; Renzulli et al., 2011). Collegial support also improves educator satisfaction, often more than material resources (Reintjes et al., 2025), although a competitive atmosphere can have adverse effects on educator satisfaction (Evetts, 2009; Haydon et al., 2018). Peer and supervisory support generally improves educator performance and morale (Grandey, 2000; Hakanen et al., 2006), but it can also inadvertently increase pressure to maintain high performance (Wang et al., 2016).

Today, teaching involves not only imparting curriculum-based knowledge to students but also supporting students' social-emotional growth (Corcoran et al., 2018). This expanded role contributes to significant time pressure, a key source of stress among educators (Collie, & Martin, 2023; Nwoko et al., 2025; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2024). Nevertheless, some studies have linked time pressure to greater job satisfaction, suggesting that satisfied educators are more willing to dedicate extra time to their jobs (Collie et al., 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

Meaningful goal-setting also supports educator satisfaction, particularly when oriented toward students' personal development rather than performance metrics (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Additionally, focusing on learning-oriented goals promotes satisfaction, while focusing on performance-driven goals can lead to stress, undermining the broader goals of student development (Li, 2021). Under such conditions, educators often seek greater autonomy and voice their concerns about the evaluation processes that they consider superficial (Al Maktoum & Al Kaabi, 2024; Schwarz-Franco & Hadar, 2024).

3. Methodology

In this section, we describe the methodological framework and procedures that guided our study. In Section 3.1, we outline our qualitative research approach and its grounding in social constructionism and AI, including our use of multimodal semi-structured interviews and creative visualization techniques. In Section 3.2, we present participants' characteristics and ethical considerations. In Section 3.3, we detail our data production procedures, including the interview agenda, appreciative tasks, and drawing activity. Finally, in Section 3.4, we explain the data analysis process, emphasizing our use of inductive thematic analysis and the strategies we employed to enhance analytical rigor.

3.1 The Research Approach

We employed a qualitative research design grounded in the epistemological frameworks of social constructionism and AI (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Gergen, 2020). Multimodal semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect empirical data (Willig, 2013). The interview guide for this study was based on the *Appreciative Qualitative Interview* protocol (Brailas, 2025), which was adapted and customized during a brainstorming session among the authors. (The full interview guide is included in the Data Collection section.)

Rather than seeking to uncover a singular, objective perception of reality, our approach assumed that knowledge is co-created through dialogue and that inquiry itself can be a transformative, generative act. The goal was not to merely diagnose problems or adhere to positivist indicators of quality, but to explore "what gives life" to participants' experiences and aspirations. Within this framework, interviews were treated as relational events during which the researcher and participants collaboratively constructed possibilities (Brailas, 2025).

Participants engaged in an appreciative visualization activity, where they were guided to visualize the school of their dreams (Mannay, 2015; McAdam & Lang, 2009; Vakali & Brailas, 2018), then draw it as they had visualized it (Brailas, 2020), allowing them to express their intimate thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a way that would otherwise not be possible (Brailas, 2020; Mannay, 2015). In this study, our AI drawing task was aimed at freeing participants from the constraints of their sociocultural "what is" reality, allowing them to imagine a "what could become" reality that could empower them (Gergen, 1978; McAdam & Lang, 2009).

3.2 Participants

Participants comprised six serving school educators, three women and three men, aged 46–57 years, selected using convenience criteria. Among the participants, three held university degrees, one had graduated from a technical institute, and two held master’s degrees. At the time of data collection, five participants were teaching in public middle or high schools located in middle-class urban areas of Greece, each serving approximately 300 students, while one participant was employed at a private primary school of comparable size. The interviews, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted in various locations, including an empty classroom, the educator’s office, and the educator’s home, while one was held via teleconferencing. Data were collected during March 2023. We adhered to the Panteion University’s Code of Ethics for conducting research with human participants. Participants were informed about the study’s purposes before the interview process began, and they signed a detailed informed consent form. Also, participants were anticipated to benefit from the process of appreciative interviewing in terms of emotional empowerment (McAdam & Lang, 2009; Reed, 2007).

