PENNSYLVANIA EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

VOLUME 40 - NUMBER 1
SPRING/SUMMER 2021

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VOLUME 40 | NUMBER 1 | SPRING/SUMMER 2021

Pennsylvania Educational Leadership is an official publication of the Pennsylvania Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Since 1996 the journal has received numerous awards from the international Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. These awards include "best affiliate journal," "outstanding affiliate article" (multiple times), and "outstanding affiliate journal."

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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS TOWARD DIVERSITY IN SCHOOL POPULATIONS

Dr. Carol E. Watson
Kutztown University
Department of Elementary, Middle Level, Library, and Technology Education
108 Beekey Education Building
Kutztown. PA 19530
484-332-5098 (cell)
watson@kutztown.edu

ABSTRACT

As student populations across the country become increasingly diverse (ethnically, socio-economically, linguistically, and culturally), significant adjustments in both cultural competence and culturally relevant practice are needed. In this study, teacher perceptions of the changing population demographics of one school district and their potential impact on equitable student learning were investigated. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Findings indicate educators in the participant district hold diametrically opposed attitudes toward changing population demographics, as well as a significant cultural disconnect between some educators and the rapidly diversifying student/parent population. While all participants reflect awareness of both a growing and diversifying student population, attitudes toward this shift are stratified, ranging from frustration and annoyance to concern and call to action.

The overriding common culture of American public schools has historically reflected the values, expectations, and practices of traditional white middle class and a Eurocentric perspective that influences classroom discourse patterns disenfranchising ethnically diverse, immigrant, and low-socioeconomic students in particular. The socio-cultural constructs of individual competition and achievement, valuing hard work and determination, and a consistent focus on the future are commonplace and well documented (Brice Heath, 1983; Emdin, 2016; Minor, 2019). Green-Gibson and Collett (2014) go so far as to state, "The public education system has always been based on Eurocentric values that work to benefit the cultural backgrounds of European Americans" (abstract). In recent times, this pervasive white/middle class paradigm has become less appropriate as the make-up of public-school student populations shifts toward a more diverse demographic (Facing History and Ourselves, 2020; Parker et al., 2020). In many school districts, changes have been characterized by significant growth in both ethnically and socio-economically diverse student populations (Banks & Banks, 2001; Brinegar et al., 2019; Burkam et al., 2004; Hodgkinson, 2001). In a growing number of school districts, patterns of demographic change have become steady, consistent, and recently increasing over the past several decades (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Despite the paradigm described above, very little is known about the perceptions and attitudes of teachers as they face a changing population dynamic toward diversity of culture, class, and language. Research has confirmed for many years that the most disadvantaged students consistently experience the least success in school (Brinegar et al., 2019). We know that teacher perceptions and attitudes do have a significant impact on student success (McDermott et al., 2012; Zimmermann, 2018). Watson et al. (2014) found significant differences in student attitudes and self-confidence toward high-stakes tests depending on the message communicated from the teacher about expectations of them. "It became more evident that different classrooms of students had a varying collective demeanor toward the PSSA test which we attribute to the teacher's influence," concludes

Watson et al., (p. 8).

Contreras (2011) found that the teachers have particular perceptions and expectations toward their Hispanic students. She concludes, "…in order to bring about systemic change in the educational system, educators must acknowledge and be willing to address that their perceptions and expectations can impact a student's academic achievement" (p. xi). Paulo Freire's seminal work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968) details the striking difference in whether or not students thrive that can be accomplished when the teacher's perspective changes from one of a traditional model to one of a child-centered model. This can only happen when teachers choose to examine their own perspectives toward diverse students and realize that a different approach is necessary. The first step in this process is to assess the existing attitudes and perceptions of teachers so we can determine how to begin. This research investigated the attitudes and perceptions of educators in a historically white/middle class school district toward a student population dynamic shifting to reflect significant ethnic, socio-economic, and linguistic diversity.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The trend toward greater diversity in student populations gives rise to multiple issues involving how teachers and administrators perceive and approach students from nondominant cultures. Students from ethnically diverse and varying socioeconomic cultures embody values, expectations, goals, and motivations that differ significantly from traditional white/middle class culture (Downey, 2008; Minor, 2019). Economically privileged students enter formal school with knowledge, skills, and mannerisms that are more highly valued by educators (Bourdieu, 1977). Economically disadvantaged students often demonstrate verbal and/or physical responses that are not aligned with nondominant culture's construct of what is appropriate and expected in the Eurocentric context and understandings (Jensen, 2009). They typically bring to school fewer verbal and mathematical skills than their peers (Lee & Burkham, 2002) because they are sometimes not valued in the same way in their home culture (Payne, 2019). Many ethnic minority students arrive having had negative experiences with traditional white middle class culture resulting in lack of confidence, mistrust of school personnel, and limited language abilities (Bermundez & Marquez, 1996; Brinegar et al., 2019). Mantero and McVicker (2006) stated that, "Changing student demographics are altering the image of the American classroom" (para. 2).

As this significant shift in school populations is taking place, the majority of America's public-school teachers continue to be European-American women (Banks & Banks, 2001; Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). Little is available specifically about teachers' perceptions of the shift in population demographics or their attitudes toward it. Riegle-Crumb and Humphries (2012) found disparities in math teachers' perceptions of ability favoring white male students. Francis (2011) reported that teachers perceived Black females to be less attentive and more disruptive than their peers of other races. White students were perceived by teachers as having

greater homework competence than Black and Latino students (Pendergast et al., 2017). Finally, Neumeister et al. (2007) concluded, "...teachers still held a narrow concept of giftedness and were not aware of how culture and environmental factors may influence the expression of giftedness in economically disadvantaged students" (p. 479). In Delpit's (1995) classic work, she explained that most teachers are teaching "other people's children" without an understanding of who their ethnically and socio-economically diverse students are or the cultural values that shaped them.

Working successfully with diverse populations will require a shift in modes of communication, management practices, and instructional strategies to name just a few (Emdin, 2016; Mantero & McVicker, 2006; Minor, 2019). Bensman (2000) suggested that in order to facilitate student success, teachers must participate in 'cultural interchange': the process of teachers learning about students' cultures and parents coming to understand the culture of school. Unfortunately, this type of open, congruent communication between stakeholders of very diverse cultural values is unusual.

All of these issues are particularly significant in locations that have, until recently, been relatively immune from the broader national influx of ethnically, socio-economically, and linguistically diverse populations. Many rural, small town, and suburban areas have not experienced consistent population growth or demographic change until recent years. As urban populations continue to overflow their geographic space limitations, nondominant cultures historically concentrated in urban areas are beginning to trickle into areas that have never dealt with diversity before (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019).

It is clear that the traditional, historical paradigm based on white/middle class values and practices alone will not be successful in meeting the needs of our growing diverse student population. Many studies have indicated that white/middle class teachers are not cognizant of either their own cultural disconnect with diverse students, or the changes they need to make in their instructional strategies, practices, and communication styles in order to be effective with diverse student populations (Bandura, 1982; Emdin, 2016; Milner, 2010). Most cling to their own cultural constructs and try to force diverse students to fit into their perceptions of 'how things should be' (Howard, 2007; Emdin, 2016). Milner (2010) explained, "When teachers operate primarily from their own cultural ways of knowing, the learning milieu can be foreign to students whose cultural experiences are different and inconsistent with the teachers' experiences" (p. 23-24). In order to develop alternative perspectives, we must first assess and understand the current mindset of school personnel. Only then can there be an appropriate, effective plan for moving forward to change the paradigm so that all students have equitable opportunity to be successful (Brinegar et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). With this in mind, the following research questions (RQ) guided this investigation:

RQ 1: To what level do school personnel notice and understand issues relating to a changing diverse student demographic?

RQ 2: What are school personnel perceptions and attitudes about demographic change toward diverse populations?

METHODS

DEMOGRAPHICS

Statistical data from multiple sources were compiled to create an accurate and current picture of the changing population demographic and resulting cultural dynamic in the area where the study was conducted, as well as to represent the historical context of the region that sets the traditional school atmosphere. The school district under study is located in a historically rural area that has seen the introduction of several large housing developments in recent years creating pockets of suburban neighborhoods. New residents are relocating from more urban areas nearby and are often from ethnically and/or socio-economically diverse backgrounds. United States Census records confirm that not only has the school district's overall student population increased across the past four decades, but the make-up of that population has also diversified significantly. A chart reflecting this trend can be found in Appendix A.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this research were identified by their status as faculty, administrators, or instructional support staff employed by the school district under study. Of the approximately 125 educators invited to participate, 38 responded to the survey. They were approached/recruited through the superintendent of the school district in collaboration with the investigator of this study. Survey data indicated that the participants were 3% administrative, 85% teaching faculty, and 10% support staff. Ninety-one percent had 20 years or less experience in public education while, 64% had less than 10 years experience. Eighty-seven percent reported experience in two or fewer other school districts, while 42% reported no experience anywhere else. Building levels of participants were as follows: elementary 39%, middle level 18%, high school 32%, and multiple/all 10%.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A mixed methods design was implemented to address the guiding questions driving this investigation. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected using the same survey instrument (Appendix B) distributed to all district faculty, administration, and support staff in all buildings (K-12) in the school district. This triangulation design is intended to bring together the strengths of both data collection methods. Creswell (2006) explained, "This design is used when a researcher wants to...expand quantitative results with qualitative data" (p. 62). As can be seen on the survey, quantitative questions using a Likert scale response are each followed by a qualitative question using a text box response intended to capture further detail. The survey was conducted electronically using an online survey distribution and data collection system. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

DATA ANALYSIS

Because only two of the questions are quantitative using a five-point Likert scale, analysis was fairly simple described by percentages for each of the choices (see Appendix C). These questions were intended to set a baseline for educator responses, each having a follow-up open-ended question to provide deeper insight through qualitative means.

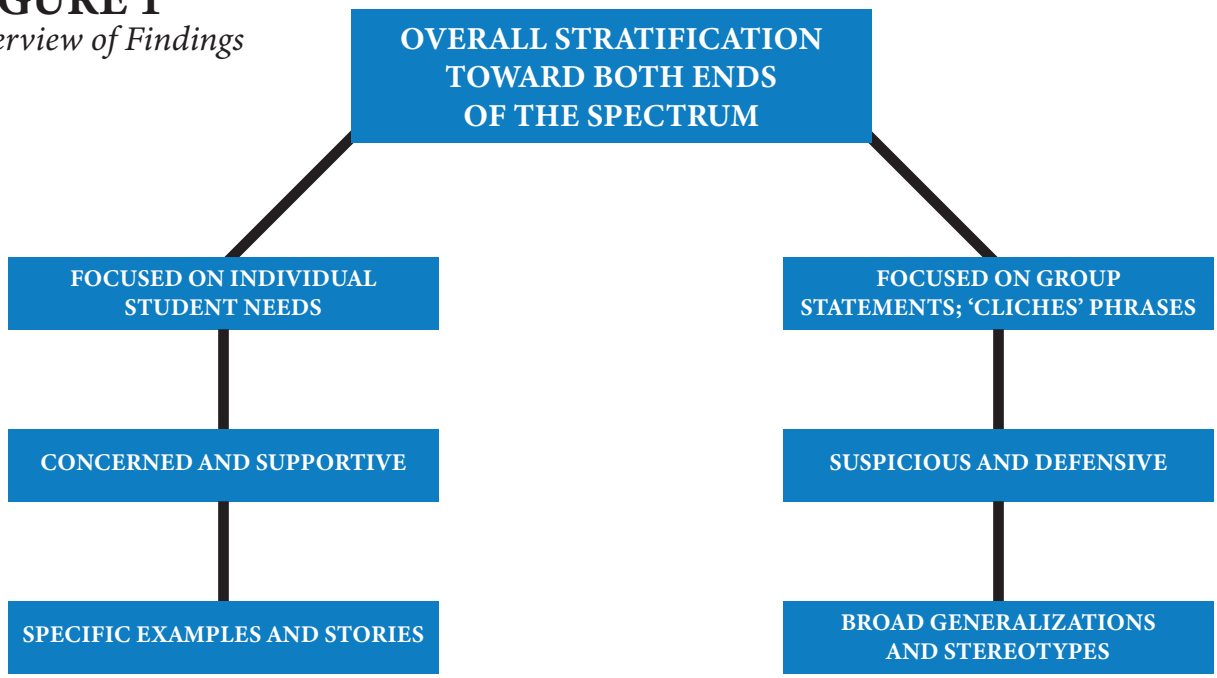
Because the surveys were completed over a period of several weeks and consisted primarily of qualitative responses, a constant comparative process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was employed in which results were checked and examined each day as they were submitted. Nowell et al. (2017) further described 'thematic analysis' as a specific type of the constant comparative process. As possible themes emerged and were identified, a simple color-coding system was developed to determine if continuing data supported the early trends as well as to note new themes that may have emerged. As data were examined, colors were assigned to emerging themes, and then adjusted to reflect if each theme was supported, faded, or became stronger as the analysis process progressed. This process was followed for both the Likert scale data as well as open-ended text responses. Throughout this period of time as data came in, several additional perspectives were invited to participate in discussions about the data. These were fellow research colleagues familiar with the focus of this study as well as the thematic analysis approach. Their added perspective lends credibility and dependability to the process of developing themes from qualitative data, and further supports the findings and conclusions from the study as a whole (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

At the end of the specified time period to respond, additional time was spent analyzing the significant amount of text responses to all of the open-ended survey questions. Analyses were first done on each question individually, followed by a more comprehensive perspective to identify overall emergent themes. As what is already known from the literature was applied, conclusions from these data as well as questions for future investigations became clear.

FINDINGS

Initial findings indicate that, with few exceptions, the majority of the respondents do recognize either a noticeable or a significant increase in the local student population as well as increasing trend toward more diverse, non-mainstream cultures. Quantitative data reflected a complete lack of agreement illustrating responses across the spectrum of the Likert scale (Appendix C). Open response comments reflected an even more stratified pattern of perceptions about that change clustered at each end of the spectrum. With varying levels of intensity, participant responses indicated a tendency toward either a concerned and supportive attitude toward issues of student population change, or a somewhat suspicious and defensive mindset. The former cited highly detailed concerns offering specific examples; very often specifically involving English Language Learner issues. The latter comments were more broad, general statements often repeating commonly used cliches. Figure 1 reflects a wholistic overview of the findings.

FIGURE 1
Overview of Findings



STUDENT POPULATION

In response to general inquiry of what participants notice about the student population, a wide variety of terminology was used, possibly reflecting a lack of shared meaning for the terms. 'Diverse' and 'minorities' are the most common, but the terms racially, nationality, culturally, and language are also used; sometimes interchangeably. 'Gay', 'religion', and 'emotional support' are each mentioned once. Issues of concern mentioned by participants were higher percentage of special needs, fewer gifted, different home situations, lack of academic motivation, poor writing skills, and lack of respect for adults, signifying the somewhat suspicious and defensive mindset of educators. Explanations of the changing demographics were suggested by many participants as multi-generational families moving to the area from New York City and Reading, PA. One response suggested that "majority students" are having difficulty adjusting to the "range" of students, and that the ethnically, socio-economically, and linguistically diverse students were "unfairly outnumbered by WASP students."

Treating Students the Same

In response to the statement 'All children should be treated the same regardless of cultural, linguistic, or individual differences', answers on a Likert scale cover the entire range from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Appendix C). While the Likert responses are more concentrated on the agree end (66%), invited comments to explain are more concentrated on the disagree end. Specific words such as 'same', 'fair', and 'equal' do not have shared meaning among the participants. Some comments are in direct contradiction to each other:

> *…everyone should be treated fairly and the same*
>
> *All children should be treated fairly but it is not fair to treat them the same…*

The focus to which participants chose to apply the statement had a broad range as well. Some comments targeted teaching and learning (academic issues), some addressed ethnic discrimination, and still others focused on the right to an education. The term 'opportunity' commonly appeared in the context of providing "the same opportunity to a quality education." Some comments promoted treating all students the same:

> *…you allow the kids the best chance to succeed by having the same barriers for all to get past*
>
> *Kids are kids no matter what background/ethnicity they are from*

Other comments directly contradicted the idea of sameness:

> *…students must be treated differently to accommodate cultural, linguistic, or individual differences…*
>
> *…it is only by treating students differently that an equal playing field can be achieved…*

Some comments indicated a mild sense of annoyance and possibly defensiveness:

> *These differences do not change the worth of a person*
>
> *duh.*

CULTURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOL

In response to the statement 'The culture of public-school places some children at an automatic disadvantage', responses on the Likert scale were again spread across the entire spectrum from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Appendix C). Fifty-five percent comprised the agree/strongly agree categories, while a lower but still substantial 28% fell into the disagree/strongly disagree categories. Also of note is that 19% of the participants chose 'don't know' opting not to make a choice at all. This stratification of opposed perspectives was a pattern across the survey questions as well as within each question separately. The comment responses reflected the same opposed dichotomy. Some participants rejected the idea that some students enter school at a disadvantage:

> *I don't believe that the culture of our middle school places any student at an automatic disadvantage...it depends on how motivated those children are to succeed.*

Others recognized differences and gave examples of implicit disadvantage:

> *I would say that children from different cultures do have an automatic disadvantage. We try to help as much as we can but there will still be a disadvantage.*

Various participants applied the statement to a range of contexts from the narrowness of their own individual school building to the broad forum of the American Educational System. Another emerging pattern was the spectrum of reactions to the statement ranging from defensiveness to recognizing/taking responsibility. Responses reflecting defensiveness included efforts to protect teachers and schools, rejection of the survey

question itself, and deflecting the answer away from addressing the survey question:

> *'Automatic' is an all-inclusive term, therefore it cannot be correct. The statement would indicate a prejudice before meeting the individual child.*
>
> *There is not ONE culture of public school first of all.*
>
> *Unless you start segregation/reversal of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, kids go to school where they live. This is not advantageous or disadvantageous. It is a matter of geography.*

