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***New England College Journal of Applied Educational Research* (*NECJAER*)**

98 Bridge Street Henniker, New Hampshire 03242

Aims and Scope of the *New England College Journal of Applied Educational Research*

The *New England College Journal of Applied Educational Research* (*NECJAER*) is an open access journal that aims to give authors a platform to publish their ideas, work, and research for the benefit of educators and their students, PreK–Institutions of Higher Education. The purpose of this journal is to help educators advance the cause of making education equitable for all students.

All aspects of education will be covered through the projects and research of our authors. Novel techniques for research, teaching and learning processes, and student life are encouraged so that educators have a platform for creating and assessing ways to make our educational systems more equitable.

Contributions regarding student and teacher satisfaction, preferences, quality of life, and their role in optimizing the educational process will be welcomed. The journal is characterized by the reporting of research and applied theories to the lived experiences of educators and their students.

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New England College Journal of Applied Educational Research **Purpose**

The main purpose of the *New England College Journal of Applied Educational Research* (*NECJAER*) is to further the ability of educators to provide equity to all students. In order to make education become transformative for all students, the *NECJAER* offers professionals in the field, pre-school through higher education, opportunities to share original research and access to the latest and most accurate research information in the practices of teaching and learning. In alignment with the New England College (NEC) mission statement, our goal is to create an equity-based scholarly journal that focuses on current and applied research in the field of education to expand upon the institution's desire to be a creative and engaged learning community. The *NECJAER* will further NEC's vision to be an equitable, creative, innovative, engaged, supportive, and environmentally sustaining learning environment by establishing the college as a center for international research in education.

To become involved as an author or editor in the *NECJAER* contact: jaer@nec.edu

Message From the Editor

During the past 4 years, it has become abundantly clear how important teachers, professors, and educational leaders are in the learning and lives of their students. All educators have read and listened to the reports about how seriously the stress of the pandemic continues to affect students, parents, and education professionals. More importantly, the professionals working in K–12 schools, colleges, and universities have lived and worked with learners who were dealing and continue to deal with the complex social and emotional issues that continue to cause social, psychological, and medical problems for our students and their families. Educators and their families have been under the same stressors as everybody else. Together, educators and students and their families must work to successfully move into our still-being-created state of normalcy. The *NECJAER* gives educators a space to share their ideas and their research so we may move forward collaboratively by helping each other grow as education professionals. Together, we will help each of our students reach their potential. To our authors, board of directors, peer editors, and educators who read our journals, we say thank you. You are making a positive difference in your part of the world.

Any person who reads this edition is welcome to add your ideas and experiences for other colleagues to read and consider. If you wish to add to this edition, send me an email at: cfitzgerald@nec.edu. We would love to build our common knowledge and support for each other in positive ways. Thank you for all that you do for your students and their families.

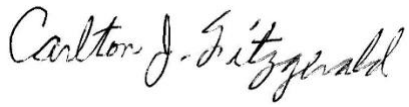

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Table of Contents

Empowered Circles: Using Talking Circles in Research

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Abstract

Talking circles, also known as sharing circles, have been used in ceremonies for hundreds of years. Rooted in Indigenous values and knowledge systems emphasizing interconnectedness and responsibility to community, participants share power through storytelling, empowering each participant to share what they want in a non-judgmental environment, leading to deep, rich, authentic responses from participants. Talking circles can be used for assessment, evaluation, research, discussion, problem-solving, and decision-making. In a study focused on student sense of belonging, participants and I employed talking circles, which changed the dynamic of data collection in ways that focus groups never could. In this article, I center on the differences between focus groups and talking circles, a reflection on the process of utilizing talking circles, and why and how more studies should consider the use of talking circles.

Keywords: talking circles, Indigenous research, research methods, storytelling, data collection.

My grandma once told me to “smile at the world, and the world smiles back.” As a gay Indigenous man, this was not always easy. It has been hard to find myself in academic writing, to feel confident in my academics, etc. Often because of this, I did not feel like there was a space for me within academia. However, this all changed when I started my doctoral journey at New England College (NEC). I was pushed to think for myself, but more importantly, show up as myself. I was able to show up as my authentic self and utilize my studies to connect each one of

my identities to my research. I did this by using an Indigenous paradigm in my dissertation while using Indigenous research methods, such as talking circles. Talking circles are a form of Wiisokotaatiwin, which means gathering together for a purpose in Anishinaabemowin.

Talking circles, also called sharing circles or circles for short, can be employed as an equity-centered alternative to traditional focus groups. This does have a connection to my Anishinaabe and Menominee background, which is why it was significant for me to use circles within my research. The use of talking circles created an opportunity to connect to my Indigenous roots and have authentic conversations with my participants. Talking circles are based on the idea of participants' respect for each other and are an example of a focus group method derived from postcolonial Indigenous worldviews (Chilisa, 2012). Rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, talking circles are an open, discussion-based methodology that centers storytelling (Kovach, 2009) and can be used for discussion, problem-solving, decision-making, and data collection. The "basic purpose of a talking circle is to create a safe, non-judgmental place where each participant has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion" (Winters, n.d., p. 1). As Chilisa (2012) explained, there are many occasions to form a circle, including around a fireplace, during celebrations when people form circles to sing, play games, etc. (p. 181). It was an honor to host seven circles within my research, and I am thankful that you, as the reader, decided to learn more about talking circles and how researchers can use them to diversify and Indigenize their research.

Literature Review

Talking Circles

The talking circle is a symbol promoting sharing of ideas, equality, respect for each other's ideas, togetherness, and continuous and unending compassion and love for one another (Chilisa, 2012, p. 181). Brown and Di Lallo (2020) utilized talking circles in place of focus groups for evaluation, and Tachine et al. (2016) used sharing circles to replace focus groups for

research. Talking and sharing circles are equity-centered as the process is based on equality among participants (including the facilitator, often called the circle keeper) and sharing power with each other (Winters, n.d.). Every participant is given an opportunity to speak and can share what they want, remain silent, or choose to skip their turn (Winters, n.d.) thereby giving participants agency to engage however they wish.

Circles are based on Indigenous knowledge systems and values and focus on sharing stories as a means to support the values of knowledge sharing, because everyone has knowledge to share, interconnectedness, and responsibility to the community. The Anishinaabeg have a deep connection to circles and specifically draw upon the Anishinaabe Seven Sacred Teachings: wisdom, love, respect, courage, honesty, humility, and truth (Winters, n.d.).

Waterman (2019) contended that sharing circles are an example of how Indigenous knowledge systems can be applied to research. Tachine et al. (2016) argued that talking or sharing circles are an excellent replacement for traditional focus groups given the disadvantages of the latter. Focus groups can silence people (Tachine et al., 2016), limit the sharing of alternative opinions (Babbie, 2007), restrict individuals from sharing personal information (Liamputtong, 2011), limit the opportunity for storytelling, and do not provide for an in-depth discussion of personal experiences (Hopkins, 2007). A key element of circles is interconnectedness and the importance of relationship building, which addresses power and privilege and yields deeper responses from participants (Archibald, 2008). Circles as an assessment or evaluation method “increases voice, decreases invisibility, and does not privilege one worldview or version of reality over another” (Brown & Di Lallo, 2020, p. 367). In addition, circles can increase validity and ensure that findings truly represent the voices and experiences of participants (Brown & Di Lallo, 2020).

While circles are based on Indigenous values and knowledge systems, non-Indigenous practitioners can use this approach. Still, circle keepers and participants must always acknowledge and respect the origins of circles to ensure the process is not culturally appropriated by using cultural artifacts without permission or making explicit the Indigenous history (Waapalaneexkweew, 2018).

To begin, the circle keeper creates a circle of chairs, ideally with no barrier such as a table, for themselves and the participants. An object such as a stick or rock is identified as the talking piece. During the circle, when participants receive the piece, it is their opportunity to share whatever they would like related to the topic of the circle with no limits on time. When the participant is done sharing, they pass the talking piece to the next person who shares their story. Since only one person talks at a time, the one holding the talking piece may speak, and all others must listen. The one challenge with circles is that because everyone is given an opportunity to speak for as long as they would like, circles can be longer than traditional focus groups. Tachine et al. (2020) utilized a sharing circle for research with Indigenous students and had some circles last as long as 4 hours. However, they noted that students chose to keep the circle going for this long and were fully engaged. Tachine et al. (2020) suggested that a circle keeper could remind participants to be mindful of the time, if needed.

Winters (n.d.) provided eight guidelines for implementing talking circles:

1. Respect the talking piece so the person who has it can convey their full message without interruption.
2. When you do not have the talking piece, listen respectfully, and reflect upon, consider, and honor the meaning of what others say, so you can build on the conversation.
3. You can pass if you need to. Nonverbal communication and silence sometimes say more than words.

4. Mute your cell phone and computer devices so as not to interrupt others.
5. Speak for yourself and from your own experiences and perspectives. Use “I language” and not generic “people think . . .” or sweeping generalizations, like “students want . . .” language.
6. Be courageous, honest, and open with your own stories. Speak your truth from your heart and be open to hearing others’ truths.
7. Listen from the heart, allowing what others say to move you. Bear witness but do not provide advice or argue with others.
8. Honor what others say with confidentiality and integrity, sharing only with context and in relevance to your own life and learning, not as gossip. (p. 6)

Winters (n.d.) described four components or phases in the circle process. The first phase is building connections which occurs at the beginning, which would be akin to the opening and introduction sections of focus groups. During this phase, the circle keeper explains the circle's purpose, may implement a relationship-building activity, and introduces the talking piece. Piercing the surface is the second phase during which participants discuss their connection with the topic and is similar to the transition portion of focus groups. During the delving deeper phase, which is analogous to the key questions portion of focus groups, participants share stories regarding the topic. Reflecting and learning is the final phase of the circle where synthesis across participant knowledge sharing is made.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a method of qualitative research in the form of small groups of people who provide opinions and other information about a particular product, issue, or topic (Morgan, 1988). Focus group participants typically have some similar characteristics or interests so its members can serve as representative samples of a particular demographic, or section of society (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus groups were developed in the years following World War II

(Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) described a focus group as interviewing a larger group instead of one person. They continued to state that focus groups are a common form of data collection for qualitative data. When using a focus group format, there is typically an interviewing protocol with structured or semi-structured questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From an equity perspective the data collected can be diversified, if the interviewer ensures that they are including all voices and creating a diverse participant selection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morgan, 1988).

Focus groups start with a predetermined group of people focusing on a specific topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morgan, 1988). Participants have an interactive discussion, and, thereby, a focus group discussion. The method may be described as an interactive discussion between six to eight pre-selected participants led by a trained moderator (Hennink et al., 2011). Focus groups typically last between 60–90-minute periods and in an environment where people feel free to express themselves (Hennink et al., 2011).

Storytelling

Storytelling as a research tool has been increasingly popular either as complementary to the classical research of qualitative methods or as a research inquiry in its own right (Lekoko, 2007). Storytelling is a potent research tool even if it does not complement but stands alone from classical inquiries, as its strengths lean more on its nature as an integral element of day-to-day communication of Indigenous communities (Lekoko, 2007). Many Indigenous researchers already mentioned believe this tool represents a different way of learning about the world, no less valuable than classical research inquires (Lekoko, 2007). Lekoko (2007) described storytelling as a “vehicle for assessing and interpreting events, experiences, and concepts” (p. 84). Storytelling is also a powerful research paradigm because all communities have stories (Maines, 1992). Some of the reasoning why I used storytelling as a research tool is described by Lekoko: (a) its potential to bring researchers and community members together to dialogue

about social problems in a free and entertaining way; (b) its problem-solving orientation; (c) its participative, interactive, and persuasive nature; (d) its comprehensive structure allows for a serious exploration of community interests and opinions; and (e) its narrative fidelity and respect of culture of Indigenous communities. Lekoko (2007) said, “great stories provide us with a road map or treasure map, which outlines all of the actions and tasks we have to accomplish in order to complete the journey successfully” (p. 86).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). Storytelling puts the researcher in the participant’s environment so they can better understand the data. The storyteller, which is the participant, paints a picture book that brings the listener into their world and the moments that researchers are currently researching. I believe it is a beautiful and sacred thing to listen to stories all around us. As researchers capture these stories, they are in a ceremony together with their participants. What I mean by this is that research is a ceremony. In Wilson’s (2008) book, *Research is Ceremony*, he discussed people’s relations with the environment and land. Wilson (2008) wrote, “Oscar and Ray write about the pedagogy of place, that the environment is the knowledge” (p. 86). Wilson explained this quote acknowledges knowledge itself is held in relationships and connections formed with the environment surrounding us. From this connection with the environment, Wilson (2008) created a concept of the connection in linking the space between people with the relationship they share. By reducing the space between objects, people, and things, one is then strengthening the relationship they share and bringing them together, so they share the same space; this process is what ceremony is all about (Wilson, 2008). A second concept outlined by Wilson is there is no distinction between relationships made with other people and those made with the environment. Wilson also quoted his friend, Jane, who stated, “When you talk about the land and people and community, everything is related in that way. The

only difference between human beings and four-leggeds and plants is the shadow they cast" (p. 87).

A Study Using Talking Circles

There were two purposes for this study. First, I explored the characteristics of creating a space in an environment to promote a sense of belonging. Second, I explored students' sense of belonging to certain spaces where they feel like they belong. For example, this included classrooms, campus unions, residence-halls, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others (LGBTQ+) pride center, multicultural center, etc. Another purpose was to understand how students describe these spaces, such as what the space looks like, feels like, sounds like, what is in that space, and who the contributors are helping to create the space.

Research Questions

My research study addressed three questions:

- What are the spaces where college students feel like they belong?
- How do students describe those spaces?
- Why do students feel like they belong in those spaces?

As a researcher, I hoped to understand students' needs and wants when creating a sense of belonging in a campus community and develop strategies for college administrators to create a sense of belonging for all students.

The Process of Circles

For my dissertation study, there were a total of 51 participants. Twenty-one participated in in-person interviews, and 30 participated in one of the seven talking circles. I increased the number of talking circles and interviews one by one until saturation was met. Originally, I was going to have six to eight participants in each circle because I thought if there was less there would be less data collected. The result was the exact opposite. I conducted a talking circle with only two participants and found more data than my biggest circle, which had seven. I did not

have taking circles that included more than seven participants, as I was concerned the conversation might get out of control and silence participants in the group. Students had the opportunity to participate in either an in-person interview or a talking circle. Both opportunities were provided so people who felt more comfortable one-on-one could do so, and those who wished to engage in a group conversation could as well. The value of using talking circles is the synergistic effects of the group process to yield information, provided participants feel free to engage with other members of the group (Brandenburger et al., 2017).

During talking circles, it is common for a sacred object to be used, such as a feather, shield, stone, basket, etc., passed from speaker-to-speaker (Chilisa, 2012). I used a sacred spirit stone (asin), which is almost perfectly smooth and round. I found the asin on the banks of Lake Superior on the reservation of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Tribe of the Chippewa Nation with my twin sister. This rare rock formation is sacred and kept secret by the Ojibwe people and is still used in ceremonies today. When the speaker is holding this object, the speaker is not to be interrupted as the group listens silently and nonjudgmentally until the speaker has finished (Chilisa, 2012). After my graduation, I will go back to Lake Superior to return this stone and thank the creator for giving me this opportunity and for this journey.

There is a specific reason why I chose to use this spirit stone. I found this stone with my twin sister on the banks of Lake Superior on our reservation. We both found these stones together, but it was as if these stones found us. I use my stone in times of need such as inspiration, strength, and praying. When I was writing my dissertation and deciding how I would incorporate talking circles, I thought about the ceremonial object, and when I did this, I was holding onto my stone. At that moment, it was like something came over me, and by the time I looked down, this previous section was written, describing how I would use this stone. This is a special moment I cherish. As Anishinaabe, we believe these stones and rocks hold our ancestors. We call them our grandfathers. When this happened, I went to an elder, and they

said our ancestors were communicating with me, and I should follow them through this journey. I hesitated about putting this story in my dissertation, because it is so personal and emotional to me but I did this to connect with others who have had similar moments and to acknowledge that our ancestors are still with us, guiding us, and we need to listen to them: *All my relations (Niinwendimaaginaatok).*

The purpose of using talking circles in a research setting is to gain knowledge through discussion (Lavallée, 2009). The benefit for conducting these talking circles was that they created wiisokotaatiwin (a purpose to tell their stories), and debwewin (truth telling), and for them to build off each other's energy. It was special to be a part of, and I thank my participants for sharing their stories with me and their peers. Before each circle, I prepared asemma (tobacco) bundles to give to each participant as an offering for their participation. After this, I offered smudging and explained what I would be doing, and asked if anyone would not wish to smudge.

Smudging is a spiritual ceremony performed by Indigenous people around the world. For the Anishinaabeg people, smudging is the burning of the Four Sacred Medicines: tobacco, cedar, sage, and sweet grass. These Medicines are represented in the Medicine Wheel, which is a circle separated into four quadrants, with layers of significance and cultural meaning. The smoke of these sacred plants purifies the air, spirit, mind, body, and energies in the space the ceremony is performed. Many Anishinaabeg people smudge on a daily basis, and it is generally used to open meetings or sessions to set a tone of gratitude and positivity. One participant declined smudging during this study. During each step of the smudging process, I explained the reasoning for each action I took to engage with participants, educate them, and make them comfortable. I also explained the expectations of the circle. If at any point a participant did not feel like answering a question or sharing something, they did not have to.

The appropriate number of talking circles to conduct can vary by study; however, a typical amount used to reach saturation is three or four (Brandenburger et al., 2017). I originally set out to conduct three talking circles. However, I conducted seven talking circles with a total of 30 students who participated. Two circles were from the fraternity Tau Kapp Epsilon (TKE). One TKE circle had four participants, and the other had seven participants. A circle in the campus center had two students. Six students participated in a talking circle in the Multicultural Center. Four people participated in a talking circle in the campus sports lounge. A group of three participated in a talking circle at the campus grill. The last talking circle was a group of four participants in a campus center. Each circle conducted took about 40 to 90 minutes, depending on the number of participants, as I needed to give enough time for everyone to tell their story.

Just like the interviews, for accuracy purposes, all talking circles were recorded and transcribed through a software called Otter. I was the only one conducting the circles. The questions asked during the talking circles were open-ended, and I used follow-up prompts to keep the conversation moving forward. However, these talking circles are unstructured. The questions I asked included:

- Can you please tell us what space you feel you most belong?
    - What are some words you use to describe this space?
- Can you please tell us how this space came to be the space you feel like you belong?
    - What was it like to find your space?
- What are the characteristics of this space that makes you feel like you belong? Is it people, location, objects in the space?
    - What would this space be like if you took one or a few of these characteristics away?
- What does this space mean to you?

    - What if this space was taken away? What is the impact?
- How does your space make you feel?
    - What was the feeling like when you first stepped into your space?

Throughout the study the following questions were added:

- Do you see respect in your space?
    - In what form?
- How is your space relevant to you?
- Do you see relationships in your space?
    - If so, how?
- Do you give something and get something in return in your space?
    - If so, please explain?
- How do you see responsibility in your space?

A benefit of only having prompts prepared in advance and not having preselected questions was to gain more knowledge and to hear participants' stories on how they would like to tell them. Prior to data collection, just like in interviews, I used a digital information form, which they received ahead of time. This form helped gather demographic information before sampling and interviewing. The purpose of this was to ensure my participants were diverse in their social identities. It is essential to have a diverse sample because if the study is overrepresented by folks of a certain race, gender, socioeconomic class, or other demographic, one cannot accurately apply the results to the rest of the population. The questions that were asked were: (a) age, (b) classification (year in school), (c) ethnicity, (d) race, (e) gender, (f) academic major, and (g) sexual orientation. I collected signed research participant consent forms after a description of the research protocol was read and explained to the participants.

The Differences of This Study

This study differs from other studies because it used an Indigenous way of being and thinking using an Indigenous paradigm and Indigenous research methods, such as talking circles. Rooted in Indigenous values and knowledge systems emphasizing interconnectedness and responsibility to the community, participants shared power through storytelling, empowering each participant to share what they wanted in a non-judgmental environment, leading to deep, rich, authentic responses from participants. The talking circles changed the dynamic of data collection in ways that focus groups never could. They changed the dynamic by giving me the opportunity to join together into something bigger than us, be in a ceremony together, I was able to better connect with participants, which helped me understand their stories more clearly.

In the setting of the study, the participants enjoyed talking circles as a method of collecting their stories. Students noted that “this was a fun way to share my story with my peers in a welcoming environment.” Students also commented on being able to learn about a different culture from their own. For example, a student stated, “It was fun to be part of a ceremony different from my own culture but that I could participate and learn.” Another student said, “My dad conducted talking circles and smudged a lot. It was good to be part of something like this that reminded me who my dad is and my own roots.” As the researcher, it was enjoyable to conduct these circles and see compassion, joy, reflection, etc. These talking circles were emotional at points where some students were brought to tears in their reflections about finding where they belong. For example, a student said with tears in their eyes,

> I never felt like I genuinely belonged until finding a space like this [the multicultural center]. It is something I will be forever grateful for. I never had a home or a family until this space and the people that fill it. It is my true home compared to the other spaces I have been.

Another example that reflects the special nature of the talking circle is from a student who commented on the impact of the circle. The student said, “This talking circle helped me realize how important spaces are to me. I have never been in an environment like this that has been so [emotionally] moving and fostered critical thinking about who I am as a person.”

Talking Circles vs. Focus Groups

One of the main reasons why I decided to use talking circles instead of focus groups was because of my Indigenous paradigm, but I also chose talking circles because I believe they have the capability of being more valuable than focus groups. For example, talking circles break down post-colonial ideas, they have a natural way of collecting stories, and they foster a sense of connection and respect for participants and the researcher (Brandenburger et al., 2017; Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Another reason I used talking circles instead of focus groups was because they break down post-colonial ideas. Chilisa (2012) explained that post-colonial Indigenous research teachings include a process of decolonizing the conventional interview technique using Indigenous interview methods, such as talking circles, and involving indigenous knowledge to inform alternative research methods compatible with the worldviews of colonized others. Chilisa described decolonization as a process of conducting research in a way that the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalization are given space to communicate from their frames of reference. Using talking circles also creates space of other types of research within academia. By doing this, it diversifies studies, creates equitable practices, and may encourage other researchers to bring in their authentic selves into research. Research is personal, as it is something one devotes much time toward. This is why, when appropriate, because it may not always be, researchers should be encouraged to connect their research to their identities. Research is never neutral, as even the research questions we pose are informed by who we are and how we see the world.

Who Can Use Talking Circles and When to Do It

Throughout this journey, many people asked me, “Who can conduct these circles?” Can I use talking circles if I do not identify as Indigenous?” or “When can I use talking circles?” For me, talking circles and qualitative research are all about connecting, relationships, and storytelling, which is why I believe talking circles are for everyone to use, if they are being used respectfully. I know there are individuals who may disagree with me stating that circles are for all, but my family and tribe promote sharing knowledge. My cousin was once down in Florida, participating in a sun dance. When she was there, she found that these southern tribes had some of our language [northern Wisconsin tribe] within their sacred songs. She told me this as a reminder that we are a people of sharing our knowledge. This shows that we have been sharing stories, knowledge, ideas, etc., for hundreds of years and we should still continue this today. By creating circles, we are creating equity-focused research.

Talking circles promote equity-based practices and showcase diversifying our research, which breaks down a Western idea of research. By anyone using a talking circle, it creates space for more Indigenous practices, shows folks that our Indigenous communities still exist, and creates an understanding to folks about different ways of thinking, doing, etc. I would encourage anyone to use talking circles, but I suggest to anyone looking into conducting a circle to consider three things. First, understand the purpose of a talking circle. This should include extensive research on how to conduct one, the history behind them, and the benefits of using circles. Second, ask why one wants to use a talking circle. Is it for personal gain or for giving something in return, such as research to the world that will help in a positive way? Third, ask how to respect the Indigenous way of being. This is understanding the Indigenous culture and the mindset that research is ceremony and is sacred, so it must be treated with respect and kindness. Lastly, ask, when. It is important to understand when a good time would be to conduct talking circles.

Talking circles can be conducted at various times. Remember, a talking circle will elevate the discussion and has power. This should be considered when the time is right. Talking circles should be used in research when researchers are looking for data revolving around diversity, equity, inclusion and/or belonging, trying to connect with participants on a deeper level, when the researcher wants participants to collaborate together, and when the researcher is looking for deep, meaningful, extensive qualitative data. Talking circles can also be conducted outside of typical research. For example, my team at work finished an extensive project together that was emotional, life changing, and impactful and because of this, I decided that my team needed to break down what they were feeling. We did this by centering ourselves in a talking circle. This created an opportunity for the team members to understand what they were feeling, discuss this journey together, and bring our team closer.

Conclusion

Talking circles are a unique way of bringing people together to discuss events, ideas, stories, etc. They bring researchers extensive data that is powerful because of how it was collected. Rooted in Indigenous values and knowledge systems emphasizing interconnectedness and responsibility to community, participants share power through storytelling, empowering each participant to share what they want in a non-judgmental environment, leading to deep, rich, authentic responses from participants. Talking circles should be celebrated and utilized throughout our society. By doing this, researchers and organizations will be able to collect meaningful data in a sacred and special way.

Indigenous knowledge and way of being is something that has been misunderstood for decades (Wilson, 2008). However, over the past 3 years, I have learned how to express myself and connect myself to my Anishinaabe and Menominee culture. For this reason, I will always cherish my doctoral journey for what I have learned about myself along the way, the connections I have made over the past three years with other Indigenous scholars and relatives,

and for understanding the relationships that are all around us. I never thought I would be a researcher because I never saw myself in research, and because of this, I lacked confidence in academia. I see now that I am a researcher, and I am forever grateful for the research process that allowed me to come to this realization. By putting my Indigenous teachings, like talking circles, into practice, I hope that Indigenous ways of being in research can flourish and be better understood. I also hope other Indigenous people will pick up the torch as well and practice their teachings. As Indigenous people, we are still here and deserve to be in academia. On June 20th, 2023, during my dissertation defense, Denise Henning of the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, told me, “You [Benny] have a gift. It is a gift the creator gives to show others that we exist and teach non-Indigenous people a new way of being and going about things.” I hope to honor this gift to make my ancestors and relatives proud.

By completing my research, I have shown myself that a connection to our Indigenous roots in research is not just another paradigm or another way of going about research but is connected to a way of life and is sacred. I hope that this article and my research will inspire other Indigenous people to lean into academia in their own way, as I did. It was horrifying at first, but once I started, it created a fire in me that burned only brighter after each page was written and made me stronger. I believe my ancestors pushed me to be the very best and showcase that we are Anishinaabeg and still strong. I challenge you as the reader to now lean in and explore other ways of doing things in research and all around us. Remember that life is a ceremony, and it is a ceremony well worth living.

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Appendix

Talking Circles Guide

Greeting:

- Boozhoo kina wiya. Hello everyone, my name is Benny Rieth, and I am a member of the Bad River Band of the Chippewa Nation. I am in the Educational Leadership Studies doctoral program at New England College, where I am studying spaces in college environments and students' sense of belonging. Miigwetch. Thank you for being part of this journey with me. I hope that this research identifies what characteristics a space needs to help foster a student's sense of belonging, aid college professionals like me in creating these spaces, and that students always find a space on their campus where they are welcomed and belong.
- Prior to coming today, you should have signed a consent form and filled out an information form. Has everyone filled both these forms out?
- Though you have signed a consent form already, if at any point you no longer wish to continue with the study, you are able to leave. If this happens, please let me know, and we can dismiss your information from the study.

Talking Circle Overview and Prep:

- Today we will be conducting a talking circle which will take about one to one and a half hours.
- The creation of talking circles has historically been credited to the Woodland tribes in the Midwest, where it was used as a form of parliamentary procedure (Running Wolf & Rickard, 2003, p. 39). Talking circles are based on the ideal of participants' respect for each other, so it is imperative that throughout our time together that we do not judge each other's stories, and we listen to each other.
- The talking circle is a symbol that promotes sharing of ideas, equality, respect of each other's ideas, togetherness, and continuous and unending compassion and

love for one another (Chilisa, 2012, p. 181). We will sit in a circle that represents the holism of Mother Earth and the equality of all of us. It is common that there is a sacred object that is used, such as a feather, shield, stone, basket, etc., which is passed from speaker-to-speaker (Chilisa, 2012, p. 181). I will be using a sacred spirit stone (asin). When a speaker is holding the asin, the speaker is not to be interrupted. The group must listen silently and nonjudgmentally until the speaker has finished.

- I will be leading the circle by asking some questions. I will first ask who would like to start. We will then pass the rock back and forth to each participant.
- For accuracy purposes, I will be audio-recording today's circle and transcribing it through a software called Otter. Is everyone okay with me doing this?
- Are there any questions on today's process?
- Before we start, I will be offering smudge. Smudging is a traditional purifying and cleansing tradition that cleanses the mind, body, and spirit. I burn sage, which will help center and prepare ourselves for our conversations today.
- Demonstrates how to smudge

Talking Circle Ceremony:

1. If you could please take a spot in the circle, I will come around to each of you. If you do not wish to smudge, please indicate to me that you would not like it by crossing your arms as if you were giving yourself a hug.
2. I now offer you each asemma. As an Anishinaabe person, we believe that asemma was the first of the four medicines that the creator gave us. It is offered to human beings, spiritual beings, animals, and natural beings as a symbolic representation of respect, gratitude, and to ask for something.
    - Today I am asking for your stories and experiences, which is why I present asemma to each one of you.