3.3 Data Production/Collection

We used the following interview questions and prompts, adapted from the Appreciative Qualitative Interview protocol (Brailas, 2025):

Opening questions

How many years have you been an educator?

At what level of education and in what type of school (e.g., public, private) are you currently working?

How would you describe a typical day at work? What do you usually do during a lesson?

Would you tell me the story of how you chose this profession?

What part of your job do you enjoy the most?

What do you think is the most important part of your job?

What do you think helps an educator to meet the demands and challenges of the job?

Appreciative Inquiry task: Recalling achievements

Now, I'd like to ask you to take some time and think of a moment in your teaching career that warmed your heart, a memory that fills you with pride, warmth, or joy. It doesn't matter if it's something big or small, just something that makes you feel proud. Take your time. The first memory that comes to mind is often the “best” one. [Relax and give the participant time to remember their experience.] Would you share this moment with me?... That’s wonderful! Thank you so much for sharing. [Give the participant time to process and internalize the experience; respectfully share your feelings or emotions in response to their sharing, if desired.]

Appreciative Inquiry task: Visualizing your ideal school

Now that you have shared this beautiful experience with me, I'm going to ask you to take part in something else. Again, take your time, and close your eyes if you wish. Imagine the image of your ideal school: What does your dream school look like? Which qualities and characteristics does it have? Think about aesthetics (abstract or concrete) and about sensations, sounds, smells, people. What is the color of your dream school? How would you decorate it? Hold this image in your mind for a moment. [Give the participant time to visualize their dream school.]

Drawing task

Have you got it? Wonderful! Now, I'm going to ask you to draw your dream school on paper in any way you'd like using the pens I'm going to give you. This drawing can't be right or wrong, and we're not concerned with artistic skill. The less you think about it, the better; the more spontaneous you are, the better. Let your hand guide you. Take as much time as you need.

Closing questions

That's wonderful! Thank you so much! Would you like to tell me about what you've drawn? [If necessary, ask questions about specific parts of the drawing.]

How do you think what you've created relates to what we've discussed?

Thank you for your time and sharing. Is there anything else you would like to share before we close?

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, which allowed us to identify recurring patterns within the data to form conceptual themes (presented in the following section). We used QualCoder, open-source qualitative data analysis software, to facilitate the process (Brailas et al., 2023). Thematic analysis followed an iterative, cyclical process (Lochmiller, 2021). The first author conducted the primary open coding, generating provisional codes and grouping them into initial categories. These categories were repeatedly reviewed, refined, and reorganized into patterns. The second author acted as a reflective collaborator, offering an external perspective, discussing analytic tensions, and serving as a triangulating partner to enhance interpretive depth. Rigor was supported through researchers' reflexivity: Both authors kept analytic memos and reflective journals on QDA, where they documented emerging insights and alternative interpretations.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of our empirical data produced seven main themes illustrating participants' values, concerns, challenges, motivations, and aspirations within their profession. We present the identified themes, along with relevant quotations from participants' interviews, in this section.

4.1 Emotional Investment in and Connection with Students

Many participants considered the quality of their relationship with their students to be central to their teaching experience (Figure 1). Students' positive feedback or gratitude made participants feel satisfied with their jobs and proud of themselves, helping them remain committed to supporting their students emotionally and academically. Participants described their investment in students as listening to students' challenges, celebrating their victories, and supporting them through setbacks, creating bonds that often continued beyond graduation. As one participant noted, "Sometimes, it feels like I am their second parent. They come to me with their worries, and even if I cannot solve them, I try to be there for them." Another participant shared, "There was once a student who struggled so much with self-confidence. Helping her see her potential felt like one of my greatest achievements." Finally, some students said the following to our participants, proving the strong connection between them: "You are the only person I can trust;" "If it were not for you, I would never have succeeded in graduating from high school."