Responses reflecting recognition of automatic disadvantage were often lengthier and more detailed than most other answers. Examples reflect broad background knowledge on the issue:

> *I believe that the Capitalist and Democratic nature of America has designed an educational system that is tailored to the WASP cultural mindset and that students entering this culture from the outside or from another alternate heritage may find themselves at a severe disadvantage.*
>
> *...the predominant American culture of competitiveness, aggressiveness, conformity, and consumption is promoted in almost all American schools, and is not conducive to bringing out the best in children and other people.*
>
> *This is an (unfortunate) reflection of the world we live in. Children with underprivileged backgrounds are at a disadvantage.*

The viewpoints from both ends of the Likert scale were communicated with very strong feelings by the participants. Finally, a noticeable number of participants avoided answering the survey question at all by either giving unrelated responses or direct avoidance:

> *The public school system has more resources than a private school.*
>
> *...standardized tests and what children are expected to know is unfair.*
>
> *Define 'culture'*
>
> *I'm not really sure how to answer this question.*

MEANING OF DIVERSITY

Participant responses utilized a wide variety of terms in different combinations to describe their own personal meaning of the term 'diversity'. Although responses varied in length, detail, and terminology, most included a variety of specific types of differences, usually in the form of a list. Some participants listed only two or three types of diversity such as, *"different races and religions"* or *"various ethnic and social classes."* Most list three to five groups such as, *"ethnicities, religions, socioeconomics, and genders"* or *"culture, race, ethnicity, sexual persuasion."* Some responses listed up to seven specific groups included in the term diversity. These began to

expand the concept of diversity beyond the usual groups toward a more inclusive perception of how people are different from each other. In addition to the more standard terms mentioned in previous responses, these also included personal characteristics such as family dynamics, athletic ability, artistic ability, musical ability, emotional capabilities, body shapes and sizes, hair color, likes and dislikes, background knowledge, and life experiences. Several participants explained a broader perception of diverse characteristics in two different levels,

> *Diversity includes any and all differences perceived between one human and another. This may be as conventional as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexuality, or as minute as manner of dress, vocabulary, or favorite food.*

In contrast, several responses were vague and generic such as, *"involves different forms"* and *"all types of students and families"*. One outlier response seemed to exclude ethnicity from their understanding of diversity describing their perception of diversity as, *"…the differences that every student brings to the classroom regardless of color or race."* Finally, another outlier denied the existence of difference races stating, *"There is no such thing as 'races' because there is only one race (the human race)".*

IMPLICATIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

When asked about implications of this shift in population demographics for themselves as both school employees and citizens, responses were quite varied, causing the researcher to be hard pressed to find strong themes or patterns among responses. Some participants recognized no implications for themselves at all:

> *I do not see any implications to me personally.*
>
> *No change. I will still do my job to the best of my ability.*

Others expressed a completely opposed viewpoint recognizing an urgent call to arms:

> *I need to be dynamic to be able to change to fit the needs of my students.*
>
> *We need a more global approach to our teaching and learning.*
>
> *I will need to be constantly evaluating and changing my teaching practice.*

Still other responses seemed either contradictory or just unclear in what they were trying to convey:

> *...every student is different even if they are ethnically similar. Diversity of ethnicity has nothing to do with teaching/education.*
>
> *I do not have to embrace the differences, but I do feel that I should respect them.*

Reflecting even more confusion and lack of shared meaning, there was disagreement about the term tolerance and whether or not it is acceptable as demonstrated in the following two participant responses:

> *I feel that it is partly my role to teach the students tolerance and acceptance.*
>
> *It is through understanding, not through tolerance, that we learn to appreciate how diversity strengthens our community and our country.*

Several comments pointed out how much harder it will be for teachers to do their jobs. One teacher asserted, *"The school will become a much tougher and more difficult place to work, because of the scrutiny that employees will face...we will have to be much more open to other cultures and religions..."*

There was a sense of overall apathy or confusion in many participants as if they have not considered the possibility that a changing student demographic would call for any change on their part. One teacher mused, *"I can teach a little bit about tolerance of others who are different from us, if the situation arises."* There were also attempts at deflection despite the fact that the survey question specifically inquired about implications to teachers. Individual comments suggested the issue being made more difficult by parents who do not agree with tolerance, parents who are not at home, and a lack of background knowledge and life experiences. Several comments hinted at an expectation of automatic assimilation into the mainstream school environment and culture. One teacher reported, *"Some students come into the district and hold too tightly onto their own former culture which inhibits their ability to fit into the educational and social settings, despite the best intentions of the students and teachers."* The use of the phrase 'former culture' in this quote clearly indicated an expectation that it is the responsibility of diverse students to set their culture of origin aside and adopt the mainstream culture.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Finally, participants were invited to add any additional comments they would like to offer. The five who chose to respond clearly continued the pattern of stratified perspectives on the issue of changing student demographics. One self-identified white teacher shared that they lived in many other places and has experienced being the newcomer. They commented, *"Occasionally, the parochial attitude of many people in (xxxxx) can be unnerving. I am sometimes amazed at the ignorance and prejudice voiced by...students. The changing demographics present a challenge."* Another participant reported,

> *[study location school district] has a lot of prejudice not only to students but also staff. If a student or staff member is not Anglican, derogatory comments are made. Most of the racism...is subtle. When cases of racism and/or discrimination are reported, the perception is that little or nothing is done.*

In direct contradiction to these acknowledgements of concern and challenge, another participant responded, *"I believe that [one of the study location school buildings] is a great school. I have a great deal of respect for this district, most of its students, and the administrators who act in the best interests of these kids"*. Another participant asked, *"Have you tested the validity of the questions within this opinionnaire? It would be beneficial to define certain terms (such as culture) so those taking the opinionnaire have a complete understanding of what you are asking,"* possibly demonstrating some defensiveness toward the survey questions themselves. Finally, one participant simply thanked the investigator for doing the research.

DISCUSSION

The most striking revelation from these findings was the broad range of understandings of and attitudes toward the changing population demographic in this locality. The most basic prerequisite to cultural conversation is a common language beginning with shared meanings for terms such as diversity and culture. Considering the broad spectrum of responses to all the survey items, disconnects among the teachers also included level of background knowledge about diverse cultures, awareness of appropriate educational responses to cultural differences, and willingness to accommodate differences outside the mainstream paradigm. These are all issues that need to be addressed at both the building level and the national level before any systematic change can occur.

Talking about race and class can be uncomfortable for those with limited exposure to contexts other than their own (typically mainstream Eurocentric norms). Lifelong held beliefs, practices, and cultural assumptions are not challenged without considerable risk. Dialogues to address these often-opposed paradigms seldom occur successfully without strategic planning and guidance over time. While part of the work that needs to be done is simply learning nonmainstream cultural norms, practices, and motivations, the challenge comes when people are asked to let go of the safe cocoon of lifelong held mainstream values and expectations to consider that there are alternate ways to be that are just as valuable and justified. This is not accomplished in one staff development session nor in any short period of time. Administrators need to first determine the mindset of their faculty/staff (both as individuals and as a group) on the continuum toward respect and value for all diverse cultures before developing a long-term plan to move forward. As the population dynamic in this locality was an example reflected in the demographic chart (Appendix A), this is a growing issue that needs to be recognized, acknowledged, and effectively addressed if we have any hope of providing all students with equitable educational opportunities.

Although this study was a small-scale investigation, school districts throughout the country are facing the same escalating demographic trends. Culturally responsive teaching needs to become a vital and consistent component of ongoing staff development. But again, the first step is to find out what teachers know and perceive about students different from themselves. A wise colleague of mine put it this way, "Without a clear understanding of teachers' perceptions about their new students (and families), schools will be challenged in their efforts to create and cultivate welcoming, inclusive classrooms for all students."

Further implications in response to the findings indicated the need to develop a strong component within teacher education programs to specifically address cultural disconnects for teacher education students (overwhelmingly female, white, and middle class). Many programs provide a basic introduction to learning about diverse populations in a relatively low-level course and expect students to apply that knowledge as they move through the rest of their coursework and field experiences. Additionally, many teachers do not have the

knowledge or experience working with diverse students to be able to provide valuable feedback or guide dynamic discussions on cultural differences and alternative strategies. In order for cultural responsiveness to be effective, it needs to be embedded into the fabric of daily practice. In the same way, if we expect teacher candidates to be culturally competent when they walk into their first classroom, teacher educators need to embed these relevant practices into every component of teacher education programs. This may well require faculty, either individually or as a group, to become more informed and experienced with diverse contexts themselves. But as the public-school population changes, so must we. Teaching and demonstrating cultural competence is the responsibility of everyone.

Finally, there has been a growing movement to diversify the country's teaching force to better address the needs of our increasingly diverse student population (US Department of Education, 2016). Only 18% of the teaching force are Persons of Color, which is highly problematic given the increasingly racially and ethnically diverse student body. Many teachers surveyed in this study recognized the importance of diversity and cultural competence, educated themselves, and facilitated culturally relevant teaching daily. Despite being part of what is often conceptualized as the dominant, mainstream culture themselves, some teachers' responses indicated that they recognized the situation and embraced the responsibility to make sure that all students felt welcome and have access to equitable, culturally responsive learning opportunities. These voices set an example for others to follow and capitalize on their advocacy.

Warren (2018) explained that effective teachers and teacher candidates "develop orientations toward instruction, and interpersonal interactions with youth, that produce evidence of culturally responsive pedagogy" (p.169). These teachers actively decenter whiteness from pedagogy and practice because they recognize it is essential for allowing more diverse perspectives in the classroom. Emdin (2016), however offered a warning and thought moving forward in this work. Teachers and educational professionals must be careful to avoid the white "savior" role when working nondominant families and students. Instead, students need educators who are curious and open to learning about diverse cultures so they feel supported while navigating traditional school contexts (Watson, 2012). Minor (2019) echoed this idea when suggesting that "authentically listening to kids is the closest thing we have to a superpower." School districts have a responsibility to commit to this work. Emdin (2016) cautioned, however that hiring more Black educators is not the only approach. Rather, districts must provide veteran teachers with opportunities to expand their understanding of culturally responsive practices so they can make more meaningful connections with all students.

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APPENDIX A

(Fleetwood Area population demographics)

	1990	2000	2010	2020
TOTAL POPULATION	10,314	14,120	16,900	
WHITE	10,125(98%)	13,880 (98%)	16,069 (95%)	
BLACK	0	0	374	
NATIVE	29	10	56	
ASIAN	18	155	235	
PACIFIC ISLANDER	0	0	11	
HISPANIC	50	240	831	
MULTI-GENERATIONAL HOUSEHOLD			221	
# OF HOUSEHOLDS	3,904	5290	6,229	
FREE/REDUCED LUNCH				28%

*Numbers are approximate due to differences in the way statistics are organized and reported out by the US Census website from decade to decade.

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/TableViewer/census
http://censusviewer.com/city/PA/Fleetwood

APPENDIX B
SURVEY QUESTIONS

What do you notice about the student population in Fleetwood Area School District over the past 5-10 years?

"All children should be treated the same regardless of cultural, linguistic, or individual differences." (Likert scale: strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree)
Please explain your answer to the previous question.

"The culture of public school places some children at an automatic disadvantage." (Likert scale: strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree)
Please explain your answer to the previous question.

In your perception, what does the term 'diversity' mean?

Based on the changing population dynamics in your local school district, what do you perceive as the implications for you as a school employee and as a citizen?

Please add any additional comments you might wish to include.

APPENDIX C

"All children should be treated the same regardless of cultural, linguistic, or individual differences."

RESPONSE	TOTAL	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS	%
Strongly Agree	16		42%
Agree	9		24%
Don't Know	3		8%
Disagree	7		18%
Strongly Disagree	3		8%
Total Responses: 38		0% 20% 40% 60% 80%	

"The culture of public school places some children at an automatic disadvantage."

RESPONSE	TOTAL	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS	%
Strongly Agree	5		14%
Agree	15		41%
Don't Know	7		19%
Disagree	5		14%
Strongly Disagree	5		14%
Total Responses: 37		0% 20% 40% 60% 80%	

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Carol E. Watson is an Associate Professor of Education at Kutztown University – Kutztown, PA. She received her Ph.D. from Virginia Tech in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus on Literacy and Diversity. She teaches coursework in social studies and literacy methods, diversity, research, and supervises student teachers. Currently, her research interests include all aspects of social justice, teaching diverse and underserved populations, middle level education, and effective teacher education.

EVALUATING DISTRICT LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PREPAREDNESS TO TRANSITION FROM TRADITIONAL PERSONALIZED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Dr. Matthew B. Friedman
1103 Mason Drive
Downingtown, PA 19335

ABSTRACT

Secondary education in the United States (US) is in flux, evolving from the traditional teacher-centered model to a student-centered approach. Specifically, education is experiencing a paradigm shift from the long-established, one-size-fits-all classroom standard to a customized, student-directed learning process. Using quantitative, non-experimental methods, this article focused on two questions: What is the gap in knowledge and skills that the U.S. schools in the Future Ready Schools network face, and where in the process are these schools making the transition to modern, personalized learning? This study identified and described a gradual shift from a teacher-centered teaching and learning environment to the current (and ever developing) student-centered teaching and learning environment in the context of pertinent leadership responsibilities required for this systemic change. The study's recommendations focused on the steps necessary for schools and districts to accomplish this shift, addressing both how teachers can implement student-centered learning in different grade levels and different content areas as well as the administration's role in these changes.

INTRODUCTION

While there are many paths to education, US education professionals have for the most part believed, up until recently, in a one-size-fits-all teaching model. Before the 20th century Industrial Revolution, American children went to school, sat in rows of desks, did what the teacher said, and took the same tests. American teachers operated schools as if they were industrial factories, with teaching and learning practices that mimicked assembly-line manufacturing (W. Watson et al., 2015). This teacher-centered schooling model suited society's needs at the time because the economy needed only a small number of individuals to be educated at the postsecondary level (W. Watson et al., 2015), but it is no longer feasible and is ineffective in meeting our country's current challenges and needs (W. Watson et al., 2015). This is especially true as technology evolves and a more racially and ethnically diverse population transform society into the information age (Chen et al., 2016; Garland & Rapaport, 2017; Walker, 2017).

Unfortunately, the pre-Industrial Revolution teacher-centered model persists in most U.S. schools today, even though it is an unsuitable model of education for our 21st century problems. In the meantime, achievement and opportunity gaps are disproportionality widening for underrepresented students, including Students of Color, English Language Learners (ELL), students with disabilities, and students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; National Education Association, 2018). Achievement gaps are defined not only by the disparities found in standardized test scores (SATs, ACTs, statewide standardized tests), but by the opportunities available to students in a given district (advanced placement courses, access to educational technology, pathways to college), overall student attainment (high school graduation rates, and college attendance and graduation rates), and employment rates (Lara et al., 2017; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; National Education Association, 2018)

For students experiencing inequitable educational opportunities disparities persist with long-term

consequences, as they may be less likely to graduate from high school or attend public or nonprofit colleges/universities (Libassi, 2018). Further, students may have fewer opportunities to find employment prospects that pay a living wage and have career advancement opportunities. Common knowledge asserts that there are far fewer job opportunities for those who do not have an education or skill-training beyond high school-level coursework and there is abundant data illustrating the impact that successfully matriculating and graduating from college or other credentialing programs may have on a student's lifetime earning potential (Lumina Foundation, 2019). In the US, K-12 schools face the challenge of preparing all of today's students with the tools necessary to succeed in an information-rich, technologically-advanced world that demands a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce (Future Ready Schools, 2019e).

Because we live in the Information Age, incorporating technology within K-12 classrooms is crucial in creating a student-centered environment. Such a model will shrink the academic achievement gap, facilitate students' acquisition of 21st century skill sets, and support successful matriculation and graduation from post-secondary institutions (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2016; Future Ready Schools, 2019e; Lara et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2018.). However, persistent barriers exist in both the implementation and reception of technology within the classroom. Because many schools are not ready for this paradigm shift, the digital divide continues to affect educational equity in all regions of the US negatively.

AN ANSWER: PERSONALIZED LEARNING AND BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The term 'personalized learning' has varying attributes based upon the local context in which it is used (Peng et al., 2019). Future Ready Schools offers this definition:

> A student-centered approach designed to help all students develop a set of skills collectively known as the deeper learning competencies. These skills include thinking critically, using knowledge and information to solve complex problems, working collaboratively, communicating effectively, learning how to learn, and developing academic mindsets (Future Ready Schools, 2019d, p. 1).

Personalized learning is characterized by six evidence-based dimensions. It is achieved through "active and collaborative learning activities, which are aligned with standards, chosen through ongoing assessment of students' progress and preferences, and supported by the use and creation of rich content and robust tools" (Office of Educational Technology, 2015, p. 5). Effective personalized learning requires rigorous and relevant learning outcomes, integrated assessments, learning pathways, powerful learning designs, rich learning resources, and new teacher roles (Office of Educational Technology, 2015). Additionally, personalized learning is increasingly recognized as a promising strategy to close achievement gaps, increase student engagement, and college readiness (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2016; Lara et al., 2017). It can boost the 21st century skill sets necessary for employment and success in college (Future Ready Schools, 2019b; Laar et al., 2017), and

prepare students to become self-directed, lifelong learners by meeting their individual needs. Leading experts agree on several common general principles, including "student voice and choice, customization to each student's strengths and needs, student agency, and flexibility of instruction" (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 5).

Fortunately, a personalized learning pedagogy is possible via the integration of technology in classrooms and schools (Grant & Basye, 2014). Technology adds choice to the "how, when, and where students access learning opportunities, thus reducing many barriers" (Grant & Bayse, 2014, p. 21). Learning becomes an individualized experience, combining personal interactions with media support, online learning, and communication activities (Grant & Basye, 2014; Kim & Smith, 2017; Schuler, 2009). As differentiation of instruction becomes a more widely used practice in teaching, technology has become an effective means of meeting this increasing demand. The introduction of mobile devices into the classroom offers five specific advantages: anytime-anywhere learning, reaching underserved populations, improving 21st century social interactions and skills, fitting with the learning environment, and enabling a personalized learning environment (Schuler, 2009).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Over the past decade, educationalists and researchers have created technological frameworks that support teachers integrating technology into classroom instruction. The most notable of these frameworks is TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge), which is rooted in the concept that technology, pedagogy, content, and context are interdependent parts of a teacher's knowledge, and all are necessary to teach curriculum effectively with the support of educational tools (Hofer et al., 2015).