3. Hands asemma to each participant.
4. After gifting asemma, join circle
5. The reason why I am interested in a sense of belonging is because, truthfully, there was a time where I felt like I didn't belong, and I found a space that helped in so many different ways.
6. Today I would like to hear your stories and your journey

Questions:

1. Can you please tell us what space you feel you most belong?
    - What are some words you use to describe this space?
2. Can you please tell us how this space came to be the space you feel like you belong?
    - What was it like to find your space?
3. What characteristics of this space make you feel like you belong? Is it people, location, objects in the space?
    - What would this space be like if you took one or a few of these characteristics away?
4. What does this space mean to you?
    - What if this space was taken away? What is the impact?
5. How does your space make you feel?
    - What was the feeling like when you first stepped into your space?

Closing:

- Thank you again for participating in today's talking circle. Each of you will have the opportunity to review your statements once they are transcribed for clarification. Does anyone have anything else to add to today's discussion before bringing our circle to an end?

Thank you, everyone, for participating. Here are a few of my business cards if anyone has any other questions in the future. Miigwetch!

The Fifth Frame

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Abstract

Bolman and Deal (2017) presented four traditional frames of reference through which the complexity of an organization and its issues can be discerned. They identified the (a) structural, (b) human resources, (c) political, and (d) symbolic frames as the classifications for understanding the challenges in the body of an organization. For the purposes of this article, we, the authors, have defined, summarized, and provided examples of each of the four frames. Furthermore, we developed the idea for and assessed the use of a new frame that accounts for a less tangible but critical element of an organization's essence. We discuss the eudemonia frame as one that people use to understand the perceived harmonious synergy of an organization and its relation to many critical components. The proposed new frame serves as a grounding force enabling anyone utilizing the four frames to recenter and refocus their interpretation of a complex issue in an organization’s core. It serves as an additional lens through which organization members may calibrate thoughts and analysis to ensure a greater level of synergy between the perception of the individuals and the overall well-being of the organization as its own entity. Much like a tuning fork can be struck against a variety of objects to align sound frequencies, we believe through our experiences that the fifth frame can be

applied to all frames of thinking to gauge alignment of strategic thinking, decision making, problem solving, collaboration, and success in any organizational context.

Keywords: educational leadership, eudemonia, frames of reference, harmonious resonance, organizational theory, synergy

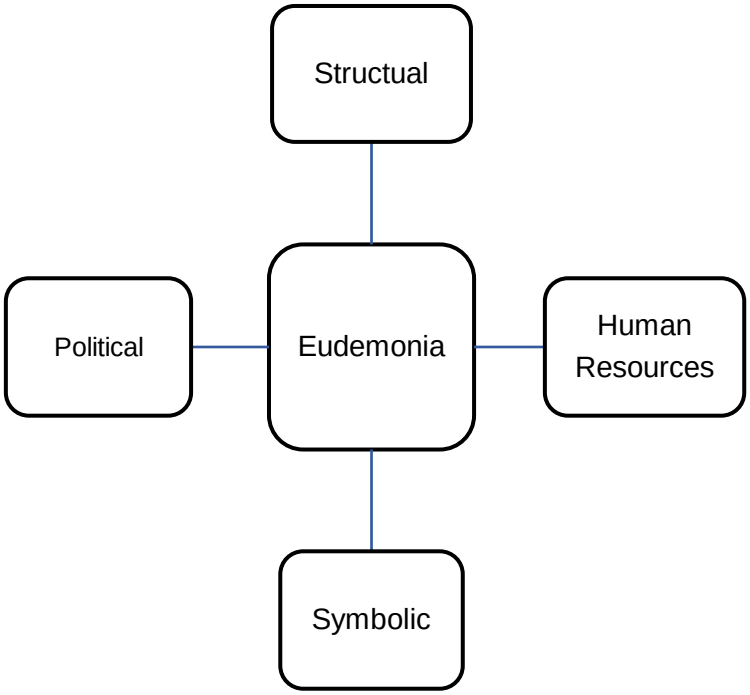
As students in New England College's Futuristic Organizational Theory doctoral class, we studied Bolman and Deal's (2017) theory of the four frames (I.e., structural, human resource, political, and symbolic) through which issues and challenges of organizations can be understood. Through our study of the frames, we developed an idea for a fifth theoretical frame. We discussed the benefit of adding a frame called "eudemonia." In essence, we believe that leaders can use this frame to understand the experiences of organization members as they perceive the synergy or harmonious resonance of all components of the organization. Based on our experiences, this universally experienced tone of open mindedness, approachability, positivity, and wellness, as it is experienced by the organization as a whole, becomes the frequency to which each element of the organization tunes. While we considered other terms for the name of this frame, we felt it was necessary to capture a holistic sense of wellness and jocundity. The metaphor we chose for understanding this frame is the tuning fork of the organization. Essentially, this frame overlays the other four frames as a comprehensive lens for understanding how all aspects of the framework, and the organization, are tuned to an effective harmonious resonance experienced by the members of the organization.

The authors of this article believe the landscape of education in the 21st century abounds with complexities, nuances, and challenges that were previously inconceivable. We believe that in a day and age where educational leaders are faced with an array of contexts and circumstances that involve a variety of stakeholders, ever-evolving demands, and limited resources, the need for strategic thinking, collaboration, and innovation cannot be over emphasized (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019). Sasnett and Ross (2007) wrote, "Bolman and Deal noted

that leaders view organizational experiences according to leadership styles or frames. They define the four frames of leadership as structural, human resources, political, and symbolic" (p. 1). The addition of the eudemonia frame to Bolman and Deal's (2017) organizational framework serves to provide a space for people to address the synergy of all components of their organization and establish metrics of measurement to determine the perception of members as it relates to the harmonious resonance they are experiencing (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Interconnected Nature of the Eudemonia Frame



Note. This figure is a conceptualization of the interconnectivity of the eudemonia frame with the other frames discussed by Bolman and Deal (2017).

The Four Organizational Frames of Leadership

Structural Frame

According to Bolman and Deal (2017), the structural frame focuses on clear organizational goals and the roles and relationships of individuals and groups within an organization. In the structural frame, the priority is to help the people and groups in the organization meet the goals and mission of the organization in the most effective ways possible. Organization members who view problems through the structural frame try to minimize personal distractions in favor of focusing on the organization's mission and goals (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Organizational leaders attempt to increase productivity and effectiveness by getting the right people in the correct roles and utilizing the appropriate structures to assist each person or group in meeting their goals. People use the structural frame to create and maintain structures and policies that assure the effective coordination of organizational goals, strategies, technology, and people (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Prioritizing effective structures ensures that human resources, training, communication, time, and money, are used effectively. The structural frame establishes the mission, goals, and expectations for the organization, people, and the design of the work to enhance the organization's accomplishments (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Organization members who develop effective structures to assess and positively deal with issues that arise are more likely to assist the organization in its success (Martin, 2020). Institutional structures, and understanding when to change those structures, work more effectively when goals are clear, when cause-and-effect relationships are well understood, and when there is little conflict, uncertainty, or ambiguity (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The structural frame focuses on the "how" of change. People using the structural frame primarily focus on strategy, clarifying tasks and responsibilities, setting measurable goals and deadlines, and creating systems and protocols that enhance the work of the organization's members (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Within the scope of the structural frame, the organization itself can be thought of as

a well-oiled machine, requiring precision movements of many cogs. As such, leaders and their teams need to be direct, focused, and methodical (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Political Frame

The political frame aids people in viewing organizations as ongoing contests of opposing viewpoints that arise from individual and group interests (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Bolman and Deal (2017) acknowledged there is a large percentage of people around the globe who have negative views about politics and politicians. More importantly, Bolman and Deal (2017) pointed out that, “a jaundiced view of politics constitutes a serious threat to individual and organization effectiveness” (p. 185). In a podcast interview for Nestell and Associates (2022), Bolman stated the political framework typically has two conditions. The first condition is a scarcity of resources, such as money, and the second is that some individuals or groups have different thoughts on how resources should be distributed. This can lead to conflict, which leads to power becoming a key resource (Nestell & Associates, 2022). According to Bolman and Deal (2017), organizations are made up of individuals and groups of people who compete for resources. Individuals may be in one or several groups within the organization that have opposing interests, values, and/or beliefs on how the resources should be allocated. These opposing views create a need or wanting for power and control, which may cause individuals or groups to attempt to coerce, build coalitions, and/or negotiate to achieve their agenda. The political frame, according to Bolman and Deal (2017), is where leaders and other members of the organization deal with the need for power within the organization to reach goals and objectives, which puts politics at the apex of many decisions that are made.

From our, the authors, experiences in schools, we believe the political frame plays an integral part in the education system. When a school district has leaders who respond in positive ways to the individuals and groups within that organization, there is a general cohesiveness, which, in turn, leads to better student outcomes (Bolman & Deal, 2017). When

leaders bargain for and allocate scarce resources effectively, we have found positive results often occur. The political framework plays a role in developing school and district policies, allocation of funds, and the creation of coalitions within the school system. From the political frame perspective, working effectively with different groups and bringing those groups together in their efforts is important for the success of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Hattie (2012) found in their review of educational research, that when a school creates a sense collective efficacy (i.e., a group feeling that together the group can and will be more successful than working just individually), then the school functions more effectively (e.g., students perform better, the culture of the school is more positive). After collecting 7 years of student achievement data in one school district, Hoogsteen (2020) identified collective efficacy as an important factor in sustaining progress, raising student achievement, and closing the achievement gap among diverse populations. In terms of the political frame, this group sense of power, or the ability to achieve a goal, benefited students (Hattie, 2012). It appears that in Hoogsteen's (2020) research, power adhered to the collective group and through bargaining and other positive strategies, teachers, students, and administrators created a more cohesive, synergetic school. Based on our research and experience, when individuals and groups are working in this type of environment and are seeking the same outcome with scarce resources, there can be positive outcomes.

Human Resource Frame

Bolman and Deal (1991) discussed the human resource frame as, "focusing on human needs and assuming organizations that meet basic human needs will work better than those that do not" (p. 151). According to Manix et al. (2021) leaders who validate feelings and relationships often inspire their employees to perform their jobs at a higher level and with a sense of empowerment. Effective human resource leaders tend to look at problems through interpersonal terms and search for ways to harmoniously adjust the organization to fit the

people, or they help the people adjust to fit the organization's synergy (Tan et al., 2015). Tan et al. (2015) also explained that from their research they found leaders who valued the human resource frame also valued relationships and feelings and sought to lead through facilitation and empowerment.

The human resource frame is a critical lens to use within education, because education is a social experience in which people must interact with each other to be more successful (Sousa, 2020; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). The schools in which we have worked all have had vision and/or mission statements to describe their founding purpose and significant organizational commitments. These documents are supposed to describe the "why" and "what" the school, as an organization, wants to accomplish (Bolman & Deal, 2017). To accomplish the stated goals of a school, one important task of school leaders, from a human resource perspective, is to organize the work and the people doing the work (e.g., students, teachers) so the school can be effective in meeting the mission and/or vision of the school (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Tan et al. (2015) noted organization leaders must fit the right people to the right job. In addition, the researchers explained how leaders must hire people who believe in and will facilitate the shared vision and mission for a school to run harmoniously. The staff within the school set the tone for how the day will run for students and how successfully the year will end (Bolman & Deal, 2017). An effective leader is like the conductor of an orchestra. They must ensure all are playing together and in the right key.

As in education, a leader of any organization must help to create ways to have the right people in the right roles (Bolman & Deal, 2017). When a leader is given a program to manage, one of their priorities must be to recruit and hire staff willing to work together to create a shared vision (Sinek, 2009). Then within their area of responsibility, each individual works to find and support the right personnel to do the job and achieve the program goals. Each leader throughout the organization must develop effective ways to meet and communicate so that

workers feel supported and believe everyone is on the same team (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019). Also, leaders must use the information they receive and be receptive to the ideas and input generated from all members of their teams (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Symbolic Frame

Bolman and Deal's (2017) symbolic frame includes three central components: meaning, belief, and faith, all of which are at the core of any individual's synergy or organization's harmonious resonance. Often, organizations create and use symbols to exemplify positive images of the organization because, "Symbols carry powerful intellectual and emotional messages; they speak to both the mind and the heart" (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 243). Leaders and followers use myths, vision, stories, heroes and heroines, rituals, and ceremonies to symbolize their 'why," or the reason they invest time and energy into their responsibilities (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Like a temple, which is Bolman and Deal's (2017) metaphor for the symbolic frame, these symbols represent more than what is on the surface. They remind organization members about what they stand for and help them feel special about what they do. According to Bolman and Deal (2017), with these well-established symbols are positive and meaningful, people carry history, values, and group identities into future tasks. It is through these positive symbols, whether tangible or not, that leaders and followers produce a culture in which everyone might feel connected and purposeful (Bolman & Deal, 2017). If these symbols are not positive and effective, then symbols can divide people. Thus, one of the important jobs of leaders is to ensure that the symbols of the organization carry the important positive messages to all members of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

In the corporate world, BMW was the perfect example of the ways in which a business can use the symbolic frame to enhance performance and improve culture. In the 1950s, BMW almost went bankrupt when they invested in two new car models that did not find success in the consumer market (as cited in Bolman & Deal, 2017). Instead of closing the business's doors,

the executives invested in a new mindset, one saturated with positive symbols: the need for openness, breaking down barriers among workers, and generating commitment (as cited in Bolman & Deal, 2017). When BMW established these values, and symbols, they used them as a focus for hiring the right people, a process that only included those who shared the same new values as BMW. Once hired, designers, workers, engineers, and managers trained new employees in the "BMW Way." The result was a successful business (as cited in Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Bolman and Deal (2017) wrote about a gentleman named Joe Vallejo, who served as a custodian at a junior high school in California. According to Bolman and Deal, not only did Joe complete his daily job responsibilities, he also provided many other services to students and their families, including giving feedback to teachers, acting as a liaison between families and the school, and helping to reach compromises at parent-teacher conferences. After he retired, the school commissioned a patio to be named in his honor, which is still there today, even after his passing. Staff and families keep his legacy alive through the stories they carry into the future. Therefore, he serves as a symbol that binds the school and community together. Educational organizations can use symbols in many ways, but all stakeholders need them to have a positive sense of identity, connectedness, and purpose (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

The Unifying Frame: Eudemonia

Eudemonia, stemming from the Greek eudaimonia, is a term that describes the overall state of being regarding the wellness of a specific entity (Moore, 2019). Eudemonia is a complex concept in that it ". . . has the whole element of subjectivity built into it. It is simultaneously both less and more prescriptive and dives quite deeply into the ideas of virtues and virtue ethics" (Moore, 2019, p. 4). In organizations that have members who strive to produce products, experiences, or services that meet the ethical needs of that organization, eudemonia describes the transverse state of ethical well-being. Bastos (2022) described eudemonia as well-being

related to “optimal experiences and functioning” (p. 3). This description aligns with the vision of many organizations. Bastos went on to elaborate that a eudemonia existence means to “know what goals you have . . . (and) express your goals” (p. 27), which when well developed, align with the stories and other artifacts of the symbolic frame. Also, Bastos expressed that eudemonia means “developing your best potentials” (p. 27), which often happens within the human resources frame, “engaging in activities” (p. 27) which relates to the political frame, and “focusing on capabilities and skills” (p. 27), which can be most often seen in the structural frame of an organization. We believe eudemonia is most effective when it is directly related and helpful to each of the other four frames.

Many people may be able to identify an organization in which they have been involved where the eudemonia frame needed intervention and focus. For example, an organization with a negative eudemonia context may be labeled a toxic work environment, have a high turnover rate of workers, may have to deal with a union strike, experience a vote of no confidence, or deal with constant changes in leadership. In these cases, people may describe the organization as having a negative feeling. They may label their time with the organization as something they dreaded or a place in which they struggled to find purpose or make connections. One cause of this may be the lack of harmonious resonance or synergy in the organization which led to a misalignment with the workers’ anticipation of what participating in an organization would feel like. The environment and climate of the organization may have felt uncomfortable, unsupportive, hostile, or even toxic. From our experiences in schools, in these organizational cultures, it can be difficult to pinpoint what is making the experience challenging; nonetheless, the feeling remains intensely undesirable. We believe that the eudemonia frame should be directly connected to each of the other four frames to develop an organization’s harmonious resonance.

Using the Eudemonia Frame With Other Frames

Naturally, we believe the most important question about the eudemonia frame is, “How can the eudemonia frame be used to help any school (or any other organization) develop and maintain an efficient, effective, and harmoniously resonant organization?” We, the authors, have developed questions that can be used to help any organization include the eudemonia frame independently and with each of Bolman and Deal’s (2017) four frames. In addition to our eudemonia organizational questions, we encourage leaders to adapt and develop other questions and implementations for their specific organization.

We have developed 3 questions that any organization can use to study any issue from the perspective of some or all of the frames. Bolman and Deal (2017) suggest reviewing multiple frames when addressing important issues. Our idea is to employ these questions and adapt them for each frame. We also have given examples of our questions in each section for using eudemonia in combination with each frame. For the purposes of this article, we use the organization we know the best, schools. Our eudemonia frame questions are developed to address what we believe are five critical areas of organizational work: (a) ability of people to accomplish their jobs effectively, (b) the climate of the organization, (c) professional development or retraining when systems or jobs change, (d) enhancing employee voice, and (e) living up to the organization mission and/or vision. These five elements can help any organization review each frame and enhance the effects of that element by addressing the synergy and harmonious resonance for the organization (and all of the people in the organization). Our eudemonia questions include:

(a) Enhancing the effective of all workers

    1. What are we doing that enhances the work of our teachers and students?
    2. What more should we doing, that would enhance the work of our teachers and students?

3. What detracts from or complicates the work of our teachers and students?

(b) Building a positive organizational climate

1. What are we doing that helps the school in our quest to create a positive climate for teachers and students?
2. What more should we be doing, that would help the school in our quest to create a positive climate for teachers and students?
3. What complicates or detracts from the school in our quest to create a positive climate for teachers and students?

(c) Facilitate the effective implementation of changes

1. When the school creates change, what mechanisms are be in place to retrain and support our teachers and students to implement those changes?
2. When the school creates change, what new mechanisms should we put in place to retrain and support our teachers and students to effectively implement those changes?
3. When our school creates change, what mechanisms are in place that complicate the ability of our teachers and students to implement those changes?

(d) Development of voice for all people in the organization

1. What mechanisms are in place to help teachers and students develop and use their voice?
2. What mechanisms should we put in place to help teachers and students develop and use their voice?
3. What mechanisms are in place that detract from the ability of teachers and students to develop and use their voice?

(e) Enabling all people to live up to the mission and/or vision

1. What mechanisms are in place to help administration, teachers, and students live up to our mission and vision?
2. What mechanisms should we put in place to help administration, teachers, and students live up to our mission and vision?
3. What mechanisms are in place that detract from or make it more difficult for administration, teachers, and students to live up to our mission and vision?

These questions can be utilized to help any organization answer three critically important questions for the growth of the organization (in our case, school). These three questions include:

(a) What are we doing as a school that we should continue to do?

(b) What are we not doing as a school that we should be doing?

(c) What are we doing as a school that we should stop doing?

We developed these questions such that any organization can implement the same basic questions for each frame. Naturally, the organization must identify areas of need so the responses to these questions can be most effective (That is a topic for another article). Naturally, these are not the only questions that might be asked, but these questions, we believe are a great place to begin the process.

Structural and Eudemonia Frames

When one considers the structures within an organization, one can consider the policies, procedures, schedules, day-by-day operations, systems, and structures that are in place. These structural elements are generally designed with the intent to ensure that an organization's everyday functioning is conducive to meeting and achieving desired goals. (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Conversely, a disconnect between structural elements and an individual's synergy or organization's harmonious resonance can create discord, deplete precious time and resources, and hinder progress toward achieving intended outcomes and goals (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Within an educational setting, for example, a school's goals usually include ensuring equitable practices and structures are in place so that all students can learn and meet grade level learning outcomes (Boaler, 2019). However, when instructional practices, course offerings, student schedules, and structural deficiencies exist that enable some but not all students to meet these goals, a disconnect between the structural and eudemonia frame is evidenced (Robinson, 2017). Similarly, a car manufacturing organization may have the goal of mass producing their quality product to maximize profit on the market. However, should the same manufacturer lack the infrastructure and staffing needed to operate machinery, conduct quality control tests, and ensure the proper materials exist to manufacture the vehicles, the goals of the manufacturer cannot be realized.

As the authors developed the eudemonia frame, one of our goals was to set up a mechanism so that structural deficiencies can be identified and addressed in a way that also fosters individual synergy and collective, harmonious resonance within the community. The strike of the metaphorical eudemonia tuning fork enables any stakeholder in an educational organization to realize that revision to instructional practice, student scheduling, and course offerings might be necessary to better align with the overall purpose and harmonious resonance of the organization. A striking of the same metaphorical tuning fork reverberates the disconnect between the day-to-day structures of car manufacturing and the manufacturer's overall purpose. Subsequent actions may address staging deficiencies, solutions to material shortages, and new processes that streamline quality control testing. Be it within an educational community, a car manufacturing corporation, or elsewhere, the structural calibration with the eudemonia frame affords groups and individuals the ability to use one's gifts to help others, thereby raising each individual's sense of synergy and efficacy within any organizational context. (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

The authors of this article have developed questions to assist schools in reviewing the structural framework as it connects to the eudemonia framework. These questions come from our beginning thoughts about the process of integrating the eudemonia frame into the structural frame developed by Bolman and Deal (2017). We developed questions in relation to a school organization, and these questions can be adapted for any organization. Our structural questions for education include:

A. Enhance the work of teachers and students:
    1. What policies, structures, and procedures do we have in place that enhance the work of our teachers and students?
    2. What other policies, structures, and procedures should we put in place to enhance the work of our teachers and students?
    3. What policies, structures, and procedures are in place that detract from the work of our teachers and students?

B. Create a positive climate
    4. What policies, structures, and procedures are in place that help the school in our quest to create a positive climate for our teachers and students?
    5. What policies, structures, and procedures should we put in place to help the school in our quest to create a positive climate for our teachers and students?
    6. What policies, structures, and procedures are in place that complicate or detract from the school in our quest to create a positive climate for teachers and students?

C. Effectively implement change
    7. When our school creates change, what policies, structures, and procedures are in place to retrain and support our teachers and students to implement those changes?

8. When our school creates change, what policies, structures, and procedures should we put in place to retrain and support our teachers and students to implement those changes?
9. When our school creates change, what policies, structures, and procedures are in place that complicate the ability our teachers and students to implement those changes?

D. Develop teacher and student voice

10. What policies, structures, and procedures are in place that help teachers and students develop and use their voice?
11. What policies, structures, and procedures should we put in place to help teachers and students develop and use their voice?
12. What policies, structures, and procedures are in place that detract from the ability of teachers and students to develop and use their voice?

E. Live up to our mission and/or vision

13. What policies, structures, and procedures are in place to help our administration, teachers, and students live up to our mission and vision?
14. What policies, structures, and procedures should we put in place to help our administration, teachers, and students live up to our mission and vision?
15. What policies, structures, and procedures are in place that detract administration, teachers, and students from living up to our mission and vision?

Political and Eudemonia Frames

The political framework plays an integral role in any organization. There is often daily conflict between the power, the coalitions, and the interest groups due to their differences in values, beliefs, information, interests, resources, and perceptions of reality. The political framework within the public school system is typically unbalanced (Bolam and Deal, 2017).

Educational equity for students, classroom sizes, curriculum, staff salary, and teacher workload are a few pieces of public education that can be lopsided toward one or more groups. When there is an offset between interest groups, there can be disproportionate visions and general angst within the system (Bolam and Deal, 2017). For example, when federal or state testing agencies report poor standardized assessment scores, then teachers and administrators may request better testing methods. If no changes are made, there can be an imbalance in power, resulting in poor harmonious resonance and synergy. Contrarily, when the federal and state testing systems send out surveys and representatives to ascertain the problems and listen to and respond positively to educators, there can be a synergistic positive harmony within the political framework.

We believe the eudemonia framework can help create a balance within the political framework. When those who have authority and power truly comprehend the issues among different coalitions and then make amenable changes, leaders can create harmonious resonance (Bolam and Deal, 2017). The eudemonic tuning of the fork can reverberate when there is synergy among individual perceptions, coalitions, and individuals within the public-school setting. When those in power assess the pulse of different coalitions through positive bargaining agreements, attend to the needs of identified coalitions, and seek out any issues that may be surfacing, they develop a positive political framework (Bolam and Deal, 2017). As an additional benefit, they may increase synergy and create positive outcomes for more students and staff within the school system they serve.

The authors of this article have developed questions to assist schools in reviewing the political framework as it connects to the eudemonia framework. These questions come from our beginning thoughts about the process of integrating the eudemonia frame into the political frame developed by Bolman and Deal (2017). Our questions include:

A. Enhance the work of teachers and students:
    1. What coalitions and/or political procedures are in place that add to the school's ability to fairly and effectively distribute limited resources to enhance the work of our teachers and students?
    2. What coalitions and/or political procedures should we put in place that will add to the school's ability to fairly and effectively distribute limited resources to enhance the work of our teachers and students?
    3. What coalitions and/or political procedures are in place that limit or detract from the school's ability to fairly and effectively distribute limited resources to enhance the work of our teachers and students?
B. Create a positive climate:
    4. What types of coalitions and/or political procedures are in place that help the school in our quest to create a positive climate for teachers and students?
    5. What types of coalitions and/or political procedures should we put in place that would help the school in our quest to create a positive climate for teachers and students?
    6. What types of coalitions and/or political procedures are in place that detract the school from our quest to create a positive climate for teachers and students?
C. Effectively implement change:
    7. When our school creates change, what coalitions and political procedures are in place that help our teachers and students to implement those changes?
    8. When our school creates change, what coalitions and political procedures should we put in place that would help our teachers and students to implement those changes?

9. When our school creates change, what coalitions and political procedures are in place that detract from the ability of our teachers and students to implement those changes?

D. Develop teacher and student voice:

10. What coalitions and political procedures are in place in our school that help teachers and students develop and use their voice?
11. What coalitions and political procedures should we put in place in our school that would help teachers and students develop and use their voice?
12. What coalitions and political procedures are in place in our school that detract from the ability of our teachers and students to develop and use their voice?

E. Live up to our mission and/or vision:

13. What coalitions and political procedures are in place in our school that assist our school in living up to our mission and vision?
14. What coalitions and political procedures should we put in place in our school that would assist our school more in living up to our mission and vision?
15. What coalitions and political procedures are in place in our school that help our school to live up to our mission and vision?

Human Resource and Eudemonia Frames

Villajos et al. (2019) postulated a theory that "Human Resource (HR) practices can contribute to the development of idiosyncratic deals (negotiation of individual HR practices) that might facilitate employees' creativity, and eudemonic well-being in the long term and, thus, the sustainability of these organizations" (p. 1). Eudemonia can be defined as happiness, welfare, well-being, and sometimes the science of happiness (Moore, 2019). Villajos et al. noted that positive HR practices may be linked to improved performance and increased well-being. When employees participate in human resource practices, their leaders consider their needs and

inclinations. This participation can prevent problems and create a more supportive environment, thereby creating a state of creating eudemonic well-being (Villajos et al., 2019). In essence, eudemonia and the human resource frames are inextricably linked because they are tied together by a focus on everyone's synergy and the organization's harmonious resonance, which both contribute to overall well-being (Villajos et al., 2019).

The authors of this article have developed questions to assist schools in reviewing the human resource framework as it connects to the eudemonia framework. These questions come from our beginning thoughts about the process of integrating the eudemonia frame into the human resource frame developed by Bolman and Deal (2017). Our questions include:

A. Enhance the work of teachers and students:
    1. What human resource structures and processes are in place that enhance the work of our teachers and students (e.g., ways to empower teachers and students)?
    2. What human resource structures and processes should we put in place that could enhance the work of our teachers and students (e.g., ways to empower teachers and students)?
    3. What human resource structures and processes are in place that complicate the work of our teachers and students (e.g., ways to limit the power of teachers and students)?
B. Create a positive climate:
    4. What human resource structures and processes are in place that enhance the school's ability to create a positive climate for our teachers and students?
    5. What human resource structures and processes should we put in place that would enhance our school's ability to create a positive climate for our teachers and students?

6. What human resource structures and processes are in place that limit the school's ability to create a positive climate for our teachers and students?

C. Effectively implement change:

7. When we create change in our school, what human resource structures and processes are in place that help our teachers and students to implement the changes we demand?
8. When we create change in our school, what human resource structures and processes should we put in place that would help our teachers and students to implement the changes we demand?
9. When we create change in our school, what human resource structures and processes are in place that detract from our teachers' and students' ability to implement the changes we demand

D. Develop teacher and student voice:

10. What human resource procedures and policies are in place in our school to help teachers and students develop and use their voice?
11. What human resource procedures and policies should we put in place in our school to help teachers and students develop and use their voice?
12. What human resource procedures and policies do we have in place in our school that detract from our teachers' and students' ability to develop and use their voice?

E. Live up to our mission and/or vision:

13. What human resources policies and procedures are in place to assist our school in living up to our mission and vision?
14. What human resources policies and procedures should we put in place that would assist our school in living up to our mission and vision?

15. What human resources policies and procedures are in place that detract from our school's ability to in live up to our mission and vision?

Symbolic and Eudemonia Frames

The symbolic frame in any organization encompasses the ways in which symbols portray meaning, belief, and faith (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Symbols can be just about anything, but Bolman and Deal (2017) highlighted myths, vision, values, heroes and heroines, stories and fairy tales, rituals, ceremonies, metaphors, humor, and play as the prominent vessels for symbolic meaning. Together and separately, these symbols hold all kinds of meanings with positive and negative connotations. We believe that ideally, symbols embody and portray the mind and heart, or eudemonia, of an organization. Leaders and followers must continuously use symbols as ways to tune into the harmonious resonance of their organization. To achieve this synergy, they need to use their tuning fork to check the frequency at which they serve their inner purpose.

