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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Pennsylvania Educational Leadership (PEL) is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal published twice per year and accepts manuscripts year-round. Topics address the interests and concerns of Pennsylvania educators at all levels. We welcome a wide variety of manuscripts including (but not limited to) single study inquiries, qualitative and quantitative research, theoretical and conceptual pieces, historical analyses, literature reviews, action research, and first-person narratives. Beginning spring 2014, the journal began including a Practitioner's Page highlighting the voices, thoughts, and opinions of educators in the field. Submissions for the Practitioners Page can take a variety of formats including (but not limited to) book reviews, policy reviews, and critical reflections on current educational issues and trends. Individuals choosing to submit to the Practitioners Page should follow the same submission guidelines as those submitting manuscripts with the exception of the Abstract. Authors must also indicate that the submission is intended for the Practitioners Page on the cover sheet.

Manuscripts should be emailed to Editor Mary Wolf (California University of Pennsylvania) at wolf@pennwest.edu for initial review. Submissions evaluated as appropriate for review are then sent to three readers for blind review. Manuscripts should follow the guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association.

Before submitting a manuscript to PEL, please consider the following guidelines carefully:

- Your manuscript should be submitted as a single Word document and include a cover sheet, abstract, body/text, tables, charts, and figures (if applicable), and references list. If possible, please include the Digital Object Identifiers (DOI) for all electronic sources. The manuscript should be typed in 12-point font, Times New Roman, with one-inch margins. The text should be double-spaced.
- The cover sheet should include the title and author information, including contact information for the primary author, including mailing address, email address, and phone number. On this page, the author should indicate that the manuscript has not been submitted elsewhere for publication. If the manuscript involves the use of human subjects, the author should indicate whether Institutional Review Board approval has been granted unless deemed exempt.
- The second page of the submitted manuscript is the abstract page. The abstract should be 150 words or fewer. The abstract should include the purpose of the manuscript and essential findings or discussion points.
- The author(s) should remove any references that might be self-identifying from the body of the text to ensure blind review of the manuscript.
- The references page will follow the body of the text and any tables, charts, or figures. Please be sure to check that all in-text citations match references in the list and that the list is properly formatted using APA guidelines. Please include the DOI for electronic sources.
- **The deadline for the fall/winter 2023 edition is August 15, 2023.**

Questions regarding a possible submission, submissions under review, or submissions requiring revision can be directed to Mary Wolf (Editor) at wolf@pennwest.edu.

PASCD RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION AWARD SPOTLIGHT



Dr. Barbara E. Davis received the Pennsylvania ASCD Outstanding Research and Publication Award in 2022. The Outstanding Research and Publication Award is presented to a Pennsylvania ASCD member who has significantly impacted education through research and publication. Selection is based on the research design, conceptual framework, format, and publication. Dr. Davis was recognized on November 22, 2022, at the annual PASCD conference held in Hershey, PA.

Dr. Davis' research titled, "Effect of Gender and Location of Superintendents on Their Use of Twitter Chats" focused on the way that superintendents and assistant superintendents participated in a Twitter chat over a six month span. She investigated the different ways that superintendents engaged in the chat through sharing, valuing, and influencing. Through a quantitative study, Dr. Davis developed a framework to categorize Twitter chat interactions and manually coded more than 1,300 tweets made by superintendents over six separate #SuptChat Twitter chats. All of the likes, re-tweets, comments, and mentions during each hour-long chat were also collected and analyzed.

An analysis of the data found that female superintendents engaged in more valuing behaviors during the chats than their male counterparts. The female superintendents were found to like, comment, and re-tweet the tweets of others in the chat more often than the male superintendents. In addition, the research found that the superintendents who were leading suburban school districts had more influence during the chat than their colleagues who were leading rural and urban districts. This influence was determined by how often their own tweets were liked, commented on, or retweeted and how often they were mentioned by others in the chat using their Twitter username. It also bears noting that there were no differences between the genders of superintendents with regard to influence during the chats when previous research has shown that female leaders often have less influence in other types of networking opportunities.

Dr. Davis is the Assistant Superintendent in the Eastern Lebanon County School District and has served in leadership roles with Pennsylvania ASCD including President from 2018-2020. She also previously worked for Tulpehocken Area and Wyomissing Area School Districts in Pennsylvania and St. Mary's County Public Schools in Maryland and was an adjunct professor for Alvernia University. In addition to her Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Neumann University, she holds a Master's in Educational Leadership from University of Scranton, a Master's in Instructional Technology from Bloomsburg University, and a Bachelor's in Secondary Education - Mathematics from Bloomsburg University.

NOMINATE A PASCD MEMBER FOR THE 2023 OUTSTANDING RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION AWARD

The Outstanding Research and Publication Award is presented to Pennsylvania ASCD member who has researched and published within the past two years. The person being nominated shall submit the published article, book, book chapter, or research report with the application form. Submitted documentation will be reviewed on the basis of design, conceptual framework, format, and publication. The award nomination process opens on July 1st. Nomination information may be found at <https://www.pascd.org/awards>.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

As editor of the Pennsylvania Educational Leadership journal, I am pleased to present you with the research and best practices of our fellow educators in this edition.

The Spring/Summer 2023 edition highlights five research and practitioner's articles focusing on ways to help students feel valued and relevant so they become more engaged, as well as the importance of educator self-care. In the first research article, Jeremy Raff and his co-authors examined the reasons behind the "summer melt" which occurs when students decide not to enroll in college immediately after graduating from high school. The factors considered include GPA and completion of the FASFA. The results will guide high school administrators and counselors in their effort to encourage college-bound students to follow through with their planned pathway.

In the second article, Deanna Mayers shares the results of her investigation into the effects of personalized, problem-based learning in relation to student motivation and engagement. Her qualitative study gives us insight to the reactions and opinions of teachers and their students on their participation with this engaging online learning strategy.

Joseph Mencarini authored the next research article where he shares his qualitative phenomenological study focused on the high school experiences of LGBTQ+ students who are now speaking as college-aged adults. The author connects the outcomes to the importance of the utilization of the PA Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education Competencies.

Utilizing reflective journaling practice as a way to support social-emotional wellness is presented by author Amy Bohm in the final research article. She investigates the usage, techniques, and perceptions of journaling. Implications indicate a need for school-based awareness that can support educators with their own coping strategies.

The Practitioner's section article includes a reminder of the importance of relationship building by the authors of the book, *The Minimalist Teacher*. Tammy Musiowsky-Borneman and her co-authors provide three key strategies to promote investing in yourself and fostering a strong relationship culture.

Thank you to our dedicated peer reviewers listed in the acknowledgements who volunteered their expertise and time in reviewing the manuscripts. I hope you enjoy this edition of the Pennsylvania Educational Leadership journal. If you are conducting your own study, please consider sharing your research with colleagues across the state. The deadline for the next PEL edition is August 15.

Mary A. Wolf
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**Stopping Melt Before It Starts:
One Pennsylvania School District's Attempt to
Predict and Prevent Summer Melt**

Jeremy Raff • Berwood Yost • Isabel Moss • Kelly Frey

ABSTRACT

This study evaluates past graduates from an urban school district in Pennsylvania to develop a predictive model that identifies risk of summer melt which in turn leads to decreased college enrollment rates. High school GPA and FAFSA completion are identified as the statistically significant predictors of college enrollment. The application of this predictive model is discussed in length, outlining the efforts of the school district to identify students at high risk for melt and providing targeted support. A broader discussion outlines how this approach can be duplicated by other school districts or college access organizations to support their college bound students.

INTRODUCTION

Summer melt refers to students who plan to attend college yet fail to enroll after high school (Oster, 2021). Students in this category are qualified for higher education and meet admission criteria for at least one college (Rall, 2016). Summer melt is a particularly frustrating issue for school districts, college access organizations, and higher education institutions. After significant time spent solidifying students' post-graduation plans, these plans can swiftly evaporate upon high school graduation. This change in plans puts students off track, unable to follow through on their academic dreams in the short term. Melt also represents a sunk cost, invested resources that cannot be recovered, for organizations who invest time and resources into helping students reach their higher education goals. Given these concerns, it is of little surprise that summer melt has gained significant traction in academic research within the past decade.

While much research has looked at factors impacting summer melt and intervention strategies to prevent it, little has used high school academic data and demographics to predict the likelihood of summer melt for individual students. The availability of predictive data could help organizations better target these interventions and supports, implementing evidence-based solutions more effectively and efficiently. This research develops a predictive model that school districts and access organizations can use to identify the students most at risk of summer melt. While focused on student data from one school district, this model has wider application that can assist with targeting students in need of summer melt prevention support. This research is not limited solely to the development of the model, but it also highlights the impact on one school district's postsecondary transition work. The use of the summer melt prevention model now acts as the central driving force behind the organization's summer melt work.

Identifying the correct supports to address summer melt is critical. Given limited resources and staff capacity, correct identification can help allocate these resources in a meaningful and effective manner. Students who are at low risk of summer melt may require different and less invasive supports, while those at high risk may require more targeted investments. These student differences may not be apparent, especially if students completed key college transition milestone activities that make them appear to be on track. This research aims to provide practical applications that schools, college access organizations, and higher education institutions can use to best support students to college matriculation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Summer Melt

In recent years, school districts, college access organizations, and higher education institutions have devoted increasing attention and resources toward addressing summer melt. Melt occurs the summer after graduation as challenges intervene and disrupt students' plans (Castleman & Page, 2014b). In this way, the opportunity to enroll in higher education diminishes as these students are unaware of, or do not understand, how to complete critical summer tasks (Castleman & Page, 2014b). Melt rates are significant for all populations, but even higher for low-income students. A national sample finds that approximately 10 to 15 percent of students suffer from summer melt with higher rates for low-income students (Castleman & Page, 2014a; Nurshatayeva et. al., 2021; Arnold et.al., 2009).