In order to improve a school district's readiness to overcome the problems cited above, Future Ready Schools (FRS) offers further guidance. Founded in 2014, FRS believes that in order to move to 21st century learning, districts must be able to assess (1) where they are in the transition process, (2) their transition strengths and weaknesses, and (3) the congruency of their leader's perceptions of their district's and schools' readiness in terms of the availability of digital resources required for the technology environment (Future Ready Schools). However, research has shown that technology availability in the classroom is not enough to ensure its use (Jwaifell & Gasaymen, 2013). Future Ready School districts may possess the necessary technological equipment to pursue a student-centered personalized learning environment but still fall short in meeting this objective because of a lack of innovation diffusion (Jwaifell & Gasaymen, 2013). As a result, it is essential to assess where current Future Ready Schools are in the transition process and identify the possible barriers to implementing a student-centered environment.

The FRS Framework guided the development of the research questions for this study. The framework is a research-based blueprint that districts have found to be feasible and attainable. The framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
Future Ready Framework

The FRS Framework consists of seven gears—designed around categories of resources, activities, methods—that serve as objectives that must be achieved if districts and schools are to transition to a student-centered learning environment.

The resources and activities are:

- curriculum/instruction/assessment
- use of space and time
- robust infrastructure
- data and privacy
- community partnerships
- personalized professional learning and
- budget and resources (Future Ready Schools, 2019c).

FRS methods include collaborative leadership, district vision, efforts to plan and implement technology into classrooms, and continuous assessment (Future Ready Schools, 2019c). The FRS Framework is based on the premise that student-centered personalized learning is essential in achieving educational equity and providing students with the 21st century skill set necessary to succeed in college and the workforce.

Using the FRS framework as a guide, this research aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What, if any, similarities/differences exist in perceived district readiness to implement student-centered learning based on demographic characteristics?
2. What are the common strengths in schools/districts' readiness that allow leaders to be prepared to effectively transition to a digital learning environment?
3. What is the relationship between the number of digital learning environment elements and level of preparedness (perceived knowledge and skills) among district leadership teams?

METHODS

This study used a non-experimental correlational design to assess secondary 2018-2019 data collected by FRS via their online Future Ready District Assessment Survey. Quantitative research methods are best used to answer the quantifiable research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), thus a quantitative methodology was most suitable for the study. In terms of research design, neither a quasi-experimental design nor a causal-comparative design was warranted because of the lack of random assignment of pre-existing groups or the need to establish a cause-and-effect relationship (Cozby & Bates, 2015). Because the research questions also explored non-causal statistical relationships between multiple variables instead of a descriptive design aimed at describing a phenomenon under study, the research design was correlational (Cozby & Bates, 2015). Specifically, the study aimed to assess the trends and patterns associated with Future Ready school and district pledges.

DATA COLLECTION: THE FUTURE READY DISTRICT ASSESSMENT SURVEY

The Future Ready Needs Assessment was originally created by the Alliance for Excellent Education, piloted at the district level, and validated by the US Department of Education (Future Ready Schools, 2019c). In implementation, groups of 12-13 administrators, teachers, and superintendents worked together to submit a single needs assessment test and the level of readiness was measured by seven Likert-type scale surveys (Future Ready Schools, 2019c). After obtaining permissions from FRS and the IRB, FRS provided the researcher with a password-protected thumb drive with all data from districts who had participated in the survey. District demographic information was also collected at the time of the initial survey from the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (NCES, 2020). Before commencing with the study, IRB approval was obtained from the PI's university. The survey consisted of five sections:

1. Information concerning each district's location and size.
2. QUESTION: Which of the following are explicitly included in your district vision for students? *(Personalization of learning, student-centered learning, 21st century skills/deeper learning, college and career readiness, digital citizenship, technology skills, anywhere/anytime learning).*
3. QUESTION: Which of the following elements of a digital learning environment are (a) available now, (b) in your plans, or (c) not a priority? *(Presentation tools, productivity tools, document management, learning management systems, e-communication asynchronous and synchronous, library of curated digital content, collaborative workspace, visualization tools, multimedia production and social media).*
4. QUESTION: Which of the following uses of technology are (a) available now, (b) in your plans, or (c) not a priority? *(Online coursework, blended learning, digital tools for problem solving*

(visualization, simulation, modeling, charting, etc., e-Communication sties for student discussions, e-Communication sites for teacher discussions, real-world connection for student projects, tools for students to develop products that demonstrate their learning, digital student portfolios, online research, intelligent adaptive learning, digital content in a variety of formats and modes (i.e., visual auditory, text), Assessment data (formative and summative), social media).

5. ON AN EIGHT-POINT SCALE, RATE THE SEVEN GEARS IN TERMS OF YOUR READINESS. *(1 = not at all prepared and 8 = district policies, expectations and plans are in place for this strategy).*

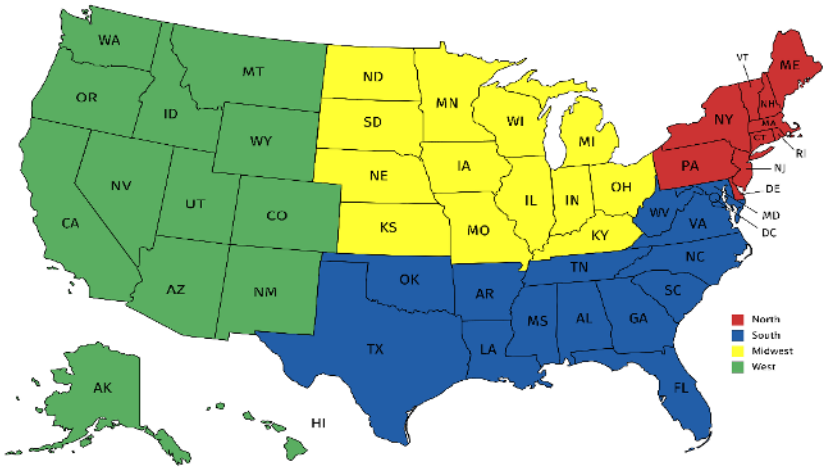
In order to accurately assess the perceived transition of readiness levels for all schools and districts taking the Future Ready Schools survey, a rubric was created in accordance with the NCES guidelines with readiness categories: Investigating (0-3.99), Envisioning (4-5.99), Planning (6-7.99), and Staging (8-10).

STUDY SAMPLE

Future Ready Schools received survey responses from 944 FRS member schools located within districts that had taken the FRS pledge. Eighty-five (9%) responses were missing demographic information and were therefore excluded from the analysis to avoid unintentional misclassification or duplication of responses. Data from a final sample size of 859 schools were analyzed which represented 649 unique school districts. Districts were grouped into four geographical regions (North, South, Midwest, and West) according to the state in which each is located as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

Four District Regions: North, South Midwest, and West



The largest proportion of districts were located in the Midwest (n=224; 34.5%), followed by the North (n=215; 33.1%), South (n=116; 17.9%), and West (n=93; 14.3%). Overall, almost half (n=292; 45.1%) of school districts were located in suburban areas, and more than one-fourth of districts (n=167; 25.8%) were in rural areas. Districts in cities (n=95; 14.7%) and towns (n=83; 12.8%) comprised the remainder of the sample. The mean number of students per district was 8,535 and ranged between 21 and 354,840 students. Underrepresented students accounted for 36.7% of the student population across districts, and the mean student-teacher ratio was 14.8 students per teacher. Districts differed significantly in their demographic characteristics depending on the region in which they were located, as illustrated in Table 1. Notably, Western districts reported a higher student-teacher ratio than other districts, Western and Southern districts a higher proportion of underrepresented students, and Southern districts a higher mean number of students per district.

TABLE 1

Comparison of School Districts by Region (N=649)

	North n = 215	South s = 116
Location		
Rural	39 (18.1%)	41 (35.3%)
Town	12 (5.6%)	22 (19.0%)
Suburb	148 (6808%)	26 (22.4%)
City	15 (7.0%)	25 (21.5%)
Unknown/missing	1 (0.5%)	2 (1.7%)
Total number of students (mean)	3,166	26,218
Student/teacher ratio (mean)	12.0	15.1
Proportion of underrepresented students (mean and range)	35.2%	54.6%

**Includes one school district in Guam.*

DATA ANALYSIS

Multiple methods were used to statistically analyze the secondary data. Likert scale responses were coded where the 'least ready' option = 1 and the 'most ready' option = the highest value. All tests were considered significant if $p < 0.05$. The following analyses were computed through the open-source statistics program, JASP, version 0.13: after grouping states by region, readiness scores were calculated. A one-way ANOVA was used to

determine if readiness scores differed based on region. Remaining demographics (student to teacher ratio, and proportion of underrepresented students) were compared to overall level of readiness for each of the seven gears. Correlation analysis was used to determine the impact of each demographic on readiness, where demographic variables were the independent variables and readiness was the dependent variable.

RESULTS

This study's purpose was to assess (a) the trends in perceived transition readiness levels, (b) common transition strengths and weaknesses, and (c) congruency between FRS district leaders' perceptions of their districts' transition readiness and the actual on-the-ground availability of the necessary digital learning environment elements. To this end, the research design rested on three research questions. They are repeated below with the answers that were found within the data.

Question 1. What similarities/differences exist in perceived district readiness to implement student-centered learning based on demographic characteristics?

When comparing districts' perceived readiness to implement student-centered learning, the regions were found to be significantly associated with the mean overall gear score [$F(3, 644)=12.25$, $p< .001$], as well as for each of the seven gears as illustrated in Table 2. The mean overall gear score for the total sample was M=42.54 (12.44). School districts within the Northern region reported the highest overall gear score (M=46.50; SD=12.02), and those within the Midwestern region reported the lowest overall gear score (M=39.79; SD=11.70). Post-hoc t-tests indicated that districts in the North scored significantly higher than the South ($t(329)=3.05$, $p< .001$). Midwest ($t(437)=5.93$, $p<.001$), and West ($t(306)=3.92$, $p<.001$). However, the difference between the (a) Midwestern and the South ($t(338)=1.64$, $p=.05$) (b) Midwestern and West ($t(315)=0.61$, $p=0.73$), and (c) South and West ($t(207)=0.80$, $p=0.21$) were not statistically significant.

TABLE 2

Mean Gear Scores and Standard Deviation by Region

	GEAR	North	South	Midwest	West	Total	F-statistic
1	Curriculum, instruction, and assessment	6.66 (2.03)	5.67 (2.02)	5.33 (1.83)	5.51 (1.95)	5.86 (2.03)	19.09
2	Use of space and time	5.26 (2.22)	4.39 (2.41)	4.18 (2.02)	4.11 (2.23)	4.57 (2.24)	11.04
3	Robust infrastructure	7.79 (2.00)	6.83 (2.47)	7.02 (2.30)	7.12 (2.08)	7.25 (2.23)	17.85*
4	Data and privacy	7.34 (1.88)	7.24 (2.26)	6.76 (2.08)	7.16 (1.81)	7.09 (2.03)	3.35
5	Community partnership	6.13 (2.25)	6.08 (2.37)	5.23 (2.03)	5.55 (2.20)	5.72 (2.22)	7.55
6	Personalized professional learning	6.60 (2.18)	6.13 (2.54)	5.84 (2.31)	5.38 (2.38)	6.08 (2.35)	7.12
7	Budget and resources	6.70 (2.53)	5.75 (2.66)	5.42 (2.55)	5.83 (2.76)	5.96 (2.64)	9.53
	Overall	46.50 (12.02)	42.09 (13.35)	39.79 (11.70)	40.67 (11.84)	42.54 (12.44)	12.25

**Due to unequal variance among regions, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used for this gear instead of ANOVA.*

Among the total sample, the gear which received the highest score was Robust Infrastructure (M=7.25, SD=2.23), followed by Data and Privacy (M=7.09; SD=2.03), and Personalized Professional Learning (M=6.08; SD=2.35). These three gears fell into the "planning" stage of readiness (6-7), according to the Alliance for Excellent Education, in partnership with the Metiri Group guidelines. The Use of Space and Time gear (M=4.57; SD=2.24), received the lowest score across regions and fell into the "envisioning" stage of readiness (4-5).

None of the seven gears scored in the lowest stage of readiness (0-3), "investigating," or the highest stage (8-10), "staging." As hypothesized, districts located in the Northern region scored significantly higher on all seven gears than other districts. Midwestern districts often reported the lowest individual gear scores, although some variation was observed in the other lowest-scoring regions.

Question 2. What are the common strengths for schools/districts readiness that allow leaders to be prepared to effectively transition to a digital learning environment?

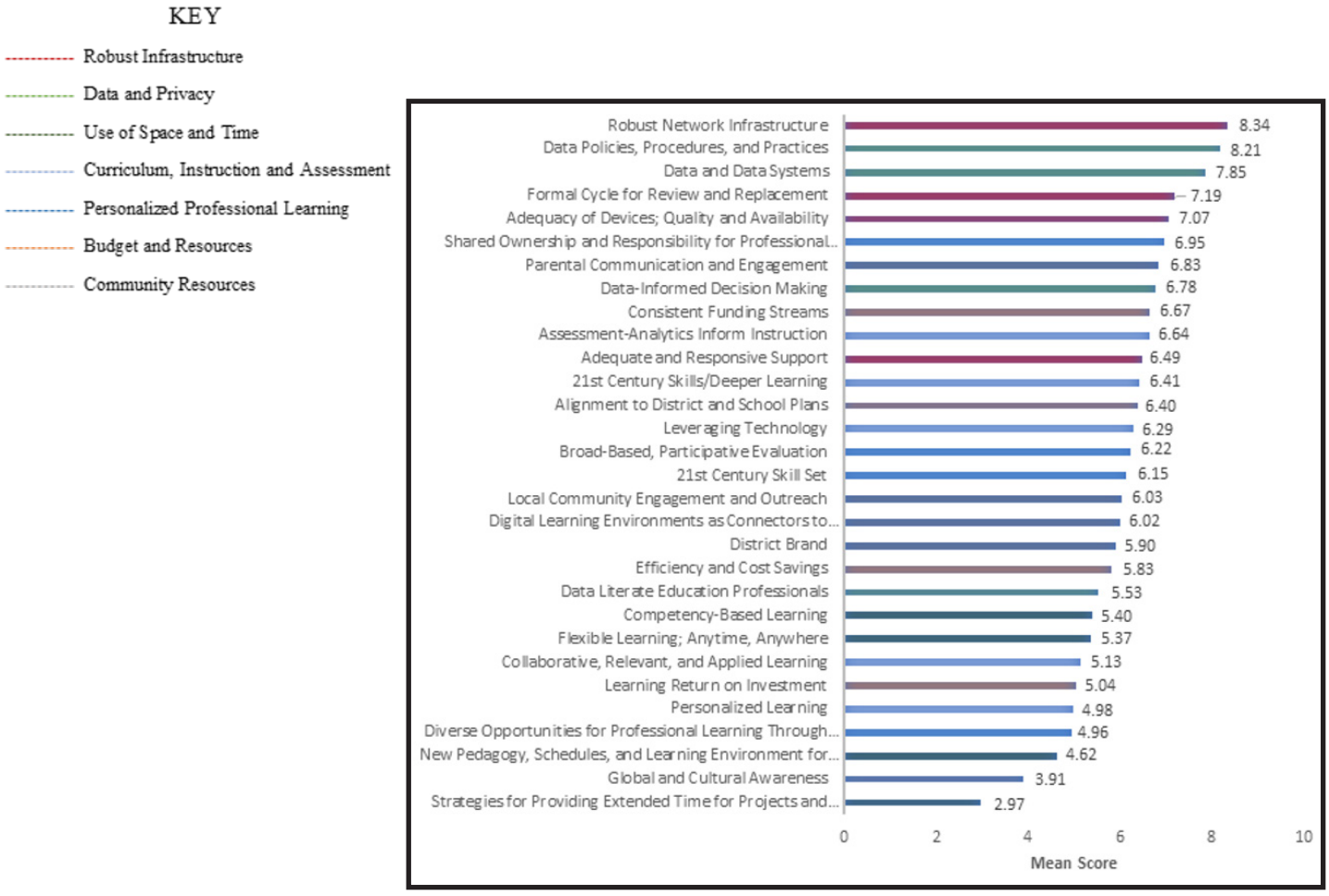
To further explore districts' readiness to implement student-centered learning, mean scores, and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated for each element. Robust Network Infrastructure (M = 8.34; 95% CI: 8.14 – 8.54) and Data Policies, Procedures, and Practices (M = 8.21; 95% CI: 8.00 – 8.42) showed the highest mean scores among the districts. These elements were classified as being within the Staging category of readiness (8-10). Sixteen elements (53.3%) scored within the Planning category (6-7), while three (10.0%) fell within the Envisioning category (4-5). Global and Cultural Awareness (M=3.91; 95% CI: 3.68 – 4.14) and

Strategies for Providing Extended Time for Projects and Collaboration (M=2.97; 95% CI: 2.73 – 3.20) were the two lowest-scoring elements and fell into the Investigating category of readiness (0-3).

Figure 3 shows the means for the element scores from the strongest (Robust Network Infrastructure) to the weakest (Strategies for Providing Extended Time for Projects and Collaboration).

FIGURE 3

Elements Needed for Student-Centered Environment (mean scores)



Question 3. What is the relationship between the number of digital learning environment elements and level of preparedness among district leadership teams?