When considering the symbolic frame and its connection to eudemonia, for the authors of this article, there are a few types of symbols that stand out from the rest, primarily because we believe they create happiness and well-being through a sense of purpose (Maslow, 1971). An individual's "why" or purpose of action can be found in myths, vision, values, and heroes and heroines. Bolman and Deal (2017) described myths, vision, and values as symbols that, "imbue an organization with deep purpose and resolve" (p. 248). Myths are typically the stories behind the development of any organization, and they help to reiterate purpose and meaning. For example, when Southwest Airlines Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Herb Kelleher readied the company's first plane for flight and met resistance from a Texas sheriff, he ordered his staff to fly the plane anyway, and even made an offbeat comment about leaving tire tracks on the sheriff's uniform, if necessary (Bolman & Deal, 2017). In a way, Kelleher's fantastical declaration, as well as the myth itself, set the course for Southwest Airlines and became a

symbol that displayed the company's purpose and "why" regarding persistence. Kelleher's story became a symbol all organization members could discuss and use to feel the harmonious resonance it takes to achieve a goal.

Furthermore, myths help to build values and vision, which are all symbols found in this frame that the authors believe epitomize eudemonia. Essentially, values help people feel special regarding what they do every day (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The values that matter most are the ones that organization members live and breathe—the ones directly connected to their purpose, happiness, well-being, and synergy. In any organization, vision is created when members shape their values and purpose into what their organization will look like in the future. Vision embodies an organization's resolve (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

The Malala Fund, founded in 2013 by Malala and Ziauddin Yousafzai, is a non-profit that holds its vision at its core and makes all decisions based on how each step will take that vision into the future. In essence, their harmonious resonance, that sense of collective synergy, impacts every single decision. Their purpose for action is the education of all girls world-wide, with a vision that one day, all girls will have access to free secondary education. To achieve this vision, the organization invests in education activists, advocates to hold leaders accountable, and raises girls' voices for all to hear (Malala Fund, n.d.). Each of these actions moves their vision forward.

The authors of this article have developed questions to assist schools in reviewing the symbolic framework as it connects to the eudemonia framework. These questions come from our beginning thoughts about the process of integrating the eudemonia frame into the symbolic frame developed by Bolman and Deal (2017). Our questions include:

A. Enhance the work of teachers and students:
    1. What symbols, stories, or meanings are in place that enhance the work of our teachers and students (e.g., ways to empower teachers and students)?

2. What symbols, stories, or meanings should we put in place that would enhance the work of our teachers and students (e.g., ways to empower teachers and students)?
3. What symbols, stories, or meanings are in place that complicate the work of our teachers and students (e.g., ways that limit the power of teachers and students)?

B. Create a positive climate:

4. What symbols, stories, or meanings are in place that enhance the school's ability to create a positive climate for our teachers and students?
5. What symbols, stories, or meanings should we put in place that would enhance the school's ability to create a positive climate for our teachers and students?
6. What symbols, stories, or meanings are in place that limit the school's ability to create a positive climate for our teachers and students??

C. Effectively implement change:

7. When we create change in our school, what symbols, stories, or meanings are in place that help our teachers to implement the changes we demand?
8. When we create change in our school, what symbols, stories, or meanings should we put in place that would help our teachers to implement the changes we demand?
9. When we create change in our school, what symbols, stories, or meanings are in place that detract from our teachers the ability to implement the changes we demand?

D. Develop teacher and student voice:

10. What symbols, stories, or meanings are place in our school to help teachers and students develop and use their voice?

11. What symbols, stories, or meanings should we put in place in our school to help teachers and students develop and use their voice?
12. What symbols, stories, or meanings do we have in place in our school that detract from our teachers' and students' ability to develop and use their voice?

E. Live up to our mission and/or vision:

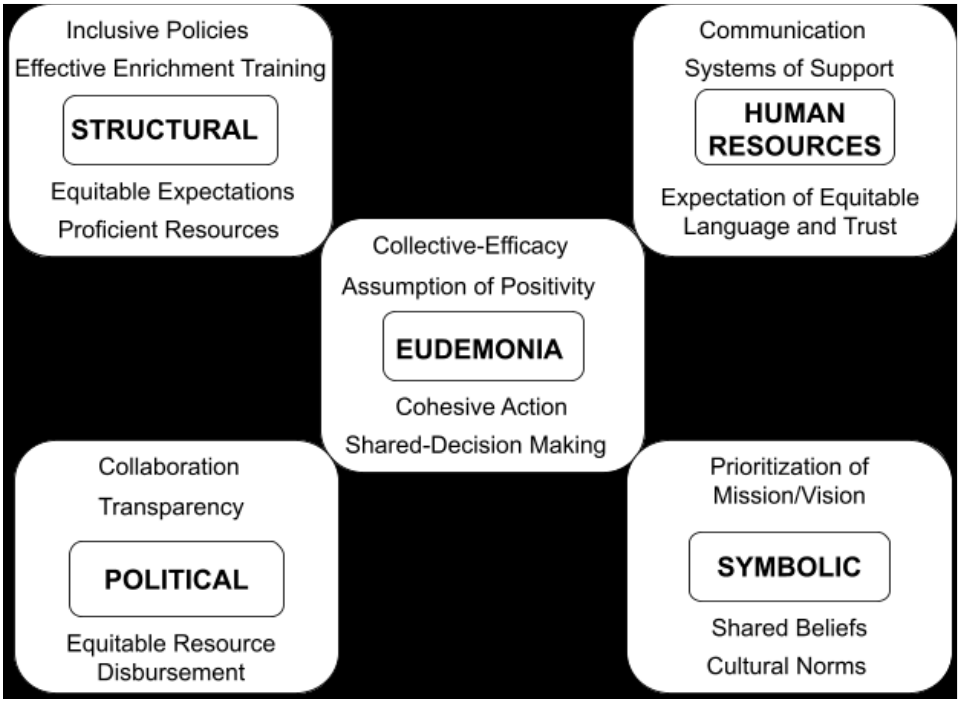
13. What symbols, stories, or meanings are in place to assist our school in living up to our mission and vision?
14. What symbols, stories, or meanings should we put in place to assist our school in living up to our mission and vision?
15. What symbols, stories, or meanings are in place that detract from our school's ability to live up to our mission and vision?

Implications for Practice

There are several ways in which leaders can work through Bolman and Deal's (2017) four original frames—political, structural, symbolic, and human resources—to ensure eudemonia exists throughout an organization. In many aspects, organizational leaders may already employ the eudemonia frame as an additional lens through which to seek solutions to problems in any of the four leadership frames. On the other hand, as outlined by our questions in each section above, there are still several places in which there is room for improvement. Based on our research, common knowledge, and personal experiences of leadership practices and the level of synergy in organizations, we have developed an exemplar framework of implications for practice that displays practical applications organizational leaders can use maintain the unification of the five frames through the eudemonia frame (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Exemplar of Five Frame Implementation



This exemplar displays educational ideas to consider how each of the original frames (Bolman & Deal, 2017) can connect with the eudemonia frame and with each other. Other kinds of organizations would develop ideas for their specific organization. As members of an organization work to improve any area of the organization, we believe it is important to connect each frame being examined with the eudemonia frame. For example, if the organization determines that their structures are not as effective as they should be, as the organization reviews their ideas about their structures, members could connect each idea to their eudemonia frame ideas. Thus, for example, members would assess their ideas for creating more inclusive policies with eudemonia ideas like collective efficacy, assumptions of positivity, cohesive actions, and shared decision-making. Members of the organization who are proposing a change should answer the question, “How does this idea help to improve the overall synergy and

harmonious resonance of our organization?" If there is a negative or no response to the question, then the proposed change probably needs to be improved to make a positive difference in the overall wellbeing of the institution and the people who work there.

Conclusion

Through our work with Bolman and Deal's (2017) four frames of reference and our experiences in our schools, some that have exuded positivity and some with negative school climates, we have concluded that eudemonia is the unifying frame that can provide organizations with ways to view issues regarding the synergy of every element that makes up an organization. We believe the eudemonia frame can be the keystone of an interconnectivity between all four frames outlined by Bolman and Deal (2017) in *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. Members of an organization can benefit from continued work and progress in the areas related to the harmonious resonance maintained by their organization. Our hope is that more studies will be accomplished with research topics related to the eudemonia frame and its impact on organizational success. We believe the development of this fifth frame will allow organizations an additional framework to view challenges and issues to aid their institutions in their work to move closer to their missions and visions.

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All We Have Is Each Other: A Grounded Theory Exploration Into the Impact of Relationship Building in a Self-Contained School Setting Following COVID-19

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Abstract

The landscape of public education has felt a severe impact from the COVID-19 global pandemic. As schools and educators move into this new normal, educators and students will have to come together to reverse the damage caused over the past 3 or 4 years. To complete this goal, educators must understand the perception of students regarding building and maintaining relationships, and vice versa. The purpose of my multiple-methods grounded theory study is to explore and explain how emphasizing student-teacher relationships (STR) can support rebuilding school community in self-contained settings following the COVID-19 global pandemic through focusing on the perspectives and perceptions of the stakeholders in the learning environment. I conducted this study in a small self-contained high school during the 2022–2023 school year with nine students identified with special education needs, mainly with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD), and ten educator participants. Results for my study are currently in the preliminary stages, however, early analysis shows a consensus from participant interviews that emphasizing STR shows a moderate to high positive impact on student-teacher relationships, student engagement, academic success, social-emotional growth, decrease of teacher burnout, and more positive teacher attitudes about their students and schools. Key contributors to this shift include, but are not limited to, mutual respect, humanness, humor, relatability, support, and

communications as major aspects of the building and maintaining the quality of student-teacher relationships.

Keywords: student-teacher relationships (STR), building relationships, self-contained setting, special education, emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD), burnout, COVID-19.

For special education students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD), researchers have uncovered that this marginalized group's secondary and post-secondary reality, specifically dropping out or not earning a standard diploma (Hoffman et al., 2015), are some of the worst among all public education students (Garwood, 2022; Garwood et al., 2021; Garwood & Van Loan, 2019; Marlowe et al., 2017; Van Loan & Garwood, 2018). Likewise, the educators responsible for guiding these students have the highest rate of burnout among all teachers across all school settings (Bettini et al., 2020). The relationships forged between these two groups can be significantly impacted by the foundational strategies utilized schoolwide and how they are implemented classroom to classroom. The two main approaches I examined are Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports [Center on PBIS, 2023) and the relationship-driven classroom model (Marlowe, 2011; 2012).

Students with EBD are intelligent, charismatic, gifted, and often misunderstood. Teachers of students with behavioral and emotional barriers are, on average, the least experienced, carry the lowest accepted credentials, and are professionally certified at higher rates through alternative routes compared to their colleagues (Gage et al., 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011; State et al., 2019). When receiving instruction in general education settings, students with EBD are often supported by teachers unprepared to support their needs, frequently resulting in removal from the classroom. Students with EBD are often supported by PBIS (Center on PBIS, 2023) to promote positive behavioral change. However, utilizing this complex multi-tiered hierarchical approach to behavioral support, with a fatal flaw of difficulty in implementation (Tyre

et al. 2018) as designed due to a lack of knowledge and coaching, can potentially hinder educators without the proper training or experience. To make matters worse, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, secondary and post-secondary-aged students have reported a 25% increase in mental health concerns, like depression and anxiety (World Health Organization, 2022).

As reform and consultation became the “it” strategies to address school inadequacies, somewhere along the way, I have found that school reform initiators have forgotten the importance of interpersonal human relationships. When a member of my family or a friend is struggling, I do not use a hard-to-implement strategy to support them. Like in most relationships, I ask how I can help support them, then follow through with basic human functions like communication, humor, respect, and reliability. Simply, this study will consider alternatives to tiered behavioral support structures by examining how focusing on relationships, as the foundational behavioral support strategy, can lead to prosperity in the learning environment.

Literature Review

This literature review presents a synthesis of current research regarding pedagogies of support for students with EBD and their teachers. I examined the state of the field by analyzing the history, rationale, and outcomes of nationally supported tiered behavioral support systems. Alternatively, I explore a relationship-building pedagogical approach as a possible substitute for supporting the needs of students with EBD and their staff moving into a post-COVID-19 environment. Lastly, I review the contributing factors that affect the fidelity and efficacy of implementing formal behavioral support approaches and how school-wide pedagogies must evolve during this unprecedented time in history.

Hayden’s Relationship Driven Classroom Approach

The Torey Hayden relationship driven classroom approach (as cited in Marlowe, 2011; 2012) is the driving force behind the conceptual framework I used for this study. This framework

was created by Dr. Michael Marlowe by using classroom techniques described in Hayden's book series (as cited in Marlowe, 2012). Hayden believed initiating and sustaining relationships is the only way to enact change with students (as cited in Marlowe, 2011). To build relationships, Hayden emphasized commitment, modeling, and communication as the three most important aspects of working with students (as cited in Marlowe, 2011). Hayden believed that misbehavior is a learning opportunity for both students and teachers. For teachers to have that mindset, they will need characteristics like acceptance, affection, flexibility, fairness, commitment, seeing from the other's point of view, joy, enthusiasm, trustworthiness, respectfulness, and tolerance (Marlowe et al., 2017). By considering all these impactful components and aspects of interpersonal relationship characteristics during learning environment observations, and through analyzing the data, I found important and positive impacts on students and their teachers.

Bronfenbrenner and Bowlby

To situate the importance of student-teacher relationships (STR), I used Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory, which posited that the environment where a child grows up is an essential aspect of the development of a child. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory detailed the correlation between child development and the quality of relationship with caretakers within five the layers of the systems model: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. In the microsystem, Bronfenbrenner described that children's teachers are equally important to parents and family in any child's development. Bronfenbrenner (2005) went on to explain, for a child to reach their full potential, they need at least one adult that is an unconditional cheerleader of their development.

Additionally, I chose to pair Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory with Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory because Bowlby described that a child's biological nature needs a nurturing relationship with their caregiver. Understanding the critical importance of the

STR in supporting a student as they move from detachment, due to COVID-19, to connectedness to combat student trauma (Subramaniam & Wuest, 2022), is a critical component of this study. As previously mentioned, parents and teachers are on the same level of importance in the child's microsystem according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological system which means the attachment theory can be applied to the STR.

Disability Interpretive Lens

When designing research tools and interacting with students, I maintained a disability interpretive lens (Mertens, 2003). This theory explained that behaviors manifest a disability and neither the behavior, nor the disability, directly reflect the student as a person. Mertens's (2003) disability interpretive lens is a theoretical framework that emphasized the importance of understanding disabilities as a social and cultural construct, rather than solely as an individual impairment. This lens recognized that disabilities are not solely a medical condition, but are shaped by societal attitudes, norms, and structures. Mertens's approach encourages the examination of how social and cultural factors influence the experiences, identities, and opportunities of individuals with disabilities. By using this interpretive lens, I aimed to promote inclusivity, equity, and social change for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Additionally, viewing this research through a disability interpretive lens assisted me in mitigating bias and allowed me to dig deeper into content by separating the disability and student.

Conclusions

Simply, there are several evidenced strategies for educators to utilize when supporting students with EBD. The approaches discussed in this literature review are additionally applicable to general education classrooms and other special education settings. Hayden's relationship driven classroom approach (as cited in Marlowe, 2011; 2012), or other relationship-based approaches, should be the foundational cornerstone for all educators across all settings. My review of the literature has shown, in order to properly implement a relationship-based

classroom pedagogy, educators need the following mindsets: understanding their place in Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological system, the importance of their roles in a child's life according to Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, and separating a disability from an individual (Mertens, 2003).

Methodology

In this grounded theory study (see Appendix A), using sequential multiple-methods, that included a student-teacher relationship (STR) inventory, an open-ended questionnaire, a researcher's journal, interviews, observations, and analytic memoing, I explored how and to what extent focusing on relationship-building between teachers and students with EBD helped rebuild community in a self-contained school setting following the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Purpose

The purpose of my multiple-methods grounded theory study is to explore and explain how emphasizing student-teacher relationships (STR) can support rebuilding school community in self-contained settings following the COVID-19 global pandemic through focusing on the perspectives and perceptions of the stakeholders in the learning environment. Upon completion of this study, I intend to create a narrative-based training guide for educators to use as a supplementary resource with the intention of enhancing community in the school environment though increasing student-teacher relationships and decreasing student trauma reactions and educator burnout.

Research Design

In designing this sequential multiple-method grounded theory study (see Appendix A), I chose to use a constructivist paradigm to make sense of the environment being studied. Guba and Lincoln (1989) described constructivism as a research paradigm that does not believe in objective reality. They explained "realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals (although clearly many constructions

will be shared)" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 43). I chose a constructivist epistemology because I believe knowledge and answers are built collaboratively between researchers and participants. I believe that individuals are a product of their circumstances, experiences, and interactions with the world. Additionally, I believe community and relationships play a significant role in the construction of how individuals make sense of the world. The combination of these two perspectives makes up the foundation for constructivism; people understand their realities and truths differently. Through this research, I wanted to understand the participants' realities and truths and will bring the participants' words back to them to ensure I have captured them correctly. My emphasis was to retell their story, from their perspective, while analyzing the data for the research question about the effects of building and maintaining STR between students with EBD and the educators in their learning environment.

Participants and Setting

Participants in this study consisted of students and teachers from the school environment where I am currently employed. Taking this perspective is also referred to as the emic position which is the "analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who participates in the culture being studied" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Initial convenience sampling for this study consisted of recruiting all 27 students and 11 educators who make up the settings' school community. The final participant group consisted of nine students and 10 staff members. Individual characteristics for the students included, but were not limited to, age, gender, medical diagnosis, disability category, academic achievement levels, cognitive performance levels, and both emotional and behavioral regulation functional levels.

Ten educators agreed to participate and this sample comprised one administrator, three lead teachers, three educational technicians, one social-emotional coordinator, and one social worker; all with different certification paths into their current profession. Due to the small number

of participants available and willing to participate, multiple data collection tools were utilized to supplement human participants and reach saturation.

I conducted the study in a small alternative school on the east coast of the United States where the educators work in unison with a population of students identified with one or more learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, or EBD. Total enrollment ranges from 25 to 40 students at any one time. The student body consists of approximately 80% in-district and 20% out-of-district students. Each student's educational background provided evidence of an inability to adhere to the school's behavioral conduct policy of following classroom and schoolwide behavioral expectations (e.g., attendance, substance abuse, appropriate language, eloping, threatening language and actions, inappropriate language) due to a manifestation of their disability in the lesser restrictive environments. Students who have difficulties conforming to the general education environment oftentimes require support from a more restrictive environment, like this one.

I chose to conduct my study in this familiar environment because I believed the relationships, I had with my students would be a significant benefit for two main reasons. First, I believed the students trusted I had their best interest in mind after years of working together. However, to ensure they knew this, I articulated the sentiment throughout the entire recruitment and participation process. Secondly, as their teacher and special education case manager, I was already conscious of their mental and emotional well-being. Therefore, the questions I asked were carefully constructed to only investigate positive experiences to mitigate instances of emotional labor and triggering. Simply, the relationships I had built with the student participants, through providing them daily support, was an asset in conducting this study. This familiarity was crucial to obtaining the most accurate information possible because I was familiar with their body language and physiological signs which would have signaled to me when the

student, for example, did not understand the question being asked or needed additional context to grasp what they were being asked.

Methods

I selected the following tools, that are widely used in grounded theory research (see Appendix B), to assist in collecting the data needed to reach saturation to properly ground the theory in evidence of what participants are experiencing in this specific learning environment. To complete this task, I used the following: (a) Educator-Student Relationship Survey, (b) Student Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire (Panorama, 2015b), (c) Educator Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire, (d) Student Semi-Structured Interview, (e) Educator Semi-Structured Interview, (f) learning environment observations, and (g) post-observation interviews. I chose an explanatory design instead of exploratory because the individual components included in my study have been researched thoroughly; yet, like individual strands of yarn, they have not been crocheted to explain the importance of relationships as we move past the COVID-19 global pandemic.

First, I administered the Educator-Student Relationship Survey with the student participants in order to gain their perspective on the impact of the following categories: (a) respect between students and teachers, (b) students' excitement to engage with their teachers, (c) students' perception on excitement received from their teachers, (d) teachers' concern towards students' emotions, and (e) teachers' interest in the students' life. The purpose of the educator-student relationship survey was to receive initial feedback from the students regarding each of the ten educators in the building. By implementing this educator-student relationship survey, I gained an understanding of each student's perspective on how interactions are supported by each staff member. I used a five question Likert-style survey to gauge student perception on the five categories. During analysis, each staff member received a cumulative score for each individual category to assist in the observation stage of the study.

Second, following the completion of the survey, I administered the Student Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire, adapted from the Panorama (2015b) classroom student-teacher relationship free response suggestions, based on the categories in the survey. This tool consisted of five open-ended questions to provide students the opportunity to add perspective and insight to the five categories in the Educator-Student Relationship Survey and identify themes to assist in developing questions for semi-structured student interviews. The Panorama (Panorama, 2015a) School Teacher-Student Relationship Survey has been altered by me to be inclusive of all educators as opposed to lead classroom teachers. Next, I asked educator participants five open-ended questions which were analyzed to generate the first round of semi-structured interview questions with all participating educators.

Third, I conducted semi-structured student interviews to gain further insight from students regarding personal qualities of teachers who support them. This interview included questions such as “How does your teacher show concern for your emotional well-being?” followed by, “Can you provide an example of a time a teacher showed concern for your emotional well-being?” I analyzed the student responses to the semi-structured interviews to continue thematic development and lead to question development for semi-structured educator interviews. Next, I conducted educator semi-structured interviews to understand the importance of relationship building skills, their pedagogy, and strategies they rely on to navigate their daily interactions with students. Additionally, I looked to gain understanding on whether the nature of the support was predominantly behavior management, relationship building, or emotional regulation based. I asked questions designed to gain understanding on the nuances of interacting with students, either regulated or dysregulated, and their perception of the impact of understanding this nuance in sustaining positive STR.

Fourth, upon completion of student and educator interviews, I conducted one structured observation of an instructional period and one alternative instructional period for the three

educators who were identified by the students as having the most positive relationships with students, based on student responses in the initial Educator-Student Relationship Survey. I was focused on witnessing interactions between students and teachers to gain a nuanced understanding of how teachers accept their students into the interaction, manage the interaction variables such as tiredness, escalation, or food insufficiency, and how they adjusted their relationship building approach based on those variables. Specifically, I wanted to observe teachers who were using strategies similar to those outlined in Hayden's relationship-building classroom approach, to support student behaviors and emotional well-being during everyday interactions, to help me decipher the impact this approach has on student-teacher relationships.

Following the observations, I conducted interviews to ask the educators to explain the interactions I witnessed and why they utilized the strategies they chose to use in order to gain understanding of how application of the strategies impacted the interaction, and ultimately their relationships. Additionally, I conducted follow-up interviews with students to understand, from their perspective, how the techniques used by the educator in that observed moment supported their emotional, mental, or physical dysregulation.

Summary

In summary, for my grounded theory data collection I used a cyclical model of collecting data, analyzing data, and using the analysis to continue collecting data until themes were created, saturation was reached, and a theory developed that was grounded in the participants' experience. I used the Educator-Student Relationship Survey, student and educator free response open-ended questions, student and educator semi-structured interviews, and learning environment observations as methods to collect the data. Through these tools, I gained insight that cannot always be observed as to how educators build relationships with students, implement behavioral support strategies, and how they chose the correct strategy in real time

based on the variables that included, but were not limited to, a specific student, specific behavior, setting, and audience.

Results

The purpose of my multiple-methods grounded theory study was to explore and explain how emphasizing student-teacher relationships (STR) can support rebuilding school-community in self-contained settings following the COVID-19 global pandemic through focusing on the perspectives and perceptions of the stakeholders in the learning environment. As the purpose of this specific journal publication is to deeply dive into the methodology and research design of this still-in-progress grounded theory study, the following presentation of results describe my experience utilizing the data collection tools and initial analysis based on initial pondering of the raw data. The initial analysis should not be considered finalized results until all steps of the data analysis process are completed during the 2023–2024 school year.

Educator-Student Relationship Survey

The quantitative nature of the Educator-Student Relationship Survey allowed me to gain perspective from student participants regarding five categories identified by Panorama Education (2015a) as essential in gauging student-teacher relationships. Ultimately, I wanted a measurable dataset to identify the three educators in the learning environment with the highest-rated relationships with students from the student perspective. Each educator participant received an average score out of 5 in each of the following categories: respect, concern, teacher's excitement towards the student, interest, and students' excitement towards the teacher (see Table 1). On the Likert-scale survey, the student participants answered one question for each of these categories for each educator. Each category was given a numerical score of 1 through 5 based on the participant's response. Column 1 featured not at all and almost never response options which were given a score of 1. Column 5 was given a numerical score of 5, featuring responses of extremely or almost always.

Table 1

Educator Average Score Per Survey Tool Category

Educator Participant	Categories				
	Respect	Concern	Teacher excitement toward student	Interest in student needs	Students' excitement toward teacher
1	4.8	4.6	4.6	4.5	4.5
2	4.0	3.7	3.1	3.6	3.3
3	4.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.0
4	4.2	3.7	3.5	3.6	3.7
5	4.3	3.3	3.5	3.4	4.2
6	4.7	4.3	4.1	4.3	4.2
7	4.5	4.6	4.6	4.5	4.5
8	4.6	4.0	3.6	4.2	4.0
9	4.3	4.3	4.1	4.1	3.8
10	4.6	4.3	3.7	3.8	3.3

Note. Average score was generated by accumulating responses from all student participants in each of the five categories for each educator. While some people are opposed to averages in a Likert-scale, the results of the interviews verified the results were accurate.

I completed the following process to identify the average score per category. After completing the survey with each student, their responses were collected and organized on Google Sheets. Next, I compiled each student response per category for each educator and calculated the average. For example, one educator scored a 4.8 out of 5 in the respect category, as shown in Table 1. To get 4.8, I found the cumulative score of each student participant's individual score for this specific teacher in this specific category (48) and divided by the total number of student participants (10) to find the average (4.8), as displayed in Table 1. Next, I sorted each of the question category columns in Table 1 from highest to lowest average score to identify the highest three scoring educator participants in each question category.

Based on these sorted rankings, participant 1 received the highest or tied for the highest score in 5 out of 5 categories. Participant 6 received the second or tied for the second highest

score in 5 out of 5 categories. Participant 7 tied for the highest score in 4 out of 5 categories. Based on their placement in the rankings, these are the educators that I completed observations on in and out of the classroom environment. Additionally, the students identified teacher respect towards students, teacher concern for student emotions, needs, and feelings, and teacher level of interest in the student as the top three most effective categories.

Student and Educator Open-Ended Questionnaire

Next, these high school aged student participants were asked four identical questions in sit-down interviews that lasted on average of 12 minutes. During this process, each of the three educators, who received the highest average scores from the students, were highlighted individually by students when asked generic exploratory questions about what educators do, or can do, to build stronger student-teacher relationships, how educators show understanding for the student, one change educators can make to improve relationships with students, and one strategy the student would use to build relationships if they were a teacher. Results from the Student Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire indicated a need for deeper exploration into respect, utilization of student-teacher check-ins, teacher emotional regulation, and confirmed the three educators identified through the previously explained Educator-Student Relationship Survey analysis process were in fact the educators with the best relationships from the students' perspectives.

Likewise, each educator completed the Educator Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire and were asked a series of four open-ended questions to explore themes of relationship building from their perspective. During this process, each of the educators were asked what educators can do to build stronger student-teacher relationships, two thigs students can do to improve relationships with educators, how educators show understanding for the student, and one strategy the educator uses to build relationships with the students. Results

indicate that educators find significant importance in areas like patience, mutual respect, mutual interests, and students viewing educators as people too.

Student and Educator Semi-Structured Interviews

Students and educators individually sat for semi-structured interviews based on the five previously mentioned Educator-Student Relationship Survey categories and aspects of building relationships. Interviews lasted 30–50 minutes depending on the participant. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the participant and me to dig deeper into categories they were more passionate and insightful about, while ensuring they commented on each category within the structure of the interview. For example, two student participants were less knowledgeable regarding the impact of school-wide positive behavior strategies, which was useful information to consider, yet allowed me to spend more time investigating the impact that transferring into our school had on their perception of their future post-secondary outcomes. While reflecting on initial jottings and ponders, the two most important contributions to the study coming from the participant interviews were: (a) the emergence of components of relationships I have not considered, and (b) in vivo subheading titles, in the participants own words, for when I organize future reporting of the results.

Learning Environment Observations

Conducting observations in the classroom learning environment and learning environments outside of the physical school classroom allowed me to view themes in the moment that began to percolate throughout the questionnaire and interview stages. I observed all three educators in each learning environment setting to gain understanding of how they utilized behavioral management strategies to mitigate or support escalations in the moment, and aspects of relationship building I had not considered, like pivoting. During two observations, students were observed showing signs of escalation (loud voices, unprompted movement throughout the classroom, and disengagement in direct instruction), prompting the classroom

teacher to “pivot” their instruction. In self-contained settings, pivoting often provides an opportunity for students to release some energy or emotions through physical activity (i.e., playing basketball in the schools’ gymnasium) resulting in the students showing a decrease in escalation. Following up on the observation with short fact-finding interviews, the educators and students confirmed that supporting the students’ needs in those moments through the pivot, as opposed to using disciplinary actions from the school-wide PBIS (Center on PBIS, 2023) model, increased the connection between the student and educator while also setting the student up for success for the remainder of the school day.