Key Factors Influencing Likelihood of Summer Melt

Melt occurs for a variety of reasons. On a basic level, lack of college knowledge or cultural capital, financial issues, failure to meet requirements, and miscommunication all contribute to summer melt (Arnold et. al, 2009; Castleman et. al., 2013; Rall, 2016; Naranjo et. al., 2016). Practical challenges include unanticipated costs, housing, and placement tests (Nurshatayeva et. al., 2021). Early research associated summer melt with unemployment, but more recent research indicates that students are less likely to enroll in college when jobs are abundant (Arnold et. al, 2009; Oster, 2021). Summer barriers prevent students from receiving support that many of them need, as students are left isolated in the limbo period before college (Castleman & Page, 2014b; Farmer-Hinton, 2008). In this period, students do not have access to their high school counselors and simultaneously do not yet have a relationship with their college advisors. While students from college-educated families have parents to manage summer tasks, first generation students must navigate the process independently (Castleman & Page, 2014b; Farmer-Hinton, 2008).

Low-income students, students of color, and first generation college students are more likely to melt than their peers (Rall, 2016; Kirkman & Wills, 2021). Racial factors play a key role, as underrepresented minorities are overrepresented in summer melt data (Arnold et. al, 2009; Castleman & Page, 2011; Oster, 2021). This is perhaps unsurprising given the racial disparity in college enrollment and completion rates. The highest college enrollment rates for the 18 to 24 year old range remain Asian and White students (Musu-Gillette et. al.,

2016). Compared with White students, the Latinx community is less likely to enroll in college immediately or finish school within six years (Fry & Lopez, 2012; Liu, 2012). In terms of support, Latinx and Asian students rated parents as less helpful than African American and White students, which reveals a racial divide in college knowledge (Owen et. al., 2020).

School districts with greater populations of low-income students, measured by free and reduced lunch eligibility, experience higher summer melt rates (Castleman et. al., 2013). This reveals the role of financial resources in encouraging college enrollment. Summer melt rates can range from 10 to 40 percent for low-income students and reach as high as 50 percent in under-resourced schools (Castleman et. al., 2013; Daugherty, 2012). Income is directly connected to social and cultural capital that establishes college as an achievable expectation for high-income students (McDonough, 1994). Students who melt may have capital, but not the capital typically required to transition to postsecondary education (Sanchez, 2020). Even small unanticipated cost barriers can prevent students from enrolling and trigger summer melt (Pallais, 2013; Arnold et. al., 2015).

For low-income students, negotiating the financial aid process poses a significant barrier to college enrollment. Completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, serves as a clear predictor of college enrollment. According to one study, completing the FAFSA decreases summer melt rates by 37 percentage points (Oster, 2021). Oster (2021) reinforces this data with research showing that 46 percent of graduates who melted did not complete the FAFSA. The FAFSA reports an expected family contribution (EFC) based on the family's income and number of dependents. A data analysis by Sanchez (2020) finds an inverse relationship between EFC and melt, as a lower EFC leads to a greater likelihood of summer melt. Students with a low EFC must focus on navigating financial aid while their peers can focus on the social dynamics of college (Arnold et. al., 2012). Low income families are more likely to require FAFSA verification, which involves additional financial document submissions (DeBaun, 2017). Those pulled for FAFSA verification are seven percentage points more likely to melt than those not requiring verification (Holzman & Hanson, 2020; DeBaun, 2021). Low-income students can struggle to interpret financial aid letters and FAFSA verification can delay arrival of such letters until summer (Sanchez, 2020). Consequently, students of low income status lack the resources and social capital to navigate these barriers (Taylor & Hartman, 2019; Constantino, 2019; Saboe-Torpey & Leavitt, 2021).

High school grades are one of strongest indicators of college enrollment and readiness. GPA serves as a clear predictor of college success and degree completion (Bowen et. al., 2011; Chingos, 2018; Zwick & Sklar,

2005). While few summer melt studies examine high school GPA specifically, Sanchez (2020) indicates GPA is a significant predictor among students headed to four-year universities.

College destination also influences the likelihood of postsecondary enrollment. Students attending community colleges experience significantly higher melt rates in comparison with four-year universities; recent studies find a 29 to 37 percent rate for community college students (Taylor & Hartman, 2019; Sanchez, 2020). Other research reaffirms that community college students are twice as likely to melt (Castleman & Page, 2014a). The institution's minority graduation rate over six years is also a strong predictor of the likelihood of melt (Sanchez, 2020). Two-year institutions allow students to attain a degree, but the path may be less straightforward (Doyle, 2009).

Intervention Strategies to Combat Summer Melt

Several intervention strategies successfully reduce summer melt. The primary strategies include distributing worksheets with key summer tasks, using digital messaging, hiring summer counselors, and partnering directly with colleges (Castleman et. al., 2013).

Summer advising reduces melt without significant financial investment (Castleman et. al., 2012; Castleman et. al., 2014). The role of high school counselors in filling knowledge gaps for low-income students has a direct positive correlation with enrollment (Belasco, 2013). Having caring adults to help with postsecondary planning is a significant predictor of decreasing summer melt (Kirkman & Wills, 2021). Underrepresented minorities prefer to receive information from high school counselors; whereas, their peers have college knowledge that makes such advising superfluous (Owen et. al., 2020). Students participating in summer advising with high school counselors are more likely to enroll and finish a semester of college (Tackett et. al., 2018; Castleman et. al., 2012; Castleman et. al., 2014). These impacts are especially significant for under-resourced communities that are eager for support (Castleman et. al., 2015; Naranjo et. al., 2016; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Even peer advising shows benefits as students with a mentor were 4.5 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than those without a peer support network (Castleman & Page, 2015).

Specialized messaging, driven primarily by texting, has emerged as a cost-effective and efficient way to distribute information in the summer (Avery et. al., 2020). Automated text messaging systems, one of the newest methods for contacting students en masse, has increased enrollment for some groups (Castleman & Page,

2015; Page & Gehlbach, 2017). A study using chatbots concludes that benefits outweigh the costs, yet students still need individual follow-up. While initial research was promising, new research shows the benefits are uncertain at the national level (Nurshatayeva et. al., 2021; Avery et. al., 2020; Sanchez, 2020).

Given these mixed results, recent research indicates that messaging efforts succeed when they have advisors aware of the local context. Localized messaging is more effective because the messages are integrated in the school system, more frequent, and come from a trusted source (Avery et. al., 2020). Similarly, hybrid efforts combining automated texting with individualized follow up shows stronger results (Page & Gehlbach, 2017). In this way, nudges reduce melt rates by keeping students engaged with tasks (Avery et. al., 2020). Nudges are most effective for students with limited access to advising (Nurshatayeva et. al., 2021; Costantino, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the School District of Lancaster (SDoL), an urban district located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The district enrolls 10,384 students from Lancaster City and Lancaster Township. SDoL has a significant percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged, 87%, and nearly 20% of students are English language learners (Future Ready Pa Index, 2022). The district is racially diverse with the majority of students being Hispanic (62%). SDoL has one main high school, J.P. McCaskey Campus, a cyber school, and several alternative education high schools. The district offers a substantial number of advanced courses; 54% of graduates participate in advanced courses, just below the state average. More than one-third (36%) of graduates participate in industry-based learning, above the state average and state performance standard.

Students for this study are selected from the graduating class of 2019. Students in the sample indicated a plan to attend college after graduation as identified by high school counselors in SDoL's school information system. In total there are 390 students that meet the requirements and are included in the sample. Students in this sample come from every high school building, though the majority attended J.P. McCaskey Campus. Demographic, academic, and behavioral data is identified from SDoL's school information system. Actual fall college enrollment status is collected from the National Student Clearinghouse. The data provided through these two sources are used to predict the likelihood of a student attending college in the fall after high school graduation.

Variables in this analysis are selected based on the findings of the literature review. Research finds racial

disparities in summer melt, with higher rates for students of color (Rall, 2016). Broad variables representing the students' racial groups are included as Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, and Unknown. Extensive research connects lower incomes to higher summer melt rates; this is represented in the research with the variable Economically Disadvantaged (Castleman et. al., 2013; Daugherty, 2012). Gender is included, using the Male variable, as gender plays a statistically significant, if negligible, role in some research findings (Kirkman & Willis, 2021; Oster, 2021). Given the significant number of English language learners in the sample district population, Limited English Proficiency is included. This is supported by research from another Pennsylvania school district (Kirkman & Wills, 2021).

While few studies explicitly examine the relationship between high school grades and summer melt, the limited research identifies the relationship as significant (Sanchez, 2020). This study uses several variables as proxies for academic performance, primarily GPA which uses unweighted grade point average on a four-point scale. A great deal of attention is given in K-12 education to addressing the roles of attendance and behavior in academic success, but this is largely missing from the summer melt literature. To examine this, two variables are included; Attendance Rate includes the percentage of days students attend school, and Out of School Suspensions is used to demonstrate student behavior.

Additional variables represent student completion of financial aid applications. FAFSA completion is noted as a strong predictor of college enrollment and is represented in the Complete FAFSA variable (Oster, 2021). This includes all students who completed the FAFSA form as verified through student-level FAFSA data from the Office of Federal Student Aid. Complete PHEAA is included to track students who complete Pennsylvania's aid form as well. While the literature review outlines the importance of college destination, this data was unavailable for this sample.

The analyses that follow use a logistic regression model to estimate the effect that different characteristics have on actual college enrollment for graduating seniors who were intending to attend college. Binary logistic regression is the appropriate statistical approach when the dependent variable has only two possible outcomes, in this instance college enrollment or not. Binomial logistic regression estimates the probability of an event (in this case, enrolling in college) occurring.