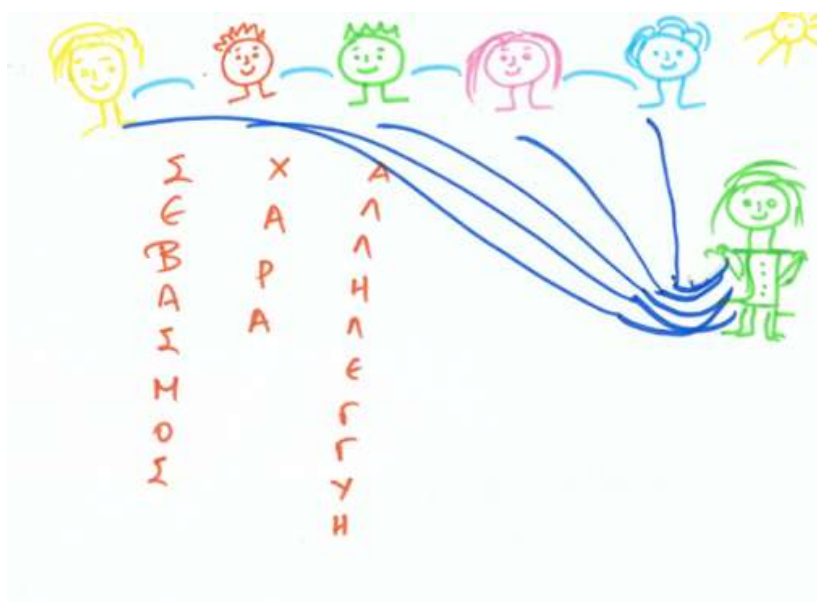


Figure 1. A participant's drawing, wherein they drew lines connecting students to themselves and wrote (in Greek) the words *respect*, *happiness*, and *solidarity*, which are considered prerequisites for a positive educator–student relationship

4.2 Challenges and Emotional Strain Among Educators

Participants acknowledged the emotional burden of their role that caused them to experience burnout and feelings of underappreciation frequently. Despite their passion for teaching, they cited heavy workloads, balancing between multiple roles, and insufficient recognition as factors that made it difficult for them to sustain their energy levels. One of the greatest challenges mentioned was dealing with inappropriate student behavior, which hindered the learning process and made participants feel disrespected. Participants clarified that this situation intensified when students perceived certain lessons as less significant than others.

Many participants recognized the need to develop support networks to cope with the demands of their profession. As one participant shared, “Sometimes, students behave in unacceptable ways, making it difficult and emotionally draining for the educator to manage the classroom. Many unexpected events can happen during the school day, causing much tension and fatigue.” Another participant said, “I’ve often felt burned out, like no one truly understands what we go through, but I remind myself why I started in the first place.” Another added, “When children misbehave, it’s almost like a cry for help. It’s as if they are saying, ‘Pay attention to me; something serious is happening.’ As an educator, you may not be able to solve the problem entirely, but showing the child that you understand them can be comforting.”

4.3 The Value of a Supportive Workplace and Collegiality

Collaboration and support among colleagues were considered essential for managing challenges among our participants. Feeling supported by the school principal was particularly important for participants. A supportive environment among staff helped alleviate stress and provided a peer-learning network of shared experiences, advice, and encouragement. Participants viewed peer support as critical for both their personal well-being and professional effectiveness. Such environments also benefited students since they experienced more positive relationships with their educators, which served as models for other relationships. Participants shared, “Our team supports each other, sharing insights and just being there when someone’s had a hard day. It’s like a family;” “When you can share the load and lean on others, it helps make this difficult job a little easier.”