DIGITAL LEARNING ELEMENTS AND TECHNOLOGY USE ELEMENTS

Digital Learning Elements are those tools and systems that schools need to have in place to successfully implement student-centered learning. They include Presentation and Productivity tools, Document and Learning Management systems, e-Communication tools, Access to a library of curated digital content, Collaborative

workspaces, Visualization tools, Multimedia production and Social Media.
The mean number of digital learning elements in use at school districts was *8.04 (95% CI: 7.82 – 8.25)* with a range of *0-11*.

Technology Use Elements are the tools and systems which students and teachers can use to implement their personalized learning programs. They include Online Coursework, Blended Learning, Digital Problem-Solving Tools (E.G. Visualization, Simulation), E-communication Sites for Teacher and Student Discussions, Real-World Connections for Student Projects, Tools for Students to Develop Products that Demonstrate Their Learning, Digital Student Portfolios, Online Research, Intelligent Adaptive Learning, Digital Content in a Variety of Formats (Visual, Auditory, Text), Formative and Summative Assessment Data and Social Media. The mean number of technology use elements was *9.08 (95% CI: 8.82 – 9.33)* with a range of *0-13*.

Spearman correlations revealed that the number of digital learning and technology use elements were significantly and positively associated with each of the seven gear scores and the overall gear score. Most correlations were of moderate strength *(rs between 0.3 and 0.5)*. However, the correlation between the number of digital learning elements, the number of technology use elements, and data and privacy gear was just below the acceptable threshold for a moderate association and therefore was considered a weak association for both *(rs=0.26; p=0.001) (rs=0.27; p=0.001)*.

TABLE 3

Spearman's Correlations (p) Between Number of Digital and Technology use Elements and Gear Scores

GEAR		NUMBER OF DIGITAL ELEMENTS		NUMBER OF TECHNOLOGY USE ELEMENTS	
		R_s	P value	R_s	P value
1	Curriculum, instruction and assessment	0.37	<.001	0.37	<.001
2	Use of space and time	0.30	<.001	0.30	<.001
3	Robust infrastructure	0.39	<.001	0.35	<.001
4	Data and privacy	0.26	<.001	0.27	<.001
5	Community partnership	0.35	<.001	0.39	<.001
6	Personalized professional learning	0.37	<.001	0.39	<.001
7	Budget and resources	0.33	<.001	0.31	<.001
	Overall	0.43	<.001	0.43	<.001

TEACHER-STUDENT RATIO

The mean student-teacher ratio for the study sample was 14.8 students per teacher, with a range of 2.31 – 54.70. Spearman correlations (p) were used to measure the strength of the association between mean gear scores and student-teacher ratio or proportion of underrepresented students per district, as illustrated in Table 4. The student-teacher ratio was negatively correlated with the overall gear score *(rs = -0.20; p = .001)* and each of the seven individual gear scores. In other words, as the student-teacher ratio increased, the gear score decreased. While all associations were significant, they fell within the "very weak" to "weak correlation" range of *0.00 to ±0.39*. The proportion of underrepresented students enrolled in the district were only significantly correlated with two individual gear scores, Data and Privacy *(rs=0.10; p=0.01)* and Community Partnership *(rs=0.09; p=0.02)*. As underrepresented student enrollment increased, so did the scores for these two gears. However, both associations were weak.

TABLE 4

Spearman's Correlations (ρ) Between Student-Teacher Ratio and Proportion of Minority Students Enrolled per District

GEAR		STUDENT-TEACHER RATIO		PROPORTION OF UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS	
		R_8	P value	R_8	P value
1	Curriculum, instruction and assessment	-0.18	<.001	0.04	.29
2	Use of space and time	-0.22	<.001	0.02	.62
3	Robust infrastructure	-0.15	<.001	0.02	.17
4	Data and privacy	-0.09	<.001	-0.05	.01
5	Community partnership	-0.12	<.001	0.09	0.2
6	Personalized professional learning	-0.16	<.001	0.00	.95
7	Budget and resources	-0.15	<.001	0.02	.60
	Overall	-0.20	<.001	0.03	.45

NUMBER OF STUDENTS PER DISTRICT

Districts displayed a wide range in numbers, from 21 to 354,840 students, and the mean number of students per district was 8,535. Underrepresented students accounted for an average of 36.7% of the student population across districts, while the mean student-teacher ratio was 14.8 students per teacher. Districts differed significantly in their demographic characteristics depending on the region in which they were located, as illustrated in Figure 3. Notably, Western districts reported a higher student-teacher ratio than other districts,

Western and Southern districts a higher proportion of underrepresented students, and Southern districts a higher mean number of students per district.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This quantitative non-experimental exploratory correlational study intended to assess educational trends in a large sample of public-school districts that participate in the Future Ready Schools network by using the FRS Framework as a blueprint. Districts use this researched-based framework to implement a technology-driven, student-centered, personalized learning environment based on Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, Use of Space and Time, Robust Infrastructure, Data and Privacy, Community Partnerships, Professional Learning, and Budget and Resources. In addition, there are four methods essential for the transition to a student-centered paradigm. Districts and schools need to consider their collaborative leadership, district vision, and efforts to plan, implement, and assess progress (Future Ready Schools, 2019c).

This study contributes to the existing body of research on the future of student-centered, personalized learning by analyzing data that delineates (or aligns) readiness for implementation from (or with) district *perceptions* of readiness. Previous research has indicated that certain demographic areas do not have the availability of technology or the teacher-student distribution that other demographic areas do, and educationalists have labeled this disparity, the digital divide (Moore et., al, 2018). In areas in which technology has been made available, however, availability is often not a motivating enough factor to guarantee the facilitation and promotion of in-classroom technology use (Jwaifell & Gasaymen, 2013). Both this lack of technological diffusion and the disparity between some demographics over others impacts a given district's ability to integrate their work into the new teaching paradigm. Meanwhile, other literature has suggested that a student-centered personalized learning environment is the paradigm shift required to bridge the achievement gap and ensure students obtain the 21st century skills necessary to succeed (Executive Office of the President, 2014; National Education Association, 2019). Future Ready Schools purports to bridge this gap.

To assess the degree to which FRS districts and schools have transitioned to the new educational paradigm, an online survey with questions based on this blueprint was sent to all FRS district offices and schools. The response rate was 72% giving this study a sample of 649 schools.

Readiness Findings

1. The study highlighted varying degrees of readiness in all four regions with the North region scoring the highest followed by the South, West and the Midwest.
2. Among the seven readiness categories, Robust Infrastructure scored significantly higher than the others followed by Data and Privacy, Professional Learning, Budget and Resources, Curriculum/Instruction/Assessment, Community Partnerships, and finally Use of Space and Time.

3. The three highest-scoring readiness categories fell into the Staging stage, 16 were classified as being at the Planning level, and the lowest five were either at the Envisioning or Investigating stages.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN CURRENT RESOURCES NEEDED FOR TRANSITION TO A DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The survey asked respondents to rate their readiness on 30 different elements (Figure 3) that are needed to transition. Among these elements, only two (Robust Network Infrastructure and Data Policies/Procedures/Practices) were rated as falling into the Staging level while the five weakest elements were rated as being at the Envisioning and Investigating levels.

CURRENT USE OF DIGITAL AND TECHNOLOGY ELEMENTS AND LEVEL OF PREPAREDNESS

The number of digital learning elements currently in use in the respondent schools varied, as did the number of technology use elements. Schools and districts that have purchased technology for students, built a network that will allow uninterrupted access for staff and students, created and implemented policies, procedures, and practices that protect data and promote safety, are beginning to lay the foundation to shift the paradigm towards a digital student-centered personalized learning environment. In other words, the more digital and technological equipment schools have, the more ready they are to make the transition. Such access to robust technology environments enables anywhere, anytime learning based on competency and mastery with empowered, caring adults who are guiding the way for each student to succeed (FRS, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study showed how far along schools and districts believe they are in their shift towards student-centered personalized learning. Several areas stood out. There has been an initial push to create a robust technology infrastructure for staff and students that will help anticipate learning needs and facilitate access to anywhere and anytime learning while striving to exceed safety, privacy, and security standards. The data also indicated that certain regions in the US are more prepared than others to make this shift.

This information can be useful to several stakeholders in educational systems. First, it can be crucial to companies and organizations that wish to assist schools and districts in becoming more prepared in this transition because it shows the areas in most need of aid and investment. By looking at areas such as the use of space and time, funders can also work on designing training and resources for student-centric personalized learning, changing the way instructional time is used, and developing new opportunities for utilizing in-school and out-

of-school time. Additional support for competency-based learning and the creation of technologies to meet the needs, pace, interests, and preferences of learners would make this transition possible for many students.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, it can be a game-changer for teachers, principals, and superintendents. While great strides have been made towards digital student-centered personalized learning in K-12 schools in the US, there is still much room for growth. Understanding how to draw outside the lines and transform the traditional schooling model can be easier said than done. Data from this study confirmed that while schools and districts are ahead of the curve in technology purchases, in the provision of a robust infrastructure for uninterrupted access, and in the implementation of policies that protect student and staff data and privacy, a tremendous gap remains regarding the use of space and time, the building of community partnerships, and aspects of personalized, professional learning. As we attempt to move from traditional teacher-centered environments that still fit within the typical seven-hour school day and have minimal connections to communities, businesses, and industries, this study's findings may help us avoid missteps and prepare in a more effective manner.

The Alliance of Excellent Education and, specifically, Future Ready Schools, have helped lead the way in guiding schools and districts in the right direction when shifting their learning environment. By providing a clear framework, needs assessments, research-based solutions, and robust professional learning opportunities, schools, and districts can feel supported as they go through this transformation.

Allowing teachers to learn through the process empowers them to incorporate the best practices in their classrooms and customize student learning. As members of the educational community consider the transformation to student-centered personalized learning, teachers will need time to make the necessary changes for their transition. The days of preparing lesson plans weeks ahead and presenting lessons at a fixed time and place disappear in this personalized learning environment. This new paradigm of teaching and learning requires collaboration, data review, and support from peers and administrators. It seems the requirements for preparing classrooms are changing day to day, even hour to hour. Although a perfect equation or solution for implementing student-centered personalized learning does not yet exist, educators and teachers only need to keep in mind that kids come first.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Matthew Friedman serves as an Assistant Superintendent at South Orange Maplewood School District. He has over twenty-three years of experience in public education and has spent the last eighteen years in administrative/ leadership roles, including Assistant Principal, Chief Academic Officer, and Assistant Superintendent. Dr. Friedman has extensive experience in post-secondary education, teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, acting as a Supervisor for the university statewide teacher certification program, and serving as a dissertation chair in the graduate school of education. Recognized as a visionary leader and educational innovator, he frequently provides educational consulting services on a national level. In his work, Dr. Friedman is passionate about creating learning environments that foster transformation, designing innovative learning experiences for all learners, curating personalized professional learning opportunities for teachers and administrators, and community building within schools/districts.

THE HYFLEX MODEL:
AN INTRODUCTION FOR EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY FRAMEWORK

Dr. Tiffany Mulally
Misericordia University/ tmulally@misericordia.edu
ORCHID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4627-0925
301 Lake St. Dallas, PA 18612
570.561.3540

Dr. Roberta Yeager
Misericordia University/ ryeager@misericordia.edu
ORCHID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4899-5214
301 Lake St. Dallas, PA 18612

ABSTRACT

Given the COVID 19 pandemic, the landscape of education may never be the same. With this swift paradigm shift to remote learning, educators will now need to focus on what methodology might benefit their students the most as we move forward into uncertainty in whether the classroom will be face to face, online, or a combination of the two. To develop a path that might best serve students with disabilities, the researchers conducted a literature review of the HyFlex model. Through the lens of the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, the authors utilized current research to describe how the HyFlex model can heighten learning through teaching, cognitive, and social presence and identified individual barriers for each of the COI components. Finally, the researchers discussed the impact HyFlex learning and the COI can have on each of the Center for Exceptional Students Standards based on current literature.

INTRODUCTION

While the past two decades have seen an increase in research concerning online learning effectiveness, recent interest has spiked as a result of the transition to remote learning during the COVID 19 global pandemic. Of particular concern is whether research in PK-12 online education, specifically related to remote learning dedicated to students with disabilities, has given ample focus to the verification and implementation of theoretical frameworks to meet their needs. During this time of great uncertainty, teachers are looking to administrators to provide frameworks and recommendations to effectively instruct students. As more students are identified with learning disabilities, educators have an obligation to make sure their needs are appropriately met (Snyder et al., 2019). This is especially important when transitioning to online teaching and learning.

When one examines the various frameworks guiding online instruction, an option that offers the most variance and incorporates the most components is the Community of Inquiry (COI) Framework. The COI, developed in 1999, focuses on meeting learners' needs in an asynchronous environment, emphasizing teaching, social, and cognitive presence as elements to support deep and meaningful learning experiences (Majeski et al., 2018). If students are to progress, including students with learning disabilities, coursework and interactions have to be designed for them, and the COI framework proports to do just that.

School closures stemming from COVID 19 shutdowns forced administrators to find operative teaching platforms for educators and students and in many instances, they supported the integration of asynchronous learning environments or virtual classrooms to deliver the required curriculum. The authors of this paper, while reviewing literature on remote learning platforms for students with disabilities, discovered an existing practical and potentially effective method, the HyFlex model, which may more effectively meet the educational needs of students with learning disabilities. The HyFlex model, a multi-modal course combining online and classroom-based instruction proctored in configurations based on the need and inclination of the student, offers the student and the instructor benefits, yet is not without challenges. By integrating a HyFlex model, the

student will have autonomy over how they join the class for every given session, whether face-to-face or in an online setting. The student may also have the option to attend either synchronously or asynchronously (Beatty, 2019).

The freedom of that choice can be allocated by the educator, whether spending a mandatory minimum number of days in person or synchronous, or allowing complete self-determination to the student. A HyFlex design allows students to predict a path that offers the best participation pattern for them to excel. The key to proper implementation is to enable students to make the best decisions by providing them with choice. It is vital that educators make sure both online and face to face components are equivalent in terms of meeting outcomes, there is reusability of learning artifacts between all methods of delivery, and there is accessibility in allowing for equitable access across all modes of participation (Beatty, 2019).

The development of a quality HyFlex design will go beyond simply allowing for various modes of engaging with the class; it also has to allow students to engage with their peers, their teacher, and the content. The authors of this paper believe that through an integration of a HyFlex model built on the COI framework, students with learning disabilities cannot just meet the levels of success they would have in a face-to-face classroom, but exceed them.

To explain how the HyFlex model can improve the education of students with disabilities, we first discuss the COI framework, touching on the responsibilities related to each of the three pillars. Then, we present a review of the HyFlex model and how it can be integrated to best serve students with learning disabilities, using a review of previous literature and the assessment of the Center for Exceptional Students Standards. Finally, the authors will demonstrate how integrating a HyFlex design developed with a teaching, social, and cognitive presence will improve the educational experience of all learners.

COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY FRAMEWORK

The community of Inquiry (COI) framework, an empirically supported educational model, distinguishes three elements that are considered crucial in a successful remote learning experience. Rooted in John Dewey's view of practical inquiry, COI was developed by Garrison et al. (1999) to meet the asynchronous, online learners' needs. The three pillars that encourage a quality online learning curriculum include teaching, social, and cognitive presence (Majeski et al., 2018). These components are situated in the postulation that higher-level thinking and learning will emerge from a sense of community derived from the presences' overlapping, increasing perceived understanding (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

TEACHING PRESENCE

One of the critical components of a successful, significant online educational experience is establishing

a COI through the "creation, implementation, facilitation, and monitoring of the cognitive and social processes to achieve learning goals" (Majeski et al., 2018, p. 54). These components are collectively teaching presence, which is included in the course design, facilitation of learning, and all direct lecturing provided (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Majeski et al., 2018). Garrison et al. (1999) argued that while social and cognitive connections between learners are essential in an online course's success, student-to-student interaction is not adequate to entrench an efficacious online learning experience. Under the category of teaching presence, the core responsibilities include the establishment of course content, including the schedule and all assignments, the monitoring and management of interaction, and the determination of what the learner needs, while providing any direction or instruction they might require (Majeski et al., 2018). Educational success research has shown that a substantial teaching presence may increase students' perception of their learning experience's social and cognitive aspects.

The first of the core responsibilities under teaching presence is instructional design and the organization of the content. According to Anderson et al. (2001), this developmental element includes planning courses and the framework of laying out the structure, interaction, and evaluation components. One of the most significant constituents separating an online or HyFlex delivery and a face-to-face delivery is the lack of social cues and norms set during a live interaction. To compensate for this lacking, the instructor of an online/HyFlex course will need to be as unambiguous and straightforward as possible regarding the course's expectations and processes.

To complete this responsibility, the instructor can create or migrate PowerPoint presentations and lectures notes into the Learning Management System (LMS), develop audio or video mini-lectures to be shared, scatter personal insight into the topics, plan an amalgamation of the group and individual work, and provide resources to help navigate the online classroom (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Of the three parts of a successful teaching presence, the design and organization component will be the instructor's sole responsibility.

The second core responsibility towards teaching presence is facilitating discourse. This concept, built from Chickering and Gamson's (1987) supposition of cooperation and reciprocity between students and a connection between teachers and students, makes for good education practice, expands to include the students interacting with the information provided within the course content (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). The instructor's role in facilitating this discourse includes responding to and commenting on a student's response, guiding discussions in the appropriate direction while not overtaking the conversation, and drawing out inactive students (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

The final core responsibility nested within teaching presence is direct instruction. Under this component, the instructor will share their knowledge and expertise (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Through this instruction, the facilitator will assess the discourse and evaluate the effectiveness of the pedagogic process. The

instructor's responsibility is to be a catalyst for contemplation and dialog through the presentation of content employing various assessment and feedback tools. One of the most significant aspects of the instructor's role during this final stage is to include explanatory and immediate feedback (Arbaugh, 2001; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

SOCIAL PRESENCE

Within the online community, an individual's ability to project themselves within social and emotional means, facilitating the perception of being an authentic person during interpersonal communication, is termed social presence (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Numerous research articles indicate that the cohesion of the student group dynamic and the effectiveness of interaction within a team will increase the importance between social presence and the ability to meet learning outcomes (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Under the umbrella of social presence, three components, open communication, group cohesion, and affective expression, lay as the keystone to creating, implementing, and executing a productive remote learning session. When a student experiences a positive social climate through the utilization of collaborative activities, there will be an increase in the satisfaction of the course and the mastery of the content within an online learning environment (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

As it pertains to building an online community, Brown (2001) asserts that there are three stages to a community-building paradigm: (1) establishing online acquaintances; through the exchange of ideas, thus (2) culminating a feeling a being part of a community; and, only after extensive, personal communication that is either longstanding or intense, (3) camaraderie. These same stages can be seen as corresponding with the social presence constructs discussed earlier. Tu and McIsaac (2002) conducted research that established the need for social presence when developing an asynchronous course.