FINDINGS

Table 1 compares the characteristics of those 2019 graduates who intended to enroll in college by whether or not they actually enrolled in college in the fall after graduation. Logistic regression was used to estimate the probability that a student actually enrolled in college from the variables included in Table 1. The post-graduation planning index identified 390 seniors as college bound, but one-third (34%) of these students did not enroll in college the fall after their high school graduation. The descriptive statistics show a statistically significant difference between enrollers and non-enrollers in regards to FAFSA completion, PHEAA completion, GPA, out-of-school suspensions, and attendance rate. Each of these meets the 99% level of significance, with the exception of out-of-school suspensions which meets the 95% level of significance.

Table 1*Characteristics of Enrolled and Unenrolled 2019 Graduates with College Enrollment Plan*

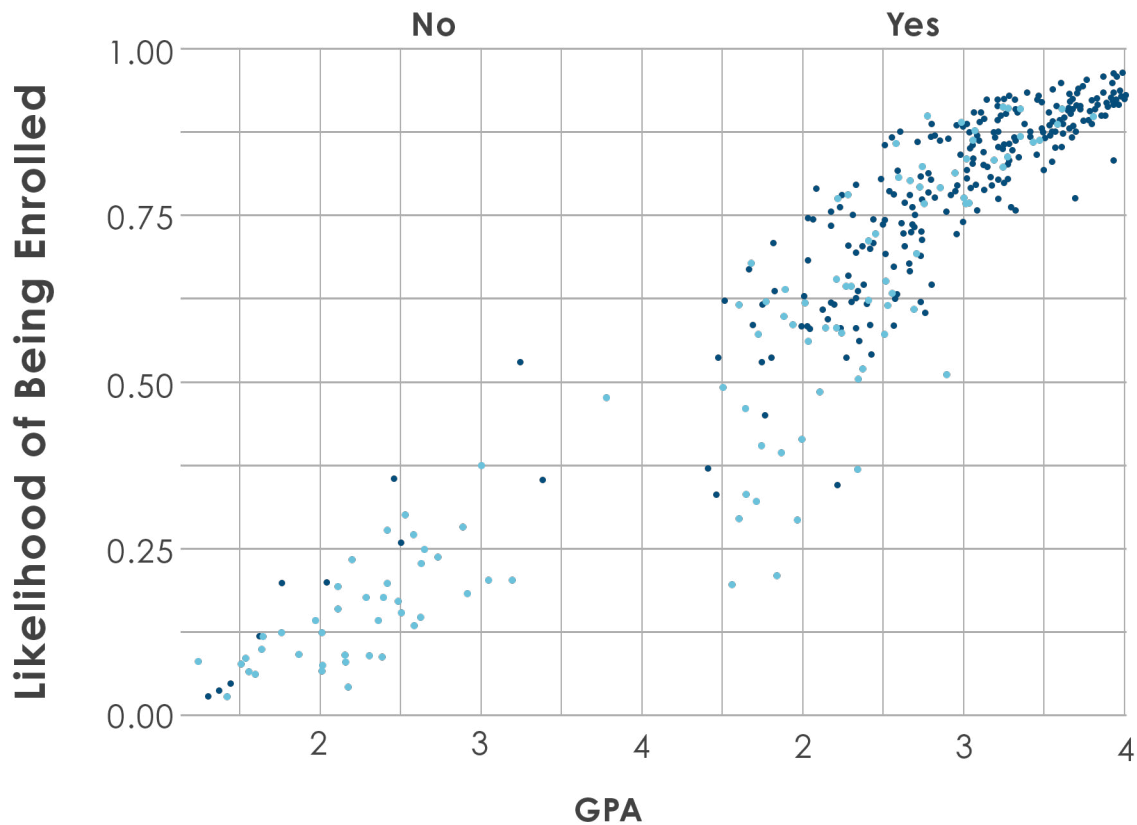
	Not Enrolled (n=131)	Enrolled (n=259)
Complete PHEAA = Yes (%)***	70 (53.4)	240 (92.7)
Complete FAFSA = Yes (%)***	75 (57.3)	249 (96.1)
Gender Code = Male (%)	40 (34.8)	100 (39.4)
Race Code (%)		
Asian	5 (4.3)	18 (7.1)
Black	28 (24.3)	51 (20.1)
Hispanic	60 (52.2)	126 (49.6)
Unknown	1 (0.9)	0 (0.0)
White	21 (18.3)	59 (23.2)
Limited English Proficiency = Yes (%)	28 (24.3)	39 (15.4)
Economically Disadvantaged = Yes (%)	100 (87.0)	207 (81.5)
GPA (mean (SD))***	2.39 (0.59)	3.00 (0.66)
Out-of-school suspensions (mean (SD))**	0.05 (0.22)	0.01 (0.11)
Attendance rate (mean (SD))***	86.73 (11.87)	92.23 (6.83)

Note. **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The model that best predicts successful fall college enrollment reports only two different statistically significant variables: Completed FAFSA and GPA ($p < .001$). The results of the logistic regression model are shown in Table 2. The likelihood of attending college increases by 5.7 times if the student completed a FAFSA. Each one-point increase in GPA nearly triples the likelihood of a student attending college. Figure 1 demonstrates this relationship visually, with enrolled students (identified in blue) more directly clustered amongst FAFSA completers with higher GPAs. The left panel shows those students who did not complete the FAFSA and the right panel shows those who did complete the form. Blue dots are students who enrolled in college in the fall after graduation and the red dots are students who did not enroll.

Figure 1

Adjusted Probability of College Enrollment by FAFSA Completion and GPA



Note Blue dots are students currently enrolled in college panel indicates FAFSA

Table 2 shows that model specificity is relatively good (49%) and that sensitivity is high (95%); the overall correct classification rate is (81%). This model does provide a significant improvement over the null model. The difference in deviance for the two models is 115.139, with 11 degrees of freedom is statistically significant, $p < .001$.

Table 2

Logistic Regression Model for College Enrollment

	Probability of Being Enrolled Attended College
Male	0.522 (0.070, 1.114)
Hispanic	0.033 (-0.631, 0.698)
Other Race	0.059 (-1.217, 1.336)
White	0.172 (-0.703, 1.047)
Completed PHEAA Forms	0.665 (-0.408, 1.7373)
Completed FAFSA	1.741*** (0.502, 2.980)
Limited English Proficiency	-0.279 (-0.946, 0.387)
Economically Disadvantaged	-0.133 (-0.979, 0.714)
GPA	0.960*** (0.472, 1.448)
OSS	-1.248 (-2.923, 0.427)
Attendance	0.027 (-0.005, 0.060)
Constant	-6.288*** (-9.167, -3.410)
Observations	368
Log Likelihood	-170.196
Akaike Inf. Crit.	364.391

DISCUSSION

Based on the literature review findings and differences between groups in the descriptive statistics, it is perhaps surprising that only two variables are statistically significant predictors of enrollment. FAFSA completion maintains statistical significance and is the strongest predictor of fall college enrollment. This is consistent with research from Oster (2021) that similarly evaluated high school characteristics. High school GPA is another significant predictor which is backed by previous research findings (Sanchez, 2020). Previous research on these indicators is fairly limited, as little research has examined student level high school data. This research helps

bolster these previous findings.

The remaining variables are not statistically significant in the best fit regression model. This includes variables that demonstrated statistical significance in the initial descriptive analysis. That said, these variables still have an impact and compound in the regression model. An economically disadvantaged student who completed the FAFSA and has a 3.0 GPA with low attendance will have a lower likelihood of enrollment than a non-economically disadvantaged peer who completed the same steps and has a strong attendance rate. Based on the findings of the regression model, school districts will be best suited focusing on increasing FAFSA completion and GPA as a method to reduce summer melt. This is hardly earth-shattering information, yet it does provide some helpful lessons for school district practitioners.

APPLICATION

While this research study includes data from SDoL's class of 2019, data was initially run using information from the graduating class of 2018. That initial model was similar, with a key distinction that it identified Attendance as a statistically significant variable in the logistic regression model. The following refers to the process SDoL utilized to put those findings into practice.

In response to the research findings, SDoL began applying the summer melt prevention model to student data in the 2018-2019 school year. SDoL utilized this data in several different ways. The logistic regression model was integrated into the Summer Melt Analysis Tool (SMAT), which provided a likelihood of enrollment value for each student. The tool assigned a risk level based on the likelihood of enrollment as outlined in Table 3. This enrollment likelihood ended up closely matching the actual enrollment rate and validates the modeling, as indicated in the third column of Table 3. Counselors and advisors then used this information to identify students with lower expected likelihoods of summer melt and the underlying reasons. Most critically, the SMAT model served the backbone of the district's summer melt prevention efforts. With limited counselor availability, staff from the district's year round Future Ready Center served as the primary individuals supporting recent graduates. Three Future Ready Center staff members offered summer advising, FAFSA completion, college transition events, and more.

Table 3*Risk Levels*

RISK LEVEL	LIKELIHOOD OF ENROLLMENT	ACTUAL ENROLLMENT RATE
Red	Less than 25%	21.5%
Yellow	25.1% to 50%	40%
Green	50.1% to 75%	71.6%
Blue	75.1% and more	78.9%

Students were prioritized based on risk level, with those most at risk of melt receiving the most individualized support. While all students received general text messages and invites to events, students in red and yellow received individual outreach from Future Ready Center staff at the start of the summer. Future Ready Center staff worked through a summer melt prevention call guide to drive the outreach efforts, asking students questions related to financial aid and tuition, registration, campus living and enrollment. Later iterations of this outreach guide included social/emotional wellbeing questions as well. This detailed call guide enabled the organization to later bring on college interns who could conduct the outreach with minimal training, increasing the capacity for outreach. All information gathered was tracked through a centralized database and updated as students completed key tasks over the summer months.