4.4 Barriers to Effective Teaching and Systemic Issues

Participants frequently cited obstacles within the educational system that hindered effective teaching. First, they believed that some of the goals they were asked to achieve necessitated overlooking students’ needs and abilities and required significant time commitments, making them unrealistic. Second, participants observed that the educational system frequently overlooked the learning process in favor of exams and quantitative student assessments. Third, participants described feeling stressed due to excessive administrative tasks, a lack of resources, and insufficient support from higher authorities, such as the principal or the ministry of education. These barriers made it challenging for educators to focus on their primary mission of teaching and supporting students since administrative demands and limited resources required significant commitments. One participant shared, “The system sometimes feels like it’s working against us. Too much paperwork and not enough time for what matters, the actual teaching.” Another participant added, “The work goes beyond teaching. We are overloaded with administrative work, have minimal professional support, and then still have to give 100% of ourselves in the demanding conditions of a classroom.”

4.5 A Commitment to Teaching and Student Development

Despite the demands and challenges that participants faced, they reported a strong commitment to their profession (Figure 2). All participants stated that they enjoyed teaching since it allowed them to share their knowledge with younger generations. Simultaneously, they explained how they worked hard to motivate their students to actively participate in the learning process, thereby maximizing its benefits. A strong desire to positively impact students' lives often drove this commitment. Participants also viewed themselves as fulfilling the role of not just an instructor but also a guide, helping students to prepare for life beyond school. They reported feeling responsible for helping students to become not only good professionals but also good people. One participant noted that "the most important part of our job today is students' character development." Another added that "watching them grow and succeed is my greatest reward. It's a joy when a former student stops me on the street and shares how they are doing in life."

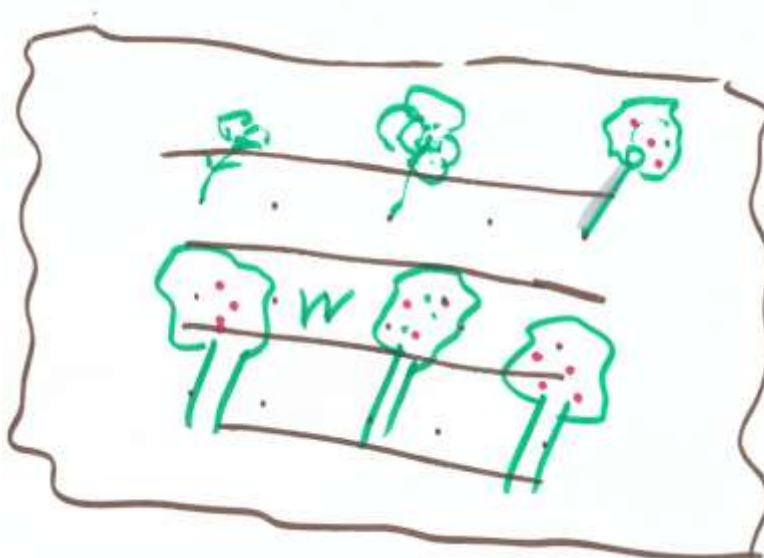


Figure 2. An educator's picture of their dream school as a garden and the students as seeds, illustrating her role as caretaker of an environment conducive to learning and development

4.6 Adaptability and Creativity in Teaching

Participants expressed a need for constant adaptation and innovation in their teaching performance to meet the ever-changing needs of their students. They explained that both their methods and their demands needed to be aligned with students' academic levels and special requirements, allowing them to impart knowledge to every student. Participants described using creative techniques to make the learning process more engaging and help students overcome barriers to learning. Adaptability was identified as a key factor because it allowed for bridging gaps in understanding and motivating students. One participant shared, "Sometimes, we make math into a game or a story. If they enjoy it, they're more likely to learn."

Another participant said, “I try to bring real-world examples into the classroom, something they can relate to. It makes a huge difference.” A third mentioned, “If I notice the children are disengaged for any reason, I make sure to adjust the lesson and create a more relaxed atmosphere.”