In the preliminary stages of designing a course with consideration for social presence, thereby emotional affective expressions, open communication, and group cohesion, elements such as personal profiles and photos, discussions devoted to introductions, welcome messages, limited class size, and activities that integrate feeling and reflection should be incorporated (Fiock, 2020; Richardson et al., 2017). When considering the emotional (affective) expression during a course design, activities that will cultivate foundational and initiatory content that will allow for the development of trust and interaction amongst peers should be included (Fiock, 2020; Richardson et al., 2017). A significant component to curating trust within a course is to create course rules (i.e., netiquettes), expectations (i.e., participation within discussions), and for interaction in both the student-to-student and student-to-instructor plane (i.e., discussion posts, journaling) (Fiock, 2020; Haythornthwaite, 2006; Stephens & Roberts, 2017). To exploit group cohesion benefits, assignments that amalgamate problem-solving tasks, small group work, or collaborative projects will prove most successful (Fiock, 2020).

Once the course has been developed, implantation of the instructor's design can best be facilitated using an LMS as the content's environment (Thompson et al., 2017). It is essential to recognize that when the classroom's schema moves from face to face to an online platform, it is imperative to acknowledge the challenges that the lack of verbal cues and body language will play in affective needs.

To overcome these challenges, to encourage the students to create profiles and share bibliographies, creating discussion forums that welcome student introductions, and integrating wikis or other digital storytelling methods (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2010) will help build trust within a course by showing that those the student is interacting with are genuine people whom where a common goal (Thompson et al., 2017).

COGNITIVE PRESENCE

One of the three pillars of a higher education process is the ability to construct and confirm meaning through critical thinking (Garrison et al., 1999; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Cognitive presence, the term used to describe the cycle of practical investigation, through which the contributor will progress from understanding the problem to analysis, comprehension, and implementation (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). To successfully realize cognitive presence, there are four stages the student must transcend, as developed by the instructor: a triggering event; exploration; integration; and resolution (Garrison et al., 2003; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Triggering events within an online environment might include activities that will elicit an inquiry and promote the student's querying process (Fiock, 2020). To prompt the exploration stage, activities that push the student to brainstorm, discover, and feel they are in an environment where open discussion is welcome are essential. To satisfy the integration stage, projects that include application and reflection will be most beneficial. Finally, the resolution stage can best be accomplished through the continued motion between "reflection and discourse; analysis and synthesis (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010, p. 32)."

Of the three components of the CoI framework, developing a cognitive presence within an online or HyFlex classroom can prove to be the most challenging (Celani & Collins, 2005). While the research demonstrates that the student's participation is a solid underpinning for developing a robust cognitive presence, studies have shown that critical thinking skills may be enriched through a multifariousness of online course formats (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). The reasoning behind the variety of online course formats' success is that group composition may prove more beneficial than discussions (Thompson et al., 2017). Studies performed by Lee & Lee (2006) revealed that when students were placed in diverse personalities rather than homogenous groups of introverts or extroverts, their metacognitive interaction abilities increased.

The barrier of cognitive presence within the online classroom is the "progressive development of inquiry" (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 162), or, more specifically, the moving beyond the exploratory stage. This might be credited to the inorganic methodology of the educational context, the nuisance of online communica-

tion, a lacking of teaching presence, or a combination of variables. Many of the remedies for lack of progression through to cognitive application focuses on the teacher and teaching presence and the development of tasks that will demand exploration and reflection (Celentin, 2007; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). The most successful instigation of cognitive presence came when instructors created a problem- or case-based assignment, with clear expectations defined, and a strong teaching presence was in place (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

HYFLEX

The HyFlex model, a course development methodology constructed at San Francisco State University, puts the impetus on the student to decide whether they attend a class in face to face (F2F), online, synchronous, or asynchronous manner. These multi-modal courses combine online and classroom-based instruction in various flexible configurations to meet student and instructional needs. With most teaching models, HyFlex offers both benefits and challenges for the student and the instructor.

The benefits offered to the students through the HyFlex model include increased access to course content, control over schedule, and additional learning resources. Faculty will benefit from a HyFlex model through an ability to serve more students with the same resources and allow for continuity in instruction when a face-to-face environment might not be possible. The HyFlex model's challenges include a required increased personal management and more resources, including but not limited to hardware, network, ability to engage in an online platform, and ability to learn through mediated experiences. The challenges that instructors will face when implementing the HyFlex model include the instructor's need to design, develop, and deliver a course that supports multiple and simultaneous modes of student participation and the biggest challenge, time.

HYFLEX FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

During these uncertain times in education, educators are searching for the best way to present their curriculum. Teachers of special education are especially challenged with meeting the diverse inclusionary needs, whether academic, physical, or social of their students. The HyFlex model is a viable option to meet the varied needs of all students.

With the percentage of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) increasing, currently at 13.7%, a 10.6% increase over 2000-2001, significant attention must be paid to the needs of students with learning disabilities (Snyder et al., 2019). Many of the Center for Exceptional Students Standards address the need to create a learning environment that accommodates students' diverse abilities. Whether managing Standard Three: Demonstrating Subject Matter Content and Specialized Curricular Knowledge through the modification of both general and specialized curricula to make them accessible to individuals with disabilities or meeting Standard 4: Using Assessment to Understand the Learner and the Learning Environ-

ment for Data-Based Decision Making through the design of an appropriate, challenging learning environment to allow for a meaningful experience for individuals with disabilities, the HyFlex model provides for the student to accommodate their own needs while never sacrificing their education (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2020).

The impetus of creating an online environment that addresses the nuances of special education is on the educator. This requires creating an environment that would meet the learning needs of students with disabilities equally in online and face-to-face courses. Through thorough course development and a robust pedagogical effectuation, every student should succeed and flourish irrespective of the need.

STANDARD 1: ENGAGING IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND PRACTICE WITHIN ETHICAL GUIDELINES

Through a HyFlex setting, Standard 1 can be met through the specification of learning to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities and offer more learning resources than might be found in a traditional face-to-face course. Each learning component can be tailored to students based on their educational requirements as well as adapting for the cultural, social, and linguistic diversity along with continued self-evaluation exercises that may be included in the LMS and completed on students' schedule. To ensure that every student will have equal access to technology needs, the Student, Environment, Task, and Tools (SETT) Framework is available to assist in the decision-making process.

Since IDEA requires that Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams determine assistive technology (AT) needs, Zabala (1995) created the Student, Environments, Tasks, and Tools (SETT) Framework. Multidisciplinary Teams (MDT) and IEP teams can use the SETT framework to gather data and make decisions about using the HyFlex format for their child's instruction. What is the functional area(s) of concern? Does the child have a high Incidence or a low incidence disability? What is the specific special learning-based needs on current abilities?

It is believed that the elements of the SETT Framework, with minor adjustments, can also be applied to non-educational environments and service plans, such as using the HyFlex format. SETT aspects help the IEP team through collaboration, communication, multiple perspectives, data, important information, and remaining flexible. In the HyFlex format, the environments may change frequently. Therefore, agreed-upon materials must be available before the HyFlex structure begins. Depending on the child's age and individualized learning needs, frequent SETT reviews are necessary. Zabala (1995) developed a set of questions that the team can use when determining whether the SETT framework will be used for a student. The same questioning format can also be used when determining if the HyFlex model will be appropriate for a high/low incidence student.

TABLE 1

Questions for SETT Framework (Zabala, 2002, pp. 1-2)

STUDENT	**What is the area of instructional concern?** **What are the student's current abilities?** **What are the student's areas of need?**
ENVIRONMENTS	**What are the significant characteristics of the student learning environment in each location?** **What is the physical arrangement of the learning environment?** **What is the instructional arrangement in the learning environment, e.g., classroom, small group, or home?**
TASKS	**What are the significant characteristics of the student learning environment in each location?** **What is the physical arrangement of the learning environment?** **What is the instructional arrangement in the learning**
TASKS	**environment, e.g., classroom, small group, or home?**
TOOLS **(BOTH DEVICES AND SERVICES)**	**What tasks occur in natural environments that enable progress or mastery toward the IEP goals?** **What tools (low and high tech) are being used currently to support the student (s)?** **What additional tools does this student require to perform in this environment?** **What strategies might be used to motivate the student's performance?** **How will these tools provide an equitable learning environment for the student (s)in meeting learning outcomes?**

STANDARD 2: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING EACH INDIVIDUAL'S DEVELOPMENTAL AND LEARNING NEEDS

Green et al. (2005) stressed individualization effectiveness within online education for students with disabilities when four key pedagogical components are enacted. These pivotal elements to the use of digital technology for individualized learning include the confirming that students are proficient in making knowledgeable, well-informed decisions, the ability to recognize and adapt the content to the diverse level of skills and knowledge of the student, the use of a myriad of tools within the learning environment, and the inclusion of feedback and assessments that are focused on the learner. A HyFlex model for classrooms will help meet all of the areas that Green et al. (2005) addressed through a well-developed LMS and a face-to-face environment to assess the learner's progress and to determine the student's ability to make an informed decision. The educa-

tor can then take that knowledge and make necessary adaptions within the online component.

When developing an online course to use within the HyFlex course, the educator not only converts the face-to-face components of the course to an online course but also creates an online component that is organic. The course's online element should contain a more substantial pedagogy and content that will adapt to learning needs of students with disabilities. According to Scott and Temple (2017), using a standardized online course framework, including a set navigation layout with a logical organization of materials, will improve the learning experience's efficiency for students in special education. All of those components can be created and deployed through the use of an LMS system.

STANDARD 3: DEMONSTRATING SUBJECT MATTER CONTENT AND SPECIALIZED CURRICULAR KNOWLEDGE

STANDARD 4: USING ASSESSMENT TO UNDERSTAND THE LEARNER AND THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR DATA-BASED DECISION MAKING
STANDARD 5: SUPPORTING LEARNING USING EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION

To ensure students have a complete understanding of the lesson's topic, competency should be included in the online course. Unfortunately, when nested in an online course, competencies will often neglect the embedded supports and dedicated instruction that are the keystones to special education (Greer et al., 2014). A HyFlex model paired with an educator dedicated to meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities, can overcome the lack of a solitary online course through the adaption of content and by identifying unique strategies to address pronounced learning needs of students. This also includes the development of approaches to help students overcome comprehension barriers. The diverse approaches that may be integrated can include extra resources within the LMS, possibly from the publisher, Open Educational Resources (OERs), or educational tools such as BrainPop.

Within the online component of the HyFlex model, instruction is dictated by the lesson, but facilitation of its completion is dictated by the teacher and, in most cases, the parent or caregiver. A vital feature of the HyFlex model is the allowance of explicit and direct instruction in both a virtual synchronous environment as well as a face-to-face setting. The HyFlex model's benefit is hosting a synchronous session with both audio and video components to allow the student to interact and allow the parent or caregiver to be present. The parent or caregiver can watch while the educator walks the student through the virtual lesson and group socialization, addressing any concerns and offering feedback when necessary. The teacher may provide follow-up advice for

the parent or caregiver following the class, which allows for a cohesive educational experience.

STANDARD 6: SUPPORTING SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL GROWTH/

STANDARD 7: COLLABORATING WITH TEAM MEMBERS

Candidates create and contribute to safe, respectful, and productive learning environments for individuals with exceptionalities through effective routines and procedures and use various preventive and responsive practices to support social, emotional, and educational well-being. They follow ethical and legal guidelines and work collaboratively with families and other professionals to conduct behavioral assessments for intervention and program development.

Developing a course based on the HyFlex model with special consideration for the Community of Inquiry framework will allow the educator to meet the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students with disabilities. When special attention is given to the social presence pillar of the CoI framework, facilitated through a robust teaching presence, there is an increased likelihood that growth on all levels will occur for students.

There are specific tools that can be utilized and implemented within the HyFlex LMS and in-person to increase the student's experience. It is essential to include a "Meet Your Classmates" section in the online course at the course development level. This will allow the students to open up and show themselves as authentic individuals, perhaps by including interesting tidbits or photos. Creating an environment where students can develop trusting relationships with their classmates and teacher is also important. This can sometimes be accomplished through ice-breaking activities both in face-to-face and online environments.

The use of group activities within the course, both online and face-to-face, will increase students' social growth. Still, it is essential to alternate group roles to allow all students to have diverse experiences. When students spend most of their time in the virtual or online classroom, the educator should also attempt as many one-on-one sessions as possible, even if only a few minutes. This type of mentoring will increase students' comfort with the online environment as well as create ease with the teacher.

When focusing on students who have opted to attend more virtual sessions than in-person classes, the educator will need to consider that they might lack social interaction. It is recommended they provide feedback in the form of audio and video rather than basic written feedback. Also, they should attempt to use synchronous sessions as often as possible and screen-sharing to allow students to develop a better understanding through specific feedback.

HYFLEX FOR HIGH INCIDENCE

A HyFlex model of instruction that follows the framework of CoI creates an environment that will meet the needs of students with high incidence disabilities. Gage et al. (2012) explained high incidence disabilities include learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disabilities, intellectual disabilities, high-functioning autism, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (other health impairment). IEP development and student involvement in developing behavioral objectives and Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) need to plan using technology with the general education teacher, the special education teacher, parents, and students. Anderson (2017) explored the evolution of the CoI model and the current state of CoI in teaching and learning in the digital age. According to Anderson (2017), the biggest concern with the existing CoI model is that while it helps construct and define a useful teaching model, it does not consider that teaching effectiveness is equally dependent on the learners. Shea and Bidjerano (2010) explained a new presence will need to be added to the framework: the learner's presence. A HyFlex class gives students, parents, and educators options when developing their SDI in their IEPs. These options include Face to Face, Online, and viewing recorded sessions. The construction, learning goals, IEPs, and assessments of blended education are guided by the Common Core Standards (Smith & Basham, 2014). The HyFlex format offers more learning opportunities for the SDI of students with disabilities.

HYFLEX FOR LOW INCIDENCE

"For most of us, technology makes things easier. For a person with a disability, it makes things possible" (Edyburn et al., 2005, p. pxiii). Students with low incidence disabilities may require specialized assistive technology to be successful in a HyFlex program. Therefore, A SETT (Zabala, 1995) evaluation will also need to be conducted. The variety of assistive technology available will provide clear benefits over using just one method. Additionally, there is no cost to the parents.

IMPLEMENTATION OF HYFLEX FOR HIGH AND LOW INCIDENCE

By integrating computer-based supplemental activities, a hybrid learning environment can enhance specific skills for students with disabilities (Rivera, 2017, p. 80). When face-to-face instruction does not fit, the general and special education teachers may use live streaming along with any assistive technology for a student with a high incidence disability. These choices may change from week to week, depending on the student's needs. HyFlex gives learners with high incidence disabilities educational options that incorporate technology, which may increase their classroom participation and engagement with classmates, and enable them to feel more confident when working in a face-to-face or virtual environment.

Multiple researchers, including the United States Department of Education, have concluded that an

educational environment that offers the option of either face-to-face or virtual for any specific session is more effective in achieving learning goals over a strict traditional or virtual classroom (McCown, 2014; Rivera, 2017; Shah, 2011). HyFlex for students with disabilities demands collaboration between special education teachers, general education teachers, parents, and students. Therefore, this method requires strong communication. Strong parent and/or caregiver involvement becomes an integral part in students' overall learning progression. HyFlex requires parent and/or caregiver and special education support for students to reach their IEP behavior objectives and curricular needs. The Center for Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (2016) concluded that many special education teachers are not trained on effective blended instructional models or are equipped with the skills necessary to implement blended learning in their classrooms. Therefore, they remain uninformed about models that will benefit students with learning disabilities (Rivera, 2017). Table 2, HyFlex Adaptability to Meet the Learner's Needs, gives many HyFlex characteristics and suggestions for general education and special education teachers. The table will help educators meet the needs and increase the strengths of High and Low Incidence learners.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Anderson (2017) explored the evolution of the CoI model and the current state of CoI in teaching and learning in the digital age. The most pressing concern with the existing CoI model is that while it helps construct and define a useful teaching model, it does not consider that teaching effectiveness is equally dependent on the learners (Anderson, 2017). Thus, a new presence needs to be added to the framework, the learner's presence (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010), because as Rivera (2017) explained, "Educational theorists believe blended education will become the primary scaffolding for special needs classrooms in the near future" (p. 81).

There is a great deal of research supporting blended instruction. Weng et al. (2014), after completing a thorough meta-analysis of research on online and blended instruction, concluded "Cognitive skills-based CAI (Computer -Assisted Instruction) as a promising intervention to enhance the learning of students with disabilities" (p. 173). Behjat et al. (2012) also supported blended instruction and Rivera (2017) highlighted,

> Hybrid learning increases the contact hours students can have with each other, and as a result, through interaction, they enhance their learning — that through blended learning, students and teachers find the appropriate software and e-learning environment to utilize the communication, collaboration, management and administrative tools to improve language skills (p. 82).