Initial efforts showed a marginal improvement in reducing melt. While college enrollment numbers overall did not change, the summer melt rate for the Class of 2019 decreased by 3%¹. It is difficult to determine long-term impacts as these rates for the Class of 2020 and 2021 are both greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and national downturns in college enrollment. This summer advising approach is unique and may not be feasible for other school districts without access to year round advising staff. Some districts have utilized grant funding or limited additional pay to hire counselors to offer this support on a short-term basis during the summer months (Tackett et. al., 2018; Castleman et. al., 2012; Castleman et. al., 2014).

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations exist from this research. While these research findings are statistically significant, they still pull from a relatively small school district and sample. Future research can apply the same process to larger and various districts to test for variation.

In addition to sample limitations, limitations exist with regards to the consideration of potential variables due to availability of data related to the selected research sample. The current regression model does not consider any variable for advising frequency, a factor that may impact melt given the literature review findings. The development of such a variable is needed for future research and should be addressed when considering future research samples. Additionally, this research does not include a variable for college destination type. Past research indicates differing melt rates for those planning to attend two and four year institutions (Taylor & Hartman, 2019; Sanchez, 2020), so future research should include a metric to best track this. What complicates the potential inclusion of this variable is that students who plan to go to college but have not identified where they will attend provide some ambiguity. A new variable on college destination indecision could be included as well. Future research would also benefit from the inclusion of local economic data, as recent research indicates strong economic trends may negatively impact summer melt rates (Oster, 2021). Finally, this research does not include any variables related to advising or support received from college partners. Access to this data point may prove difficult given that it is not included in the current National Student Clearinghouse reporting. It is critical to consider not only efforts by school districts, but also the postsecondary institutions where students are slated to enroll.

The primary focus of this research is the identification of a model to best predict summer melt. While SDoL's summer intervention effort is not the primary focus of this research, its limited success indicates that further research is needed on the effectiveness of this type of effort. Further studies could focus exclusively on the implementation of such an effort and identify which components of intervention are most successful and what variables are not currently being considered. Additionally, research could focus on the effectiveness of interventions across the different risk level groups identified in Table 3. While students in the 'Red' or 'Yellow' groupings may have an increased likelihood of melt, interventions may not be as successful with this group of students.

Note

[1] The Summer Melt Rate is calculated using the formula $100 \times (1 -) = \text{Summer Melt Rate}$. This specific calculation includes all students enrolling in college, not just those who indicated a plan to enroll, in the numerator.

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The Influence of Online Personalized Problem-Based Learning on Student Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Innovative technologies are being created, and individuals and companies are embracing and using emerging technology to customize all aspects of their lives and businesses, including learning spaces. Today's students demand authentic, meaningful learning experiences in real-world settings (Cook & Artino, 2016; García-Cabre-ro et al., 2018; Martinek et al., 2016; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012). This study addresses the question of how personalized, problem-based learning affects the motivation and engagement of students in grades 5 -12. This qualitative case study is focused on the implementation of online problem-based learning experiences with students with teachers to explore the effects on motivation and engagement. The study collected data through interviews, open-ended surveys, lesson observations, and lesson artifacts. The study found that teachers perceived the students were more engaged with these instructional strategies and student surveys confirmed that engagement and motivation was increased with the real-world and personalized nature of the problem-based learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

Today's students are finding, evaluating, and applying information in drastically different ways than students did just ten years ago (Brenneman, 2016; Anderson, 2014). As educators, we must evolve how we engage and motivate students and what skills students will need to be ready for today's workforce. Personalized learning strives to provide students with choice and control in their learning with high-interested topics using adaptive technologies (iNACOL, 2011). Schools are beginning to embrace personalized learning to create ideal learning opportunities focused on growing students at their rate, interest level, and instructional level (Allan, 2007; Brenneman, 2016; García-Cabrero, et al., 2018; Martinek et al., 2020; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012). The field of online learning is exploding with opportunities for students to choose how, when, and what they learn. Online personalized problem-based learning offers the ability to foster lifelong learning in students by moving from one-size-fits-all to a customized environment, from teacher-centered to student-centered approach, and from memorizing material to learning how to learn (Cotrell, 2017; Martinek et al., 2020; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012). The study from Park et al. (2012) found that student engagement is not a fixed attribute, and engagement depends a great deal on the nature of the learning context. Building on the idea that learning context improves engagement and students are seeking customized learning experiences, this study investigated how pairing problem-based and personalized learning with choice and voice affected engagement in students in grades 5-12.

Definition of Problem-Based Learning

Personalized problem-based learning experiences connect complex thinking, content standards, and lifelong skills to high-interest topics to increase student motivation. Marra et al. (2014) note that as adults, we solve problems every day, and we learn from those in the workplace, at home and in our community. Problem-based learning (PBL) is an instructional strategy where learning occurs while solving an authentic problem. In a PBL environment, students start with a problem and learn through the process of solving that problem. This approach, built on constructivist learning theory, gives students a reason to learn the content, to solve the problem. In a meta-analysis of studies on problem-based learning, Strobel and van Barneveld (2009) found that traditional learning approaches tended to produce better outcomes on an assessment of basic skills. In contrast, a PBL approach tended to deliver better results in students demonstrating they can apply knowledge and skills to authentic environments, and the students and teachers also indicated higher satisfaction with the problem-based

learning approach (Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009). This study demonstrated a strong research base supportive of problem-based learning in the medical field. However, more research was needed in other disciplines and content areas to expand the use of PBL in the K-12 learning environment and to define the best implementation processes more clearly.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain deeper insight into the teachers' perspectives on the use of personalized problem-based learning experiences as an instructional strategy. The problem addressed in this research study was student disengagement due to a lack of interest and motivation with traditional instructional practices (Parsons et al., 2018; Schlechty, 2011). Engagement and motivation to learn are problematic when students are uninterested in the topic; thus, one could conclude that learning is compromised (Parsons et al., 2018). According to Schlechty (2011) students are engaged when they are involved in their work, persevere despite challenges and barriers, and show joy and pride in achieving their work. To achieve the goals of the study, an inductive thematic analysis was employed to analyze the artifacts, interviews, surveys, and observations with the participants.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the concepts of constructivist learning principles, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and problem-based learning theory. Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and problem-based learning theory (Jonassen, 2004; Irby et al., 2013; Harland, 2003) provided a basis for understanding the learning principles in this personalized problem-based learning study. Zone of Proximal Development is the gap between what a student can accomplish independently to that which the student can do with adult guidance or working with more knowledgeable or skilled peers (Vygotsky, 1978; Abtahi, 2018). Vygotsky (1978) stated that the best environments for learning are those that are authentic, real-life learning experiences. Both Vygotsky and problem-based learning theory recommend instruction begin at the student's current level of knowledge and skills (Harland, 2003). Problem-based learning theory is a student-centered methodology that uses complex, ill-structured real-life problems to simultaneously develop content knowledge and cognitive skills to solve a problem (Irby et al., 2013; Harland, 2003, Pyle & Hung, 2019). Ill-structured problems have an unclear path to a solution, unknown obstacles, and multiple solutions and require students to make judgments or take a stand on issues, such as diagnosis-solution problems, strategic performance, policy

analysis problems, design problems, and dilemmas. (Jonassen, 2004). Harland (2003) explains that both ZPD and PBL assume that students bring experience to the learning situation and existing knowledge, which can be applied to solve problems, which then builds more knowledge and skills for that student. Contemporary research on problem-based learning has shown that students consistently retain knowledge, transfer problem-solving skills, and become more self-regulated, lifelong students (Hung et al., 2008).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This study used a qualitative methodology with a case study design to examine how online personalized problem-based learning impacted student engagement and motivation. The goal of qualitative research is to provide an understanding of an activity or learning environment by discovering meaning in individuals and understanding a phenomenon (Creswell, 2018; Bloomberg, 2018). Through observations of online behaviors, student analytics, teacher interviews, open ended surveys, and artifacts this qualitative data allowed issues to be examined from authentic and distinctive perspectives (Byrne, 2017). Additionally, the study was guided by a pragmatic research philosophy that recognizes concepts that are only relevant if they support action (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The case study employed an explanatory mode of case studies. Yin (2012) recommends the explanatory mode as an effective approach to explain how learning takes place. Explanatory case studies allow the researcher to explore and describe the learning experience while explicitly investing relationships between two events where the first one may cause the occurrence of the second event. (Mills et al., 2010). The case study research design method culminates a rich, complex understanding of the topic under exploration (Bloomberg, 2018) to gain actionable knowledge of the effect that online personalized problem-based learning has on student engagement. The researcher utilized a thematic research approach to data analysis to answer the why and how to improve engagement through online assignment design. In this inductive thematic approach, the researcher looked for identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data from the bottom up driven by the data, not the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher worked with six teachers for eight weeks. There was no direct line of teacher evaluation between the researcher and the targeted population for the study. The unit of analysis in this study is the problem-based learning experiences. Teachers implemented online personalized problem-based learning experiences with their students. Data was collected for the study through online learning analytic data, observations,

surveys, interviews and artifacts such as assignments and planning documents. Each teacher selected one unit to teach an online personalized problem-based learning experience instead of the traditionally designed assignments. To better identify strengths and weaknesses of online assignments, teachers were trained in how to create problem-based learning assignments using research-based practices (Marra et al., 2014; Anjarwati et al., 2018; Strobel & Van Barneveld, 2009). The researcher trained the teachers to create problem-based learning experiences aligned with research-based practices.

In this case study, the researcher compared the perception of teachers before the training segment and after the implementation segment. The qualitative interview data and open-ended surveys were the primary instruments used to collect data regarding the design of the learning experiences. Observations of live online lessons provided the researcher with information and data to make informed decisions to improve performance. Artifacts, such as teacher planning documents and student final products, were reviewed to provide a richer view of the new instructional strategies influence on motivation and engagement. Finally, the open-ended student engagement survey provided information from the student's viewpoint.