Figure 3. An educator’s drawing depicting her vision of an ideal school in the countryside, close to the forest and the sea, that facilitates outdoor learning

4.7 Visions of an Ideal School

Participants shared their visions of an alternative educational experience in which schools fostered both students’ intellectual and personal or social-emotional development. They envisioned flexible, inclusive learning environments that encouraged students to connect with the world around them, and many viewed outdoor or experiential learning as more aligned with these goals (Figure 3). Their visions reflected a desire for an educational system that went beyond rote learning to encourage curiosity and critical thinking, connecting learning with happiness and satisfaction. One participant stated that “Education is about learning to learn and loving knowledge.” Other participants said, “In my dream school, we would teach outside, in nature, where learning feels natural and inspiring;” “Education should be about exploration and growth, not just memorizing info. I want students to think about and feel the world around them;” “I want them to become not only good students but also good people;” “The ideal school is built first and foremost around the human being. Even with perfect buildings, outstanding educators, and all the necessary resources, without a spirit of humanism, the school will remain incomplete.”

5. Discussion

Our results emphasize educators' values, challenges, and motivations, underscoring their commitment and fulfillment, despite systemic obstacles and emotional burdens. We validate Smith (2025) finding that intrinsic factors drive educators' job satisfaction, while external factors contribute to dissatisfaction. Participants expressed a strong commitment to student growth, emphasizing academic, social-emotional, and critical thinking skill development, supporting Van Dam et al. (2010) results showing that educators globally share a vision of holistic development for their students.

Participants noted the importance of supportive relationships with students, seeing themselves as mentors, aligning with prior research emphasizing educators' mentoring roles (Corcoran et al., 2018; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; O'Connor, 2008; Borman & Dowling, 2008). Positive relationships with students resulted in greater satisfaction among participants, aligning with the findings of Nwoko et al. (2025) and Pedditz et al. (2021). Contrary to studies suggesting that such connections increase educator stress (Chang, 2009), participants reported receiving moral rewards from these relationships that contributed to their resilience, as Yin et al. (2017) also found. An important reward for participants was their students' positive feedback, as found by Fatima et al. (2025). Notably, this recognition appears to empower educators to remain devoted to their students' needs while simultaneously resulting from such devotion.

Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by their additional administrative tasks, which deprived them of time and energy that could have been devoted to students. This dissatisfaction with the administrative aspects of teaching supports the findings of Reintjes et al. (2025). Participants were required to take on multiple roles, which increased their stress, consistent with the results of Collie and Martin (2023), Nwoko et al. (2025), and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2024). Simultaneously, they reported limited resources and inadequate official support from their schools, difficulties that became more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Westphal et al., 2022). These findings reinforce those of prior research emphasizing the demanding nature of teaching and the importance of educator support (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Reintjes et al., 2025). However, participants noted that the fulfillment they derive from seeing students advance counteracted some of these burdens, echoing Skaalvik and Skaalvik's (2010) observation that meaningful interactions with students can improve educators' satisfaction.

Participants described a positive workplace climate and strong peer relationships as essential for their emotional well-being and professional efficacy. Contrary to the findings of Wang et al. (2016), collegial support did not appear to increase pressure among participants, who reported that collaboration with peers and a supportive principal can increase their motivation and sense of belonging in an appreciative professional community. This theme aligns with the results of Ari and Sipal (2009) and Erichsen and Reynolds (2020), who clarified the impact of principals' support and peer networks on educators' satisfaction. It also confirms that collegial collaboration can improve educators' job performance and morale, as shown by Reintjes et al. (2025). Participants valued collegial support more highly than material resources, as Reintjes et al. (2025) also found.

However, they also noted that competition among the staff could disrupt this positive environment, consistent with the findings of Evetts (2009) and Zeichner (2014).

Participants advocated for more engaging approaches for students that enhance learning effectiveness and students' agency in the educational process, consistent with Brailas et al. (2017) findings. Educators must continuously adapt their teaching methods to overcome students' initial resistance to challenging subjects or subjects perceived as boring. Participants reported using technology or creative activities to encourage students' active participation, which served as an important source of satisfaction for educators. This flexible, student-centered approach supports the evidence of Wubbels et al. (2013) and encourages the adoption of a teaching philosophy that values flexibility and situatedness over rigidity to address students' individual learning needs in a tailored manner. Such adaptability is particularly necessary in educational systems focused on performance rather than learning.