Summary of Results

Utilizing the relationship survey, open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and learning environment observations with follow-up interviews in a cyclical approach assisted me in exploring teacher pedagogy in theory and in practice. Gaining deeper insight into the structures used in this school setting supported the explanatory nature of the study and allowed me to make connections between the data that may have not been available without using multiple data collection tools in the research design process. Results show the data collection tools I utilized garnered the type of information I was hoping to receive, did not create emotional labor for the students, did not create power dynamics with students or educators, and increased my understanding of the importance of building and maintaining relationships between special education students with EBD and the educators that support them in a self-contained learning environment following the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Discussion

Special education students with EBD have the worst post-secondary outcomes of all students (Garwood, 2022; Garwood et al., 2021; Garwood & Van Loan, 2019; Marlowe et al., 2017; Van Loan & Garwood, 2018) and their teachers are more likely to reach burnout than any of their colleagues (Bettini et al., 2020). While districts across the country utilize school-wide

positive behavioral interventions and support systems, the results of this study show that a more effective foundational building-block for self-contained learning environments is focusing on relationship-based school-wide and classroom approaches. While educator perspective is important, what makes my research study different and impactful to the field is the emphasis on the perspectives and perceptions of the students. These data collection tools were designed and utilized to draw on student-voice and give students a platform, many for the first time, to be heard regarding what is important to them when building relationships with their teachers. The results of the tools' efficacy and my initial ponderings of the results show that when conducting research on how to best support students, the students should be the primary stakeholder in order for the research to have validity. Finally, repairing relationships was a component of this study, however, results and discussion on this component of STR will not be addressed until the final iterations of my dissertation study.

Limitations

Limitations in this constructivist grounded theory research study include, but are not limited to, positionality in the research setting, participant recruiting, and school year calendar. As a special education teacher in the research setting, I teach social studies to all the students who participated in the study and serve as special education case manager for several of them. To mitigate potential bias, students on my case management list were given the opportunity to have their participation overseen by an alternative educator. Regarding the recruitment of participants, in a small self-contained setting, findings are not generalizable to a broader setting. To mitigate this, I invited every student enrolled in the setting in order to collect data from the widest range of gender, age, race, disability category, location, and socio-economic level possible. Lastly, the time of school year could potentially affect how students and staff view relationships based on burnout, emotional dysregulations, and personal outside-of-school

variables. To mitigate this, I only interviewed or observed participants in moments when they were self-identified as being in a positive and regulated emotional state.

Finally, the potential power dynamics at play could have affected the answers and responses provided by both students and educators. It is impossible to remove power dynamics in hierarchical environments, like a public-school building. To mitigate concerns by students and educators, I obtained assent from students and consent from educators. Students and educators were repeatedly informed in the consent form and prior to each meeting of their option to discontinue participation at any time; participation had no effect on their academic standing for students and employment for educators.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the importance of building and maintaining student-teacher relationships in self-contained learning environments from the perspective of students and their teachers. Relationships are the foundational building block to reverse the negative trajectory of post-secondary outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The results of this study should be applied to similar settings and student populations. Future research should examine the effectiveness of these strategies in building relationships between students and teachers in all learning environments, including general education setting as students across the institution of public education are feeling the mental health impacts of COVID-19. By digging deeper on this topic, researchers can contribute to the enhancement of school culture and community throughout the entire institution of public education. Additionally, the results from this study could be utilized as strategies for researchers to consider when examining effective methods specific to repairing relationships in the learning environment.

Final Thoughts

As a result of this study and the findings described within, I aspire to offer resources to educators to supplement their current professional development in hopes of providing the best

possible educational services to special education students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. This population of students is often left behind due to archaic and exclusive disciplinary practices by educators and administrators who have been less than successful in managing the student behaviors. Through my work, I hope to offer practical and applicable tools to help speed up the learning process for educators and make generational educational enhancements through sharing the importance of selecting a relationship-based pedagogy as any learning environment's foundational approach.

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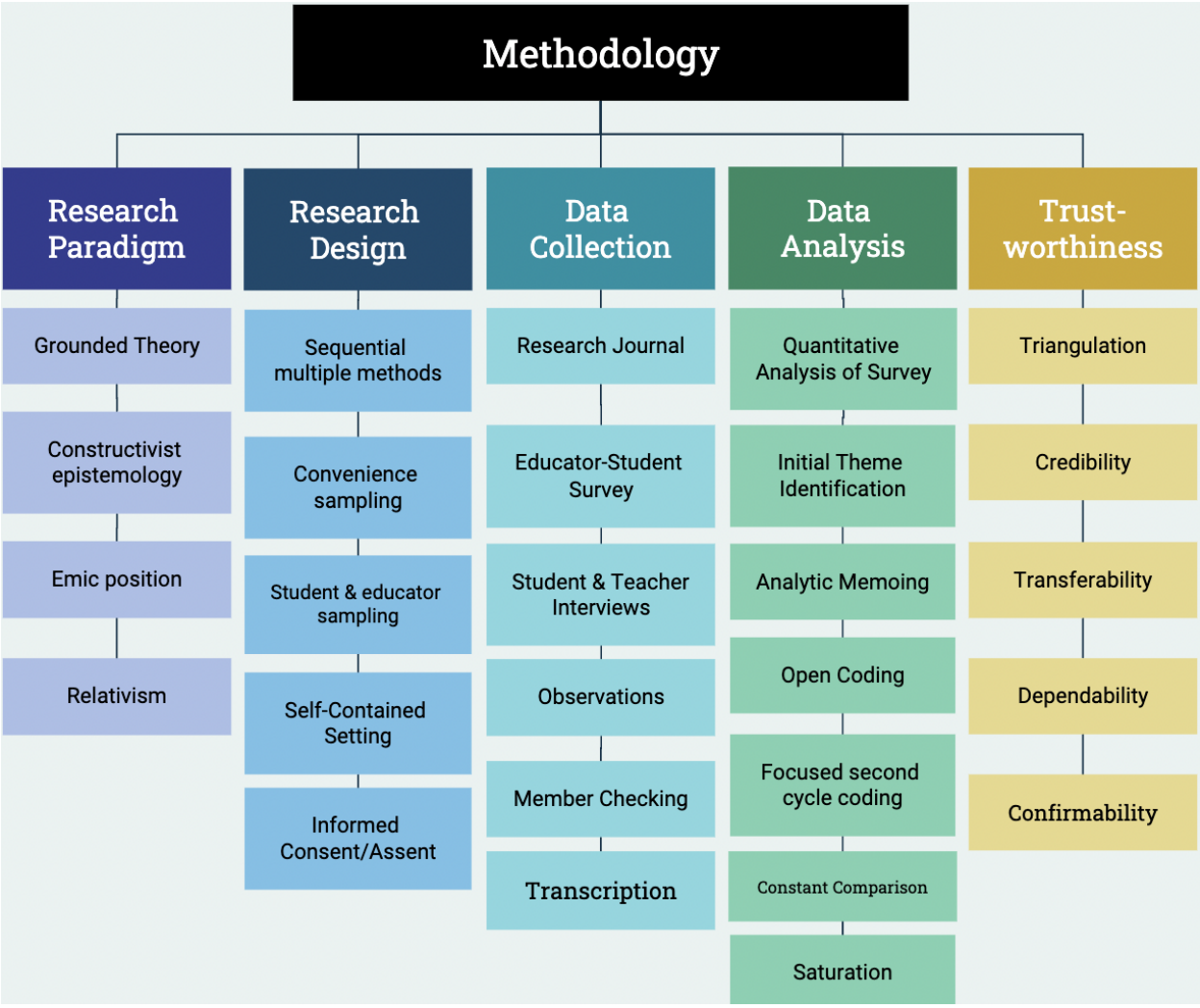
Appendix A

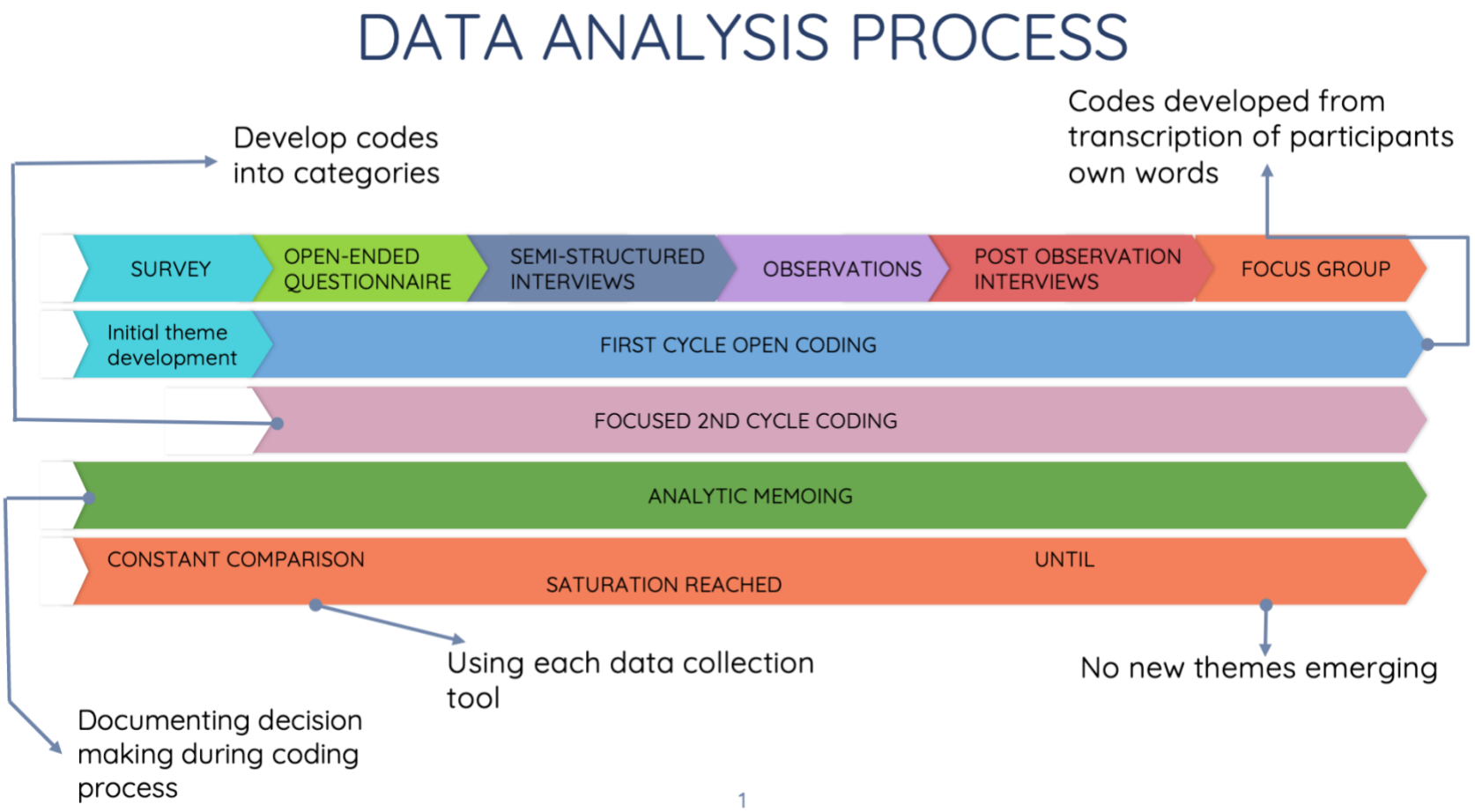
Methodology



Source: Christopher Sacoco (2023)

Appendix B

Data Analysis Process



Source: Christopher Sacoco (2023)

Gamify Your Way to an Engaging Specialist Classroom: Lessons Learned in the Library From Teaching During a Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper presents one elementary school librarian's experience using gamification and game-based learning in the specialist classroom. While the academic literature on gamification and game-based learning is increasing, there has not been much written on using these techniques in the specialist classroom. Using a case study method, the researcher explored the question, "How might a specialist teacher apply gamification and game-based learning techniques in the specialist classroom to improve student engagement and overall classroom management?" Data for this case study included a comparison of student work over 3 years, 1 year without gamification and game-based learning, and 2 years with gamification and game-based learning, and direct observation of student participation, attentiveness, and overall behavior. Analysis of the data showed that students responded positively to gamification and game-based learning, and the quality of student work improved when game-based learning and gamification techniques were employed in the specialist classroom.

Keywords: gamification, game-based learning, specialists, play to learn, classroom management

Students who are engaged in classroom activities are typically well-behaved, meaning they are actively participating in an instructional activity, and not drawing attention away from the academic task at hand (Fulton, 2019; Sparks, 2013). Gamification and game-based learning are capturing the interest of classroom teachers who are looking to increase engagement

among all students in their curricular activities (Chen et al., 2019). It is necessary to distinguish between game-based learning and gamification. Gamification refers to using game elements, such as points, rewards, and competition in non-game-based activities. Game-based learning on the other hand refers to creating learning activities that are inherently game-like and playful (Abu-Hammad & Hamtini, 2023; Pho & Dinscore, 2015).

Classroom management in the specialist (e.g., art, library, music, physical education) classroom poses unique challenges for the specialist teacher and the students. For students, a specialist class provides a break from the structure of a typical day, and an opportunity to connect with a different teacher while exploring enriching content (Kuykendall, 2022). A student who loves to draw may find relief during art class to have time dedicated to practicing the craft. A student who loves books may have the opportunity during library time to engage with stories far and wide, while also learning valuable information gathering skills. A student who is musically inclined may relish the opportunity to sing, dance, and explore music with the music specialist, and a physically active student will welcome the opportunity to run and play during physical education. For students whose favorite special is “not” art, library, music, or physical education, that class period might be challenging.

For the specialist teacher, in a school with only one specialist per course, the class rotation provides the opportunity to work with every student in a school over the course of the week, and to expose every student to everything that the specialist teacher loves about art or library or music or physical education. The challenge for a specialist teacher is in establishing classroom routines with students who are only in the class one day per week, while also differentiating instruction and assignments to meet the needs of every student in the school. Classroom routines are just as important in the specialist classroom as in the primary classroom. The specialist teacher needs to establish routines quickly and efficiently, and hook students early into the specialist class, to have ample time to complete planned projects and

activities. Game-based learning and gamification are proving to be effective ways to increase student engagement (Chen et al., 2020, p. 1). Morgan (2015) stated the answer to increasing student engagement is not to simply allow young people to play games all day, or to sit in front of a computer for hours. The answer involves taking those elements from gaming that keep players returning for more: deep engagement in an activity, playfulness, collaboration, communication, creativity, and engagement with technology. In this process, teachers also can develop opportunities to learn from other students and opportunities to teach other students. (Morgan, 2015, pp. 183–184). It is possible to incorporate all of these components in a specialist classroom despite the limitations of schedule and time, and the large number of students typically on a specialist's roster. In this study, I explored, as a library specialist teacher, my approach to establishing procedures and building classroom community through games-based learning and gamifying the library experience.

Literature Review

Classroom Management in the Specialist Classroom

Elementary public-school students are assigned to a classroom with one or more teachers, who are responsible for establishing a positive learning environment and making sure students learn the state required curriculum for their grade (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2018, p. 3). Students see their classroom teacher every school day of the school year, and one of the first orders of business for the classroom teacher involves establishing classroom procedures, rules, and norms. It is in developing these routines that teachers create a sense of safety, trust, and community in their classroom (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2018, p. 3). A classroom grounded in safety, trust, and community is ripe for what comes next, promoting engagement, curiosity, and excitement about the curriculum (ElSayary et al., 2022, p. 272; Massachusetts Department of Higher Education,

2018, p. 3). It takes time and effort to develop classroom procedures, and it is not unusual for the first weeks of school to be dedicated to classroom management.

In some districts, students might also spend a small portion of the school day, ranging from 30–50 minutes (Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, 2018, p. 14), with one of the specialist teachers. The classroom teacher is not typically present for the specialist class (Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, 2018, p. 14). A specialist teacher typically refers to those who teach art, library, music, or physical education classes (McConnell, 2018). For those districts with specialist classes, it is not unusual for students to attend a different special class each day of the week. For example, on Monday, students might have library class, on Tuesday and Thursday they might have physical education, on Wednesday students might have music class, and on Friday art class. These specialist classes offer a break from the routine, and an opportunity for students to develop skills outside of state mandated curriculum.

While a break from routine is good, and exposure to art, books, music, and physical activity is important (McConnell, 2018, para. 2), breaks in routines can cause problems for those students who need structure to thrive (Rabadi & Ray, 2017). Classroom teachers develop classroom routines with daily practice, an opportunity that specialist teachers do not have if they see students only once per week. It is just as important for specialist teachers to develop classroom routines, and it is just as important for students to feel the same sense of safety, trust, and community in the specialist classroom, so students can thrive in their specialist classes, but it takes much longer because the practice is spread out over weeks.

Engagement

Classroom management skills include a wide range of activities, from setting up a classroom, determining class rules, preparing activities, and paying attention to behavior (Bozkus, 2020, p. 433). Poor behavior can manifest in a variety of ways, from the seemingly well-behaved child sitting quietly at the desk but not really paying attention, to the disruptive

child sending paper airplanes through the air or blurting out non-sequiturs. Anyone who has worked in an elementary classroom can attest to the idea that a student who is engaged in a learning activity is a well-behaved student. The students who tend to misbehave are those who are disengaged (Fulton, 2019). Students might disengage from a learning activity because the activity might be too challenging or too simple, or the activity might lack meaning for the student (Riches, n.d.). To re-engage a student in a learning activity, it helps to explore the different types of engagement as described by ElSayary et al. (2022).

In describing the academic communities of engagement (ACE) framework for blended learning, ElSayary et al. (2022) described three different types of student engagement: social emotional engagement, which refers to the “emotional energy associated with learning” (p. 272), cognitive engagement which refers to the mental effort of learning, such as a student’s ability to “focus, questioning, thinking critically, and problem solving” (p. 273); and behavioral engagement which refers to “physical activities associated with completing the course requirements, such as attendance and submitting tasks” (p. 273). Understanding the types of engagement creates space for a teacher to pinpoint where a student is dropping off, and to then develop modifications to the learning activity to bring the student back into the activity. ElSayary et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of direct communication with students as a means of increasing their social emotional engagement (p. 272). To improve cognitive engagement, ElSayary et al. (2022) suggested scaffolding, questioning, and use of appropriate teaching apps and effective media (p. 273). To improve behavioral engagement, ElSayary et al. suggested following up with students who have missed a class, a deadline, or an assignment (p. 274).

When discussing 21st century learning skills it is not uncommon to hear them referred to as the four Cs of education (P21, 2009). The four Cs of education include critical thinking, creative thinking, communicating, and collaborating (P21, 2009). As education and research into education evolves, teachers continue to see the four Cs in many educational initiatives from

design thinking (Flannery, 2018), in the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) standards (2023), and in the elements of engagement (ElSayary et al., 2022). Even the ISTE standards have evolved from their inception in 1998 as a means for learning to use technology to, a means to use technology to learn in 2007, and as a means of transformative learning with technology in 2016 (ISTE, 2023). Educator tools and resources evolve, student needs and interests evolve, and technology evolves as we ask the question that educators have been asking since the dawn of public education, “How do we best engage today’s students in their education?” (Paterson, 2021; Library of Congress, n.d.).

Gamification

Educators have different resources at their disposal (e.g., frameworks, guidelines, standards, technology, access to information), the question is, “How do teachers apply all of the tools and resources to create a classroom environment that is structured, safe, engaging, and conducive to learning?” Gamifying the classroom is one approach that has been successful in the upper elementary library specialist classroom (Morgan, 2023). McGonigall (2011) wrote, “Games are providing rewards that reality is not. They are teaching and inspiring and engaging us in ways that reality is not. They are bringing us together in ways that reality is not" (p. 13). It makes sense then, to draw on those successful community building and engaging elements of gaming in the classroom. It is possible to draw on both game-based learning and gamification in one classroom setting, as I will display in this case study.

As a teacher trying to implement gaming strategies into my teaching, I first must ask, “How do I cover the curriculum and meet the individual needs of students?” In a heterogenous classroom, one teacher has to meet many different learning styles and needs. “Schools try to strike a balance between covering the curriculum with meeting students’ individual needs” (Sanders, 2021, p. 383). The next question, I ask is, “How do I cover the curriculum and keep students engaged?” Particularly in K–12 classrooms, classroom management is a very

important piece of the day. Students who are engaged are typically better behaved than students who are not engaged but incorporating gaming and fun into a school day is risky for teachers, because it involves giving up control (Sanders, 2021). According to Sanders (2021), “School as an institution seems to be of two minds about how to engage with the students’ interest and also maintain order and focus” (p. 383).

According to Sanders (2021), many teachers are not making full use of a computer’s capabilities in the classroom. Sanders stated, “Traditional School arrangement supports the generalized and simplistic use of computers as an electronic grade book or paper collection and dissemination tool” (p. 383). While gamifying a classroom does not specifically refer to computer games, computers do provide opportunities for creating an immersive and engaging academic gaming experience for students when those computers are used to the fullest extent of their potential.

Games have been around since the ancient people walked this earth, and references to gaming appear in Herodotus' seminal work, *The Histories*, (as cited in McGonigall, 2011). Teachers have been using different kinds of games since the beginning of formal schooling. According to Sanders (2021), though, to be effective in education, gaming has to be immersive. Learning and the game need to be one, teachers should not make students leave the game to get the academics (Aprea & Ifenthaler, 2022, p. 400). Neither game-based learning nor gamification require a digital platform to be fun. While the majority of what will later be described will be digitally gamifying the elementary library classroom, there are elements from most of the learning activities that could be carried out using traditional, paper and pencil, methods.

Games have the potential to give students unique ways to interact with the curriculum and each other. Sanders (2021) stated, “Game based learning environments present new ways for students to encounter, interact with, and create information” (p. 384). Minecraft is one game that creates an opportunity to completely flip the approach to teaching and learning. According

to Sanders (2021), “Minecraft is a block building game environment where the player can theoretically create almost anything imaginable” (p. 384), including opportunities to interact with the curriculum in meaningful ways. “Minecraft gameplay has two modes, sandbox (creative) and survival mode. Both modes are customizable” (Sanders, 2021, p. 384). The main difference is that in creative mode the builder has access to all of the materials, and in survival mode, the builder must make, grow or gather the materials. Additionally, in survival mode the building process can be interrupted or destroyed by creatures. There is a version made just for schools, Minecraft Education. “Minecraft is one of the few games that has captured the imagination of educators and students alike” (Sanders, 2021, p. 384).

From my experiences, there are several challenges, especially in public schools, to moving to a game-based teaching and learning system. To experience the true benefits of game-based learning, the game must be immersive, and to be immersive may require an active shift from standards-based learning (Sanders, 2021). Private schools appear to have more freedom from standardized testing to break from traditional approaches to education; public schools do not have that freedom. How do specialist teachers find time to create space during class time for an immersive experience (Sanders, 2021, p. 385)? Further issues of equity arise with regard to availability of devices. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many school districts throughout the United States that did not provide devices to all students. Device availability changed dramatically as a result of the pandemic (Kuykendall, 2022), and now many more districts do put devices in students’ hands, even so, not all students have devices. There are still students without access to technology. For that reason, it is important for teachers in those districts to consider the options for game-based learning and gamification sans devices.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic changed many aspects of education; administrators, teachers, students, and families came out of the pandemic with new fears, concerns, and challenges

(Vidić et al., 2023). As a result, post-COVID-19 classroom management includes an even greater focus on social emotional learning, relationship building, and individualized instruction (Moore et al., 2022). Post-COVID-19, students and families are feeling higher levels of anxiety and mental health issues (Moore et al., 2022), and a greater dissatisfaction with teachers and school (Vidic et al., 2023, p. 22). Some students' views of teachers were impacted during COVID-19, when teachers were forced into teaching digitally, many whom were unprepared and had to focus more of their energy on learning the technology, and thus had less left for supporting the students (Vidić et al., 2023). Now teachers are struggling to manage the mental health and behavioral issues they are seeing in their students as a result of the pandemic (Moore et al., 2022).

Because so many students have fallen behind socially, psychologically, and behaviorally (Moore et al., 2022), I believe that relationship building between teachers and students and among students has become even more important in our post-COVID-19 education. Gamification has the potential to help teachers in efforts to bridge the gap from where students were prior to COVID-19 to post-COVID-19. The social aspects of gaming and the natural engagement of students in the gamification process can benefit students socially, academically, and emotionally. Since gamification does not have to be digital to be effective, every teacher can use this tool to help re-engage students and help students to build up their emotional, social, and behavioral strengths. In schools in which students and teachers had access and training and who actually grew in terms of technology skills during COVID-19, those teachers and students can continue their technology development (Erwin et al., 2021).

Some teachers might worry about changing their approach to teaching so soon after COVID-19 to incorporate elements of gaming into their curriculum, and they might worry about relying on technology. However, relationship building that can occur through game-based learning is even more important now in post-Covid-19 education. Many teachers and students

did develop new skills with technology as a result of the pandemic and those skills should be maintained and further developed (Erwin et al., 2021). As for shifting approaches to teaching, one might argue that good teaching involves continuously adapting teaching to support continually evolving student populations (Erwin et al., 2021). Did anything good come from the pandemic? For at least one elementary library teacher, the pandemic created an opportunity to make the shift to a gamified classroom, and that proved to be most beneficial for both students and the teacher.

Methodology

This qualitative study used case study method to gather information about my experiences as library teacher using game-based learning and gamification in my grades 3–6, library classes during the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years. I gathered data through observational methods in my library classroom and through a comparison of student work and behaviors from the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years with work and behaviors from the previous academic year. Changes to my teaching schedule as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, forced me to make drastic changes to “where I taught,” so I took the opportunity to capitalize on gaming elements that had worked for me in the past and intentionally brought those elements into everything that I did with students in my library classroom to change “how” I taught.

Problem

ElSayary et al. (2022) pointed out the importance of teacher to student, and student to student interactions in improving social emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and physical engagement in a class. The types of interactions can be difficult to foster in a specialist classroom due to limitations of time; time required to foster individual relationships with students, the limited amount of class time given the amount of material to cover (e.g., transitioning in, introducing lesson, transitioning to activity, time for clean-up, transitioning out,

time required for book checkout). The problem for a library specialist teacher is getting to know students individually in a sufficient manner to make them feel seen, and having the classroom routines established to the degree that creates the space for students to interact with each other productively, not in such a way as to distract classmates from the task at hand.

Background

In March of 2020 a raging world-wide pandemic brought the world to its knees. In September of 2020, the district in which I work created a plan for returning students to school safely. The plan included a combination of remote and in person learning options, and for specialists, a traditional weekly specialist schedule at the lower elementary school for students in grades K–2, and a rotating 34-day schedule at the upper elementary school for grades 3–6, where specialist (art, innovation, library, music, and physical education) teachers would see the same four classes every day for 34 days and then switch to a new rotation of students. The 34-day rotation was a vastly different model than specialist teachers had been previously accustomed. Typically, specialists would see every student in the district, about 600 students, once each week. To reduce the challenges with working with 600 students each week online, all specialist teachers in the district switched to the rotation model at the upper elementary school.

This new schedule meant specialists needed to be prepared with 136 lessons, one lesson for each rotation day for 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students. Given the unpredictability of teaching modality with COVID-19, lessons needed to be suited for live in-person instruction, remote in-person instruction, and asynchronous instruction. Every specialist approached the challenge differently. I immediately saw the potential with this model. In the library special classes, I set out to develop lessons that would work for all models and could be used throughout the year. This was to be my second year in the district, however, the first year was cut short due to the pandemic, which meant I had quite a bit of work to do to come up with

lessons for all grades. At the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, the district started classes 2 weeks later than usual to provide time for the teachers to prepare their lessons.

During my first few years of teaching, I relied on the photocopier for library activities. Dealing with handouts for over 600 students was cumbersome and wasteful. Handwritten comments on the printed activities were one directional and did not create space for two-way communication with students. I would write comments, return the paper to the student, and given the short class period and once-a-week class schedule there was not time to follow up with every student on the feedback. But I had many questions. Did students read the comments? Did students have an opportunity to apply that feedback to future assignments? Did I have a way of keeping track of the feedback given so that I could tell whether the student had applied the feedback? All of the elements of good teaching were very difficult to emulate in a specialist classroom where paper materials dominated. Finding some of those returned assignments in the trash barrel further highlighted the problem. I had the sense that there had to be a better way.

When the pandemic forced me to move all of my library lessons to a digital format, Google Classroom offered an appropriate space. I transitioned every assignment to a digital assignment. During this process, I also took the opportunity to eliminate all but the most successful assignments and in developing new assignments took only the most successful elements of the best assignments to use as the basis for new assignments. Quickly, I realized that the most successful assignments had one thing in common: they involved some sort of game. With this in mind, I started to assess the work I did my first year in the district. Some of those lessons had been very successful. Those I kept intact. Others had been good, but not great. Those I revised. Some did not work at all, and I eliminated those lessons. One thing I learned as a library teacher is that behavior problems came with bored students. If students were not behaving, then the fault was usually with the teacher and the lessons. During the

2019–2020 school year, I could see the more successful students trying very hard to please me, but I lost other students. I needed to fix that.

It took about 6 weeks of long hours with the computer on my lap, from sunrise to almost midnight every day, to reinvent the library lessons. I stopped to eat, bathe, sleep, and then when school started, teach, but did nothing else. It was a “LOT” of work. But when I was done, I was done. My lessons were set for the year, allowing time to tweak as needed, but not plan. Every second of that time spent had been worthwhile. I loved what I came up with, and even better, so did my students.