The HyFlex format adds another option to the blended design. HyFlex will break down barriers and help teaching and learning approaches for students with disabilities so they have equitable access to the classroom and curriculum. Higher education institutions have been using the HyFlex format for quite some time

and as Miller et al. (2013) contend, "Students greatly enjoyed the educational choices and overwhelmingly reported the incorporation of technology increased their participation in class" (p. 1). The authors of this paper argue that now is the time to bring a viable remote learning alternative to our K-12 classrooms that also effectively meets the needs of students with disabilities. The HyFlex format does give more variety for SDI for students with disabilities and is serves as a viable option during our current reduction of face-to-face classrooms.

TABLE 2

HyFlex Adaptability to Meet the Learner's Needs

HYFLEX CHARACTERISTICS	ADAPTABILITY TO MEET THE LEARNER'S NEEDS	
	HIGH INCIDENCE	LOW INCIDENCE
LEARNER CHOICE: Provide meaningful alternative participation modes and enable students to choose between participation modes daily, weekly, or topically (Beatty, 2019).	• Grammar Support Tools • Word Predictors • Monitoring – cognitive abilities, motor abilities, and sensory abilities • Physical environment • Extended time • Supported environment • Background noise elimination • Visual schedule	• Switches • Word predictions • Classroom communication device • Current seating and positioning • Mobility issues • Extended time • Flexible start and end dates • Supported environment • Adjustable lighting • Background noise elimination • Visual schedule
EQUIVALENCY: Provide learning activities in all participation modes, which lead to equivalent learning outcomes (Beatty, 2019).	• Online learning tools • Peer tutoring • Classroom communication device • Define expectations, progress monitoring, annual goals • Tasks that will lead to active participation • Graphic organizers • Rubrics • Varied activity formats • Oral tests • Authentic assessments • Break Box • A duplicate set of texts for home • Test accommodations and/or modifications • Reduced amount of paper • Record the teacher reading instructions • Recorded lessons • Chuck assignments	• Braille embosser and text to Braille conversion • Animated signing characters (signing avatars) • Word predictions • Voice recognition systems • Full-time paraeducator • Alternative curricular materials • Expectations understood in each activity • Varied activity formats • Authentic tests • Parallel curriculum • Break Box • Test modifications • Larger font • Reduced amount of paper • Record the teacher reading instructions • Recorded session • Web captioning • Chunk assignments • PECS (visuals)
REUSABILITY: Utilize artifacts from learning activities in each participation mode as "learning objects" for all students (Beatty, 2019).	• UDL • Device Selections (SETT)	• Alternatives for Handwriting difficulties • Alternatives for Verbal communication
ACCESSIBILITY: Equip students with technology skills and equitable access to all participation modes (Beatty, 2019).	The SETT Framework (Zabala, 1995) • Alternative mouse systems • Alternative keyboards	SETT (Zabala, 1995) requires that IEP teams determine assistive technology (AT). • Text-to-speech

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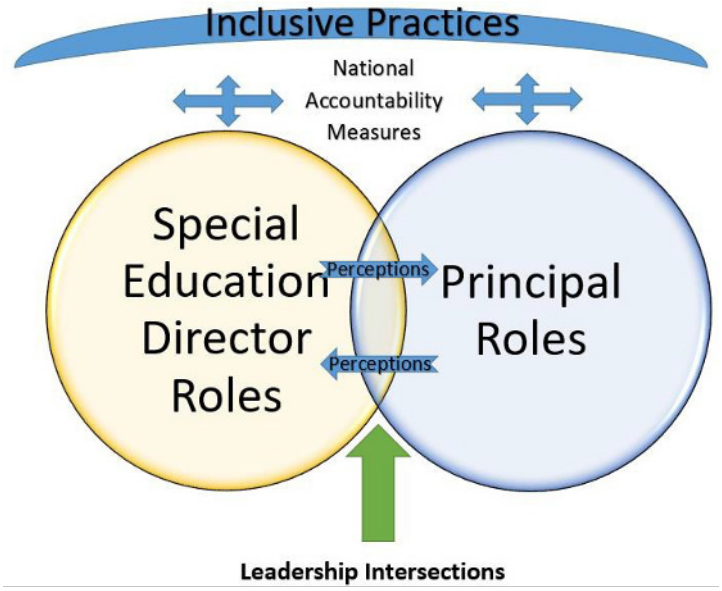
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tiffany Mulally, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at Misericordia University in the Teacher Education Department. The majority of her work has dealt with online education and working to create the best learning experience within the learning management system (LMS). Dr. Mulally has addressed these concerns in multiple roles over the years (technology coordinator, instructional designer, assistant professor). While Dr. Mulally is best known for research on gender in active transportation and sex trafficking, she has many manuals and pieces of training completed within the university and the Pennsylvania Department of Education focusing on technology within the classroom. Dr. Mulally has worked on multiple research projects for Rails To Trails Conservancy as well as a Highly Qualified Teachers Grant through the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Roberta A. Beckley Yeager, EdD, is an assistant professor in the Teacher Education Department at Misericordia University in Dallas, PA. Yeager teaches online, hybrid and Face to Face special education courses to help students become robust teachers and advocates for all children. She is a former special education teacher served all exceptionalities at various levels through her 25 years in public education. Her experiences in K-12 have influenced her educational approach to higher education. Yeager believes in collaboration while creating a positive learning environment promoting inclusion for all, whether academic, physical or social. She also taught elementary education in an inclusionary setting. She earned her doctorate in curriculum and teaching from Northcentral University, San Diego, California. Yeager's teaching and research interests are special education and inclusion for all students of varying abilities.

ROLE INTERSECTIONS OF PRINCIPALS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTORS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION INCLUSION

Dr. Caron Anthony-Higley
35655 Danner Drive
Union City, PA 16438
(814) 694-9574
canthonyhigley@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the intersecting roles of principals and special education directors in special education inclusion, within one educational service agency region, in a Northeast state. It expanded Cobb's (2015) research on principal roles to include the voice of special education directors and connect the reflective reports of the two administrative figures. Eight administrative pairs participated in the study, out of 14 eligible districts. Personal interviews collected data on the experienced intersections of leader roles in special education inclusive practices. Using MaxQDA Analytic Pro, the results found three macro-themes (organizational structure, cultural values, workload demands) revealing differences in role definitions, leader perceptions, and system expectations. This phenomenological study furthers the understanding of the role intersections associated with leadership positions in special education inclusive practices. In contrast to typical attrition patterns, the leaders within this study demonstrated long-term commitment to the school communities they served.

INTRODUCTION

Within the public school system, the implementation of special education inclusive practices is the responsibility of both principals and special education directors (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Billingsley, McLeskey & Crockett, 2017; Cobb, 2015; Frick, Faircloth & Little, 2012; Lee, 2016; Pazey & Cole, 2012; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010; Voltz & Collins, 2010). The amount of time these leaders spend on special education inclusive practices continues to increase and cause complications in two processes that, in past practice, operated independent of the other (Bartoletti & Connelly, 2013; Bays & Crocket, 2007; Billingsley, et. al., 2017; Hite, Williams, and Baugh, 2007; Stevenson-Jacobson, Jacobson & Hilton, 2006). Both the principal and special ed-

ucation director are required to adhere locally, to state and federal mandates of special education compliance, as directed through the Office of Special Education Programs within the U.S. Department of Education (Americans with Disabilities Act; Billingsley, et al., 2017; Every Student Succeeds Act; Lee, 2016; Public Law 94-142; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act; United States Department of Education, 2019; Voltz & Collins, 2010).

Although the successful integration of special education services requires frequent collaboration between the public school leaders, both professionals express difficulty with finding time in their regular daily duties to include collaboration (Grissom, Loeb, & Mitani, 2015; Klocko & Wells 2015; Hines, 2008; Hrong, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; Weiczork, & Theoharis, 2015). The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the intersecting roles of principals and special education directors, as involved in special education inclusive practices. It was conducted within one educational service agency region in a Northeast state.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

The proportion of children ages 3-21 receiving special education services has expanded across the United States. The United States Department of Education through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that the percentage of special education students accounted for approximately 13.7% of total student enrollment in 2015-16, as compared with 8.3% in 1977 (United States Department of Education, 2019). The special education population, that spends at least 80% or more of their day within the regular education environment, has increased from 31.7% in 1989 to 62.5% in 2015; whereas, those spending less than 40% of their total day in the regular education environment, has decreased from 24.9% in 1989 to 13.6% in 2015 (United States Department of Education, 2019). The population and location of special education service delivery has changed the school environment.

Appropriate funding and resource distribution concerns the outcomes of public-school systems (Frick, et al., 2012; Griffith, 2015; Hrong, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; Millard & Aragon, 2015; Pazley & Cole, 2012). According to the Nation's Report Card data, public school funding receives allocations from the following resources: local government- 45%, state government- 46%, and federal government- 9% (Baker, Frarrie & Sciarra, 2018). Inadequate funding issues continue to burden public school systems; therefore, funding can also be a barrier to successful special education inclusive practice implementation.

Some research indicates that educational leadership roles are beyond the skill set of one expert leader and might benefit from a shared approach (Boscardin 2005; Frick et al., 2012; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Weiczorek & Theoharis, 2015). Furthermore, realigning perceptions and redesigning roles may promote collaborative partnerships and foster the communication procedures necessary, to support the demands of the job (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Billingsley, et al., 2014; Frick, et al., 2012; Klocko & Wells, 2015; Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996). Although the successful integration of special education services requires frequent collaboration

between the principal and special education director, both professionals express difficulty with finding time in their regular duties to include collaboration (Grissom, Loeb, & Mitani, 2015; Klocko & Wells 2015; Hines, 2008; Hrong, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; Weiczork, & Theoharis, 2015).

In 2015, Cobb completed a meta-analysis on the many roles of the principal as a special education leader, noting the disproportionate amount of time principals spend on special education. Cobb (2015) categorized the role of the principal through *inclusive program delivery as a visionary, advocate, interpreter, and organizer* (Cobb, 2015, p. 221). Cobb (2015) also noted the domains of *staff collaboration and parental engagement*, to include the principal as a *partner, coach, and conflict resolver* (Cobb, 2015, p. 221). Cobb suggested that "if schools are to enrich the way in which inclusion is supported and practiced," new research needs to investigate and identify the "perspectives and actions that principals need to take on, and the supports they need, as special education leaders" (Cobb, 2015, p. 231). Cobb (2015) concluded that there may be additional unidentified roles that "represent the dynamics of special education principal leadership" (Cobb, 2015, p. 230). Thus, the success of special education inclusive practices within a school system is dependent on the interactions of principals and special education directors as leaders.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

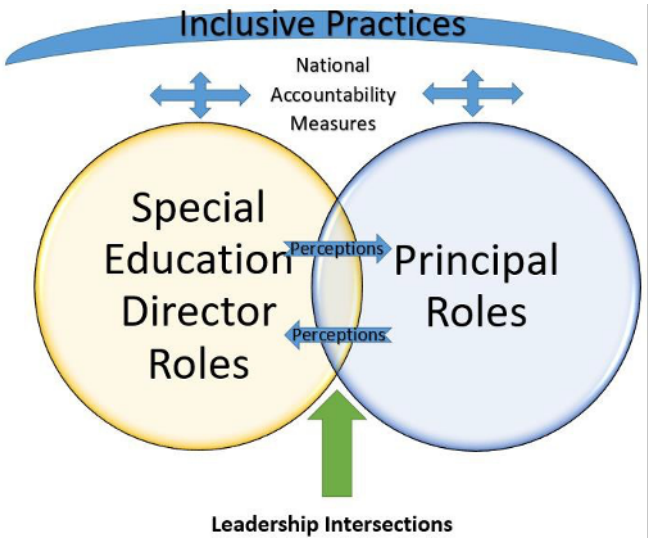
As accountability measures evolve and enrollment numbers build, educational leaders are challenged with the implementation and oversight of special education inclusive practices within the public education system (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Billingsley, et al., 2014; Cobb, 2015; Pazey & Cole, 2012; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Compliance measures for public school systems continue to increase through case law rulings and legislation, without proportionate increases in funding and resources (Baker, Frarrie & Sciarra, 2018; Millard & Aragon, 2015). At the same time, principals and special education directors report an increased level of expectation and expanded role of responsibility related specifically to the practice of special education inclusion (Levonson, 2012; Mitchell, 2014; National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Service, 2017; Shoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Voltz & Collins, 2010; Wagner & Kasiyannis, 2010). As a result, the demands on the system, within an already overloaded timeframe, will continue to influence outcomes in public education. Furthermore, "Developing a common language for discussing roles, responsibilities, tasks, and communication" will be a "key step in reshaping the normative environment" and for "formalizing shared responsibilities" in public school systems (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012, p. 16). As a result, this study aimed to address the following questions:

1. What are the intersecting roles of principals and special education directions related to special education inclusive practices?
2. What are principals' and special education directions' perceptions of these role intersections?

The study also intended to identify the role intersections and perceptions of the leaders responsible for the implementation and oversight of special education inclusive practices, within the public school (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Conceptual Framework for the Study



RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted using a phenomenological approach as this method offers an evaluative process of educational practices through systematic interpretation of a phenomenon, while influencing change within educational organizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen 1990; 2014). The validity of "scientific investigation" exists when lived experience is explained by "first-person reports" to discover the essence of a phenomenon and the shared meaning of an experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). By capturing the personal report of the participant, phenomenology extends an intimate view into the relational connections between principals and special education directors while presenting rich descriptions of the role intersections as related to special education inclusion according to definition, interpretation, and reflection.

SAMPLING PROCEDURES

A personalized email solicited a congruent sample of special education directors from fourteen public school districts, with parallel organizational systems within a bound region. Eight of the fourteen special education directors volunteered to participate in the study. Following a semi-structured interview, each director suggested potential principal participants, within the same district. Principal participants were then recruited using the same personalized invitation. Recruitment concluded after one principal participant was confirmed from each district. Each complement principal was interviewed using the same interview protocol (Appendix A).

DATA SOURCES

Interviews were conducted using a descriptive and semi-structured format (Bevan, 2014; Seidman, 2013). Eight participant pairs were interviewed. The administrative experience of the 16 participants ranged between 4 and 25 years. At the time of the interviews, four principals were in elementary schools, three oversaw middle schools, and one principal was in a high school. Seven of the participants were male and nine were female. Eighty-eight percent of the special education directors were female. Twenty-five percent of the principals were female. Six of the eight special education directors reported experience as either an assistant principal or principal. None of the principals reported prior experience as a special education director.

DATA ANALYSIS

This study applied the qualitative coding analysis of sixteen transcripts that included 61,139 words in 141 pages of data using MaxQDA Analytic Pro software (Saldaña, 2016). Eight data groups, consisting of one special education director and one principal, allowed a comparison of roles within each of the districts. The following file sets offered further comparison and thematic analysis: Set 1- Special Education Directors; Set 2- Principals; Set 3- Special Education Director and Principal Pairs by District. Additional data analysis involved contextual comparison of individual participants, role comparison by principal and special education director groups, and cross-comparison of district pairs. In order to capture the content and organize related elements, conceptual coding was applied to responses under the structure of the questions in MaxQDA. Memos were added to maintain the integrity of the data during analysis. Elaborative coding was applied in MaxQDA to connect Cobb's (2015) framework (Tables 1 & 2).

Cobb (2015) categorized three domains and seven roles when reporting on the workload challenges principals face, in supporting special education inclusion (Table 1).

TABLE 1

Special education inclusive practice roles by domain

	INCLUSIVE PROGRAM DELIVERY	STAFF COLLABORATION	PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT
VISIONARY	•	•	
PARTNER		•	•
COACH		•	
CONFLICT RESOLVER		•	
ADVOCATE	•		
INTERPRETER	•		•
ORGANIZER	•	•	•

SOURCE: Cobb, C. (2015). Principals play many parts: a review of the research on school principals as special education leaders 2001-2011. *International Journal of Inclusive Education. 19* (3), 213-234, Table 6.

TABLE 2

Examples of Data Elements Used in Elaborative Coding

DATA ELEMENTS	EXAMPLES
Visionary roles for encouraging program delivery	valuing beliefs that ensure equity, communicating expectations, organizing procedures, developing a special education plan, and promoting a vision for personnel, etc.
Visionary roles for facilitating staff collaboration	expressing attitudes, having special education background, preventing attrition, and promoting a vision, etc.
Partner roles for facilitating staff collaboration	partnering with staff and community, democratic and facilitative leadership, sharing responsibilities, and data analysis, etc.
Partner roles for fostering parent engagement	responding to parents and negotiating, etc.
Coach roles for facilitating staff collaboration	encouraging open communication, outlining roles, mentoring, and fostering team teaching, etc.

TABLE 2 CONTINUED
Examples of Data Elements Used in Elaborative Coding

DATA ELEMENTS	EXAMPLES
Conflict resolver roles for facilitating staff collaboration	determining role clarity, discipline, and negotiating work dynamics, etc.
Advocate roles for encouraging inclusive program delivery	asking for personnel and resources to enrich practices, etc.
Interpreter roles for encouraging inclusive program delivery	identifying innovative research, interpreting policy, guiding teacher practice, seeking out professional development for collaboration, etc.
Interpreter roles for fostering parent engagement	interpreting policy for parents, etc.
Organizer roles for encouraging inclusive program delivery	administering services to include all students in school culture, gathering resources for teachers, organizing professional development, delineating fiscal resources for school-wide curriculum, removing barriers, and allocating funding distribution, etc.
Organizer roles for facilitating staff collaboration	organizing schedules for teachers and students, selecting staff members, making shared curriculum decisions, and organizing paraprofessional assignments, etc.
Organizer roles for fostering parent engagement	setting up meetings, and identifying parent needs, etc.

SOURCE: Cobb, C. (2015). Principals play many parts: a review of the research on school principals as special education leaders 2001-2011. *International Journal of Inclusive Education. 19* (3), 213-234.

FINDINGS

Principals and special education directors work together to implement special education inclusive practices (Table 3). The definitions, perceptions, and role intersections of special education inclusive practices as described by each complement pair of leaders are listed in Tables 4-7.