Participants voiced concerns about various systemic barriers that limit their ability to fulfill their educational mission, including performance-oriented policies that prioritize testing and superficial metrics over meaningful learning and social-emotional development. Previous research (Li, 2021; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009) has critiqued such policies for undermining educators' efforts, aligning with this finding. Participants expressed a desire for greater flexibility and autonomy in curriculum decisions for better alignment with their values, as noted by Schwarz-Franco and Hadar (2024) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017).

Participants envisioned an educational system that nurtures students' social-emotional and multi-dimensional development, in line with Corcoran et al.'s (2018) suggestions. This educational ideal, often articulated as a dream for a more open, flexible, enabling, and enactive learning environment, aligns with participants' desire for education to become an empowering and inspirational journey. Focusing on these goals can increase educators' job satisfaction, as Li (2021) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2018) posited. Participants acknowledged that this vision is aspirational but expressed hope that educational systems will move in this direction, as supported by Friedman (2013) findings on the value of a positive learning climate.

While we offer valuable insights into educators' motivations and challenges, our study was limited by its small, convenience-based participant group and the subjective interpretations inherent to thematic analysis, which restrict generalizability, although measures such as triangulation, reflexivity, and participant feedback following analysis were employed to enhance validity (Hurst, 2023). Importantly, the aim of AI is not statistical generalization but the facilitation of positive change within human systems under an action research paradigm. Our findings underscore the potential of embedding AI principles into educator training programs, encouraging reflective practices that emphasize strengths, resilience, and collaborative problem-solving. Further research could explore the development of educator identity in relation to educational constraints, building on the finding that educators' values often contrast with performance-driven educational policies.

6. Concluding Thoughts

Despite constant pressure from the educational system, our study demonstrated educators' commitment to student growth. Participants did not rely solely on formal support or external recognition but drew strength from their relationships with students and the professional support they received from colleagues, finding meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in their roles. These connections provided stability and direction, even when policies or institutions failed them. The professional experiences that made educators feel proud included witnessing students' development, particularly when students expressed gratitude or offered positive feedback. The ideal school environment, as envisioned by our participants, is supportive, collaborative and flexible, enabling educators to prioritize holistic student development over rigid performance demands. As Greek educators continue to advocate for student-centered and balanced education, we suggest formulating policies that consider autonomy in the classroom, support from colleagues, and sufficient time to build strong relationships with students to ensure meaningful reform. Our findings show that educators find satisfaction in their jobs not because teaching is easy but because the meaning they derive from their roles outweighs the burdens of teaching.

These findings have important implications for educational policy and educators' professional development: They underscore the importance of policies and professional learning frameworks that prioritize relational work, educator autonomy, and time for meaningful engagement with students. However, these conclusions emerge from an exploratory inquiry grounded in the situated experiences of a small group of participants and are intended to generate understanding, reflection, and possibility rather than definitive or universal claims.

This study also contributes to qualitative methodology by illustrating how appreciative inquiry can function as both a research method and an intervention within an action research paradigm. By integrating multimodal tasks such as visualizing and illustrating one's ideal school, the approach demonstrates the generative potential of appreciative qualitative interviews in co-creating empowering narratives rather than merely extract data.

Ethical Approval: This study was conducted at a Greek public university, where undergraduate dissertation projects are exempt from formal ethical review by a committee. In such cases, the academic supervisor holds full responsibility for approving the research procedures and ensuring adherence to ethical standards. This study falls under this exemption.

Informed Consent: Participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to the interviews and provided written informed consent. They received a full explanation of the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there are no known conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

All authors were actively involved in the work that led to this publication and take full responsibility for its content. All ethical standards regarding the protection of study participants were met, in accordance with the Research Ethics Committee of Panteion University.

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Nefeli Karousatou

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8282-1336> nkarousatou@gmail.com**Alexios Brailas**

Panteion University, Greece

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2016-4438> abrailas@panteion.gr