The researcher interviewed the teachers involved in the case study to gather teacher perceptions of student engagement regarding the two types of learning experiences. All interviews asked the same questions to all participating teachers but also allowed for individual teacher reflection. In interviews and surveys, the researcher asked teachers to describe and reflect on their perceptions of student engagement and motivation at three points along with the four-week study. All interviews were recorded, and machine transcribed using the VidGrid Recorder application using the researcher's laptop and analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher used the cloud-based ATLAS.ti with the smart auto coding for a more transparent coding process, allowing for more credibility to the research.

This study examined all data ambiguities or contrasted findings to explore and understand the effects of the design of online learning assignments on motivation and engagement (Creswell, 2018). The researcher used a variety of approaches to examine the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data. The dependability and credibility of the data was explored through multiple triangulation methods and peer examination (Frey, 2018; MacDonald, 2012). The study used member checking and peer debriefing and thick descriptions to make transferability connections to ensure credibility (Frey, 2018).

The study was divided into two distinct phases: teacher professional development and instructional implementation. In the first phase, the researcher began by collecting data on teacher backgrounds and professional

learning experiences. Each teacher was interviewed before the training on problem-based learning to establish their background, learning preferences, and teaching style. After initial data collection, teachers participated in a professional development program on research-based problem-based learning and a coaching session to further support their learning. In the second phase, the study focused on the implementation of problem-based instructional experiences. First, the researcher observed the live launch lesson for the problem-based learning experience. Following the live lesson, the researcher surveyed the teacher, reflecting on the launch of the project through four lenses, backward-looking, inward-looking, outward-looking, and forward-looking.

After the projects were completed, teachers invited students to complete an open-ended survey that compared this learning experience to other experiences they have done in the past and provide reasons as to why they like one over another. After students completed the experience and submitted the survey, a final interview was held with the teacher to compare the two types of learning experiences and review the student survey data. Lastly, a document review (lesson study) of the artifacts was completed. The learning experiences lessons were reviewed for alignment to the research-based protocol. Any variances to the protocol were compared to the perceptions of student engagement from the teacher to determine if that variance may have contributed to a different outcome. The researcher reached data saturation after the fifth interview, with no new data emerging from the participants.

Research Questions

Student engagement is essential for teachers and researchers because it is associated with achievement. Personalized problem-based learning and student engagement may be factors that contribute to skill development in adolescent students. As a result, the questions asked in this study target student engagement focusing on personalized problem-based learning experiences.

The following research questions are the basis of this study:

RQ1. How do teachers perceive the impact of problem-based learning experiences on student engagement?

RQ2. How does online personalized problem-based learning foster student engagement?

Population and Sample

The population for this study was six teachers in grades 5-12 and a sampling of students at a public

cyber charter school in Pennsylvania. The student population has a poverty rate of over 50%, and nearly 30% of students are identified with a cognitive disability. Students are all learning at home with a learning coach, often a parent or guardian, with 24/7 access to instructional content. Students engage with highly qualified, certified teachers in synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences. Teachers will have anywhere from one year of teaching experience up to 23 years of teaching experience. The study used a purposeful sample to choose the six teachers, along with 8-10 students per teacher aligning with recommendations from Maxwell (2009) and Yin (2009) to ensure a heterogeneous population. Additionally, purposeful sampling supports a bounded system within a common learning environment, student background, and instructional approach in this case study (Maxwell, 2009). In alignment with guidelines noted by Bloomberg (2018), the study began by identifying a specific case with limits including a specific time frame, place, event, and process. The sample focused on teachers teaching in the same cyber charter school, using the same learning management system, and teaching similar age groups of students.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for leaders and practitioners in the field as it contributes to the literature to determine how pairing problem-based and personalized learning with choice and voice affected student motivation and engagement. Learning how educators can redesign learning experiences to allow students to be more authentically motivated offers the ability to foster lifelong learning in students by moving from a teacher-centered to student-centered approach, and from memorizing material to learning how to learn (Cotrell, 2017; Martinek et al., 2020; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012). Pink (2010) also asserts that when students are involved in tasks that have meaning to them, they are more likely to internalize, retain, and use in other contexts. He goes on to explain that employers are starting to employ this technique in the workplace. Student engagement may be the root of many issues of achievement, absenteeism, community disengagement, behavioral issues, and many other chronic school problems. Without engagement, the quality of student learning is likely to be low (Schlechty, 2011; Pink, 2010). Pink (2010) goes on to state that in our personal lives, engagement in solving a problem or answering a question is a strong path to mastery in that area.

Instrumentation

The qualitative case study researcher used interviews, observations, artifacts, and surveys to collect data.

In designing the interview questions, the researcher used a semi-structured interview as defined by Roulston and Choi (2018), which allowed for follow up questions to generate an open conversation with the teachers. In designing the interview questions, the researcher began with broader questions and moved to more specific questions while also formulating open, rather than closed questions (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Member checking was used to check for accuracy and unbiased representation of participant teachers' experiences and reflections which allowed teachers to review and add to the interview and interpreted data.

The observation of the live launch lesson was held in Zoom, an online conference platform that offers a robust video and audio communication along with whiteboard, annotation, and screen sharing capabilities. Zoom is the platform used by the cyber charter school to deliver all live and recorded direct instruction lessons, allowing the observation to take place in the natural setting for teachers and students capturing behavior as it occurs. The teachers record and post their live lessons for students to refer to later. The researcher had access to these recordings for additional detailed notes of observations. For this study, the observer used the research role of complete observer or peripheral membership as not to disrupt the normal flow of activities in the lesson. A field notes approach was used with detailed written descriptions with the aid of the recording from each observation using an observation protocol. The student engagement survey provided additional qualitative data in narrative responses to open-ended questions directly from students. The students responded to open-ended questions and provided details about their personal experience with the two learning experiences, opinions, engagement, and insight into what motivated them to learn (Julien, 2008).

The final part of triangulation was provided by the lesson study including the learning experience artifacts to validated or rebutted, clarified, or expanded the findings across other data sources to guard against bias (Frey, 2018). The researcher used a standard approach to analyze the lesson plan, handouts, and presentations as tools of communication between the teacher and the students (Prior, 2008). An inductive approach to coding was used to analyze the documents with a set of codes derived from the keywords used gained in the literature review for the study.

RESULTS

The data collection began with the six teachers who participated in this study along with the students in the course each teacher selected to implement the strategy. The initial interview revealed additional demographic data about the teachers. As shown in Table 1 all six participants were experienced online teachers with an average of 6 years' experience teaching online. ATLAS.ti and Microsoft Excel were used to tabulate responses

from the teacher collected at the completion of the project along with final teacher interview responses. In each category, two major themes or key perceptions emerged, the strengths and the challenges of using personalized problem-based learning to affect student engagement and motivation.

Table 1

Demographics of Participant Teachers

PARTICIPANT TEACHING	GENDER	GRADE LEVEL	SUBJECT AREA	NUMBER OF YEARS TEACHING
PT 1 (SS)	Female	5	Social Studies	16
PT 2 (TW)	Male	6	Mathematics	8
PT 3 (RP)	Female	8	Social Studies	10
PT 4 (PL)	Male	9	Science	21
PT 5 (HJ)	Female	10	Social Studies	19
PT 6 (TK)	Female	11	English Language Arts	20

Research Question 1. How do teachers perceive the impact of problem-based learning experiences on student engagement? Research question one was divided into two thematic categories based on the inductive thematic analysis of the interviews, observations, and surveys.

Initial perceptions of online personalized problem-based learning could affect the desire to use the instructional strategy. All teachers expressed their learning style was hands on kinesthetic, but participant teacher one shared, “I am a definite auditory and kinesthetic if I had to put it into those two categories. I’m one that has to hear it, definitely, and then has to curate some sort of aspect of it at the end” and participant teacher five shared this: “I think because I need to see so many examples, I always try to put lots of visuals in and describe everything very carefully, maybe too much.” Another question during the initial interview asked teachers their experience on authentic, real-world project-based learning. The range of experience the PBL spans from very little to a good deal. Participant teacher six answered the question “My last question is do you have any experience with project-based learning? And if so, did they focus on real world topics?”

“I do have experience with project-based learning, and we like to think that the topics are real world. But I feel like unless the delivery of it is in some authentic way, like I described with my French teacher, I don’t think that translates. I think we use real world as buzz sometimes. But the kids know it’s still to the teacher as the only audience. And therefore, it’s really not real world. They’re just creating a scenario.”

In comparison participant teacher two, who answered like this, “Trying to think. I mean, honestly, I haven’t had much with project-based learning.”

In answering the question regarding student interest, “How do you feel online students’ interest in the topic affects the quality of their work?” Participant teacher five answered this question like this:

”I think it’s immensely important. If they’re not interested, they’re just kind of going through the motions to check it off, forget it, if they’re going to check it off a list. If they’re interested in it, then they’re going to invest in it and they’re going learn more.”

Participant teacher one answered the question like this:

“Tremendously. If it’s not a topic of interest or based on their background knowledge, they will not dig in deeper to it to kind of create a level of understanding. Sometimes they go through the motion. I think when you can build them up to setting a hook as to how this may pertain or continually have them try to reflect on the relation authentically to their lives, it’s a huge help to increase engagement.”

After the initial interview and training process was complete, the researcher observed the launch lessons for each of the personalized problem-based learning experiences. The 30 to 40-minute lesson observations were conducted for the purpose of recording the instructional pedagogy and observing the motivation and engagement students displayed at the introduction of the project format. Using the observation protocol with ATLAS.ti inductive coding the researcher noted five key techniques used by participant teachers.