The Game

The underlying game used in this study was based on a book series by J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter*, that was popular among students at that time. All students were sorted into one of the four Hogwarts Houses (Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, or Slytherin) and then competed the entire school year to win the “house cup.” The winner of the house cup was announced during the morning announcements on the last day of school. In the library, the winning seating area was decorated in house colors, where the trophy and decor would stay for the entire following year. When the winner was announced, one could hear cheers erupt in classrooms throughout the building. This game included every student in the school, as the game was developed so that every student could participate, whether they were familiar with the book series or not and regardless of academic, physical, or emotional ability. Since the entire school was divided into one of four houses, there were representatives from different grades in every house. Occasionally, siblings were in different houses which brought the competition home for some.

I took inspiration for the Hogwarts houses from the librarian who preceded me in the district. The former librarian used it primarily for seating arrangements and made a big deal of using a sorting hat and completing the process in a very Hogwarts style manner. Initially, I

assigned students to Hogwarts houses by hand, asking students to choose their top three describing words, which were borrowed from a Harry Potter Fandom website, and then used to create the houses. Each classroom had an equal number of students in each house, and students sat in the library with the other members of their house. This by-hand method proved to be very time consuming, and I was already considering other options as I thought ahead to my second year in the district. The second year turned out to be the pandemic year, so initially I only saw students remotely. I needed a digital option for sorting students and also for keeping track of which house students sorted into. Drawing descriptive words from the Wizarding World website, I created a Google Form for students to complete on the first day of remote library class. Students chose the word that best described them, and based on their response were immediately placed into one of the four Hogwarts Houses: Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, or Hufflepuff. For this game to be fair, it was important that each house had an equal number of students. To keep students from outsmarting the form (and intentionally selecting a word to get into a particular house), each of the following years I used different words. It was my expectation that the number of students would be roughly the same in each house through natural selection, however, I did carefully monitor the numbers and adjusted the words students might choose if houses started looking unbalanced.

Once sorted into Hogwarts Houses, everything that students did in library classes all year earned, and occasionally lost, points for their Hogwarts House. The first student to arrive in library class earned Hogwarts House points, which was a great way during the pandemic to get students to show up to my Zoom class on time. The district was only remote for about 6 weeks, and the first to arrive points did not transfer well when we moved back to the in-person classroom. I heard from one classroom teacher that students were racing out of recess and up the stairs to be the first one to library class and the classroom teacher was worried about injuries; thereafter, most points were handed out for events that took place “after” students

arrived at the library. Although, I still did hand out some points outside of the library class. For example, during morning bus duty, I was known to give out Hogwarts House points for students who showed kindness to others by holding open doors, or helping out a friend (and, yes, there were occasionally three (or more) students holding any given door at a time—fortunately, there were plenty of points to go around).

In class, students earned points for completing an assignment according to a rubric. A perfectly completed assignment might earn 25 house points. One missing a citation or two might earn 20 points. I framed my response by emphasizing points earned, rather than points lost. Every student, on every assignment, had individual feedback from me telling them how many points they earned by completing a task. This type of feedback and communication between teacher and student went a long way toward improving social emotional engagement (ElSayary et al., 2022). Because my assignment feedback was handled privately in Google Classroom in the assignment comments section, students had an opportunity to read and respond to my feedback, which supported students' cognitive engagement (ElSayary et al., 2022). Because I used Google Classroom comments to provide feedback to students as they worked on a particular assignment, I could quickly identify students who were falling behind, and support each student as needed, thus supporting students' behavioral engagement (ElSayary et al., 2022). Students who finished early could earn extra points by completing a second assignment on a different topic, or by helping me by straightening bookshelves, cleaning tables, or helping a classmate complete their assignment.

The Hogwarts House framework helped me to establish routines very quickly in my library specialist classroom. Students understood that following expected behavior norms was one way of earning house points, completing assignments was another way to earn points, and showing kindness was a third way to earn house points. I kept track of house points on a Google spreadsheet, and we started each class by reviewing current standings, which changed

greatly from class meeting to class meeting, since the whole school was involved. While I used Google Forms and Google Sheets to set up and maintain the house points, this classroom management technique is one that works equally well in both a digital and non-digital environment.

Discussion

How might one assess the success of these game-based learning and gamification strategies? One way to assess success is through direct observation: observing student work, and students in the classroom, their behavior, their level of engagement, and their motivation. Students looked as if they were having fun. I also appeared happy, and the behavior issues that I had struggled with in the past all but disappeared. I saw students excited to work on and share their library assignments. I saw students being playful and having fun. The work that students turned in was higher quality than work I had received from students in previous years. As the students and I worked in these ways, I learned how to use points in a positive way, rather than punitively. Importantly, I also learned to keep graded points private as much as possible to prevent comparisons and preserve student dignity. The lessons in this case study were initially designed based on a 34-day rotation, where I saw the same students every day for 34 days and covered all of the year's material in 34 days, and then moved onto a new rotation of students. The second year, we moved from a 34-day rotation to a two-week rotation, where specialists saw the same students every day for 2 weeks, and then moved to another rotation of students. This approach worked just as well during the 2-week rotation as in the 34-day rotation. This schedule would also work equally well in a typical specialist schedule where the student comes to special 1 day per week for the entire year. In fact, some elements of this two-week rotation design are better under a traditional approach, because each week students would see a big leap in house points because every student in the school would have had an opportunity to contribute during the course of a week. The true benefit of the 34-day rotation and 2-week

rotation for me was that I felt as if I got to know the students better seeing them every day for 34 days or every day for 2 weeks, but aside from that, the lessons and activities were designed to fit any model, 34-day rotation, 2-week rotation, or a full year of lessons.

One might think this is too much work to manage. Teaching “is” work but taking the time to make lessons and the classroom environment engaging for students created valuable time for me to build relationships and inspire students. Ultimately, it was not really too much time for me to manage, it was freeing. I was able to assign points for assignments during my 45-minute prep. Since my lessons are done for the year, I did not need to spend that time planning. Since my lessons are all digital, I did not have to spend that time making photocopies. I did not make ANY photocopies this year. You are welcome, environment.

So, what worked in this process:

1. The quality of student work improved dramatically from the 2019–2020 year to the following years. I, as the library teacher, gave routine feedback which students applied to their work. Students were motivated to earn additional points, and those students who finished early had the opportunity to earn additional points by either helping classmates who were still working, or by completing the assignment multiple times, choosing different topics. High achieving students had the opportunity to get rewarded for their efforts, while lower achieving students had ample time and extra support to complete their projects.
2. Student motivation to complete library assignments also improved dramatically from the 2019–2020 school year to the following years. Where I used to struggle to get students to complete assignments, now students seemed eager to do the work. They were motivated both by earning Hogwarts house points, and by the intrinsic gamified nature of the assignments. The assignments were fun to do because the topics were

of the students' choosing, and the assignments were fun to present to the class. No one wanted to be left out of the learning activities.

3. I observed increased engagement by students. They seemed eager to come to library class and were willing participants in the action. I also observed more smiles, laughter, and a sense of playfulness that was not apparent during the 2019–2020 school year.
4. Planning daily lessons well ahead of time freed me to focus on relationship building. Rather than using planning time to plan upcoming lessons, that time was spent providing feedback to students. Feedback is important in developing cognitive, social, emotional, and physical engagement (ElSayary et al., 2022). Planning time was also used to improve lessons as needed. I found there is comfort in knowing the plan for each day as one enters the school building in the morning.
5. While digital tools are not essential for gamification and game-based learning, they did provide some advantages. Specialist teachers used SeeSaw at the lower elementary school and Google Classroom at the upper elementary school. All assignments were digital as was all of the student work. It was not necessary to spend time each day making photocopies. When it came time for report cards, there was a digital record of all student work. It was easy to make comments, provide feedback, and see version history. In addition, digital tools also made it easier to build differentiation into every assignment by providing seamless access to word banks, templates, and graphic organizers for all assignments. The resources were there for students who needed them. Further, a digital specialist class site opens the door to increased instructional time. Students receive directions three ways: (a) live during all class instruction, (b) recorded videos for revisiting the lesson, and (c) written step-by-step instructions.

6. I easily created a gamified classroom and game-based assignments using tools such as digital breakouts, mystery research projects, web search challenges, and WebQuests. I also constantly looked for opportunities to build competition or playfulness into student presentations, as it seemed to motivate the students. I made sure students knew they could reach out to me with questions about any of these assignments.
7. Giving students control over specific research topics proved to have a positive impact on motivation. While I selected the larger topic from the state mandated curriculum for the grade (e.g., animals for third grade, inventions for 5th grade) students got to choose “which” animal or invention to research.
8. Research shows that students like to have an audience for their work (Lee & Hannafin, 2016) and presentation skills are included in the 2017 English Language Arts and Literacy Frameworks (DESE, 2017). Therefore, presentations were built into every project and students learned how to make presentations in a variety of formats. Class time was spent going over protocols for being an effective presenter, such as speaking slowly, looking at the audience, and making sure to call on different students. Class time was also spent going over how to be a respectful audience member, raising hands to take guesses, not laughing at mistakes, not blurting out, and not taking a guess if an audience member somehow learned what the secret item was ahead of time. I took great care to emphasize the importance of secrecy and not letting classmates see the Chromebook screen as students worked on their projects, but occasionally a secret animal would be revealed prematurely. For students with anxiety about presenting, they could either choose someone to present on their behalf or create a presentation that did not require the student to stand front and center to present.

9. To assess learning, I followed up all class presentations with a Kahoot, Quizziz, or Google Form activity that included questions from both lessons and student presentations. These assessments provided yet another way to earn house points and validation for the presenters that their messages were received, and students seemed to enjoy seeing points made in their presentations appear in a Kahoot. In addition, all three methods provided data that showed what students had taken from both the presentations and the lessons. In looking at the data, I could immediately identify strengths in learning, and gaps, and use that data to plan future lessons. The data gathered from these low stakes, low pressure assessments showed that student understanding of essential concepts improved over time, as concepts were routinely introduced, practiced, reinforced, and then assessed in a manner that was playful and relaxed. From my observations in class and my review of these formative assessments, I definitely did see an improvement in the quality of student work.

Recommendations

From a review of my experiences with the process of developing lessons and observing students in my library classroom as they navigated the lesson activities, I developed the following recommendations for educators to consider:

1. A large-scale study is needed. My review of the literature showed there to be scant research on classroom management in the specialist classroom, and even fewer studies on using gamification and games-based learning to improve specialist classroom management.
2. Consider using gamification and game-based learning techniques to give students an opportunity to escape for a time from anxiety provoking external stressors. Games provide an escape from reality (McGonigall, 2011). As teachers work to create a safe environment for learning in their classrooms, I found that providing an

opportunity for students to escape from post-COVID-19 stressors goes a long way toward achieving that goal. Incorporating gamification and games-based learning techniques offered opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the activity and escape from their worries.

3. Students are children and children are playful (Caine & Caine, 2011). I tried to draw on that inherent characteristic to activate their creativity and curiosity while also teaching important content.
4. Draw on the media for storylines to infuse into your specialist classroom. An art teacher might turn the classroom into a Hokusai “Wave” design studio, for example, where students are tasked with creating a Hokusai inspiration piece. A music class might draw on a current and popular musical such as Wicked.
5. Design learning activities that are game-like. For example, asking students to present facts about an animal or invention without revealing which animal or invention they are discussing. I found that it created opportunities for classmates to listen carefully to clues and take guesses as to the specific presentation topic. Doing so promoted active listening among audience members and gave the presenter an opportunity to interact with the audience, while also creating a playful activity that is game-like.
6. Schools might want to rethink the specialist class schedule. Schools with specialists who cover teacher preparation periods typically schedule visits with each specialist once per week. My experience with seeing students every day for 2 weeks, or every day for 34 days, showed a huge improvement in relationship building between students and me, and an improvement in student learning. When there is a week between classes, it takes much longer to complete longer projects, and it is necessary to spend more time reviewing work from the previous week. Students are

more likely to forget how to cite a source, or where to find the information, when there are big gaps of time between lessons. When students have an opportunity to work on the same skill every day for two weeks, they are more likely to remember that skill during their next rotation. I found that less time was spent re-teaching previously learned skills, and more time was spent on building off those skills and introducing new content.

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Helping the Helper: Managing Vicarious Trauma From Work

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Abstract

In 2019, I published my dissertation research focusing on the extent Title IX agents in colleges and universities experienced vicarious trauma because these professionals work with individuals who may have experienced trauma. People in the helping professions understand the cost to caring, and professionals who hear clients' (or students') stories of fear, pain, and suffering may feel similar fear, pain, and suffering because they care. With the national average of approximately 50% of women and 60% of men in the United States being exposed to a potentially traumatizing event, it is vital the experiences be shared, to serve as a protective factor. Based on my doctoral research, I have developed and delivered over the past 4 years a variation of workshops to provide helping professionals with basic information and skills to identify and process vicarious trauma. I also explored the additional research learned from conducting these diverse national workshops and shared best practices as gleaned from workshop participants. Readers of this article will increase their knowledge about personal strategies for managing vicarious trauma.

Keywords: trauma, vicarious trauma, helping professionals, best practice, work burnout

In the 1990s, Stamm and Figley determined helping professionals such as law enforcement, military, medical, and social service personnel; emergency responders and disaster relief workers; clergy, mental health professionals, researchers, and policy

professionals experience vicarious trauma (as cited in Courtois, 2002). Employees in helping professions assist others in their time of need on an individual, community, national, or international level (Stamm et al., n.d.). While some professionals working in areas such as Title IX or student conduct may not self-identify as being in a helping profession, the roles they perform serving students and the community align with the responsibilities of other helping professionals.

Bassett (2019) defined Title IX agents as higher education professionals who have direct contact and responsibility for sexual misconduct violations, which include all forms of sexual harassment, sexual violence (i.e., verbal, physical, and sexual assault), sexual discrimination, domestic violence (intimate partner violence), dating violence, and stalking. Due to the gravity of sexual misconduct cases, intimate disclosure, and graphic nature, Title IX agents experience vicarious trauma.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education professionals are not fully prepared or educated about the array of situations they could be exposed to when supporting their clients/students. While it is important educators understand the risk factors and indirect trauma impact such as vicarious trauma to identify, prevent, and/or minimize these effects (Newell & MacNeil, 2010), the field must provide self-care strategies, recommendations, and education to assist helping professionals. Helpers can be found in health care professionals, social service workers, teachers, attorneys, police officers, firefighters, clergy, airline and other transportation staff, disaster site clean-up crews, and others who offer assistance at the time of the event or later (Stamm, 2010).

The research suggests Title IX agents are not knowledgeable on what vicarious trauma is and/or how to manage it (Bassett, 2019). Researchers have suggested other various populations within higher education experience trauma and these professionals are unaware of vicarious trauma or the impact of it. Thus, to fill the gap in education on vicarious trauma, I

designed and developed workshops based on my dissertation research to provide awareness and knowledge while providing resources.

Evaluation Questions

The purpose of the workshop evaluations was to determine if the learning outcomes were achieved. The learning outcomes were:

1. Participants will be able to clearly understand the concept of vicarious trauma and other related terminology as defined from experts in the helping profession.
2. Participants will be able to clearly identity the indicators of vicarious trauma and connect those indicators to their personal experience.
3. Participants will be introduced to numerous assessment tools for processing vicarious trauma.

To support the workshop purpose, the following evaluation questions were explored by way of survey:

1. Please select all the statements that you agree with.
    - By attending this workshop, I am more aware of vicarious trauma as a topic
    - By attending this workshop, I am more aware of vicarious trauma as it relates to my role
    - By attending this workshop, I am able to provide myself and others vicarious trauma assistance and/or support
    - I am grateful that my institutional leadership found this session to be important to present as professional development
    - I found/learned skills that I will use again
    - The workshop was a good use of my time
    - The workshop style served my learning needs
    - The presenter was knowledgeable on the subject matter

- The presenter kept my attention during this workshop

2. How would you best describe this session? Please comment anything you want to share with the speaker.
3. If you would like the presenter to add your comments to her website, please indicate what you would like published. Testimonials always helps others to understand possible value of this workshop.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework to create the workshops was constructivist self-development theory (CSDT). CSDT provides an outline for understanding individual differences to trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1992) where individuals create their reality of life through the development of cognitive schemas or beliefs and expectations about self and others (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006). The theory is founded upon a constructivist view of trauma and how an individual's past traumatic events structure how they adapt to trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1992). There are five aspects of CSDT: (a) frame of reference indicating one's sense of identity, view on self, the world, and/or relationships has been changed or challenged, (b) self-capacities, one's ability to process emotions, feel worthy of love, and loving others has changed or been challenged, (c) ego resources, one's capacity for empathy and self-awareness has been changed or challenged, (d) psychological needs regarding intimacy, esteem, power, trust, safety, independence have been changed or challenged, and cognitive schemes, such as your beliefs, assumptions, expectations of self and others have been changed or challenged, and (e) memory and prospection, examples such as having flashbacks to a situation or your thoughts process as fragmented, disjointed, with or without emotion.

One of the workshop activities allowed participants to better understand the impact of vicarious trauma by connecting qualitative statements disclosed during the research (Bassett,

2019) to the five aspects of CSDT. As reflected by workshop participants, CSDT has been a useful tool for professionals to process and manage their vicarious trauma.

Literature Review

Van Dernoot Lipsky (2009) suggested evaluating helping professionals' response to trauma exposure is critical, because how trauma impacts their work in the present directly affects their work in the future. Stamm (2016) suggested individuals in helping professions include health care professionals, social service workers, teachers, attorneys, emergency response, etc. Higher education professionals are like those in helping professions (Flintoft & Bollinger, 2016), in that they are hearing others' stories of trauma and at times, helping others during a heightened time of their crisis. As such, they are exposed to traumatic disclosure narratives, as a part of their job. While not all higher education professionals may self-identify as being in a "helping profession," the roles many perform serving others align with the responsibilities of other helping professionals.

Experts have indicated vicarious trauma is the emotional residue from working with individuals as professionals who hear trauma stories and become witness to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors' experience (ACA, 2011). Newell et al. (2015) suggested professional understanding of the field of traumatology has evolved over time and therefore is seen as a contemporary concept. Newell et al. (20150 created a terminology and construct timeline in *Clinician Response to Client Traumas: A Chronological Review of Constructs and Terminology*, which provides readers a deeper understanding of the evolution of trauma. As suggested in Bassett's (2019) research, participants were asked if they understood the terminology and definition of secondary/vicarious trauma. The three terms used most frequently and interchangeably are by Figley (1988), who coined the term compassion fatigue, Stamm (2005), who outlined compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress, and Pearlman (1995), who developed the term vicarious traumatization.

It is important educators understand the risk factors and indirect trauma effects such as vicarious trauma to identify, prevent, and/or minimize their effects (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Therefore, there has been a need to examine the correlations of Title IX agents' lived experiences with vicarious trauma. Bassett's (2019) mixed-methods correlational study described Title IX agents as higher education professionals with direct contact and responsibility for sexual misconduct cases. Bassett (2019) suggested Title IX agents were negatively impacted by their work. Of the 253 study participants, 126 (49.61%) shared a story in response to the question, "If you feel that you have experienced some vicarious trauma due to your Title IX case management experience, please share an example of your experience." All 126 responses described feelings or challenges consistent with the indirect effects of vicarious trauma.

The lived experiences of secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue have been vastly reported, but few scales purport to measure the phenomenon (Motta et al., 1999). An assessment tool would be helpful to higher education professionals to determine the extent to which they experience vicarious trauma. Stamm (2005) created the standard Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) scale based on the professional quality of life theory, where the quality one feels in relation to their work as a helper is measured. Professional quality of life incorporates two aspects, the positive, Compassion Satisfaction (CS), and the negative, Compassion Fatigue (CF). Compassion fatigue breaks into two parts, burnout and secondary traumatic stress (STS). STS is often referred to as vicarious trauma (Stamm, 2010). Stamm (2005) also explained STS is a negative feeling driven by work-related trauma. The ProQOL focuses on the individual's lack of well-being, negative attitudes toward work, or work overload (Cieslak et al., 2014). Used for over 15 years and developed with data from over 3,000 people, the ProQOL is well respected in the field of research (Stamm, 2010) and is a tool introduced during the vicarious trauma workshops described herein. The ProQOL, a 30-item self-reporting

instrument, is the most widely used instrument of the positive and negative aspects of helping in the world (Stamm, 2018).

In Bassett's (2019) research, Title IX agents were asked to complete a survey that included the ProQOL and measured the extent to which they felt they had experienced vicarious trauma from their Title IX work. The participants were then provided with the definitions and indicators of vicarious trauma and then re-asked if they felt they had experienced vicarious trauma from their Title IX work. A majority of the participants altered their original answers after the vicarious trauma definition was provided. The data suggested these professionals increased their answers after being educated on the terminology.

Bassett (2019) deduced two reasons why participants increased their understanding of vicarious trauma in the study. One reason was how the participants self-identify to the words "vicarious trauma" and "secondary trauma". One participant indicated, "I think the word 'trauma' is too extreme, but I think I have experienced effects from my work in Title IX that include some of the challenges cited." The second reason was how participants expressed being hesitant to share their experience, also referred to as a disclosure. Participants indicated their lack of sharing disclosures was a feeling of fear of being perceived as weak, incompetent, or not skilled in the profession. One participant stated:

> I have felt very hopeless. I would not have ever considered myself an angry person, but I feel more angry than I used to, and much less optimistic. I feel afraid. I have changed my habits—I used to read a daily paper, every single day. I don't do that now. I feel tired a lot. I feel like I can never, ever, do well enough. I can draw a pretty straight line from these feelings to my job.

Additionally, Bassett's data suggested a stigma with the perception of vicarious trauma within the Title IX agent role and higher education as a profession. Bassett posited educating higher education professionals, including Title IX agents, regarding vicarious trauma may serve as a

protective factor and destigmatize the field of trauma. During the vicarious trauma workshops, participants demonstrated their lack of understanding about vicarious trauma and disclosed how they fear sharing the stories of vicarious trauma. Instead of being ashamed by their vicarious trauma, through the workshops I conducted for numerous organizations, participants have been educated on the value of empathy and how to better manage how they process their vicarious trauma.

Methods

The mixed-methods survey focused on the experience of higher education professionals who participated in vicarious trauma workshops. This methodological approach is the most appropriate because the intent was to identify if the workshops provided valuable information and had general workshop effectiveness. Additionally, the evaluation allowed participants to provide disclosures or comments for themes to emerge. The purpose of the workshop was to provide higher education professionals the knowledge and awareness of and some pathways to manage their vicarious trauma.

Research Design and Data Collection

To measure the overall experiences of participants attending seven vicarious trauma workshops during 2021–2023, a survey (see Appendix) was disseminated at the conclusion of the workshop via SurveyMonkey to evaluate their experience. The surveys were submitted anonymously and typically completed within 1 day of the workshops. The participants' experiences were best measured in their open-ended narratives of answering the question, "How would you best describe this session? Please comment anything you want to share with the trainer."

The evaluation was based on the learning outcomes for the workshop and additional qualitative questions pertaining to the participant's feedback such as if the workshop was a

good use of my time, met their learning needs, and if the presenter was knowledgeable on the subject matter and/or kept their attention during the workshop. The learning outcomes included:

1. Participants will be able to clearly understand the concept of vicarious trauma and other related terminology as defined from experts in the helping profession.
2. Participants will be able to clearly identity the indicators of vicarious trauma and connect those indicators to their personal experience.
3. Participants will be introduced to numerous assessment tools for processing vicarious trauma.

The purpose of the workshop assessment was to give me data to improve each workshop. In addition to the quantitative questions, survey participants were asked how they would best describe the workshop and to share any additional information. After receiving robust responses, I decided to also use the data to suggest themes that would aid in applying additional research into practice through semantic analysis. According to Poesio (2000), the goal of semantic analysis is to determine, as much as possible, what participants mean when they share information with a researcher. For example, one participant wrote:

> I have this lonely feeling in higher education, like I am drowning in my own sea. This presentation helped me realize that I was not alone in this experience. Feeling burnout is not because we are failing, it is because we are grieving. It helped me change my viewpoint on the workplace and how I can make it positive.

It was important for me to understand that this participant, and others in their similar situations, had to work through their feelings of failure to gain an understanding that what they were really dealing with was grief caused by the vicarious trauma they had and were experiencing.

Another indicated, “I appreciate the time to dig deeper into the trauma that we as student-facing staff are exposed to daily. It became clear it is an occupational hazard.” Overall, evaluations suggested the impact of the workshop was favorable and a good use of attendees’

professional development time. These representative quotes confirm the need to increase professionals' protective factors to reduce burnout as well as to continue the much-needed conversation regarding vicarious trauma. This data also revealed the importance of understanding that in addition to helping other people who were dealing with trauma, the care giving professionals should make sure they take care of themselves, so they can continue to care for and about others.

Participants

The target population for this research were attendees of the vicarious trauma workshops. The original intended audience for these workshops were Title IX agents including investigators, coordinators, hearing officers, and student conduct professionals who may have a wide range of professional titles. However, since publication of my dissertation and the COVID-19 global pandemic, interest in the workshops increased and I have since been presenting to staff working in additional areas of higher education, including student affairs, residential life, academic advising and career coaching, student accessibility, and diversity and inclusion professionals in both public and private institutions.

Individuals who coordinated the hosting of the seven workshops were asked to share the workshop evaluation with their colleagues who attended the workshops. The response rate from these selected seven workshops yielded 55.3%. Of the 179 professionals who attended these workshops, 99 completed the evaluations in their entirety.

The sampling for this research were higher education professionals who attended one of the seven vicarious trauma workshops. Since demographics were not asked within the evaluation, the organizers of each workshop helped me understand who attended the workshops (see Table 1). The first workshop was hosted virtually by Bridgewater State University in 2021 for a group of student affairs professionals. The second was also conducted virtually and was hosted by Northeastern University in 2022 for a group of academic coaches.

The third workshop was conducted in-person hosted by Gateway Community College, in 2022. The workshop was open to all Connecticut State College and University system professionals. The fourth workshop was in 2023 for a group of student conduct professionals at the University of Connecticut. The fifth workshop was hosted virtually in 2023 by Connecticut Association of Higher Education and Disability (CT AHEAD) and included representatives from a diverse group of institutions within Connecticut. In 2023, Nebraska State System hosted the sixth workshop where the participants gathered during their professional development retreat and the material was presented virtually. The participants also represented a wide range of universities within the Nebraska State System. The seventh workshop was conducted virtually in 2023 to a group of master level higher education student affairs students at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

Table 1

Workshop Details

Workshop	Date	Host	Participants	Modality
1	2021	Bridgewater State University	Student affairs professionals	Virtual
2	2022	Northeastern University	Academic coaches	Virtual
3	2022	Gateway Community College	Connecticut State College and University system professionals	In-person
4	2023	University of Connecticut	Student conduct professionals	In-person
5	2023	Connecticut Association of Higher Education and Disability (CT AHEAD)	ADA professionals within Connecticut	Virtual
6	2023	Nebraska State System	Nebraska professional development retreat	Virtual
7	2023	University of Colorado	Master level higher education student affairs students	Virtual

Findings

This evaluation explored the extent to which higher education professionals understood vicarious trauma and to what extent educating them on vicarious trauma increases their awareness of and pathways to manage their vicarious trauma.

My analysis of the workshop evaluations revealed:

- Ninety-four percent (93%) of respondents indicated they became more aware of vicarious trauma as a topic.
- Ninety-four percent (93%) indicated they became more aware of vicarious trauma as it relates to the roles of the participants.
- Ninety-four percent (93%) indicated they are able to provide themselves and others vicarious trauma assistance and/or support.
- Ninety-six percent (95%) of respondents indicated they learned skills and tools they will use again.

Additionally, participants shared their appreciation for the material and expressed a desire for more training. The open-ended question for the survey was, “How would you best describe this session,” the terms that appeared the most on the evaluation were either insightful, informative, or engaging. As an example, one respondent wrote:

> I thought that this session was very informative! I had always wondered about vicarious trauma but never had the language to describe it so this was a very helpful in doing that. I just wish we had more than an hour because we were given a lot of information at once. But overall, this was awesome, thank you!

Some participants added other positive responses. One participant wrote the workshop was “an emotionally intelligent and culturally competent approach to education!” Another participant indicated:

> I appreciate the time to dig deeper into the trauma that we as student-facing staff face every day. It became clear it is an occupational hazard and I would have loved to hear more about what kept the speaker in higher education for so long (as it seems like burn out is more prevalent than ever).

These findings suggest the need for continued conversation with higher education professionals regarding vicarious trauma.

During the seven workshops, an average of three participants disclosed the workshop was the first time anyone had educated them on the understanding and evolution of vicarious trauma. One attendee stated, “I thought the session was informative. Before attending this presentation, I had never heard of vicarious trauma.” Another participant stated, “[This is] something many of us experience but this is the first time I had heard it has ‘a name’ and have someone explain it.”

At least one participant per workshop had shared they had never been introduced to Stamm’s (2010) ProQOL prior to the workshop. While it was not a question on the survey, attendees verbally shared their excitement to learn about this helpful tool. Attendees who had been introduced to the ProQOL expressed a deeper appreciation for how the tool can help to serve higher education professionals.

On numerous occasions, participants of the workshops asked if there is a double impact on the professional if they themselves have experienced the type of disclosure they are also hearing on a secondary level. Further research is needed to understand the intersection of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and lived direct trauma with the secondary trauma heard from work.