TABLE 3

Reported interaction between principals and special education directors by method

	Principal			Special Education Director		
	In person	Phone	Text/Email	In person	Phone	Text/email
<1 hr/day	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓ ✓		
>1 - < 2 hrs/day	✓			✓ ✓ ✓ ✓		
>2 - < 3 hrs/day						
>3 - < 4 hrs/day				✓		
>4 hrs/day				✓		

Note: Check marks equal number of participants that reported the indicated criteria

TABLE 4

Participants define special edcation inclusive practices according to Cobb's (2015) framework

	Principal			Special Education Director		
	Domain I	Domain II	Domain III	Domain I	Domain II	Domain III
Visionary	1,2,3,5,8				5,7,8	
Partner						
Coach						
Conflict Resolver						
Advocate				1,6,7		
Interpreter				1,5,7		
Organizer	1,2,3,4,6,7	5		1,2,5,6,7,8	2,4,5,6,8	

Note: The numbers delineate assigned district groups and do not indicate any mathematical value
Domain I - Encouraging inclusive program delivery
Domain II - Facilitating staff collaboration
Domain III - Fostering parental engagement

TABLE 5

Participants describe the principal role according to Cobb's (2015) framework

	Principal			Special Education Director		
	Domain I	Domain II	Domain III	Domain I	Domain II	Domain III
Visionary	4,5,7	6,8		1,3,5,6,7	1,4,6,7,8	
Partner		6			1,6,7	1
Coach		3,5,8			3,5,7,8	
Conflict Resolver		7,8			2,5	
Advocate						
Interpreter				5,6,7,8		
Organizer	1,2,4,5,8	2,3,4	1,2,3,8	7	2,3,4,5	7

Note: The numbers delineate assigned district groups and do not indicate any mathematical value
Domain I - Encouraging inclusive program delivery
Domain II - Facilitating staff collaboration
Domain III - Fostering parental engagement

TABLE 6

Participants describe the special education director role according to Cobb's (2015) framework

	Principal			Special Education Director		
	Domain I	Domain II	Domain III	Domain I	Domain II	Domain III
Visionary	2,5,6	2,8		1,2,3,4,5,6,7	1,4,5,8	
Partner		2,3,4,6,8	1,3,4,7		1,3,4,5,8	8
Coach		1,2,7,8			2,3,5,6,7,8	
Conflict Resolver					1	
Advocate				1,4,6,7		
Interpreter	1,2,3,7,8			1,2,4,7,8		
Organizer	1,3,5,6,8		1	1,3,4,8	1,4,5,6,7,8	3

Note: The numbers delineate assigned district groups and do not indicate any mathematical value
Domain I - Encouraging inclusive program delivery
Domain II - Facilitating staff collaboration
Domain III - Fostering parental engagement

TABLE 7

Participants describe an event with role intersections according to Cobb's (2015) framework

	Principal			Special Education Director		
	Domain I	Domain II	Domain III	Domain I	Domain II	Domain III
Visionary	3			1,2,3,4,5,8	3,6	
Partner		3,4,5,6,7	2,7		3,5,6	3,6
Coach		2,3,5				
Conflict Resolver		1,5,6,7				
Advocate						
Interpreter	3,4,5,7,8			8		
Organizer	3,4,5,7	1,2,4,5,7,8	2,3,7,8	1,2,3,4,5,6,7		4,6

Note: The numbers delineate assigned district groups and do not indicate any mathematical value

Domain I - Encouraging inclusive program delivery

Domain II - Facilitating staff collaboration

Domain III - Fostering parental engagement

Three macro-level themes involving the intersecting roles of principals and special education directors in special education inclusive practices were identified: organizational structure, cultural values, and workload demands. Each are discussed below. The role of mentoring was a nuanced theme.

Regarding special education inclusive practices, principal participants defined practices according to an organizer role. They described a bifurcated system with challenges in balancing resources according to individual and group needs. Special education directors defined inclusive educational practices according to the role of visionary and organizer. They focused on the legal right to opportunity and equity for each student. Further, the principal's role was perceived as balancing a system of demands in program delivery. Principals most often reported organizer roles. Special education directors, however described the role of the principal as a visionary, with their primary role as developing a cohesive system in program delivery and in the promotion of equal opportunity. Special education directors reported a visionary gap in the role of the principal.

Principals described the role of the special education director as a principal partner and compliance resource manager; whereas, special education directors reported their role as a visionary, coach, and organizer. Principals described the role of the special education director as a liaison or mediator for team members. Special education directors reported building organizational capacity by leading professional development and monitoring compliance guidance.

Findings from this research highlighted how principals described the role intersections in procedural management involving staff collaboration through partner roles. However, special education directors described

the role intersections through program delivery involving organizational guidance and procedural policies as a visionary and organizer. Both principals and special education directors reported intensive workload demands within two systems void of alignment and limited by resources. Both groups expressed challenges coping with work-related demands outside of their control. Finally, principals and special education directors spend a significant portion of their workday partnering face-to-face and using professional dialogue to support special education inclusive practices. Both groups expressed gratitude for the support of the other administrator and noted the professional relationship as a strength.

DISCUSSION

Principals and special education directors play many roles in supporting special education inclusive practices and these roles align with Cobb's (2015) framework. Seven out of 16 participants reported spending more than one hour per day, on average, interacting in-person with professional dialogue to support the workload demands of special education inclusive practices. Grubb and Flessa (2006) warned that as demands on school leaders increase, the divided model of public-school leadership would prevail. In this study, leadership was reported as a challenge for special education directors in the regular education arena.

The organizational structure for supporting special education inclusive practices was a well noted challenge reported within this study. Public schools are learning organizations that utilize both formal and informal learning systems for organizational learning (Ryan, 2010). Organizational leadership teaches us that systems must be prepared to produce influence and change, rather than management and order alone (Northouse, 2013). In addition, visionary alignment and redesign is critical to the underpinnings of success within an educational system (Tucker, 2016). Similarly, to the reports collected, Leech and Fulton (2008), discovered that in sustaining organizational capacity, educational systems must consider themselves learning organizations and align instructional leadership as such. Without organizational alignment, ongoing complexities will continue to confuse role expectations and erode the capacity of the system, thereby reinforcing a culture of misperceptions.

Both principals and special education directors presented examples outlining their roles as demanding and time intensive, with limited resources. Since burnout and attrition are more common in principal and special education director roles, it is more important than ever to identify supports that buffer job-related stresses associated with the demands of public education (Wheeler & LaRoche, 2009). Findings demonstrated that the public-school leaders in this study devoted a significant amount of time to face-to-face interactions and professional dialogue, involving special education inclusive practices. Results indicated that in addition to ongoing dialogue, a mentorship role may act as a buffer.

An organizational system that facilitates collaborative leadership with clearly articulated roles supporting aligned and focused targets, may reduce workloads in public school administration. Ainscow (2005) de-

fined approaches or interruptions that "make the familiar unfamiliar in ways that stimulate self-questioning, creativity, and action" (Ainscow, 2005, p. 7). Leadership strategies suggest a focus on measurement and value by "measure[ing] what we value, rather than is often the case, valuing what we can measure" (Ainscow, 2005, p.10). Findings from this study revealed that the principals and special education directors articulated a robust definition of special education inclusion with a voice of equity that presented itself across multiple, daily opportunities. Although, they face many challenges, principals and special education directors are highly influential leaders capable of transforming the public education systems. Thus, it may be beneficial for principals and special education directors to focus shared leadership on aligned voices, values, and measurement, while re-articulating the organizational vision and targeted outcomes on equitable expectations and accessible resources.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using Cobb's (2015) framework, this phenomenological study revealed the definitions, perceptions, and role intersections of special education inclusive practices within the public school system between principals and special education directors. These descriptions found rich definitions of cultural differences, exposed structural practices and system deficiencies, as well as perceptions that determine roles and role expectations. The shared commonalities reported may offer support in bolstering definitions and aligning perceptions within the role intersections, thereby buffering workload demands.

Understanding the challenges that principals and special education directors face as leaders of special education inclusive practices should inspire innovative research approaches along with adequate funding. There was a sense of urgency in the narrative stories shared in this study, that suggested without change, sustainability would be difficult. It is clear that, although the roles were described as demanding, and the perceptions frustrating, the public-school leaders remained determined and committed to the students and school community. In the end, the strategic intent of these intersections was expressed with hope and optimism to support students with the resolve of less resources and more resourcefulness of those working within the current system. When education can focus on the vision of an aligned and united front that includes adequate funding, the collective power of diverse expertise will be synergized to promote equity in public education.

The described demands with special education inclusive practices remain. Current leadership approaches must align to develop one inclusive, rather than integrated, educational community. Future research recommendations might include extensive exploration of the gaps noted in addition to public-school policy, funding comparisons, leadership styles, caregiver engagement, as well as data from leaders with extensive experience in assuming both roles. Hopefully, with more research in public education and special education inclusive practices, we will develop clear and cohesive systems that employ focused strategies for alignment, fueling the dedicated leaders who wholly support all children equitably, in one united public education system.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Describe your current leadership position.

2. Describe how you came into your leadership position.

3. Name the other educational leaders in your district with whom you interact regularly.

4. Define special education inclusive practices.

5. Describe your role as a SPED Director/Principal regarding special education inclusive practices. Describe the role of the SPED/Principal regarding inclusive practices.

6. Describe any typical event(s) within your role as a SPED Director/Principal that might coincide/overlap with the roles and responsibilities of the SPED Director/Principal? Are there others?

7. Describe the perspective of the Principal/SPED Director during such an event.

8. Are there responsibilities or activities associated with your current role that might be difficult for Principals/SPED Directors to understand? Are those responsibilities or activities isolated or separate from inclusive practices?

9. Are there situations or events that are easier/more difficult when interacting with the SPED Director/Principal? Are those times isolated from or integrated with inclusive practices?

10. Looking back at your calendar last week, how much time did you spend interacting with the SPED Director/Principal? How does that compare to a typical week? Are there times or events during the year when this time increases or decreases?

11.What was the event and the purpose of those interactions? What did those interactions consist of: phone calls, emails, meetings, etc.? In your estimation, how many involved special education inclusive practices?

12. When do you find having contact with the SPED Director/Principal most helpful/try to avoid? Are those times isolated from or integrated with special education inclusive practices?

13. Are there questions that I should have asked or other important information that I should know about inclusive practices and educational leadership? Anything else that you would like me to know?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caron Anthony-Higley, Ph.D., M.Ed., MA, CCC-SLP/L has supported marginalized learners for over twenty years and holds ten years of experience in administrative leadership, PK-12. She also teaches early childhood development coursework in assessment, behavior, cultural awareness, early intervention, and inclusion/exceptional learning through the University of Arizona Global Campus.

ENCOURAGING SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION AMONG EDUCATORS

Dr. Karen K. Tyler
Edinboro University of Pennsylvania
1032 Copper Drive
Erie, PA 16509
ktyler@edinboro.edu
814.881.4339

Social justice simply defined is equity, equality and fairness among humans at every level of society. As straight-forward as this definition reads, social justice education can become quite complicated, compromised or ignored in today's classroom. Teachers may feel inexperienced, ill-educated or cautious of their approach related to issues of social justice and as a result, bypass an increasingly serious responsibility.

The goal of social justice education is to further a call of accountability and care among teachers and students. To develop knowledge, behaviors and skills related to inclusive learning and life experiences has potential to broaden the optics of all involved in the process. According to Adams, Bell and Griffin (2007), the aim of social justice is the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Personally, in aligning my thinking with the goal, I am reminded of a recent trip to Amsterdam during which I was introduced to "black schools". The Dutch government classifies any school with an ethnic mix of more than 60% of students from a non-western background as "black". Children from Turkey, Morocco, and India are color-aligned and according to city records, half of the children residing in Amsterdam attend a black school. Through a humanitarian lens, this situation is identified as segregation and racism at an offensive level. On the contrary, the residents of Amsterdam report that racism doesn't naturally exist in the Netherlands. Black children, they explain, are decisively separated from the native Dutch as ethnic minorities in an arranged, agreed upon educational system. Families are offered school choice and often decide to align their child's education with students of like-cultures and backgrounds. This example, among many, is an illustrative starting point to explore issues that surround social justice education. A twist in the unsettling situation is the high number of "white" families interested in enrolling their white child(ren) in the black schools, often noted for their rigorous academic programming.

Effective social justice education requires educators to instill content mastery, critical thinking, action skills, self-reflection, and awareness of multicultural group dynamics among students (Hackman, 2005). Through content mastery, children work to acquire facts and inform their thinking, planning and cause for action. Engaging students in cause-research necessitates identification or pre-selection of age appropriate literature and the curation of texts – both digital and in paper form. Fully immersed, unedited searches for information can be problematic so teacher involvement is necessary. Safely navigating information to identify a movement or issue correlated with one person, habit or belief; a group of people or a school/ district can lead to students' skills in critical analysis. Imagine studying the patterns of immigration in the Netherlands. Would we better understand the challenges among schools aligned with colors of skin? Would we soon learn that there are other factors involved in the division among students? If so, what can be done in support or to negate the situation or outcomes? Thoughts to that end involve critical thinking and further analysis as a result of social justice education.

Critical thinking can be approached through lessons grounded in comparisons between biased or an-

ti-biased perspectives, favoritism or anti-favoritism viewpoints. Students should be encouraged to differentiate between opinion and fact, applying skills in critical analysis. Careful consideration to information, points of view and possibilities should be conjured through holistic social justice education. Again, in reference to the black or white schools, what are significant factors that must be understood to develop a stance in support or in opposition to the culturally normed educational systems?

Action skills typically surround the interrelated principles of equity, access, participation and rights. Equitable distribution of resources among groups of people; access to goods and services regardless of age, gender and ethnicity; active participation opportunities; and the protection of human liberties concerning circumstances and decisions affecting them too often requires action. Educators encouraging students to seek justice in support of these principles are fostering not only action, but also hope and progress. Tackling every-day classroom problems with solutions can be as simple as negating an issue with roles and responsibilities with the assignment of duties or "jobs". With a lens towards social justice, the perspective is more powerful and in alignment with societal change. For example, perhaps the classroom is host to students that are transitioning from one gender to another. Research can suggest how other classrooms and schools have handled potential challenges such as bathroom labels or non-labels along with action steps such as petitions or presentations among the governing board to adjust school or district-wide policy.

Political alignment, peer pressure, religious affiliation, celebrity messaging, fads and our visual culture often inform the action or inaction of students in relation to a passion or interest. Facilitating lessons to address self-reflection are relevant. Deepening students' understanding of why they are called to action, or what motivates their move toward progress, requires time and effort. In its best form, self-awareness can propel proactive motives rather than reactive choices as students plan for positive outcomes in a class, school, district, community, state, nation or world.

In 2015, a group of countries within the United Nations designated Sustainable Development Goals for the future and the planet. I find the goals to be natural springboards to social justice education. For example, the second goal surrounds the notion of "zero hunger". Imagine if we presented the issue of hunger among our students with research related to global, national, state, community and district data illustrating the numbers of students that qualify for free and reduced lunch. What if students learned a high percentage of students in their own school qualified for free and reduced lunch? Would they grow curious about what those numbers meant and how deeply hunger affected their friends? What content mastery could be gained to support potential solutions to an increasing problem? Would learners actively engage in a plan to attend to that need? How and to what extent would you, the educator, support their action plan? Self-reflection should be practiced and honored among students and faculty alike.

Finally, the awareness of multicultural group dynamics requires educators' sensitivity and care. Hackman (2005) reminds us, "While student-centered pedagogy is a key aspect of a social justice classroom, it should not be used as a means for members of traditionally marginalized groups to be placed in the position of educating the dominant group members in the classroom." We cannot be naive to the sensitivity needed in discussions surrounding classroom, school and district-based issues. Action or change, either planned or taken, can evolve into aggressive conversations and opposing or defensive viewpoints which must be mitigated meaningfully to grow positivity and common ground among a diverse group dynamic.

As educators, we are called to the task of carefully facilitating research-based discourse and awareness of group dynamics among our students regularly. Social justice in simple form, may begin in the kindergarten setting and can be evidenced in the development of class rules and consequences. Student-led inquiries toward injustice and equity can begin as simply as, "Why should the whole class be punished if just one student breaks a rule?" And as students' progress their social justice platform, the examination of societal regulations may prompt a student to ask, "Why do I need to adhere to a community curfew if I have never broken a law?" These questions highlight examples of issue progression from a micro to a macro level. With well-informed and professional educators prompted to grow social justice education in the classroom, perhaps on another visit to Amsterdam I may hear a student explain to his teacher, "I think our school has a lot to offer students of other cultures. I'd like to become an advocate on our behalf."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Karen Tyler is an assistant professor with Edinboro University overseeing the Graduate Reading Program. She is the head of Erie Day School, a diverse toddler through grade eight independent school on the shores of Lake Erie. Email contact: ktyler@edinboro.edu

GOT ETHICS? AN INTRODUCTION TO A TEACHER'S MORAL DECISION-MAKING COMPASS

Paul K. Fox
1564 Hastings Mill Road,
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
paulkfox.usc@gmail.com | pfox@uscsd.k12.pa.us
412-596-7937

"I keep a close watch on this heart of mine
I keep my eyes wide open all the time
I keep the ends out for the tie that binds
Because you're mine, ***I walk the line****."*
— Johnny Cash

When Johnny Cash sang the lyrics "I walk the line," it was a part of his love song, but in education, it is a "fine line" to maintain the standards and appearances of professionalism, morality, and ethical codes of conduct in the school workplace. The goal of this article is to review the following:

1. Definitions, philosophy, and practices of teacher day-to-day decision-making, professional standards, fiduciary responsibilities, and codes of ethics
2. Professional nature of teachers' relationships with students, parents, other professionals, school institutions, and maintenance of appropriate student-teacher boundaries
3. Values set forth in the Pennsylvania Professional Standards and Practices Commission Code of Professional Practice and Conduct and introduction to the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification Model Code of Ethics for Educators
4. Ethical recommendations for the avoidance of unacceptable appearances and/or actions

Every day in the news media, we hear of serious breaches of professionalism, violations of ethics, and incidents of "on-the-job" misconducts, the result of poor judgment of CEOs, politicians, celebrities, and yes… even schoolteachers.