During the lesson observations the researcher noted that five of the six teachers provided a detailed definition of problem-based learning and two teachers focused explicitly on the personalized problem statement step. As seen in Table 2 all teachers described to students how they have the freedom to write a problem statement based on the mini case study from their perspective. Five of the six teachers provided explicit instructions to students on how they will need to research possible solutions for their problem statement, select a solution to this problem, then defend that solution with research. Participant teacher six introduced the mini-case study then described problem-based learning as “each of you can come from a different point of view as you write your personal problem statement” and Participant teacher five stated to the students, “each of you will have different ways to present their findings” as she went on to emphasize the personalized nature of the problem statements. The same five teachers took time to explicitly go through each checkpoint in and explain what students should do to stay on track.

Table 2*Themes in Lesson Observations*

LAUNCH LESSONS	
Defined Problem-Based Learning	5
Defined Problem Statement	2
Discussed Final Product	4
Provided detailed descriptions of each step	5
Stressed how this is personalized	2

In the teacher survey, teachers were asked: 1) What problems did you encounter while you were working on this instructional strategy? How did you solve them? In what ways have you gotten better at this instructional strategy? 2) How do you feel about this instructional strategy? What parts of it do you particularly like? Dislike? Why? What did/do you enjoy about this instructional strategy? Have you changed any ideas you used to have on this instructional strategy? 3) In what ways do you feel your work meet the standards for this instructional strategy? If someone else were looking at your live launch, what might they learn about who you are? 4) As you look at this live launch, what is one thing that you would like to try to improve upon? What would you like to spend more time learning about? Teachers identified multiple strengths in the instructional strategy with multiple sub-themes emerging.

As seen in Table 3, four of the six teachers noted they enjoyed teaching this project with comments like this statement from Participant teacher three, “I like that it forces students to ‘think’ and allows them to be creative at the same time” and “I really liked how students were able to look at a case studies and formulate their own problem statement” from Participant teacher two. Additionally, five of the six teachers noticed that more students asked for help during this project. Participant teacher 5 expressed it like this, “A few students needed 1:1 clarification that the solution was to be a concrete proposal rather than a vague idea. I met with these students and used questioning to prompt them toward more concrete solutions-based thinking.” At first this was coded as a challenge due to directions, but upon further discussion with the teachers in the final interviews the research realized this was a strength. Participant teacher six described that students sought out time with the teacher because they were fully engaged in the project and motivated to work more intently on this project whereas past projects the students simply did the work out of compliance. Participant teacher two noted, “I found that students responded very positively and thoughtfully to this instructional strategy.”

Table 3*Teacher Perceptions of Strength of Personalized Problem-Based Learning*

STRENGTHS	TEACHER SURVEY
Enjoyed the Project	4
Freedom	6
Students Asked for Help	5
Motivated and Engaged	3
Personalized	3
Real World	3
Thinking	2
Totals	21

As seen in Table 4, all six teachers noted directions as an issue with the strategy. Participant teachers three and six also noted that some challenges to this project were their readiness to teach with this strategy and participant teachers one, three, and five remarked time to implement the project was a challenge. Participant teachers three and five noted they did not feel confident to implement this strategy are also the same two teachers who noted that the strategy was too unstructured for them. Participant teacher three said it like this, “I really don’t like this instructional strategy. I felt like it was too open-ended for the students. If I were to use this again, I would modify it and provide more scaffolds.”

Table 4*Teacher Perceptions of Barriers of Personalized Problem-Based Learning*

TEACHER SURVEY (OF 6)	
Directions	6
Lack of Teacher Readiness	2
Not Structured	2
Time	3
Too Personal	1
Challenges	14

Research Question 2. How does online personalized problem-based learning foster student engagement? The research question was divided into two thematic categories based on the inductive thematic analysis of the student survey.

In the surveys, students overwhelmingly noted strengths of this instructional strategy. Students made 73 overall mentions of strengths detailed in Table 5, compared to only 7 mentions of challenges. In looking at the strengths mentioned, one must note that of the 38 students who responded to the survey, 37 mentioned they enjoyed the project. One student stated, “I enjoyed this project “Hands Up! Don’t Shoot!” the most because the material is related to current events which makes it more interesting for me.” Another student shared, “I liked this one, especially what I did with part 7 even though it was lengthy.” Both these comments are consistent with responses of other students. The students responded that the freedom to decide how to solve this problem was at first hard but also enjoyable because they could choose how they would solve the problem and then defend their choice. One student described the experience as “I had to think outside the box to come up with a solution.”

Table 5
Student Perceptions of Strengths of Personalized Problem-Based Learning

STRENGTHS	STUDENT SURVEY
Enjoyed the Project	37
Freedom	6
Students Asked for Help	4
Motivated and Engaged	27
Personalized	14
Real World	17
Thinking	24
Totals	73

All challenges mentioned were focused on the directions. One student expressed concern about the directions in this response: “Make the instructions clearer. More guidance. Make it easier with clearer broken-down steps.” Another student stated, “More ideas such as graphic organizers to help gather and organize information.” A third student explained the issue like this, “give more researching links and explain better.” In addition, four other students stated similar issues around directions and the need for more support in the steps of the project.

Table 6*Student Perceptions of Barriers of Personalized Problem-Based Learning*

STUDENT SURVEY (OF 37)	
Directions	7
Lack of Teacher Readiness	0
Not Structured	0
Time	0
Too Personal	1
Challenges	8

A noteworthy data was that the only challenge that students mentioned with the problem-based learning project was the directions except for one outlier. One student believed the problem; racial injustice, was too real world and demonstrated comments that it was too sensitive and focused on her opinion and not facts. This student stated, “Change the project altogether. Racial feelings are not something to be expressed to others outside of family and graded.” This student was an outlier to all other students in the study, struggling to find facts to support opinion in a very sensitive topic.

Additional data collection from lesson artifacts and learning analytics were used to develop latent themes, where the researcher looks beyond what is said to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations. In reviewing the artifacts from the project, the researcher noted that 2 of the 6 teachers created additional organizers to support their students in addition to the template directions. In reviewing the student work, teachers noticed more effort in the final products shared. This aligns to the feedback from the student survey, where one student said, “I enjoyed this project the most because it was something that made me really think about stuff dealing with this subject matter. When it is something that really is interesting to you, you tend to do a better job.”

The triangulation of the data collection ensured the validity of the study; thereby, increasing the transferability of the research. Member checking was conducted with each participant to maintain accuracy for the data collected, and the participants were given a copy of their interview transcripts and observation notes, along with student survey data.

EVALUATION OF THE FINDINGS

The problem that was addressed in this qualitative research study was student disengagement due to a

lack of interest and motivation with traditional instructional practices. The case study allowed the opportunity to investigate the student and teacher's perspectives on problem-based learning through interviews, observations, and surveys. The six teacher participants provided insightful information with similar positive experiences with the utilization of personalized problem-based learning in their classrooms as a tool to teach concepts in a real, authentic setting. The results obtained from the study were supported by the literature of Vygotsky (1978) which asserted that the best environments for learning are those that are authentic, real-life learning experiences.

The overall findings for research question one on how teachers perceive the impact of problem-based learning experiences on student engagement revealed evidence of increased engagement with the students. Evidenced by teacher perceptions, observations, and students' reflections, students were more motivated by personalized problem-based learning. In addition, most teachers noted that more students were motivated to ask for 1 on 1 help during this project. Furthermore, four of the six teachers noted this was engaging for them as a teacher with all mentioning the word "fun" in their surveys. Although the teachers were in favor of the personalized problem-based learning, they acknowledged the need to have more experience with the strategy to be even more effective.

The overall findings for research question two on how online personalized problem-based learning fostered student engagement uncovered those students liked the experience despite it being difficult. This aligns with the work from Schlechty (2011) who explains that students are engaged and persevere despite challenges and barriers when they when the work is connected to the real world. Looking at both teacher and student surveys, both noted a strength of personalized problem-based learning as the integration of learning to real world problems. The students overwhelmingly indicated that personalized problem-based learning rooted in concepts to the real-life situations was more motivating and engaging for them. The finding was supported by the reports from Marra et al. (2014) who cite problem-based learning, built on the constructivist learning theory, as an approach which gives students a reason to learn the content, to solve the problem.

One noteworthy finding outside of the primary research questions is that both teacher and student survey responses indicated difficulty with directions in using this strategy. This aligns with Piaget's theory that when a student is presented with information or an experience that contradicts their prior knowledge, the student becomes motivated to adjust or adapt prior knowledge to return to equilibrium (Kretchmar, 2019). Netcoh (2017) also found that when students were given a choice they requested some guiding structures and boundaries to help them transition to self-directed learning.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the triangulation of data collected, the results of this study indicated that all six teacher participants along with their students perceived problem-based learning as a valuable tool for student engagement and motivation. Of the participant teachers who applied personalized problem-based learning, all but one agreed that they would like to continue using personalized problem-based learning a few times each school year to increase engagement and motivation in their content area. All participant teachers reported that personalized problem-based learning provided the students with an engaging learning strategy to contribute to the course objective.

The study provides a foundation for educational leaders on the importance of personalized problem-based learning on engagement as well as the effectiveness of the theory of Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and problem-based learning theory (Jonassen, 2004; Irby et al., 2013; Harland, 2003). By developing these insights, educational leaders can begin to include personalized problem-based learning into the list of research-based instructional practices. In addition, the study can also create an awareness of the need for adequate training and resources for the teachers to implement personalized problem-based learning in their courses. It was found that the perceptions of personalized problem-based learning on student engagement were viewed positively by teachers; that the increased motivation and engagement led to a deeper understanding for the students as evidenced by student work. Meanwhile, the main challenge was the lack of sufficient time to plan and incorporate the new instructional strategy.

The real-world nature of problem-based learning increased engagement in the instructional materials. Cultivating a learning environment where students are motivated by challenges to solve and opportunities to learn through their passions is essential and worthy of additional time, effort, and research (Duckworth et al., 2007; Gagne et al., 2013; Pink, 2010; Gardner, 2011). In the final interviews, all participants talked about the value of the real-world nature of the personalized problem-based learning. One participant said, "The project was real to the students where other projects were more school based and contrived." Another teacher shared that one student was very behind on other schoolwork but, engaged in all live sessions and asked for individual help with this project. This is similar to the findings of Strobel and van Barneveld (2009) in their meta-analysis where they cited that the problem-based learning approach tended to deliver better results in students demonstrating they can apply knowledge and skills to authentic environments, and the students and teachers also indicated higher satisfaction with the problem-based learning approach.