Discussion

The overall concept of professional quality of life is complex because it is associated with characteristics of the work environment (organizational and task-wise), the professional’s

personal characteristics, and the individual's exposure to primary and secondary trauma at work (Stamm, 2010). Other research has suggested the COVID-19 global pandemic has had devasting effects on the mental health of many (Latsou et al. 2022). Overall, Bassett (2019) showed higher education professionals are not being educated on vicarious trauma, which would help address the effects of COVID-19. The results from this research indicate higher education professionals are suffering from different forms of vicarious trauma, many without understanding what is happening to them. The workshops I implemented in this study showed higher education professionals do not have to suffer alone, and they and their institutions have tools and training available to help. It is critical the people who help students and employees at higher education institutions become aware of and positively deal with vicarious trauma. For higher education professionals to be at their best when they are suffering on their own, they (we) all need to work together to become the strong professionals our students and staff need in their lives at schools across our nation.

Obviously, workshops like the ones I have been presenting must continue to inform and give ideas of how to address vicarious trauma. That, though, should be the starting point for institutions of higher education. I believe each institution must develop other ways to help professionals in the field. Awareness is just the first step in learning how to reduce the negative impact of vicarious trauma and prevent burnout. Programs of education, help, and support must become part of the culture of every higher education institution, so each helping professional has ongoing opportunities to process and regather their emotional strength. It is vital higher education professionals learn how to effectively deal with the trauma disclosed to them and their own vicarious trauma. University and college professionals do not have to suffer in isolation; there are processes and tools available to help us all.

Limitations

The survey was given to all participants and the data revealed what those who participated in the survey believed. The results are valid for this population, and other participants that did not fill out the survey may have other opinions. of this study should be interpreted with the following limitations in mind. The responses from my participants validated the need for more conversation and research regarding vicarious trauma.

The seven workshops discussed in this study varied in delivery modality and included both in-person and virtual delivery. Additionally, some of the trainings were an hour long while others were full day events. This inconsistency could have impacted what and how participants learned the information.

Lastly, the evaluation was not required of every participant. Those who did not complete the evaluation may have had difference experiences than those who did. Increasing the evaluation response rate could provide a more accurate picture of participants' experiences.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

Individuals, institutions, and professional networks need to bring the topic of vicarious/secondary trauma into the higher education curriculum with trainings, conferences, and graduate programs. While equity, inclusion, and Title IX work is often compliance-focused, each institution's leadership team should also understand the emotional stress caused by working with clients/students of trauma, and best practices need to be established and embraced to manage vicarious trauma. These workshops have demonstrated the need for widening the audience for this conversation. The data suggest other higher education functional areas do benefit from understanding the impact of vicarious trauma.

Recommendations for Practice

I have the following recommendations for institutions of higher education to consider:

- Create a committee to review positions in which employees interact with any constituents who have to deal with trauma (e.g., wellness center, Title IX offices, dean of students, advisors) and develop ongoing systems to check in with and offer opportunities to debrief with professionals in the field.
- Create training for all personnel who interact with students or school personnel who may have to deal with trauma.
- Develop a phone hotline for any constituent who may need emergency assistance.
- Develop and train all personnel about procedures for working with people in need and contact information.
- Train all instructors to develop skills in inclusive and trauma-sensitive teaching and learning practices.
- Develop and implement practices that ensure equity by decolonizing language, research, teaching and learning practices, policies and procedures, and day-to-day interactions in the institution.

Recommendations for Research

I recommend further research is needed to:

- Understand the intersection of PTSD and lived direct trauma and secondary trauma heard from clients/students.
- Track the participants to determine if the tools that they were taught during the workshops are being implemented.
- Verify whether or not these tools are helping to manage vicarious trauma.
- Understand if vicarious trauma is an additional aspect impacting why higher education colleagues are leaving the field. Since COVID-19, the boundaries of work and life have shifted to non-traditional work hours and higher education leaders believe contribute to professionals leaving the field (Desjardins, 2022). In fact, the

U.S. Department of Labor (2021, January) estimated that in the 2020 academic year, 650,000 employees left the field of higher education either by choice, by layoff, or by termination.

- Determine if more effective programs might be developed according to demographics.

Conclusion

I created interactive workshops to deliver the tools needed to address higher education professionals, as research suggests they are not taught about their work vicarious trauma. After completing my dissertation, I developed and conducted these workshops to increase professionals' awareness of this important issue. Because of the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on higher education work and those doing it, demand for the workshops increased and were presented in a virtual setting, requiring the delivery of information to be presented in a creative manner. The most recent workshops demonstrated a post-COVID-19 hunger for understanding vicarious trauma and preventing burnout. Professionals have expressed they want to see institutional leadership invest in professional development around this topic.

My final message to higher education professionals is to not be ashamed of vicarious trauma. An essential statement that was unpacked during the workshop was provided by Dr. Tana Bridge, a higher education professional, who stated "The only people that are impacted by vicarious trauma are people that care" (as cited in Bassett-Cameron, 2023, p. 19). All helping professionals should acknowledge vicarious trauma as a symbol of empathy and should only concern themselves with mitigating the negative effects of vicarious trauma and burnout. Sharing their experiences with others is a strong tool for managing vicarious trauma. Addressing issues such as overworking, poor time management, and skipping lunch, and practicing self-care are some ways to address vicarious trauma. By not addressing vicarious trauma, colleges and universities risk losing quality staff who provide essential support to students.

Care-giving, professional staff are critical to helping all our students deal with the traumas of life in positive ways. The world is trying to recuperate from the traumas caused by the pandemic. Higher education helping professionals are dealing both with their own stressors from the pandemic and the stressors and trauma experienced by our students and staff. Institutions of higher education have a moral responsibility to support those people charged with helping others in our higher education system. The health and wellbeing of our helping staff must be a major goal for each institution, so our students, faculty, and staff have the support they need to move forward in positive and productive ways. We simply cannot afford to lose our helping staff, because we choose to pretend that their needs are not as important as the needs of the people they serve.

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Appendix

Workshop Survey

1. Please select all the statements that you agree with:
    - By attending this workshop, I am more aware of vicarious trauma as a topic
    - By attending this workshop, I am more aware of vicarious trauma as it relates to my role
    - By attending this workshop, I am able to provide myself and others vicarious trauma assistance and/or support
    - I am grateful that my institutional leadership found this session to be important to present as professional development
    - I found /learned skills that I will use again
    - The workshop was a good use of my time
    - The workshop style served my learning needs
    - The presenter was knowledgeable on the subject matter
    - The presenter kept my attention during this workshop
2. How would you best describe this session? Please comment anything you want to share with the speaker.
3. If you would like the presenter to add your comments to her website, please indicate what you would like published. Testimonials always helps others to understand possible value of this workshop.

Gender Stereotypes and Expectations in Early Childhood Education: Dismantling and Understanding the Gender Binary

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Abstract

Gender norms and stereotypes are a part of human development and socialization in America from an early age. Research shows that not all children identify with those stereotypes and not all families fit into those stereotypical roles. Early childhood educators have the responsibility of implementing a family centered approach to early childhood education and ensure that young children can explore who they are and want to be, in a safe, inclusive environment. This is an important issue, especially in these times when many people have developed changes in their understandings about human identities and gender flexible pedagogy. This article will explore the ways in which educators of young children can create less divisive and more equitable classes where all children have a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Keywords: gender, stereotypes, gender binary, gender assignments, gender flexible pedagogy, early childhood education, sense of belonging.

In recent years, Americans have witnessed a change in cultural understanding and incorporation of a wider spectrum of human identities and perspectives. These include, but are not limited to, gender expression, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender roles. There has been an increase in “activism and campaigns for the rights and recognition of LGBTQ+ groups, and most recently a surge of interest in gender and non-binary groups and individuals” (Warin, 2023, p. 3). Many Americans are beginning to uncover and explore what gender means

to individual people and how we can create more equitable, just, and inclusive communities. In this article, I discuss why and how we can create gender flexible early learning environments that are emotionally safe and open to exploration and expression beyond stereotypical gender roles.

Literature Review

Why a Gender Flexible Pedagogy Matters in Early Childhood Education

There are people who would argue that embracing a gender diverse preschool classroom or discussing gender identity is inappropriate at a young age (Meckler, 2022). However, there is evidence that children begin to develop gender identity in early childhood. In one of the first and largest studies examining gender development in young people, Beemyn and Rankin (2011) found almost 80% of their participants felt different about their gender "at or before the age of 12" (p. 40). Some of the participants shared that they felt different "than other people of their assigned gender" as early as 4 or 5 years old (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 41). Of the 75 participants interviewed by phone, the median age of those who began to recognize these differences was 5.4 years old (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 42). Similar results were found in earlier studies by Bolin (1988) and Grossman et al. (2005).

Gender assignment often happens before a child is born. Gender reveal parties and questions such as, "is it a boy or a girl" determine gender according to the anatomy with which a child is born. In much of our society, sociocultural expectations of each gender are assigned as soon as a child enters the world. They enter the world into a gender binary based on biological sex. Bornstein (1994) wrote:

> Gender involves not only gender assignment—the gender label given to someone at birth based on their perceived sex—but also gender attribution, gender roles, gender identity, and gender expression. (as cited in Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 20)

The world seems to tell children who they should be before they have a chance to discover who they are.

"Gender identity" refers to how a person feels about their own gender (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). "Gender expression" refers to how a person chooses to demonstrate their gender (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Gender expression can be shown through behavior, clothing, make-up, hairstyles, etc. (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). "Genderism" refers to the expectations, beliefs, discrimination, and negative treatment of those who stand with the mainstream gender binary toward people who do not adhere to "dominant gender expectations" (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 21). As educators, I believe, we have the responsibility to create classrooms where all students are treated with respect and kindness—where they have an opportunity to explore their gender identity and gender expression without genderism.

Research demonstrate that early childhood educators are likely to have a student (or students) in their classroom who comes from a home with same-sex parents or students who will identify as LBGQT+ in a later part of their lives. The U.S. Census (2019) reported that 14.7% of the 1.1 million same-sex couples in the United States had at least one child under 18 in their household (as cited in Taylor, 2020). Estimates suggested that 1.6 million children ages 13–17 identified as transgender in the United States (Herman et al., 2020). The UCLA Williams Institute School of Law (2020) estimated that 1,924,000 children between the ages of 13–17 identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Conron, 2020). Patterson et al. (2016) found when they "live in supportive environments, LGBTQ+ parents and their children are more likely to thrive" (p. 6). Peterson's et al. findings are important because their research shows the importance of living with people who are open and accepting, especially with issues like gender identity, and when the school environment supports that acceptance from home, students do better.

Developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2020) in early childhood education includes creating a caring, equitable community of learners; engaging diverse families in

reciprocal partnerships; and implementing a culturally responsive and responsible curriculum that includes diversity, equity, and inclusion. Early childhood educators have the responsibility of creating environments where students have a voice, feel they belong, feel accepted where they can safely express their feelings, and explore who they are (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2017).

When young people feel they are different from their peers, it is critical that those young people know they are loved (NAEYC, 2020). Feeling valued and having a sense of belonging is "fundamental to any child's well-being and happiness" (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008, p. 3). Brooker and Woodhead (2008) continued, "The positive identity which is developed in early relationships is the result of children feeling they are liked, recognized, and accepted for who they are and what they are" (p. 4, para. 1). When students do not feel they belong, they can be distracted by searching for signs of discrimination, or being left out, leaving less energy to engage in learning (Laldin, 2016). Eisenberger and Cole (2012) wrote, "threats to social connection may tap into the same neural and physiological 'alarm system' that responds to other critical survival threats, such as the threat or experience of physical harm" (p. 1). The authors wrote that "threat related neural and physiological responding may have health implications" (Eisenberger & Cole, 2012, p. 2). In other words, social health and physical health are connected. According to Holzman (2021), schools can play an integral role in helping students discover their true selves. Holzman wrote:

> School should be a brave space for students of all ages to explore their identities and figure out who they are. Yet, transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students report experiencing a hostile school environment year after year. According to GLSEN's 2019 National School Climate Report, 42.5% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe at school because of their gender expression, and 37.4% felt unsafe because of their gender identity. (para. 7)

Human Needs Theory

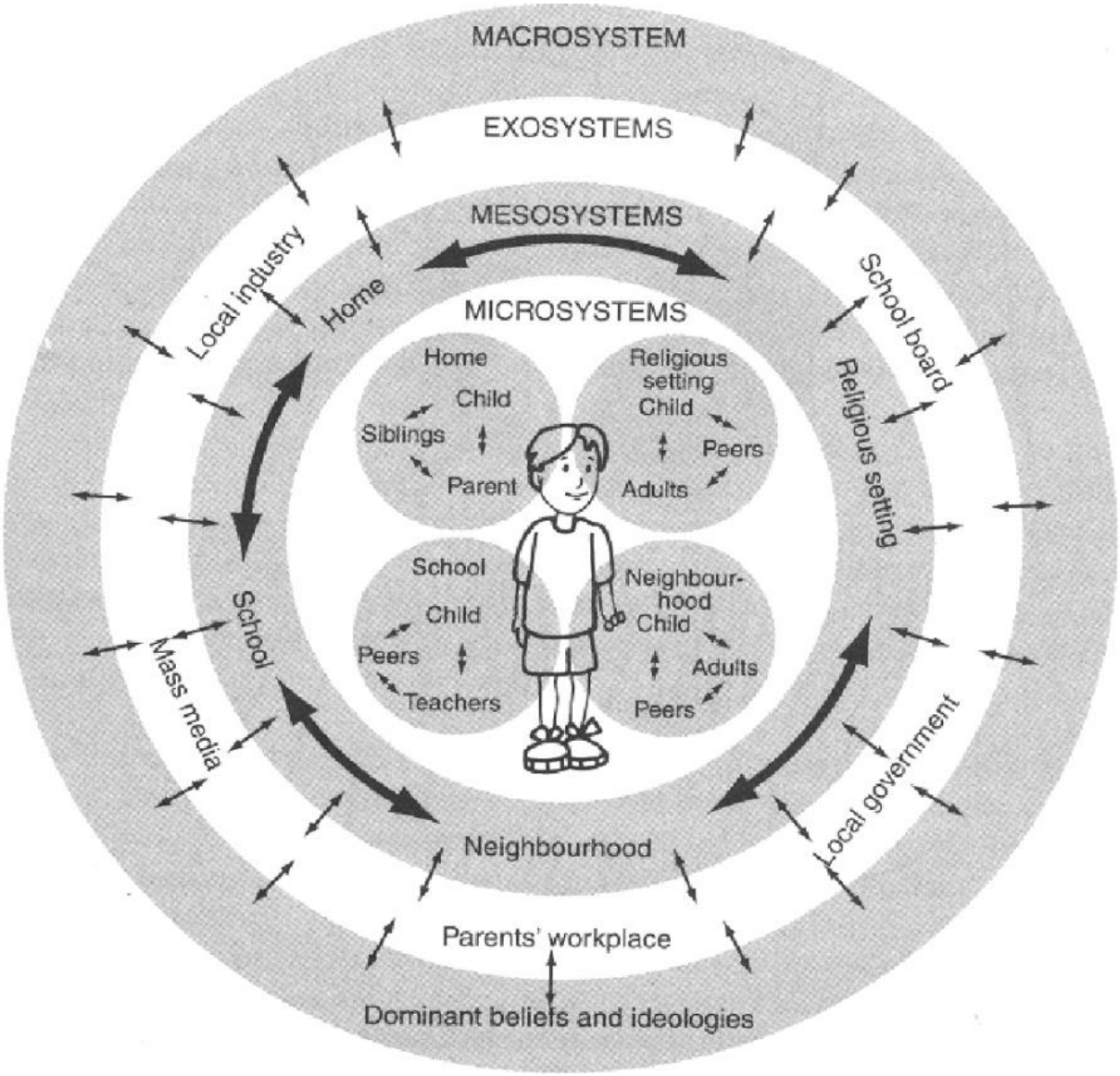
Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs as well as studies conducted by Ryan and Deci (2001), Ryff and Keyes (1995), and Tay and Diener (2011) found there is a direct correlation between well-being and having certain universal human needs met. These needs include a sense of belonging, respect, social support, safety, and security (Tay & Diener, 2011). Families are not the only ones responsible for contributing to the emotional well-being of children. I believe that educators are at the forefront of individuals implementing meaningful educational change and of creating educational environments that celebrate diverse ways of thinking and feeling that allow all children to feel they belong and have a voice.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory (see Figure 1) explains how all of the influences in a child's environment affect child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The environments with the greatest influence on child development are closest to children and are in direct contact with children, such as family, the classroom, and friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Gauvain and Cole (1993), the environments impacting child development are also by influenced by other (more removed) systems such as history, societal norms, laws, environment, and the passing of time. All the systems described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) impact families and children. The complex interactions and networking among the ecological systems in a child's environment cause them to influence each other, and eventually, these influences trickle down to impact the child, which shapes their development and well-being (Neal & Neal, 2013).

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory



Note. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. Adapted from "Understanding early childhood education: Issues and controversies," by H. Penn, 2005. Copyright 2005 by Bell & Bain.

Ecological systems theory is particularly important in understanding how vital it is for early childhood educators to create a learning environment where children can be themselves, feel safe to express themselves, and where they know they belong (Allen & Bowes, 2012). Preschool is often a child's first introduction to school, and these early experiences have a significant impact on brain development and long-term, socioemotional well-being (Allen & Bowes, 2012; OECD, 2018). Exposure to positive factors, especially stable, responsive, safe, and supportive relationships with school, promote long-term positive development (Allen & Bowles, 2012; OECD, 2018). As stated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2022), supportive and safe early learning environments are best practice in early childhood education. It is, therefore, the responsibility of educators to create an environment where all children can feel safe to be themselves because they are treated fairly (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). The students who fit in the binary gendered system are not the only ones who have a need to belong.

Culture and Binary Environments

Cultures provide traditional roles and expectations for boys and girls, making gender a socially constructed phenomenon (Warin, 2023). Teachers can see these cultural gender roles expressed in children's play and learning (Brody, 2022). People, the environment, and schools often reinforce stereotypical gender roles without being aware (Holzman, 2021). Queer theory "challenges the concept of identity as something that is fixed and necessary" (Thurer, 2005, p. 99). Beemyn and Rankin (2011) found that respondents in their study described their gender identity in more than a hundred different ways. If gender is not innate, or fixed, if millions of people do not identify with one gender role or the other, I believe that as early childhood educators we have an obligation to create more gender flexible classrooms where personal expression and the discovery of self is encouraged and supported.

Non-Binary Early Learning Environments

As an educator, I am always asking myself, “What can I do to improve my practices, and how do my practices need to change?” This cycle of inquiry, my observations of children’s play, discussions with non-binary coworkers, reflecting on my own children and their upbringing, and working for a progressive organization, lead me to want to learn more and do better. I have the opportunity to create a safe environment where children can consider different perspectives, challenge the status quo, and be truly themselves. But, how do I get there?

As early childhood educators, we work in one of the “most gendered professions” (Warin & Adriany, 2015). Less than 3% of early childhood teachers around the world are men (Brody, 2014). How do I (as a woman) challenge gender stereotypes in a profession led by women? I want to challenge stereotypical gender roles; there are probably many things I am doing throughout the day to reinforce gender roles without being aware, from the way my classroom is set up, to the way I comfort students, or the stories I read. I am a gendered being.

According to studies cited by Warin and Adriany (2015), teachers must be aware of gender roles and gender possibilities—and be critically reflective—in order to create a gender flexible classroom environment. Nicholson et al. (2019) wrote that teachers should closely examine their own biases, assumptions, and “gender-self” in order to create a classroom environment that reflects “gender justice” (p. 97). The authors continued to say that the commitment to working on change, adjusting teaching practices, and self-awareness is work teachers can do piece by piece (Nicholson et al., 2019) and over time. Being mindful and reflective is the first step toward change. When early childhood educators remind ourselves that our work helps us to create a nurturing and accepting environment where everyone is free to explore their identity (teachers, families, children, and coworkers included), then schools are helping students to feel comfortable with who they are. I am convinced this is the work we need to do to create open and honest connections within our schools and communities.

Nicholson et al. (2019) suggested that teachers begin by looking inward and asking themselves important questions related to the question, “What is gender to me?” Specifically:

- How did I learn about gender?
- How have gender norms limited my life (i.e., what my family, culture, and community communicated to me about what was expected of me related to gender)?
- How have gender norms benefited me?
- What gender assumptions and beliefs do I knowingly cling to?
- What do I love about my gender?
- How does my gender relate to, and interact with, the other social categories I identify with and belong to (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, ability, religion)?
- How does all this influence my work with young children?
- What feelings come up when I think about changing any of my beliefs about gender?
- What have been my historical responses to children breaking the rules of gender? Are there times when I have felt discomfort?
- What fears do I hold about engaging in the work of gender justice in my program?
- How have my own beliefs about gender affected my teaching?
- How am I modeling my own gender with children? Is it in line with my authentic gender self?

Being aware of my own perceptions and biases will allow me to be more mindful about how I interact and treat others.

As I continue the process of self-assessment, reflecting on my beliefs, and behaviors, I first think about the physical learning environment I am creating for my students. The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes (2022) found that nearly 60% of teachers said that they expected boys and girls to choose different activities in their classrooms. Lyttleton-Smith

(2019) in a U.K. study found early childhood classrooms are gendered in the way they are set up. Studies have found that in early childhood programs play areas are often gender-based; often the dress-up clothes are with the kitchen materials, which indicates that construction blocks and dress up do not go together (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019). Educators can do one or the other but not both. Lyttleton-Smith (2019) wrote:

> The spaces of the small world and the home corner exerted greater gendering power because of the unproblematic narratives suggested by their content; in the home corner: homemaking, beauty, shopping, and clothes. In the small world: cars, trains, construction, and mathematics. Breaking these narratives that lead girls and boys to play only with objects of a similar (gendering) theme may support children whose interests or skills do not fit such a binary pattern, enabling greater freedom of expression outside of gender expectation . . . no princess dresses outside where they might get dirty was a rule in the nursery featured here, with the effect of preventing girls enjoying princess-play the opportunity to also be active and boisterous. (p. 668)

After reading about gendered and divisive play areas, I placed building blocks in the kitchen area of our classroom, to see what would happen. Suddenly, materials were combined (e.g., clothes and cooking, building blocks dressing up), and engineering mixed perfectly with kitchen and dress up play. Placing toys in a more gender-neutral way and having dress up clothes and toys that are not stereotypically male or female allowed for greater exploration.

Kroeger et al. (2019) suggested that teachers consider having neutral-colored toys in the classroom with gender-nonspecific figures. Kroeger et al. (2019) noted that gender specific materials can lead to gender specific play as children bring their assumptions, expectations, and experiences to those materials. Many gendered toys limit play, creativity, and innovation (Kroeger et al., 2019). My classroom dress-up materials are not gender specific (scarves or animal costumes), allowing for a wider, more open, and creative range of play. As a result of

being a nature-based teacher, my classroom includes endless neutral, natural, play materials for students to interact with, such as wood slices, wood blocks, animals, and sticks.

Another way I can make positive changes in my classrooms is through language. Language is a strong first step in eliminating gender stereotypes in the classroom (Kroeger et al., 2019). When talking about insects or plants, I can try to refer to the insects by their name rather than immediately addressing the creature as “he.” I can begin by addressing groups of children in gender neutral ways such as “friends,” “superheroes,” “everyone.” The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes (2022) found that 54% of the teachers in their study often heard “boys will be boys” when boys acted out, nearly half of the participants heard gendered pet names. Being mindful of our binary language can make a significant difference in creating an equal and respectful learning environment.

Literacy and books are an important part of early childhood education. Children immerse themselves in the imaginary stories and act them out. Books are also a wonderful way to have conversations with young children. A study by Abad and Pruden (2013) found that children who are exposed to books that challenge gender stereotypes are more likely to play with “counter-stereotypical toys, change perceptions of what activities and jobs are appropriate for women and men, and widen children’s aspirations” (p. 16). The organization Lifting Limits (2023) wrote:

> A review of the top 100 children’s picture books published in 2018 found a child is 1.6 times more likely to read a picture book with a male rather than a female lead, and seven times more likely to read a story that has a male villain in it than a female baddie. Male characters outnumbered female characters in more than half the books, while females outnumbered males less than a fifth of the time. (para. 2)

Teachers can take the time to look through their book collection to see how books portray gender roles. Do I have books that challenge gender stereotypes? Warin (2023) suggested changing pronouns in books when reading to children or singing children’s songs to share

stories that break the binary. Of course, teachers must be mindful of the laws in their states, as they make these kinds of choices.

There are a number of books that teachers may want to consider adding to their libraries. Here are a few:

- *Jacob's New Dress* by S. Hoffman and I. Hoffman (2014)
- *The Paperbag Princess* by R. Munsch (1981)
- *Worm Loves Worm* by C. Smith (2017)
- *Julian is a Mermaid* by J. Love (2019)
- *10,000 Dresses* by M. Ewart (2008)
- *The Different Dragon* by J. Bryan (2011)

The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes (2022) wrote, "strong evidence shows that using counter-stereotypical reading material can reduce gender stereotyped views and behaviors, and improve wellbeing, among young children" (p. 8).

Books, posters, and nonstereotypical play areas may spark discussions and interactions with students about individual choices, possibilities, experiences, and points of view. Teachers may be fearful of what parents, administrators, or school boards will say about addressing these topics in an early childhood setting. It is important that educators share with parents that a nonbinary classroom allows for children to discover who they are and creates a space where all children belong. The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes (2022) found:

> Gender expectations significantly limit our children, causing problems such as lower self-esteem in girls and poorer reading skills in boys. The report finds that stereotypes contribute towards the mental health crisis among children and young people, are at the root of girls' problems with body image and eating disorders, higher male suicide rates and violence against women and girls. Stereotyped assumptions also significantly limit career choices, contributing to the gender pay gap. (pp. 6–7)

Additionally, their study found “80% of parents agree that they want to see their child’s school or nursery to treat boys and girls the same, with the same expectations and opportunities” (The Fawcett Report Commission on Gender Stereotypes, 2022, p. 8).

Conclusions

Early childhood educators who engage in reflective practice (Bleach, 2014), prioritize creating a caring community of learners and understand the importance of creating supportive, inclusive, and accepting classrooms, will be models to students and families as to how we can create equal opportunity and widen understanding of the gender spectrum. Gender sensitivity (Warin, 2023) gives our children the freedom to discover who they are without a socially constructed gender binary which may lead to feelings of being different, ashamed, unsafe, or not belonging (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). When students feel supported in their classroom environments, their learning is more successful (Sousa, 2017).

I began writing this article to reflect on my own early childhood education practices to ensure that I create a learning environment that not only welcomes all students and their families but also allows individual students to feel they belong. Reflecting on my own experiences and observations has been eye opening. It is my hope that any educators who read this article will take a few ideas back to their own classrooms. Meier and Henderson (2007) wrote, “early childhood is the foundation for young children’s views and experiences with getting along with one another, and with understanding and taking a stance toward the world of relationships” (p. 178). Early childhood educators are therefore in the unique position of helping to start a healthy vibrant human ecosystem that represents, celebrates, and supports diversity.

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Elements of an Inclusive Syllabus: Graduate Student Ratings

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Abstract

Syllabi can be a mechanism by which professors can foster inclusivity with students. This article highlights how I, an educational leadership professor, intentionally incorporated elements within course syllabi to foster inclusivity. The text, *What Inclusive Instructors Do: Principles and Practices for Excellence in College Teaching* (Addy et al., 2021) provided several recommendations for course syllabi. Through action research, I collected graduate students' ratings of three inclusive syllabi elements. The specific syllabi sections included for this study were: (a) the instructor's approach, (b) what success "looks like" in the course, and (c) rationales for heavily weighted assignments. Articulating the instructor's approach, how to achieve success, and rationales for key assignments align with adult learning theories by giving the students the important connections between the course and the goals of the students (i.e., to become certified principals). Student ratings, collected via action research using a 10-question Likert-scale anonymous survey, indicated positive ratings of the syllabi elements. Student feedback indicated that the three elements from the syllabus helped students understand what to do and how to successfully engage in the course, peers, and the professor. These results indicated that efforts to make syllabi more inclusive made a difference for students, and I believe these results can translate to any class that utilizes a syllabus.

Keywords: inclusive syllabi, equity in education, inclusion in higher education, inclusive strategies, adult learning theories

Fostering inclusivity is vital at all educational levels, including the higher education level (Awang-Hashim et al., 2019). As an assistant clinical professor in the Educational and Literacy Leadership Department at Sacred Heart University, I agree with Hashim et al. (2019) that it is important for me to model as many inclusive practices as possible for our future educational leaders. After a 25-year career as a K–12 teacher and administrator, I sought resources to support my teaching as I transitioned to the higher education level. In the fall of 2022, the Center for Teaching and Learning at Sacred Heart University created a faculty learning community for staff; throughout the semester, a group of faculty members read and discussed chapters from the text, *What Inclusive Instructors Do: Principles and Practices for Excellence in College Teaching* (Addy et al., 2021). The text provided specific strategies for our consideration to help make our classes more inclusive. I developed and implemented an action research study with graduate students across several semesters in which the participants rated three inclusive strategies that I implemented as a result of my exploration of the Addy et al. (2021) text. This article examines the data provided by my students as they rated the three inclusive elements that I incorporated into my syllabi.

Inclusive Syllabi Elements

According to Addy et al. (2021), exploring the purpose of syllabi—with intentionality—can benefit higher education classrooms. Typically, syllabi have been embraced "as a contract, as a communication tool, or as an organizational plan" (Addy et al., 2021, p. 48). Extending syllabi to become more (inter)active as a means for students to be introduced to the instructional approaches embraced by their instructor could yield more inclusivity (Addy et al., 2021). My goal was to invite students in the graduate courses I taught to become active participants in the syllabus as a living document that can help my students and I to be more effective in our work together. If syllabi are approached as "a *living* [emphasis in original] constitution [it] invites participation, allows for evolution (or amendment), and accommodates a

community's changing needs" (Addy et al., 2021, p. 50). I approached syllabi as an ever-evolving understanding of how the class community will (inter)act. When creating each syllabus, I introduced three elements including an "Instructor's Approach" section, a "What Does Success Look Like in This Course?" section, and detailed rationales for assignments that contribute significantly to the overall course grade. Intentionally incorporating these elements aimed to provide a more inclusive experience for my graduate students.