- No one in the profession can "dodge" or ignore these essential questions:
- How do ethics inform a teacher's personal and professional actions?
- What does it mean to be a "fiduciary" and "moral exemplar" in the community?
- How do you avoid any action and/or appearance of impropriety, and prevent the "slippery slope" of inappropriate student-teacher relationships, and other ethical problems?

You must have seen the news stories! In a word, the trending statistics of Pennsylvania and United States ethical indiscretions by teachers are *abominable*! According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), in the year 2019, there were 714 reports of PA educator misconducts; more than a 278% increase in PA educator misconduct actions compared to the number of complaints filed in 2011 (256 reports). Within PDE disciplinary case resolutions in 2019, 35% resulted in job loss and a permanent revocation or surrender of the teaching certificate. The total number of Pennsylvania "certificate actions" has steadily increased from 156 in

the year 2016, to 160 in 2017, and 220 in 2018, and reported slightly less in 2019 (215), with a total of more than 2,339 actions since 2004 (Pennsylvania Professional Standards and Practices Commission).

Can it get any worse? In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education released the results of the Shakeshaft national study by the American Association of University Women, with 9.6 percent of U.S. students reporting that they had suffered some form of sexual abuse during their K-12 school career. "The list of [bad] conduct included lewd comments, exposure to pornography, peeping in the locker room, and sexual touching or grabbing" (Shakeshaft, 2004). This means one in 10 enrolled in grades K-12, or 4.5 million students, were affected, and two-thirds of those stated the incident(s) involved physical contact by a teacher or school coach.

The PA Professional Standards and Practices Commission's (PSPC) Educator Ethics and Conduct Toolkit states the following (Pennsylvania Professional Standards and Practices Commission):

> The overwhelming majority of educators in Pennsylvania exercise their fiduciary responsibilities with care and conviction. The few who breach their duties, however, undermine the profession and leave a trail of devastation, particularly with student victims. Approximately 60-70% of the PSPC's cases each year involve some type of sexual misconduct, including criminal convictions for sexual offenses, boundary violations with students, and misuse of school equipment such as computers to access sexually explicit materials.

What is not well-known is how many school employees receive formalized and comprehensive training on ethics, whether in a college class, a teacher orientation or induction, or staff in-service programs. Some districts provide an annual review of their policies on confidentiality (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), workplace sexual harassment, nondiscrimination, anti-bullying, sensitivity training, Act 126 mandatory reporting, and diversity awareness… but not comprehensive training in educator ethics, which would include a review of the definitions, statutes, regulations, case law, ethical standards, professional aspirations, teacher/student boundaries, etc., and interactive discussion on the peer evaluation of workplace decision-making and fact scenarios! According to Hutchings (2016):

> This lack of ethical training is unfortunate because the teacher/student relationship is a continual emotional and intellectual interchange. From the beginning, few teachers are prepared for immersion into this complex world… At a minimum, a solid professional, ethical framework is necessary to guide teachers' words, acts, and decisions.

When was the last time you reviewed a copy of the *PDE Pennsylvania Code of Professional Practices and Conduct for Educators?* Do you know that earning a Pennsylvania teaching certificate and working in the Commonwealth, it is assumed all teachers agree to embrace and be legally bound to this "Code," which defines the interactions between the individual educator, students, schools, and other professionals, and the explicit values of the education profession? Now is the time to learn the details of your inherent legal responsibilities. Read,

download, and distribute a copy from http://www.pspc.education.pa.gov/Statutes-Regulations-Policies-Forms/Code-of-Professional-Practice-Conduct/Pages/default.aspx.

The keystone of "right or wrong" and what your mother always said was "behaving appropriately when no one is watching you" are all about professional ethical standards that guide decision-making. The work of Hutchings and Thompson (2016) helps to further clarify these sometimes-blurred definitions:

- **Personal Morality:** "Personal values and beliefs derived from one's life experiences... subjective and may/may not align with community mores."
- **Regulations of Law:** "Policies, statues, and judicial activity that articulate conduct absolutes."
- **Professional Ethics:** "Professional ethical standards that assist practitioners within situation and systemic contexts in choosing the best course-of-action."
- **Professional Dispositions:** "Agreed-upon professional attitudes, values, and beliefs to be held by educational practitioners."

Teachers are among the singular professions which have a "fiduciary" responsibility. The term "fiduciary" can be defined as "a person or organization that owes to another the duties of good faith and trust, the highest legal duty of one party to another, and being bound ethically to act in the other's best interests" (Infinity Financial Partners, 2021). Joining doctors and other medical personnel, lawyers, counselors or therapists, and the clergy, educators ascribe to the highest standards of training, moral decision-making ("code of ethics"), behavior ("code of conduct"), and self-regulation and assessment of the "best practices" regarding the mastery of skills and subject areas necessary to their field. However, unlike other professionals, teachers generally do not receive regular and systematic pre- and in-service training on ethics (Hutchings & Lipson, 2014). Regardless, the duty of all teachers is to act as a fiduciary in their students' best interest and to create and maintain a safe environment for them at all times.

Trust has evolved into the operative foundation of the relationship of students with their teachers. However, when a teacher enters into an inappropriate relationship with a student, the teacher violates the recognized student-teacher "boundary." When educators become confidants, friends, or counselors of students, a dual relationship is created which creates an ambiguity in the student-teacher relationship where roles are less defined. This ambiguity may foster inappropriate actions and educator misconduct (Dreon & Sheppeard).

Some educators unintentionally fall prey to the "slippery slope" of professional misconduct, such as viewing students as peers, suffering from adult relationship issues, immaturity, or lacking personal crisis management skills. In addition, there are special vulnerabilities for recent college graduates or "rookie" teachers:

- Inexperience
- Close to students' ages – looking like the teacher is "one of them"
- Sharing of common interests and musical preferences

- Overlapping circle of friends
- "Cool factor" – perceived by the students as youthful, mod, chic, or stylish

Moreover, because of the demanding nature of those initial first years of teaching, a new teacher may spend less time with his or her family and may begin turning to students as a support system. This is discussed further in the PSPC's educator ethics and conduct toolkit (Dreon & Sheppeard):

Learning to recognize one's own vulnerabilities is the first step in avoiding misconduct with students. Every decision made by a teacher with respect to his or her students should be prefaced with the question: 'Whose needs are being met by my course of action?' There can only be one acceptable answer to this question – the needs of the student! Betraying the trust of students, parents, the profession, and the community is never acceptable.

Besides the PSPC, the single best resource on professional ethical standards comes from the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification's Model Code of Ethics for Educators (MCEE). Endorsed by the PDE (but not adopted as a substitute to statutes like the PA Educator Discipline Act), MCEE outlines the following principles:

- Responsibility to the Profession
- Responsibility for Professional Competence
- Responsibility to Students
- Responsibility to the School Community
- Responsible and Ethical Use of Technology

Be sure to download and read a copy of MCEE to enrich your own study of education ethics at the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (2015).

Are teachers expected to be role models, even outside the classroom and on their own personal time? The statutes and courts seem to support this. Professional expectations do not always distinguish between teachers' on or off-duty conduct. According to the PSPC, "Teachers must act in their private lives in a way that does not undermine their efficacy in the classroom, demean their employing school entity, or damage their position as a moral exemplar in the community" (Dreon & Sheppeard).

There is recent good news from the PDE. During its meeting on July 8, 2020, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education (2020) proposed changes to teacher certification to include professional ethics training:

> Proposed amendments [to Chapter 49] are intended to reinforce the professional integrity expected of both new and experienced educators... Protecting students from educator misconduct is of the utmost imperative... The Board seeks to ensure that educators in this

Commonwealth are prepared not just in pedagogy and content knowledge, but that they possess a clear understanding of the ethical practice that is expected of them.

According to Dr. Kerry Helm, Chief, Division of Certification Services, Office of Postsecondary and Higher Education, Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Bureau of School Leadership and Teacher Quality "will be overseeing the competencies and their inclusion in the program framework guidelines that guide teacher preparation." (K. Helm, personal communication, September 15, 2020). As of April 9, 2021, he added that PDE Chapter 49 has not gone through the final approval process yet. "The Board is currently in the process of reviewing public comments and comments from the Independent Regulatory Review Commission (IRRC)" (K. Helm, personal communication).

The purpose of this article was to promote thought-provoking discussion and review philosophy and definitions of teacher ethics. Now it is your turn to face these critical issues and/or incidents, openly investigate and illuminate philosophical inconsistencies within your institutions, associations, schools, and/or among colleagues, and develop your own "iron-clad" professional code of ethics that addresses the daily work of your practice.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For five decades, Paul Fox has taught music and directed community and youth orchestras, choruses, and theater productions. Retired in June 2013 from the Upper St. Clair School District (Allegheny County in Western PA) as Performing Arts Curriculum Leader and music teacher, he remains active as Artist Director of the South Hills Junior Orchestra, and serves as State Chair of the PMEA Council for Teacher Training, Recruitment, and Retention and PMEA Retired Member Coordinator.

Website: https://paulfox.blog/

COACHING POINTERS: MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Dr. Tina Selvaggi
West Chester University
Recitation 107F
High St and Rosedale Avenue
West Chester, PA 19383
610-436-2879
tselvaggi@wcupa.edu

Additional Authors:
Karissa Lookingbill, M.Ed | Jessica McGrath, M.Ed. | Ashley Smith, M.Ed. | Jessica Toland, M.Ed

A large comprehensive institution of higher education in Pennsylvania offers a Literacy Coaching Endorsement Program for licensed reading specialists/postgraduate students. During the four-course program the postgraduate students learn about and apply theoretical models of coaching, explore leadership and change theory, understand the use of data in coaching/professional development, and finally, complete a hands-on coaching practicum. Throughout the program, but especially during the practicum, the postgraduate students shared coaching experiences, discussed concerns while coaching, and formed bonds within the cohort. The following advice is the result of the collaboration of a recently graduated cohort of postgraduate students.

KEEP A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

As educational leaders, literacy coaches are responsible for professional learning and facilitating change in K-12 schools. As a result, literacy coaches are often faced with resistance when asking teachers to change or adjust instructional practices. It is important for literacy coaches to be positive role models by maintaining a positive stance while fostering important relationships with teachers. This includes solving a problem, improving a situation, and learning and growing with teachers. It is important for coaches to avoid perseverating on the problem or getting involved in negativity. Coskie, Robinson, Buly and Egawa (2005) found providing teacher support by developing trusting relationships, understanding issues, and providing feedback were important when attempting to create a professional learning community. Fostering relationship and building trust building help literacy coaches to plan and participate in conversations about instructional practices and instruction (Walpole & Blamey, 2008).

BE A LISTENER

Shhhhh… Listening helps literacy coaches learn what teachers and students need. When in doubt about what to do as a coach, listen… hesitation is probably a sign that more information is needed. Sometimes teachers just want a sounding board or someone to ask the right questions, with empathy, at the right time. Literacy coaches are rarely criticized or disliked for listening carefully. For example, a literacy coach working with a teacher in her first year in kindergarten might try to help by giving advice and asking questions about her classroom, students, and problems; especially when faced with tears about being overwhelmed and stressed with the workload. Instead of helping, this would cause the teacher even more stress because the teacher might think she wasn't doing enough, and she would leave feeling more overwhelmed. Once the coach realizes that approach isn't working and decides to sit back and listen without interrupting or trying to fix the problems, the teacher and coach can slowly work on solutions to help the kindergarten teacher grow as an instructor. Empathetic listening helps a coach see the world through the other person's lens (Covey, 1989). When teachers have someone to listen to them, they often feel valued and respected, which in turn, inspires them to treat others

respectfully. We have to remember that without empathy, true listening will not happen (Knight, 2009). This listening stance fosters a collaborative and positive work environment.

SHARE GENTLE ENCOURAGEMENT

When sharing gentle encouragement, or a "loving shove", literacy coaches should remember the gradual release of responsibility or "I do, we do, you do." The coaching cycle can include offering support such as observing, modeling, and co-planning then co-teaching. Sometimes after co-planning and co-teaching, teachers are hesitant to take the next step, so the literacy coach has to be careful not to model instruction for too long. It helps to set the expectation as early as possible that this modeling is a part of the coaching cycle. It's important to note that not all coaching cycles progress through the gradual release of responsibility in the same way; it depends more on the comfort level of the teachers as well as the teacher and coach relationship. According to Sweeney (2016), positive pressure to become more independent in the classroom coupled with adequate support helps build teachers' confidence and make the change process more effective. This positive pressure can come in many forms, including student data, focused goal setting, or collaboration with peers.

JUDGEMENT FREE ZONE

Similar to a bank vault, the literacy coach should act as a "vault" when teachers share sensitive information. It is important for the coach to act as colleague NOT as evaluator. As an example, one day, the young teacher viewed as "not a team player" and the first to leave the building sans overflowing teacher bag, asked to meet the literacy coach to review literacy data and create a series of lessons together. The coach felt surprised and a little bit flattered. Might this teacher be hoping to take advantage of someone excited to share their passion, energy, and ideas? Might she be hoping that she can present a goal for her students and the coach will take care of the rest? That wasn't for the coach to judge at that time. The coach had a teacher willing to look at data together, to target a goal, and take some sort of steps to work towards it. The coach reminded herself about the importance of maintaining a collaborative school culture where all teachers, regardless of years of experience, are on a continuous path of learning because everyone needs some form of support at some point in time (Sweeney, 2011). The coach and teacher truly co-planned and shared the work. In the end, this teacher helped her class grow as readers, discovered new strategies and texts that would engage and propel her students, and, maybe more importantly, learned how powerful collaboration can be. When literacy coaches provide support, encouragement, and responsiveness to teachers through strong interpersonal skills (Toll, 2014) like communication and empathy, while remaining organized and focused on the task at hand, true collaboration can occur. It is definitely progress when the teacher who felt like an outsider amongst her grade-level colleagues, feels safe

enough to work with the coach. It is important to note she came back later, wanting to expand from the initial work done together and it felt like trust had been built and the coach/teacher relationship was growing. None of that could have happened if the coach's thoughts were focused on sharing any perceived flaws or inadequacies with colleagues or an administrator. In order to build this trust, the coach often has to walk a fine line between acting as a peer and working with administration. If the literacy coach's work influences the teachers' performance reviews in any way, trust cannot be built or maintained (Toll, 2014). This relationship of trust can eventually be a step toward building a more collaborative culture throughout the building.

CREATE BUY - IN

Sometimes, literacy coaches are expected to work with individuals that do not necessarily want their services. As a literacy coach it is important to remember that 100% buy in from individuals is not always possible and it is important not to turn these unwanted encounters into a "face off". This need for buy-in was witnessed in a school setting when a literacy coach presented at the first faculty meeting of the year about a list of services she could provide to fellow educators, speaking passionately about how to help those teachers with struggling learners and reminding them of the weekly newsletters that would be sent with tips and tricks. Of course, there were the first responders, those who jumped up from their seat literally running to the coach to schedule time, speaking about their laundry list of changes and ideas. While it was amazing to see the excitement of those initial teachers, it was that one teacher in the back who politely nodded along while grading papers that caught the eye of the coach. The coach became fixated on how to reach that one teacher and she started seeking that teacher out, trying to connect. The coach was sure that the teacher would be convinced of the power of coaching when she saw successful coaching happening with other individuals. The coach tried to create buy-in by considering information about her personality, learning styles, gender, and even generation (Sweeney, 2011). While the teacher was always polite and friendly, the coach could tell she was not interested in pursuing a coaching relationship. The coach spoke to the teacher with honesty and openness about the purposes of coaching and school goals and questioned her goals in hopes to collaboratively accomplish them. Did the coach ever reach that teacher? No, to this day the teacher has not worked with the coach. It is important to realize that there is fine line between being available when individuals request coaching but not pushing the coaching at them. Instead of focusing on one resistant teacher it is better to focus on at least a dozen other educators looking for meaningful practices and their appreciation for the power of coaching. As Bean and DeFord (2012) state, it's the careful listening, attention to teachers' agendas, the follow through, and a forward-looking attitude when setting a positive tone for coaching that makes the biggest difference. And that is more than enough.

START SMALL

When managing expectations about being a literacy coach, it is important to start small and vow not to become overwhelmed by the big picture. Literacy coaches are only a small part of the big educational picture, but it is easy to get caught up in the work and take failures personally (Toll, 2014). Many factors affect students and teachers; therefore, it is essential for coaches to celebrate the little victories. Small change is a good thing, so take note of everything that is accomplished on a regular basis (Toll, 2014). It is helpful to remember that changing too many instructional practices just might not be possible, instead focus on those willing to change. Literacy coaches ultimately share the common goal to help students succeed. When handling situations with difficult individuals, be nice, just keep moving, and remember everyone cares about the student (Sandvold, 2007).

FINAL THOUGHTS

In the words of Toll (2014), literacy coaches should remember to breathe, have hope, see the good, and take care of themselves! While this article outlines the major highlights of what was learned during the Literacy Coaching Endorsement Program, there is always much more to learn as a practicing literacy coach, and it is important to remember that the impact of coaching makes a positive difference for teachers and students.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tina Selvaggi, Ed.D. is an associate professor in the Department of Literacy at West Chester University of Pennsylvania.

Karissa Lookingbill, M.Ed. is an instructional coach at the Chester County Intermediate Unit in Downingtown, PA

Jessica Ward, M.Ed. is a literacy specialist in the Ridley School District in Folsom, PA

Ashley Smith Masterson, M.Ed. is an is a literacy specialist in the Downingtown Area School District in Downingtown, PA

Jessica Toland, M.Ed. is a first grade teacher in the Springfield School District, Springfield, PA

Tina Selvaggi email: tselvaggi@wcupa.edu

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