Another teacher explained that this instructional strategy allowed her to get to know her students on a more personal level as they personalized their approach to the problem. A study by Stanley and Plucker (2008) investigated ways to improve high-school graduation rates and found that forming relationships with adults was one of the most meaningful actions to increase engagement. More autonomous extrinsic motivation is associated with more engagement, thus better performance, lower dropout, and higher quality learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The personalized problem-based learning provided students with an opportunity to connect their background knowledge and led to deeper understanding for students. When the learning environment allows for personalization, intrinsic motivation can flourish (Cook & Artino, 2016; Garn & Jolly, 2014; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012). This approach to personalized learning used context personalization focused on interest topics, not a traditional content area. In the final interviews, one teacher participant shared that it was, “Neat to hear some kid’s ideas. They had many right solutions that they supported with facts that I didn’t think about.” Another teacher participant described that the students shared how the freedom to write their problem statement made it more interesting to them and she thought this made them more engaged and invested. This approach created a personalized learning environment which provided student autonomy and met each student at his/her ZPD on topics of high interest that are relevant and challenging (Vygotsky, 1978; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012). The findings in this study align to that of the work of Patall et al. (2018) and Garn and Jolly (2014) as both studies revealed that personalizing learning experiences increases engagement and motivation. Similarity in findings also exist within a study by Garcia-Griffin (2013) where elementary students participated in a daily class that was a topic that interested them and the students reported that they enjoyed it when they had a choice in activities. In a study by Walkington and Bernacki (2018), students who were able to choose their personalized problem in Algebra classes outperformed students who received random personalized problems. Both researchers, along with the work from Patall et al. (2018) and Liu et al. (2019), support the proposal that students who have more ownership of the learning experience are more intrinsically motivated to learn.

Implementing a new instructional strategy takes time to understand and practice for the best results. The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model was used in this study to provide students and teachers with the opportunity to transition to self-directed learning. Despite the application of this model, both students and teachers found the transition to the personalized problem-based learning challenging. One teacher participant shared she was not confident in this instructional strategy and felt the freedom was too much for students. This teacher

also expressed the need to control her class and felt this was not structured enough. Another teacher participant stated, “It was challenging to design the live launch and project assignment in a way that provided students with enough resources and information to identify and define a problem statement while not undermining the open-ended nature of the problem-based learning strategy.” These findings align with a study by Netcoh (2017) where teachers expressed a concern that students perceived choice as an opportunity to do anything they wanted, rather than an opportunity to work toward learning standards and transfer goals through projects that were relevant to their lives. Netcoh’s results further point to a need to provide professional learning opportunities for educators when implementing student choice and autonomy. Along with Netcoh (2017), both Young (2017) and Canan (2016) also found explicit, in-depth professional learning on the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model positively impacted teacher planning, instructional delivery, and the effect of students completing independent work.

In this research study, it was found that personalized problem-based learning also had a positive effect on student engagement as evidenced by project artifacts and student survey responses. Students only noted one significant barrier, clear directions, to the instructional strategy. Upon a deeper examination of the literature, the main findings or major themes of the second research question were also supported and evidenced in the previous scholarly reports and studies.

Application and connection of assignments to real-life situations for students increased motivation and enjoyment for students. One student posted to the survey, “This project was meaningful to me. The topic that I chose is one that my family and many others are currently facing.” Another student shared, “The content of this project was very meaningful to me being that this is a current issue that is affecting our nation right now.” This study aligned with Fredricks (2014) found that authentic instructional models such as personalized problem-based learning build engaging classroom tasks that result in more in-depth learning. Autonomy in developing of intrinsic and self-determined academic regulation (Martinek et al., 2020), when students who have more ownership of the learning experience, they are more intrinsically motivated to learn (Patall et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019).

The dramatic shift from teacher directed projects to student centered problem-based learning experiences caused stress and confusion that emerged through inadequate directions. This study used the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model; however, the project moved quickly through the stages identified by Fisher and Frey (2021) as focus, guided, collaborative, and independent. The students in this project had worked independently

online with school-based projects in a focus and guided format. This project presented students with an authentic, ill-structured problem in a guided format with a launch lesson and steps through the problem-solving process. In the survey with students, one student share, “This project seemed difficult at first, but seemed to get easier as the pieces started to fall together. I think it is just right the way it is.” However, another student was more direct with, “Make the instructions more clear. More guidance. Make it easier with clearer broken down steps.” A teacher participant echoed the comments from the students, with this perspective, “students struggled to get started with the problem statement but once they finished that they were able to curate their own knowledge and design their own learning path based on their own background.” In reviewing how Fisher and Frey (2021) describe the Gradual Release of Responsibility, the teacher models his or her thinking and moves to the guided instruction stage giving students a chance to attempt the learning task with teacher support with the last two stages put students in collaborative tasks to problem solve and think with peers and finally maturing to be a fully self-directed student by the final stage. In this project, these stages were rushed and the collaborative stage was skipped. In a study by Netcoh (2017), students were given a choice; many students requested some guiding structures and boundaries to help them transition to self-directed learning, supporting the gradual release of responsibility model. In studies by Young (2017) and Canan (2016), researchers found a significant gain in achievement and critical thinking skills when the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model was applied. The research may consider what this student shared in the “give more researching links and explain better.” Additional teacher participants described these directions issues like this, “Some of my students found it difficult to narrow down a problem.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study was conducted to gain insight into teachers’ perception of personalized problem-based learning as part of their online teaching pedagogy. In general, engagement or motivation correlates to the emerging understanding of mindset and grit as a strategy for K-12 students (Dweck et al., 2014); therefore, providing an alternative to the teacher directed instruction may increase the students’ motivation to engage in personalized learning experience, and improve engagement and deeper learning. Nevertheless, the problem is the lack of opportunity for the students to engage in personalized, problem-based learning due to challenges such as teachers’ minimal technical skills to implement personalized, problem-based learning, and the lack of planning time to implement that strategy.

The first recommendation for practice is for educational administrators and teachers to consider providing a more in-depth professional learning experience to implement personalized, problem-based learning with confidence and fidelity. For educators to implement more effective, innovative practices professional learning must be provided on the new understanding and skills, only then can these new practices increase learning (Hall & Hord, 2011). During this research process, teachers participated in a one-hour orientation to the new instructional strategy with follow up asynchronous learning and personalized coaching. This process was about 4 weeks long and included writing the mini-case study describing the problem for students. This was not an adequate amount of training to implement personalized, problem-based learning in an online classroom with confidence. In future implementations, one may consider implementing professional learning communities (PLC), which are grounded in adult learning theory, where teachers learn by working with their colleagues through sustained conversation and collaboration to develop more effective instructional practices (Sutcher et. al, 2009). In a PLC, teachers and educational leaders work together in actively planning the work in a community of practice. In a study by Peppers (2015), teachers overwhelmingly indicated that PLCs were a strong, sustainable approach to professional development. Hall and Hord (2011) state that “change cannot occur without professional learning” (p. 53). To accomplish this recommendation, one may consider devoting a longer-term PLC building knowledge and skills in supporting topics such as personalized learning, ill-structured problems, case based learning, advanced organizers, and gradual release of responsibility.

The second recommendation is to improve the directions in the problem-based learning sequence creating a more gradual release of responsibility for students. In this study, both teacher participants and students noted an issue with the template directions. Netcoh (2017) found that when students were given choice, many students requested some guiding structures and boundaries to help them transition to self-directed learning, supporting the gradual release of responsibility model. By modifying the directions for clarity and providing templates as some of the teacher participants added, this barrier could be greatly reduced. The researcher suggests the development of scaffolds for students to gradually become more self-directed and understand the expectations of each step of the problem-solving process. Adding advance organizers, one of the research based instructional strategies from Haystead et al. (2009) which yielded a 22 percentile gain in studies, teachers can provide scaffolds to help students focus on what is important and organize the useful with information that is not well organized.

The third recommendation for practice is for educational students and teachers to consider implementing

personalized, problem-based learning as a regular instructional strategy in their online courses. Developing PBL units is challenging, teachers need sustained practice in this instructional strategy. This study found that teachers who never practiced problem-based learning also cited a lack of confidence as their reason perhaps not using the strategy again. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) tells us that individuals are more motivated to engage in activities if they feel they are competent and likely to be successful, this is true for adult students also. Huei-Chen and Blanchard (2019) found similar results in their study where 30% of teachers in the non-PBL group attributed not practicing PBL to their lack of perceived competence. This recommendation suggests educational students require teachers to use of personalized, problem-based learning as a routine instructional strategy while support the teachers through professional learning and coaching.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of the study included the population of the participants and the nature of this kind of case study, having only one source of data of analysis. The study only included 6 online teachers in Grades 5-12 who teach in the same learning management system from a cyber charter school in Pennsylvania. The generalizability of the findings to in-person instruction, other learning management systems or grade levels was therefore not definite; however, it can be guaranteed that the content of all data was maximized to generate extensive and meaningful results that would aid in the design and implementation of future personalized problem-based learning experiences. Based on the limitations, two main recommendations for research and practice were developed to address the limitations and, at the same time, improve the content and results of future studies with the same subject.

For the first recommendation, future researchers can consider using in-person instruction or other learning management systems to validate the use of personalized, problem-based learning in other learning environments. Other studies with the same goal and topic can include the perceptions and experiences of the stakeholders such as the administrators and parents from the school community. These stakeholders may share their firsthand knowledge on how personalized problem-based learning has positively or negatively affected the children's growth and progress as students and as members of a community. In a blended experimental research study, Banas (2009) articulated four hypotheses focused on perceived task relevance and attractiveness as a relationship to achievement and perseverance and reported that the experimental group described significantly higher levels of motivation than the control group.