Instructor's Approach

The "instructor's approach" section included a detailed definition of the accepted viewpoint of the syllabus as a "living constitution" (Addy et al., 2021, p. 50), along with the feedback process that I value (see Figure 1). I aimed to articulate the value of involving students in the classroom process by providing an explanation about how student feedback will be utilized. The instructor's approach section also explained the intentional modeling that the instructor planned: seeking feedback from stakeholders (in this case, graduate students) and transparently making changes is a process that future educational leaders should utilize with their future stakeholders (e.g., staff, parents, families, students). From the outset of the syllabus, the instructor's approach was intended to provide students with an understanding of "why" and "how" the instructor approaches feedback. This practice aligns with adult learning theories [The Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy (TEAL) Center, 2011] and was expected to foster more learner engagement with the content and course.

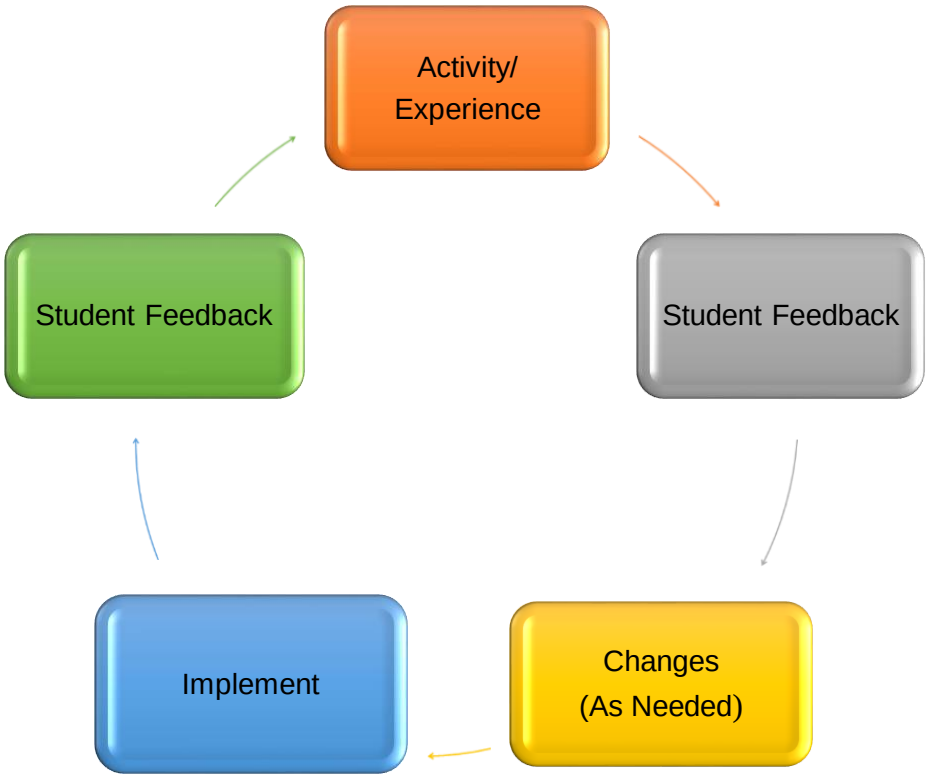
I believe that if students understand how I function as a professor, that will give more students an understanding about how they should proceed in one of my courses. As displayed in Figure 1, I asked for feedback from students in two ways, during the class experience and after the class experience. By giving my students a voice, I hoped to encourage their participation by making their ideas important for the class.

Figure 1

Instructor's Approach

Syllabus: Often, a syllabus is viewed as a contract, a way to communicate, and/or an organizational tool. My approach aligns more with the perspective espoused by Addy, Dube, Mitchell, and SoRelle (2021): I view this syllabus as a "*living* constitution" (p. 50), encouraging participation, changes, and accommodating the needs of our class.

Feedback: Your voice is valued and vital for our class learning. Your feedback is vital to be able to best meet your needs as learners. Feedback will be elicited from you on an ongoing basis, through exit slips, anonymous surveys/forms, and/or community circle conversations. My approach to feedback is reflected in the following graphic:



Note. Changes I make based on your feedback will be shared in a transparent manner. Not only will this process improve my ability to instruct you, but it serves as a model for you as a future administrator when working with staff. Furthermore, the assignments identified in this syllabus may change after our in-person meetings, based on our work and your input.

Source: Excerpt from Kimberly Hellerich's EDL 635-AB Spring 2023 Syllabus

I developed the instructor's approach section of the syllabus to help my students understand that I believe their experiences as teachers matter to me as I work with them as professional educators. The elements of my instructor's approach align with Knowles (1980) and his ideas about how to approach adult learners and get them engaged in class. Knowles advised that teachers of adults should consider the following:

- Create a cooperative environment in classes.
- Assess students' specific needs and interests.
- Develop learning objectives based on students' needs, interests, and skill levels.
- Create and implement sequential learning experiences to achieve objectives.
- Work collaboratively with adult students to select methods, resources, learning experiences, and materials for learning.
- Assess the learning experiences and make adjustments as needed.
- Assess student needs for further learning.

I created and implemented the elements that I added to my syllabi with these adult learning assumptions in mind. My goal was and is to develop equitable classes in which every student will be successful by working collaboratively with me and each other as adult learners. The syllabus begins the process by helping to give every student a voice and an understanding of how to work with me and each other.

What Does Success Look Like in This Course?

Adding a "What Does Success Look Like in This Course?" section was also inspired by the Addy et al. (2021) text. When drafting this section, the tone was intended to feel conversational; it was my goal for students to feel that their success was achievable. Utilizing a conversational tone was aimed at developing a welcoming and invitational connection with students. Furthermore, specific choices, such as of "our course," signals to students that I see myself as a partner with students: the learning throughout the course will be experienced

collectively and collaboratively. I am considering the students—and will include them in their learning processes.

I believe that if students follow the ideas expressed in the what success looks like section of the syllabus, they will be included and find success in this class. I included four elements in my syllabus for students (educators) to be successful in class:

- Bring an open mind to every assignment and in-person class. You will be asked to read/discuss/reflect on varied perspectives. Embrace the challenge. Be open to changing your mind. Be open to listening to—and learning from—other perspectives.
- Engage in the content and discussions with your peers. Engagement involves attention and commitment. Share your perspective(s). Identify and ask questions. All voices are vital to our discussion and learning.
    - Note: When you have Discussion Boards that ask you to reply to a peer, it is vital that you respond in a timely manner. Your peers are relying on you to engage in a dialogue—we are working together as a collective group. Please make a commitment to your peers to post responses on time. If unforeseen circumstances (or roadblocks) arise, please let me know.
- Be willing to rework assignments so you can better demonstrate your understanding of the content. I espouse a growth mindset approach to assessment: your learning exists on a continuum and your first attempt may not accurately represent your best work.
- Communicate with me if roadblocks arise. I will assist you in any way I can, including brainstorming way(s) to remove roadblocks.

(Source: Excerpt from Kimberly Hellerich's EDL 635-AB Spring 2023 Syllabus)

As noted in the, what does success look like in this course section, students are introduced to some fundamental values that I espouse: engaging with the course content

demands an open mind, attention, and commitment to learning; reworking assignments and practicing a growth mindset are highly valued. Furthermore, communication about roadblocks is key—and I, as the instructor, will partner with students to brainstorm ways to remove them. From this section, students are introduced to me as their instructor—and how I established an environment where success can be achieved, if students are: committed to their learning, open to growing as a learner, and willing to communicate with the instructor.

Understanding these important elements of the class will, in my experiences, make success and learning more accessible to every student. The idea is that teaching and learning for me is a partnership between each student and me (and with each other). This leads to the next component understanding the rationale for each assignment. By connecting each important assignment to their goal of becoming a certified principal, my goal is to have every major assignment make sense and have meaning (Sousa, 2017) for each student

Rationale for Key Assignments

Lastly, I provided a "Rationale (Addy et al., 2021) for Key Assignments" within my course syllabi. I hoped that providing a detailed explanation of the intention for the key assignments would create clarity for the students—and foster an understanding of "why" the assignment is planned in the manner it is. This process directly reflects adult learning theories (Knowles, 1980; TEAL Center, 2011). It also provides a contextualized understanding for the learner, which aligns with andragogy, providing active exploration of experiences grounded in real-world experiences (Recigno & Kramer, 2022). Offering clarity in this manner was intended to benefit myself and the students, because if students understand what I am asking of them and why I am asking it, then hopefully, assignments will have more sense and meaning (Sousa, 2017) for students. If I can create and justify assignments that have meaning and make sense to all of the students, then research indicates that more students will be successful (Knowles, 1980; Recigno & Kramer, 2022; Sousa, 2017; TEAL Center, 2011). The syllabus is the beginning of

the process, so in order to make my courses more inclusive and equitable, in addition to making the syllabus become a living document, I believe I must follow up with teaching and learning experiences that engage students and that offer students multiple ways to interact with the curriculum and offer feedback and assistance that will enable each student to be successful in our classes together.

Table 1 displays two examples of key assignments from one of my syllabi. Both assignments were developed to give students real-life experiences of a principal. The first assignment is a simulation case study that students review in small groups and discuss and develop ideas about how to help a teacher who is struggling in their classes. In the second assignment, students are asked to conduct a classroom observation of a peer. My students are asked to "conduct a pre-observation conference, view the lesson, and provide feedback via a post-observation process." The goal is to make this process as real as possible and give all students the opportunity to apply theory into real practice.

Table 1

Examples of Use of Rationale in My Syllabi

Assignment Title	Description and Rationale
Support the Struggling Teacher (Group Presentation/Assignment)	Assignment
	Your assignment is to analyze this case study with your group and to develop a formal improvement plan that will engage the teacher in improving their practices based on what you have learned in our class about teacher improvement and adult learning theory and in best practices that you find in the research. (15-minute presentation)
	Rationale
	This assignment is intended to provide you with the opportunity to consider how to support struggling teachers via observations, feedback, and identified resources. The group presentation element is intended to demonstrate that there are multiple ways to support struggling teachers, with varied resources.

Assignment Title	Description and Rationale
	Assignment
	Conduct a successful peer teacher observation that models professional ethical behavior during a teacher pre and postconference that insures high academic learning and equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive instruction through the use of preplanning and postconference tools and Connecticut State Department of Education approved instructional framework. Submit as a Word document in Taskstream and in Blackboard.
	Rationale
Peer Teacher Observation (Key Assignment)	Rationale: This assignment is intended to provide you with a real-world opportunity to apply learning gained during this course—and reflect on the process. You will conduct a pre-observation conference, view the lesson, and provide feedback via a post-observation process. You will create a list of resources and articulate the connection between the resources and the post-conference discussion. When you are an administrator, these elements will be part of your job expectations; by practicing the process and honing your observation skills, you will be well positioned to speak to the process during a job interview.

Note. Additional items within the syllabus also included rationales, including due dates for Discussion Board submissions—to explain why assignments are due prior to the class (so the instructor can review and make instructional adjustments as needed for the subsequent class session).

Source: Excerpt from Kimberly Hellerich's EDL 635-AB Spring 2023 Syllabus

Summary

In my work to attempt to conduct classes that are inclusive (available for all students) and equitable (all students are successful) I have developed three elements for my syllabi to help my students and me begin our classes together as partners in learning. For me that partnership means that each person (including the instructor) in the class must work in positive and collaborative ways so that we are all successful. My goal is to honor, include, and meet the

learning needs of each of my professional adult students in their quest to become certified principals (Knowles, 1980; Recigno & Kramer, 2022; Sousa, 2017; TEAL Center, 2011). I have attempted to begin that process in a positive way by setting up the syllabus so that students understand three important aspects of our class: my approach as an instructor, what success looks like in the course, and clear descriptions and rationale for key assignments. The results of my action research project indicate that students agree that these three elements were helpful to my students.

Action Research

I believe my transition from the K–12 setting to higher education provided me with a K–20 perspective. In my experiences, I have found that many successfully implemented strategies in K–12 schools can benefit higher education settings, including graduate level programs. Relatedly, higher education instructors and institutions can benefit from engaging in action research (Gibbs et al., 2017). At the higher education level, action research can be seen as a mechanism for critical reflection. Further, action research has often focused on “first-person practitioner research aimed at improving individual teaching practice” (Gibbs et al., 2017, p. 6). Action research approaches can assist instructors to become more effective.

To gather student feedback about the elements of inclusivity in the syllabus, I provided my classes with 10 questions via an anonymous SurveyMonkey survey. Students completed the seven Likert scale prompts and three open-end questions on the survey after reviewing the syllabus and prior to any instruction occurring within the course. Table 2 displays the prompts and open-ended questions from the survey.

Table 2

Student Survey

Prompts	Response Scale
1. What is your opinion of the "Instructor's Approach" section of the syllabus?	5-Point Likert Scale Liked it very much—Disliked it a lot
2. I appreciate the concept that the syllabus is described as a "living constitution."	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
3. I anticipate that the feedback cycle may be helpful to me in this class.	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
4. What is your initial reaction to the "modeling strategies" and "challenging your thinking/adopting a "leadership lens" sections?	Open ended response
5. I anticipate that the belonging wheel (included in the Classroom Community section) may help me engage as a learner in this class.	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
6. After reviewing the "What does success look like in this course?" section, I feel that I can experience success during this course.	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
7. I appreciate Dr. Hellerich included her personal goals for the course as part of the syllabus.	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
8. Based on the "Instructor's Approach" section, what is something you are looking forward to?	Open ended response
9. When reviewing the syllabus, reading the rationale for assignments:	Helped me understand the assignment more. Did not help me understand the assignment more.
10. Do you have anything else you'd like to share?	Open ended response

Note: N = 69

Data Analysis of Syllabi Elements

I analyzed student ratings data from three graduate level spring courses and three graduate level Summer 1 classes. There were 69 students who completed the survey (see Table 3). For each prompt I determined the percentage of students who chose each level of the five Likert scale choices from very positive to very negative. For the purposes of this article, I analyzed what I consider to be the three most important items related to my inclusive syllabus: (a) What is your opinion of the “Instructor’s Approach” section of the syllabus? (b) After reviewing the “What does success look like in this course?” section, I feel that I can experience success during this course. (c) When reviewing the syllabus, reading the rationale for assignments: Helped me understand the assignment more; Did not help me understand the assignment more. In general student data indicate high levels of ratings for the three inclusive elements of the syllabi.

Table 3

Student Population Enrolled in Courses

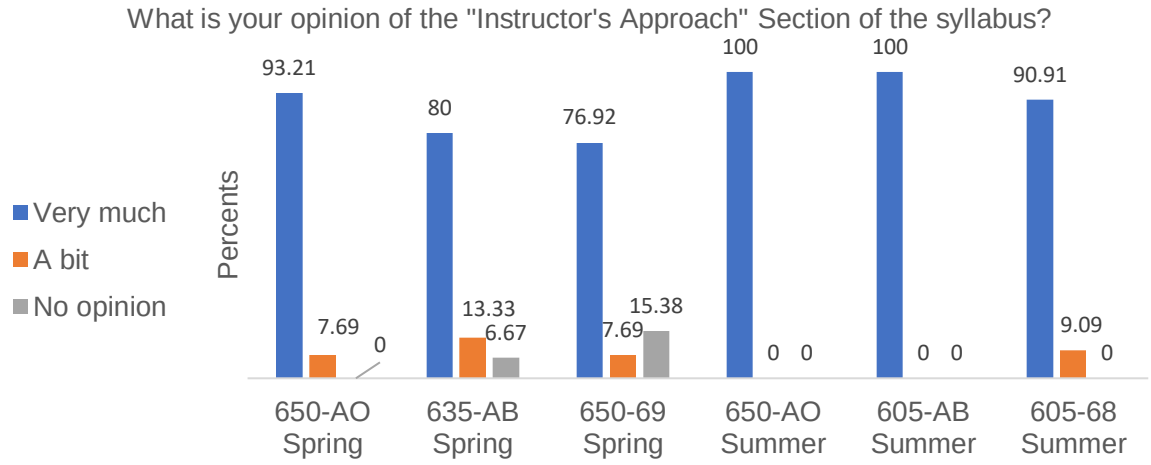
Course	Number of Students Enrolled
650-AO Spring	14
635-AB Spring	12
650-69 Spring	14
650-AO Summer	7
605-AB Summer	11
605-68 Summer	11
TOTAL	69

Instructor's Approach

For the instructor's approach section, approximately 90% of the student responses across classes indicated a high level of "liking" this section of the syllabus (see Figure 4). Specifically, the responses from students enrolled in three summer courses yielded 97% of students selecting the Likert scale level 5 answer of "I liked it very much." For the three spring courses, 93% of the students rated this element as level 5. No students in any of the courses rated this element at a level 2 or level 1. Overall, approximately 90% of students in the six courses rated this element of inclusion for the syllabi with level 5 responses, 6.5% at level 4, and 3.5% at level 3. Thus, the vast majority of student responses across the courses indicate they perceived the Instructor's Approach section of the syllabus in a very positive manner.

Figure 2

Ratings of Instructor's Approach Section



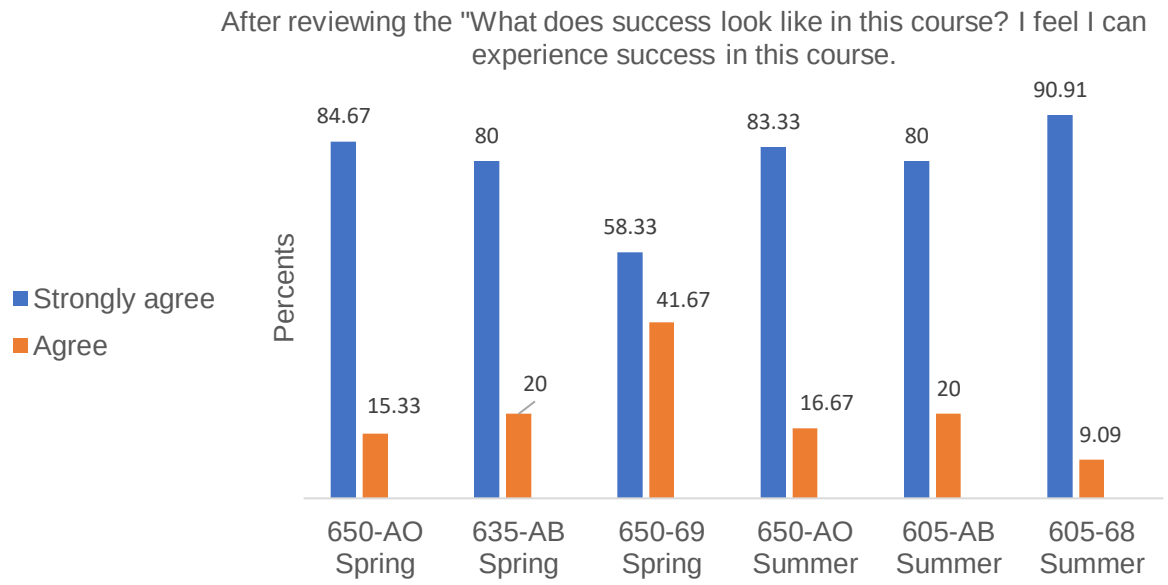
Note: See Table 3 for the N for each course.

What Does Success Look Like in This Course?

Within the section of the syllabus, “What does success look like in this course?” I articulated the expectations for success: engaging with content and peers, having an open mind, and accessing a growth mindset. Exploring the student ratings for this inclusive element from the data revealed, as displayed in Figure 5, that all of the responses were at level 5 or level 4. Approximately 80% of the student responses were level 5 and 20% were at level 4. None of the student responses were below level 4. The student rating data overwhelmingly indicated that students believed, after reading this section of the syllabus, that they could experience success based on the expectations outlined in that section of the syllabus.

Figure 3

I Can Experience Success



Note: See Table 3 for the N for each course.

Rationale for Assignments

Finally, graduate students enrolled in courses in 2023 spring and summer 1 terms provided an overwhelmingly positive response to the question regarding the provided rationale for assignments. In each of the six classes, 100% of students indicated, “The rationale helped me understand the assignment more.” Providing the rationale for assignments that contribute to a significant portion of the course average was deemed helpful by all of my students.

Discussion

From my review of the student ratings for the three elements of inclusivity in the syllabus rated by students, approximately 90% of the student ratings were at level 5, strongly agree and approximately 6.5% of the ratings were at level 4, agree, with approximately 3.5% rated as neutral. Thus, students overwhelmingly rated the elements as worthy and helpful. My conclusion is that students appreciated my efforts to make my syllabus more inclusive for them. These results encourage me to continue to search for ways to ensure the inclusion of all students in my syllabi and in my classes. I believe that since students read the syllabus prior to our first class, the syllabus helped me to set a positive and inclusive tone for my classes.

Limitations

As with any study there are limitations regarding use of the data. First, the number of participants in this study were all graduate students in an educational leadership program. More studies that incorporate a variety of majors and levels of students would be useful. Second, this study had a limited number of participants (i.e., six of my classes), therefore, the results of this study should not be generalized. Third, this study took place in one university, in one department, and in one professor’s classes. Studies that incorporate more diversity of types and levels of schools and numbers and variety of educators would be important to assess a much wider range of data. Fourth, my study utilized student surveys to rate the elements introduced

into my syllabi. Studies should be introduced that assess student achievement and student social and emotional comfort and/or growth. Fifth, I studied three elements of inclusivity in my syllabi. There are certainly more possibilities for making syllabi more inclusive, and other educators and researchers should study other possibilities.

Implications

By applying an action research approach to this study of the responses to my attempts to make my syllabi more inclusive, I heard directly from my students what they thought about my efforts. In my view, there is reason to believe that action research can be an important tool for any professor or teacher who wants to implement ideas into their syllabi. Awang-Hashim et al. (2019) related, “It is important that higher education practitioners participate in strategic reflection to review and understand how diversity and inclusion is conceptualized and managed in their own context” (p. 107). Higher education instructors, and their students, can benefit from exploring additional inclusive elements within courses, including syllabi.

Given the positive perceptions among these graduate students, I believe that several inclusive elements could be applied to a wider range of course syllabi—beyond these educational leadership courses. This action research data yielded that the instructor’s approach section was appreciated, the explanation on how to achieve success in the course allowed students to feel they could be successful as the course began, and the rationale for major assignments helped students understand the assignments. I believe these elements can be seamlessly integrated within the syllabi of any higher education course, across all departments. Perhaps each department could create a syllabus template into which these elements would be introduced. If instructors articulate their approach, their expectations for student success, and provide a rationale for key assignments, many, if not all, students could benefit. The elements may provide for additional inclusivity and (inter)connectivity between students and their instructor—at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Furthermore, I believe these kinds of

elements could also apply to any level in which teachers utilize a syllabus. Educational leaders and teachers can replicate these or similar concepts with their students. Finally, these ideas may be useful in professional development for schools and their teachers at any level. Employing adult learning theories (Knowles, 1980; TEAL Center, 2011) when trying to help educators consider becoming more inclusive by engaging them as professional adults seems, to me, to be a vital aspect of any professional development.

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A Phenomenological Study of Principals: Using Their Stories to Help Future Principals

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Abstract

In this article, I detail my journey through which I have experienced phenomenology. The article includes theoretical connections, personal aspirations, methodology, data collection, and themes that I have identified as I analyzed the data. I have deep personal connections to the phenomenon in the study, the journey to becoming a school principal, and I explain how those connections influenced the research design for my study. The stories that were shared with me by the participants, school principals from the elementary and secondary level in Massachusetts, are central to my experiences as a researcher in this project. I have included my reactions to stories from participants to develop perspective into my experience that aligns with my personal aspirations of becoming a school principal. The article contains quotes from the participants and takeaways that have emerged through the course of revisiting and analyzing the array of responses provided. As pressures mount and problems become increasingly complex in education, principals shared the responsibility of remaining responsive to these challenges. Though demands of time, energy, politics, and resources have placed complex issues onto school principals, the positive influences that effective principals have on their students, staff, and community cannot be overstated. As one participant recounted, “As a leader, you have the ability to really make a difference in such a profound, broad way.” My hope is that their stories can become part of my story and the stories of other future principals.

Keywords: phenomenology, qualitative data, educational leadership, authentic learning, story telling

I have wanted to be a school leader ever since I began teaching, but as I listened to and read about all of the pressures being placed on public schools today, I was beginning to wonder, “Is it worth it?” So, I developed my phenomenological dissertation study to gather the stories of principals in the field in my state. I wanted to hear the stories of people who have chosen and continue to choose to be school leaders. When asked why, one of my participants summed up the feeling of many of the administrators in my project when they responded:

> I get to see kids and adults doing so many incredible things in a given day and know that how I act, the decisions I make to support them, and how I make myself available to them matters. It’s a tough job, but it’s also the best there is.

Rita Pierson (2013), in her famous TED Talk, said, “Every child needs a champion.” From my work in my study, I have come to believe that every school needs a champion, a person who believes in every individual in the school; a person willing to stand up to help every person in the building be whom they can be; a person willing to be the principal. My dream is that one of those people will be me.

The Problem

According to DeMatthews et al. (2021), principals are vital for school improvement and principals are critical in the creation of inclusive and high-performing schools. DeMatthews et al. also reported approximately one in five principals leave their school each year, and the rate of change in principals is higher in schools that serve low-income students of color. Studies have also indicated that effective principals play a crucial role in improving schools and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Robinson et al. (2008) found that principal leadership style also plays an important role in the success of teachers and students.

Unfortunately, a 2022 National Association of Secondary School Principal’s (NASSP) survey reported that half of the 1,000 nation-wide principal participants reported they were

considering leaving the field or retiring due to the stress levels of the job. In the same study, 70% of principals reported having been personally threatened. Additionally, 73% of the surveyed principals reported they had needed help with their emotional or mental help during the previous year. This is important because, according to Snodgrass Rangel (2018), principal turnover can be disruptive and is negatively related to achievement, teacher turnover, and a healthy and positive school climate According to Fink and Brayman (2006), teachers who work in schools in which there is rapid principal turnover more often report poor working conditions, negative school cultures, a lack of a coherent vision or mission, staff cynicism about principal commitments, and a lack of work on continuous improvement. DeMatthews et al. (2021) recommended added emphasis is needed in both principal preparation programs and professional in-service development to recruit and sustain highly effective principals in public schools.

Purpose

There are two main purposes of my phenomenological study of a small group of principals in my state: To gather the stories and recommendations from current principals in my state to enhance the abilities of (a) universities and colleges in their efforts to prepare educators who will develop into effective school leaders; (b) school districts to hire and retain effective school principals. In order to accomplish the purposes for this study, I developed two research questions: (a) In what ways do school leaders describe their journey to becoming school principals? (b) In what ways can the stories of school leaders becoming school principals support the preparation, retention, and efficacy of aspiring principals?

Theoretical Connections

As I began to develop this study, I had to take the time to consider the theoretical connections that developed the context under which knowledge and understanding of our world take place. It did not take long for me to gravitate towards two theories that resonated in ways

that aligned with how I felt knowledge acquisition and understanding would be represented in the study: constructivism and social constructionism. Though similar, each learning theory offers unique elements that I felt would help me more fully understand the journey of becoming a principal.

Based on my experiences in schools and in my research about the topic of becoming a school principal, it became clear to me that leadership style matters (Obama et al., 2015). Principals in my study concurred with the idea that how principals behave and interact with people is tremendously important. The climate of any school is affected by the school leader's style and effectiveness of dealing with the myriad of issues which affect students and teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Thus, the theoretical connection of leadership style to the job of principals helped me formulate this study.

Constructivism

Constructivism (Mcleod, 2023) is a learning theory that emphasizes the active role of learners in building their understanding. Rather than passively receiving information, learners reflect on their experiences, create mental representations, and incorporate new knowledge into their schemas. This promotes deeper learning and understanding (Mcleod, 2023). Constructivism is an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner. In elaborating on constructivists' ideas, Arends (1998) stated that constructivists believe in the personal construction of meaning by the learner through experience, and that meaning is influenced by the interaction of prior knowledge and new events (as cited in Mcleod, 2023). These ideas align with the notions of Piaget (1957), who is credited with the creation of cognitive constructivism, the theory that students construct their individual meanings based on their prior knowledge and the child's interactions with new understandings or knowledge.

According to Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978), learning is not an abstract concept but rather a series of real social interactions in which people work together to make meaning. Each individual constructs their meaning but that is influenced by the environment in which the learning occurs. The interactions of the people (students and teachers) influence each person's ability to construct their own meanings. Thus, learning, or the creation of meaning, occurs both socially and individually, and the environment in which learning is taking place makes a huge difference in what and how students learn.

When thinking about how principals traditionally complete coursework practicum hours through an accredited institution prior to assuming their first principal position, I quickly gravitated towards constructivism. From my own experience and learning as a middle school educator for 8 years, I recall learning a great deal about educational practice and the profession at large from my experiences authentically engaging with my students and colleagues in the work as a new teacher. As such, my presumptions developing and beginning the study were that principals probably constructed their learning and understanding of leadership through their experiences of actually being a principal. I believed that by listening to their descriptions and stories, I would assess the validity of my hypothesis.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism (Nickerson, 2023) theory states that people develop knowledge of the world in a social context, and that much of what we perceive as reality depends on shared assumptions. From a social constructionist perspective, many things we take for granted and believe are objective reality are actually socially constructed, and thus, can change as society changes. Social constructionists, like constructivists, believe that knowledge arises out of human relationships. Thus, what a person takes to be true and objective is the result of social processes that take place in historical and cultural contexts (Nickerson, 2023). As I considered learning theories, I could not settle on constructivism without also acknowledging the merit of

social constructionism. Presumptuously, my experiences as an educator have allowed me to interact with my principal on many occasions, and observe my principal engage with many different individuals, groups, and stakeholders in and outside of the school community. From school committee meetings, district leader meetings, talking to parents and guardians, communicating with general and special educators, the amount and variety of social interactions in which a principal routinely engages is something I feel is important in the development and understanding of what the phenomenon of becoming a principal is like.

Leadership Styles

The way a school principal leads in their school community is impactful in many ways Özgenel, & Karsantik, 2020). In today's climate of heightened expectations, principals are under pressure to improve teaching and learning. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2022), school leaders need to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. Principals are expected to broker the often-conflicting interests of parents, teachers, students, district officials, unions, and state and federal agencies, and school leaders need to be sensitive to the widening range of student needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

Studies have explored and analyzed the relationship between principal leadership styles and school performance. Obama et al. (2015) found that principals' leadership styles do influence school performance either positively or negatively, and it has become clear that no single leadership style is appropriate at all times. These researchers' study found that democratic and situational leadership styles have a positive impact on school performance; while autocratic and laissez-faire leadership styles were found to have negative impacts on school performance. Leadership in education is a key component of a positive school culture

and profoundly impacts student learning and achievement (Obama et al., 2015). Using effective leadership practices in schools is crucial to providing an appropriate learning environment for students. In fact, with the right approach, effective school leadership can provide the key to education transformation, changing a school or district into an extraordinary one (Obama et al., 2015).

There are several kinds of leadership styles that characterize the approach a school principal can assume in their role, that serve as a lens through which I have been able to examine and analyze data in this study. For the purposes of this study, I included the following leadership styles: authoritative, situational, democratic, transactional, and transformational. Leadership styles can play a crucial role in regard to teacher performance and school effectiveness (Obama et al., 2015). While a principal may have more than one leadership style and prefer to use different leadership styles for different situations, research suggests the leadership style or styles school principals have or prefer affects their leadership practices which will affect the performance, motivation, and job satisfaction of teachers and staff (Ozgenel & Karsantik, 2020).

Authoritative Leadership

Authoritative leadership can be described as a style of leadership that stresses personal dominance, strong centralized authority and control over others, and unquestioning obedience (Chen et al., 2014; Harms et al., 2018). Authoritarian leadership has been found to negatively influence team interactions, organizational commitment, task performance, and morale (Chen et al., 2014). Also known as coercive or dictatorial leadership, authoritarian leaders tend to keep all the decision-making authority to themselves and make the decisions about policies, procedures, tasks, structures, and rewards and punishment exclusively on their own (Chen et al., 2014; Harms et al., 2018). The intention behind most authoritarian leaders is to retain control, and they usually require unquestioning obedience and compliance (Chen et al., 2014).

Situational Leadership

Situational leadership can be described as a style of leadership where a leader adapts their style of leading to suit the current work environment or needs of a team. This style of leadership is not dependent just on the skills of a leader (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018). It is also based on a leader's ability to adjust to the requirements of a team or organization in order to be a better and more effective leader. This leadership style may also be referred to as situational leadership theory or the situational leadership model and was originated by Hersey and Blanchard (as cited in Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018). According to Henkel and Boudreau (2018), Hersey and Blanchard posited that a situational leader may use one of the following leadership behavioral styles depending on the situation: telling, selling, participating, and delegating. First, telling is a leadership behavioral style that is used when a team requires close supervision and constant guidance. Leaders using a telling style may make all of the decisions and then communicate these decisions to the team. The telling style is most commonly used when repetitive results are needed or when a team is at the novice level. Second, selling is a leadership behavioral style that is used when a team or employee is unmotivated to perform a task or job duty. Third, the participating behavioral leadership style is most commonly used when a team is competent in particular tasks but do not have the willingness or confidence needed to complete them. Fourth, delegating is a leadership behavioral style that is used when a team is efficient and effective at their jobs and requires little guidance. This kind of leadership is considered a hands-off approach. Leaders trust their employees and are confident in their abilities. They give guidance and take responsibility where needed, but this leadership style means that team members and colleagues have the real lead. A delegating leadership style is a low task and high relationship behavior approach to leadership where a leader empowers an individual to exercise autonomy. Employing this approach entails providing the individual with the big picture, then trusting them to deliver agreed-upon results (Henkel and Boudreau, 2018).

Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership can be described as a style of leadership where school leaders give each person on a team a voice in determining how their company functions (Srivastava et al., 2022). This leadership style is also known as participative leadership, since a democratic leader encourages people to voice their opinions, help with decision-making, and collaborate. Overall, the decision-makers make choices that are in sync with what the majority of others want or desire. In addition to this, these leaders reject traditional “top-down” hierarchical organizational structures (Miller, 2022). These leaders are secure in sharing their power and letting everyone have the opportunity to lead the organization in the right direction (Miller, 2022).

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership can be described as a style of leadership where the leader assumes a more structured approach to management that relies on rigorous checks and balances throughout an organization (Western Governors University, 2021). Typically, employees are given their short- and long-term goals and are expected to work toward them under supervision. Everyone is expected to adhere to strict guidelines set by the leader. Employees who meet their goals are rewarded, while those who fail to meet their deadlines are reprimanded (Western Governors University, 2021). Transactional leaders work well in environments that thrive on structure and organization. Employees are allowed a certain degree of autonomy within the confines of the organization’s policies, so long as they are capable of meeting their goals effectively and on time (Western Governors University, 2021). For employees who excel in an environment based on consistent company policies, transactional leadership can be a key motivating factor in encouraging them to realize organizational goals. Rules, regulations, and a high degree of organization create the foundation upon which transactional leaders build their organization (Western Governors University, 2021).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is a leadership theory where a leader works with colleagues to identify needed changes, creates and enacts a vision, and executes the change in conjunction with their highly committed team (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Transformational leadership focuses on charismatic and effective leadership elements (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Transformational leaders are believed to tap into the potential and motives of colleagues to make it easier to reach the collective goals of the team. This style illustrates that leadership is different from power since it is inseparable from the needs of employees (Northouse, 2016). It means that the leader does not act because of the power given to them by the nature of their leadership position (Northouse, 2016). They act in the interest of those seeking to work with them to attain the collectively created vision. A transformational leader invests time seeking to inspire and support colleagues in their understanding and acceptance of the vision (Northouse, 2016).

Positionality

In a professional capacity, I have aspired to become a school administrator for some time. As someone who is deeply vested in public education, I am committed to serving in an administrative capacity that will allow me to affect an even greater magnitude of change beyond the classroom level. As a current 7th and 8th grade science teacher in Massachusetts, I am fortunate to work alongside and affect change amongst the students I teach, colleagues with whom I collaborate, as well as vested families and community members who care a great deal about the education of their youth. This project helped me to further develop and strengthen my skills, thinking, and competence as an emerging leader.

I understand that throughout my career there will be many different contexts and circumstances in which I will need to exercise the leadership frames in my thinking, decision-making, communication, and interactions with a variety of individuals. I will encounter adaptive

challenges and contexts that demand rethinking, reframing, and action that is reflective of my district's mission and vision. I believe school leaders across the nation have experienced, and will likely continue to experience, flux in their contexts that will impact their leadership practices, including the core values, beliefs, and skill sets those in their communities wish for children to develop through the course of their schooling.

Methodology

The main purpose of my study was to gather the stories and recommendations from current principals in my state to enhance the abilities of (a) universities and colleges in their efforts to prepare educators who will develop into effective school leaders; (b) school districts to hire and retain effective school principals. In order to accomplish the purposes for this study, I developed two research questions: (a) In what ways do school leaders describe their journey to becoming school principals? (b) in what ways can the stories of school leaders becoming school principals support the preparation, retention, and efficacy of aspiring principals?

I employed qualitative interviews of school principals to gather their stories of what helped each participant, what hampered each person, and what recommendations they have for colleges and universities, school districts, and for individuals as they begin their principal careers. In reviewing the data, themes emerged, from the stories of the principals, related to how principals might be better prepared to face the ever-growing complexities and pressures of school administration.

Research Design

The design I used to research and describe the journey school leaders have taken to become principals is a phenomenological research design. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon. An emphasis on a specific phenomenon is prioritized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The essence of a phenomenological study is to reduce

individual experiences with a specific phenomenon to a description of a universal essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study I conducted focused on examining how school leaders describe their journey to becoming principals and their experiences as principals. This phenomenological study includes descriptions of individuals at three stages of their careers including (a) their teaching experiences prior to becoming a principal, professional experiences they feel prepared them best for becoming a principal, and why they decided to become principals, (b) elements of their principal preparation program they felt prepared them best for becoming a principal along with elements of being in the leadership role that have resonated most with each participant, and qualities, skills, and/or goals they feel helped them begin their journey, and (c) how they describe their journey to becoming a school principal, and what they wish they had known going into the principalship.

Additionally, I asked each principal to share their advice for principal preparation programs in two ways: 1. What did their principal preparation program do that every principal preparation program should do? 2. What did their principal preparation program not do that the participants in this study believe all principal preparation programs should do to ensure their graduates are fully prepared on day one of their careers as principals?

In this study, I used a phenomenological research design to gather data for further analysis in order to answer two main research questions. First, in what ways do school leaders describe their journey to becoming school principals? And, second, in what ways can the stories of school leaders becoming school principals support the preparation, retention, and efficacy of aspiring principals?

Phenomenological research is oriented towards the interpretation of lived experiences and is useful for the analysis of the journeys that school leaders describe to becoming principals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of the study was entirely on the phenomenon of becoming a

school principal, especially targeting the data collection to participants' experiences in that role. In the collection of this data, I gathered the stories of the participants in a way that highlighted their stories with meaning and purpose (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this process, the meaning and purpose of their journeys provided a rich account of how they became principals, perspectives and recommendations aspiring principals could consider before enrolling in a principal preparation program, information for university programs to consider to make their program, curriculum, and structure more effective, and help for beginning principals to develop ideas to enter their administrative roles better prepared to be successful and grow in their careers.

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study primarily took place in Massachusetts. My reasons for conducting the study in this state included my aspirations of becoming a licensed principal in the state and the state being my primary residence. I traveled to my participants to conduct the interviews in person. Alternatively, I utilized phone conferencing video chatting software if that was a more convenient option to the participant. I attempted to balance both male and female participants as well as diverse races and ethnicities to allow for equal representation of perspectives to the collection and analysis of my qualitative data.

As it was essential that all participants had experience with the phenomenon of being a principal. I initially intended to use purposeful criterion sampling. Criteria in this study was to include participants who had a minimum of 5 years of experience being a principal in the same school, successfully completed a principal preparation program through an accredited institution, been recommended for principal licensure, and were principals of communities with a median household income of $38,000–$200,000.

Something significant that changed about the study was the criteria through which I selected participants. I accessed a database through the Massachusetts Department of

Elementary and Secondary Education of principals in various communities. Using the database, I attempted to identify and narrow down potential participants using the aforementioned criteria. However, it soon became apparent that one of the criteria was limiting. A significant number of potential participants had not served as a principal for 5 years in the same setting. The reasoning for this element of the criteria for potential participants was to account for the time needed for a new school leader to become acclimated to a new school, district, and community. Broadening the criteria to 2 years instead of 5 made it more feasible to locate potential participants, accounting for an element of a problem that exists across many schools: retention. Though not surprising, this was not something I anticipated as I began the study and allowed me to adapt to and refine my methodology accordingly.

Data Collection

After a brief, initial interview with each participant to gain a better sense of their experience and where they presently served as a principal, I scheduled my first round of "formal interviews" with each participant. The questions posed in this interview included:

- Why did you decide to become a principal?
- Describe any professional experiences prior to becoming a principal that you feel prepared you to become a principal.
- Describe your preparation to becoming a school principal.
- Describe your level of knowledge and experience with the National Educational Leadership Program (NELP) standards.
- Describe elements of your leadership role that resonate the most
- Based on your journey, what were the five elements that were most important to your preparation?
- If you had a magic wand and could include anything in your preparation program, what would it have been?

- If you had a magic wand and could include anything in your journey to becoming a principal, what would it have been?
- What recommendations would you give to an aspiring principal to help them on their journey?
- What recommendations would you give to principal preparation programs to support more equitable learning outcomes for principal candidates?
- What advice would you offer to an aspiring principal?

When I thought about the kinds of questions I would pose to my participants, I imagined a “path” or “story” that each participant followed from beginning to present that led them to where they are today as a principal. Elements prior to the principalship (including what lead up to their deciding to become a principal, the kinds of experiences they had had leading up to becoming a principal, and the preparation program they enrolled in were elements that came to mind right away (and ones that were directly relevant in my journey to becoming a licensed administrator).

Data Analysis

Thus far, I have transcribed recorded interviews between myself and my participants. These included an introductory interview and two formal rounds of interviews with each participant during the 2022–2023 school year. This totaled three transcribed interviews per participant. I spent several months re-reading each transcript, making notes of codes in the text. These codes often consisted of words, phrases, or quotes that resonated or got to what felt like the essence or “bottom line” of addressing the question. Once I had taken the time to identify codes for the interview questions in each transcript, I devoted time to look for and identify particular patterns in the codes I identified to determine “themes” or broader abstractions that more comprehensively addressed the questions posed across all participants that responded. These themes will now be examined and used in a way to more succinctly and concisely

answer the research questions grounding the study: In what ways do school leaders describe their journey to becoming school principals? And, in what ways can the stories of school leaders becoming school principals support the preparation, retention, and efficacy of aspiring principals?

Preliminary Results

Themes

I have been fortunate to interview several principals at the elementary, middle, and high school level throughout Massachusetts during the 2022–2023 school year. Through the course of these conversations, I have been able to listen to many journeys to becoming a principal, an array of stories and experiences in leadership, and advice to those considering the role. From my initial reviews of the data, four themes have emerged in relation to ideas that are important for principals: 1. Leadership style, 2. Flexibility, 3. Inspiration, and 4. Making a difference.

As I listened to and considered these stories, it became apparent a principal's leadership style makes a difference in the kinds of outcomes a school and those in it experience. Two leaders recounted a negative experience working with leaders who would be considered authoritarian. "I knew right away I never wanted to be like her when I had my first job," one participant explained. Another principal contended:

> They made everyone's life hell, including mine. It was their way or the highway. Consequently, it became a terrible place to work, the staff were miserable, and, well, I had a prime example of what I never wanted to be.

Though several styles exist, a second theme that emerged in participant responses was the need to be flexible with one's approach. One leader explained, "I've worked hard to be flexible with how I approach things and my style I guess you could say." Another leader stated:

> I don't think it's effective to be static or that you could ever just stay in one style. It depends on the context. Sometimes, I need to make a hard and fast decision. Other

> times, there's the latitude of inviting others to play a part in sharing the decision made. And still in some ways, I know and trust my staff well enough to be a bit more hands-off knowing they are going to make choices and decisions that are right by our kids. For me, it all depends.

This level of flexibility corresponds with another approach to leadership: situational leadership. According to Hersey and Blanchard (1969), situational leadership is an adaptive leadership style (as cited in Cherry, 2023). This strategy encourages leaders to take stock of their team members, weigh the many variables in their workplace, and choose the leadership style that best fits their goals and circumstances (Cherry, 2023).

Related to the third theme (inspiration), five out of eight participants recounted a leader that had inspired them in their journey to becoming a school principal. Four out of eight of these participants described their individual as "uplifting" and "empowering." All five of these participants described the individual as "inspiring." It may not be surprising, then, that studies have revealed many researchers have found that principal leadership style and staff perceptions of leadership style have one of the greatest bearings on school performance (Tedla et al, 2021). Indeed, such studies have substantiated schools that embraced more democratic and participatory leadership styles, that encouraged group work and team spirit performed significantly better on state assessments than those that used more autocratic leadership styles that were largely dictatorial (Tedla et al., 2021). Similarly, those schools in which teachers and staff felt supported, appreciated, and experienced happiness in their organization experienced greater levels of staff retention, increases in student achievement, and increases in job satisfaction expressed by staff (Tedla et al, 2021).

Related to the fourth theme (making a difference), principals shared with me how important it is to them to make a positive difference in their schools. One principal stated, "You know what I love about this job? I get to see kids and teachers in the zone." Another reiterated,

“I get to see my kids grow into incredible people.” A third principal told me, “I get to hand them their diplomas, to be part of sending on to the next part of their lives.”

What Do You Wish You Had Known?

I know there have been plenty of occasions, especially early on in my career as an educator, where I wish I had known certain things or been able to impart some words of advice to the 22-year-old that had just taken the leap into their first middle school teaching position. Things like "take care of yourself," "leave work at work," "work smarter not harder," and "you are a wonderful teacher even when 'those' days happen," are among things that come to mind when I think back on my journey, and what I wish I could have heard starting out. I knew this was something I really wanted to ask and be attuned to when the time came to hear, process, and digest the many stories into becoming a school principal I would hear.

While I heard many different stories and insightful words of wisdom in response to this question, one comes to mind that still resonates when I reflect. A principal of a combined middle school and high school in southeastern Massachusetts recounted that they had wished someone would have told them it is perfectly okay to be imperfect at this incredibly demanding job. With a wide smile and an infectious amount of energy, they stressed the importance of having fun, being a human alongside the many wonderful staff, students, and families one will meet, owning and learning from the many mistakes one makes along the way, and to enjoy every moment of the journey. This principal stated:

> You are going to mess up. And that is okay. Own it, learn from it, and move forward. Laugh with your colleagues, lean on them, be fun, be friendly, and make it all fun. It can be a thankless job and kill your energy. Don’t let it. Be kind to you, be kind to your staff and students, and let them see you’re perfectly imperfect just like the rest of them. Trust me, it goes a long way.

In full transparency, I am rather hard on myself. When I was an intern and was asked to self-assess a lesson, I had taught, I was notorious for selecting scores that were on the lower end of the rubric scale. When it came to debriefing the lesson with my evaluator, I mainly focused on the many components of the lesson I felt fell short of expectations. As time progressed and I gained more experience, confidence, and knowledge of professional practices and pedagogy from coursework and colleagues, I gradually learned to relinquish such negativity, and embrace appreciative feedback. As I reflect, I remember always wanting to be my very best for my students, and wanted to do just about anything to make it happen, even if it meant tearing apart lessons I had developed and taught as a new educator. Time and experience taught me you otherwise. And while I am confident there will be plenty of mistakes and stories to be had as I venture into the world of becoming a school principal, stories like this are the grounding force reminding me to appreciate the strengths and gifts I bring as a leader, learn from the mistakes, be human, and embrace the journey.

Advice

From my review the data to date, participants have given some sage advice for aspiring principals:

- During the preparation program engage in authentic experiences as much as possible.
- Engage in a formal mentor system during preparation and initiation of one's administrative career.
- Develop skills in the following attitudes and skills:
    - Maintain a sense of humor
    - Invest in relationships
    - Communicate often and with a wide range of people and groups
    - Expect the unexpected

- Exercise emotional intelligence
- Dealing with angry adults

Regardless of the journey described, the value participants placed in ample authentic experiences and mentorship as integral to preparing aspiring principals is unquestionably worthy of note. Seven of the eight participants emphasized a need for preparation programming to develop curricula that prioritized learning experiences that transcended what would be learned from a textbook reading or written assignment. A middle school principal participant shared, “The book stuff is great and certainly holds its purpose. But like teaching, ya know, until you’re in the trenches actually doing the work, it doesn’t carry the same kind of weight.” Five of these participants compared this process to a student teaching internship (or rather a “student principal” internship) in which a principal candidate has the opportunity to experience undertaking the roles and responsibilities of being a principal for an extended period of time under the supervision of a mentor principal. One participant stated:

> I think for this job you really need to be given a larger, substantive window of time where you take the reins on everything. Taking on staff meetings, classroom observations, and evaluations, attending different meetings, working with other district leaders, taking the lead on issues or concerns that come your way on a given day. There’s no better teacher than experience, especially when it comes to being the leader in your building.

Five out of the eight participants expressed a desire for new principals to have access to a mentor within the respective school district, or even a mentor within the same state, to guide, support, and be a resource to someone starting new to the role or moving to a new school. One participant noted, “I wish I had what I had when I first started teaching: a mentor. You don’t usually get one, but yet they are so valuable and are your anchor as you’re figuring everything out.” These same participants recounted the level of difficulty and feelings of isolation they

experienced entering the role without the support of a mentor. One elementary principal recounted their first year in the position:

> I was brand new and I really did not know anyone. I had other administrator colleagues in the district who were nice but really did not have the same kind of camaraderie you have when you meet your new teammates on your teaching team. I felt so on my own, like my own island, and all alone. It really didn't feel good. And it didn't take me long to figure out that if I'm gonna be best at this gig, I need to meet other people and have my tribe. You cannot do this job alone.

Though a supportive superintendent and fellow principal colleagues within the district were said to be beneficial by the same participants, a desire for more systemic support and structures was a recommendation borne from revisiting these interviews.

Equally important were the many skills and/or attitudes participants shared that resonated with their leadership practice. These ranged from being able to have a sense of humor, investing in relationships, and being a presence before, during, and after school to exercising emotional intelligence, expecting the unexpected, remaining calm, and knowing how to communicate and interact with a wide range of individuals and stakeholders. One principal shared, "You've got to be able to laugh every day in this job, otherwise it can and will consume you." Another participant recommended:

> Get out there! See what's going on in the hallways, classrooms, the cafeteria. Be seen by folks and get dirty. I love when I can join in on a fun science experiment, help the cafeteria out serving up lunches, and chat up parents at drop off or dismissal. It makes a difference, it shows you are a human, and that you care.

Another principal recounted a stressful end to the school day:

> I had three things come up all at once. One of the secretaries brought a scheduling conflict to my attention, there was a student altercation in the hallway that had just

> happened, and a staff member had just shared their cancer diagnosis. And this all within minutes. So, you keep your cool and think rationally and with your heart. Obviously, my staff member comes first. Schedule can wait, and I can deal with the fight in a bit as long as they are not still hurting each other and are kept apart.

Six out of the eight participants expressed the difficulty of handling irate parents or community members and the challenge of responding to several different matters that were otherwise unexpected or were ones that previous preparation efforts did not address. One participant recounted “I think that has been one of the harder things about this job. Knowing how to handle parents that are very upset, taking out their anger on you, sometimes even taking to social media . . . it’s just so hard.” Another participant shared, “It’s just one of those things that’s so tricky. When emotions run high, you have to keep your calm and think and act with a level head. But that’s way easier said than done and can be so stressful.”

Discussion

Broadening the criteria for potential participants proved more reflective of the realities of principals in today's context. I recall embarking on this study feeling confident I had a handle on who I would be interviewing, the kinds of stories and insights shared with me, and how they may contribute to the field of educational leadership. Though I had a solid base of knowledge and background, there was far more learning to be had! Adapting the methodology of the study allowed for richer narratives and deeper development of themes to responses. Epistemologically, the change in sampling complemented the nature of the study by affording a greater dimension through which interpretation of the data could be realized. Since the epistemological underpinning of this phenomenological study was to gather the stories of a sample of principals in my state, it was important to ensure the realities described included a range of experiences that principals have faced in their work histories (Creswell, 2013).

Something that immediately resonated with me as I have had the opportunity to revisit these conversations is the variety of pathways and journeys principals have undergone to become school leaders. Some have served as classroom teachers, coaches, and instructional leaders prior to become a principal. Others pursued careers that were not in education prior to making the change. Some have served in their school community for several years and progressed to becoming the building principal, while others have worked in a variety of schools, states, and in different roles. One principal recounted:

> Prior to becoming the principal, I was a social studies teacher at the high school for 10 years. Then, I became the department chair. When I got my administrator license, I applied for and became the assistant principal. After a few years of that, one summer my superintendent came to me in a pinch to fill in an elementary principal position that had opened unexpectedly. And here I am now six years later.

Another described their journey as “crazy”:

> I started out working in the business sector years ago. I went on maternity leave to have my first baby. When it came time to go back to work, I just couldn’t muster going back into that office. It didn’t energize me. I had always thought about working in a school, more specifically with kids and behaviors so I went back to school and got my BCBA license. I got a job as a behavioral interventionist and did that gig for seven years till one day, my superintendent asked if I ever thought of going the school leadership route. I figured ‘why not?’ And it just became something I loved so much that I did the classes, the practicum stuff, got the license, and have been at it since!

Reflections

When I think about this study as a whole, I often describe myself as having been an outsider. As I have come to learn more about research in recent years, this term describes the idea that the researcher conducting the study has not experienced the phenomenon in question

that others have. In other words, going into this study, I never had any prior experience with or knowledge of what it is like to be a school administrator. Though I aspired to become one and could only surmise the kinds of challenges one faces in a role like that, my thoughts, questions, and curiosities permeated my thinking and desire to know more as an outsider.

I knew I had much to learn going into this study. There is only so much research and literature one can wrap their mind around and learn from. As I considered what this study was going to look like, I wanted to be sure I was as intentional as possible in the kinds of questions I posed to my participants who had lived this experience that felt so foreign to me. I spent time in the weeks and months leading up to finalizing my dissertation proposal jotting down thoughts and questions that popped up when I least expected it. I wanted to be sure the questions I brainstormed in the first round of interviews captured the journey and experience of becoming a principal, and the interview that followed continued to broaden and deepen the richness of each individual account that was shared.

It was nothing shy of a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak with and be afforded the many experiences, journeys, and stories of becoming a school principal as I conducted this study. Each story and recount offered something unique and thought-provoking as I considered the overarching purpose and questions driving the study. These same stories and experiences are those that will allow me to develop and propose recommendations to principal preparation programs to augment curriculum, resources, and support principal candidates experience prior to making the leap into this important role.

I would consider my own experience interviewing several school principals a gift. Their stories were impactful in how my own thinking, views, and mental models of what I envisioned becoming a school principal would be like. Though I am still of the belief that until I assume my first position as a principal I may not truly know and understand the weight of what it is like, the

perspectives I have gained and insights I have gained engaging with these stories is unequivocal and ones I hope to bring with me into a school principal role one day soon.

Experiences in Real Time

The study consisted of three different interviews that took place with each participant. The first interview was a brief opportunity to introduce myself, the study, and learn more about the participant. The two interviews that followed in fall and winter often took place in the afternoon during the school day, or shortly thereafter. The latter interviews allowed me to hear, and sometimes see in real time, the kinds of experiences principals face and are expected to address in a given day. This, in and of itself, was telling in terms of what the job of a principal entails.

By being able to experience, in real time, some of the issues with which principals must deal I gained invaluable insight into some of the stories and advice principal shared with me. I can recall an interview that was scheduled with a middle school principal in a neighboring district. We had rescheduled the interview a few times due to scheduling conflicts. It was not long after we began the interview that the phone rang. The receptionist had called to report an urgent matter that required immediate attention. I saw the expression in their face changed rather suddenly to one of concern, and they asked if they could step aside for a few minutes to attend to the information they had just received. I did not have to think twice to assure them it was perfectly okay, and we could reschedule if need be. Roughly half an hour later, they returned. Upon their return they explained that a student had gone missing at dismissal, and the student's panicked guardian had come to school very upset and irate. Thankfully, the student had made a last-minute decision to attend an optional after school program and was located within several minutes, though the student neglected to inform their guardian of their plans. When I had asked if they would like to continue the conversation at a later time, I was assured they were willing to continue. "You know, it's just telling of how this job can be sometimes," the

participant remarked. “No two days are ever the same. Expect the unexpected. And if you just keep a cool head and trust your gut, you will be alright.”

In an interview with another participant, we were interrupted by a student at the participant’s school pulling the fire alarm. In another interview, our interview was cut short by an emergency meeting the superintendent called. And on another occasion, the high school principal had requested to reschedule due to a pipe that had burst, displacing several classes, moments before the meeting. Though certainly stressful, each participant contended, in their words, that it is “part of the job”. I can remember so clearly one elementary principal remarking:

> You will have a schedule all laid out for the next day. Your meetings, when you will do some observations, when you will make some phone calls or send some emails. And then the moment you walk in the door to start your day, or even as your day starts to get underway . . . boom! It all changes! But that’s just it. And you learn to roll with it.

I will be the first to admit that there were times where I could sense the stress and frustration in my participant's voice, or thought to myself, “Wow, that is heavy. Can I actually do that? Is this something I actually want to do?” Those moments were very telling of just how taxing and demanding a job like being a school principal can really be. And though those were some of the harder moments, the energy and enthusiasm each shared about different parts of the job far outweighed some of the more challenging moments that came about. “You know what I love about this job? I get to see kids and teachers in the zone. I get to be a friendly and familiar face to so many. It’s just the best” one participant shared. Another principal shared:

> These kids grow in leaps and bounds. You get to see them become some of the most incredible humans with the most brilliant ideas. I get to hand them diplomas and see them off to the next chapter in their lives. My partner and I go to all the games. They know him well, and we always get to chat with so many families, younger siblings, and you just become part of a big ol’ family. I mean, how cool is that?

Final Thoughts

These anecdotes and the light that shone through my interviewees in their expressions and body language as they reminisced and shared their stories reminded me a lot of my experience with teaching. I have had some of the best days of my life in the classroom. I have had some of the worst I could imagine. I have days where I wanted to hand in my keys at the office and never look back, and I have days where I could not imagine myself doing anything else. The more I engaged with my participants and could immerse myself in their stories, the more it reminded me of my own and provided the reassurance I needed to be confident in moving towards this next chapter in my personal and professional life.

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