Another recommendation is for future researchers to consider performing a mixed-method design including qualitative interviews and quantitative data and statistics on how the student's instructional growth is affected by the use of the personalized, problem-based learning instructional strategy. By using a mixed-method design, insights from both approaches can increase the quality of the research study to be produced (Gerrish & Lacey, 2013). The data may confirm the need for others to follow the use of personalized problem-based learning in their schools to develop the students in academic and cognitive thinking skills. Other researchers have discovered that learning in a personal context has a stronger transfer to other learning experiences and students remain proficient even after the personalization is removed (Cook & Artino, 2016; Garn & Jolly, 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the findings of the study provided evidence on the increased need and attention to address student frustration and boredom with traditional instructional approaches focused on the first level of Bloom's Taxonomy, remembering, and recalling facts (Anderson et al., 2001). This study sought to understand how a student's disengagement and boredom affect motivation through personalized problem-based learning experiences using self-determination theory as the theoretical framework. School leaders are striving to provide learning opportunities customized to the personal rate, interest level, and instructional level of today's kids (Martinek et al., 2020; Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012; Allan, 2007).

The study served as a template for the educators to realize the significance of how students engage with online personalized problem-based learning experiences to help educators design future projects that both motivate students and challenge their academic growth. By listening to the perceptions and experiences of the teachers on the effectiveness of the instructional strategy and the evidence cited those students felt more engaged and challenged with the authentic nature of these personalized, problem-based learning experiences; thus, proving that the theory of Zone of Proximal Development and problem-based learning theory is helpful in solving the current issues of student engagement and motivation.

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**LGBTQ+ Students’
Experience in Secondary Education
and Their Applicability Towards the Pennsylvania Culturally
Relevant and Sustaining Education Competencies (CR-SE)**

Joseph Mencarini, Ed.D.

ABSTRACT

According to current Gallup poll data, approximately 20% of Gen Z adults polled identify as LGBTQ+ (Jones, 2022). Therefore, regardless of other demographics a school may possess, it can be assumed that the school contains a significant number of students that either currently or may someday identify as LGBTQ+. Given this assumption, an educator must be aware of their students' intersectional identities with regards to how these factors may interplay with their gender identity or sexual orientation. A qualitative phenomenology investigated the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college-aged adults regarding their secondary school careers. Challenging heteronormativity emerged as a theme from the data. In April 2022, the Pennsylvania Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education Competencies (CR-SE) were approved. The author argues that the PA CR-SE provides an important resource for educators to better understand LGBTQ+ students and ensure that they receive an equitable educational experience regardless of other intersectional identities.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ students, secondary education, professional development, queer theory, hegemonic heteronormativity, Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE)

INTRODUCTION

According to Jones (2022), a recent Gallup poll revealed that 7.1% of Americans identify as LGBTQ+. This percentage varies widely by generation but presents an upward curve: whereas only 2.6% of Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) identify as LGBTQ+, 20.8% of Generation Z (born 1997-2003 in the Gallup survey) identifies as such. Given this trend, Jones states that “with one in 10 millennials and one in five Gen Z members identifying as LGBT, the proportion of LGBT Americans should exceed 10% in the near future” (para. 17).

Therefore, regardless of other demographics a school may possess, it can be assumed that the school contains a significant number of students that either currently or may someday identify as LGBTQ+. Thus, in addition to their need for more understanding about their students’ race, ethnicity, religion, and home culture, an educator must also be aware of their students’ intersectional identities with regards to how these factors may interplay with their gender identity or sexual orientation.

After analyzing the data and applicable literature, this researcher identifies the Pennsylvania Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education Competencies (CR-SE), adopted in April 2022 in an amendment to Chapter 49 of Title 22 of the Pennsylvania Code (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2022), as an important tool in addressing the needs of LGBTQ+ learners within the school setting.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Sedgwick (1993) claimed, “Heterosexuality has been permitted to masquerade so fully as History itself” (pp. 10-11). Atkinson and DePalma (2008) argue that “[t]he heteronormative is the ‘natural order of things.’ It is the collective voice of reason, a tautology that explains things must be this way because that is the way they are” (p. 27). Smith (2015) adds to this, noting that heteronormativity “privileges heterosexuality and hegemonic gender, positions LGBTQ+ identities on the margins of school cultures, and produces the taken-for-granted truth that educator support for these students—beyond securing their safety—is too political and possibly inappropriate” (p. 225). This fear of crossing boundaries becomes a major source of tension and isolation for many educators that seek to ‘queer the classroom’ or simply communicate to students, especially those who identify as LGBTQ+, that there are other, equally valid options (other than the heteronormative hegemonic) available to them.

Smith (2015) writes, “Historically, US public schools have been invested in preserving hegemonic gen-

der norms and providing students with role models who will guide students' development toward fulfilling gendered social expectations" (p. 224). Steck and Perry (2018) note that the term "heteronormativity" was coined to "describe the dominant socio-cultural bias for a binary conception of sexuality and heterosexual privilege that perpetuates homophobic stereotypes and prejudice against same-sex attraction" (p. 229). The authors then go on to list examples of school policies, practices, and curricular issues that exhibit heteronormativity, such as:

- Many schools requiring couples at dances and proms to be male/female
- Student dress codes often require students to dress their assigned sex
- Transgender students are often disallowed from using the bathroom that aligns with their identified gender
- Transgender students are often disallowed from using their preferred pronouns and/or names on correspondence
- LGBTQ+ speakers, clubs, and events are often limited. (Steck & Perry, 2018, p. 229-230)

Wozolek (2018) writes, "If...queer histories have been sterilized from the curriculum, how can queer students expect to have their ways of being, knowing, and doing valued in school and broader communities?" (p. 375). Wozolek goes on to note, "There is a longstanding history of arguing that by allowing marginalizing systems of schooling to be maintained, the status quo of white, Christian, heteronormativity is preserved" (pp. 376-377).

It is important to note, as Payne and Smith (2018) point out, that LGBTQ people are of all races, ethnicities, religions, and abilities, but their LGBTQ identity itself is not "visible" as many other identities are thought to be, and many LGBTQ people cannot be recognized at a glance. Many LGBTQ+ individuals also choose to not disclose their identities in school contexts for fear of reprisals. This becomes a problematic cycle: "LGBTQ people feel unwelcome in the school environment and, therefore, choose to not disclose identities; administrators do not recognize any LGBTQ people without their disclosure and, therefore, feel no need to act" (Payne & Smith, 2018, p. 190).

Lugg (2003) writes of the history of heteronormativity and homogeneity evident in the role of school administrator, noting that as education became professionalized, the demographics of leadership and administration became "increasingly male, married, and ultimately, fiercely homophobic" (p. 61). The author goes on to explain that "educational administrators were and remain the enforcers of community and legal standards, and in many locations, this includes erasing any mention of LGBT issues, harassing and ignoring LGBT students...

and firing LGBT personnel” (p. 76).

Furthermore, teachers face a lack of professional development (PD) regarding LGBTQ+ issues (Kimmel, 2016; Payne & Smith, 2018; Pennell, 2017; Smith, 2015). Smith (2015) asserted that there is a considerable dearth of PD surrounding LGBTQ+ issues: “Most teachers are not educated about LGBTQ issues. They often claim that they do not know the correct ways to support LGBTQ students and parents, address homophobic behaviors and attitudes, or integrate LGBTQ identities into their curriculum” (p. 225). However, Kalinowski et al. (2019) explained that many different students are at a deficit in the classroom for a variety of language-based reasons as well, for example, and that teachers do not receive enough effective PD in order to adequately address these barriers. Therefore, given that the likelihood that a teacher has received PD on meeting a students’ needs decreases with each additional intersectional identity held by a student, and given the possibility of inviting community backlash when teaching PD on controversial topics, the burden gets placed on the teacher to independently research how to meet the needs of students with a wide range of challenges. Malm (2020) found that “teacher educators’ professional development is largely determined by intrinsic motivation. Positive aspects relate to feelings of self-esteem, nurturing meaningful relationships, and caring for students; negative aspects relate to concerns about a heavy workload, professional ambiguity and a lack of time for scholarly pursuits” (p. 351).

Payne and Smith (2018) examine administrators’ resistance to offering PD regarding how to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students. They argue that administrators often form their understanding of what it means to have a diverse school population, or judge whether they have a diverse school, based on what is seen, e.g., students from different ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic differences based on school data, or statistics based on religious or linguistic diversity within the community.

La Salle et al. (2019) found that students who self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were less likely to report positive answers to survey questions regarding their school’s climate and culture. In other words, students who identify as LGBTQ+ were found not to be able to engage with school resources or personnel as wholly or effectively as their heteronormative peers. This resulted in less engagement, more discipline, and less counseling support. According to Kosciw, et al. (2020), 59.1% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation, and 42.5% felt unsafe because of their gender expression. Additionally, many LGBTQ+ students reported avoiding clubs, functions, and other extracurricular activities, or even avoided school altogether, due to feelings of unease or lack of personal safety.

Additionally, The Trevor Project (2022), reported in their 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health, a survey of 44,828 LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 13-24, that “45% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth (53%) and 1 in 3 cisgender youth (33%),” and that 18% of surveyed youth between the ages of 13 and 17 attempted suicide during the same time frame (p. 5).

Wozolek (2018) refers to the point at which an LGBTQ+ student engages in self-harm or attempted suicide as “the break,” noting:

When schools react to the break, they do so by engaging with the school and community with positive thinking about how they might change school culture but rarely do so with an attention to personal responsibility. Therefore, there is a high degree of ethical responsibility for the witnesses to proactively become involved in the sociocultural norms and values that are central to the sounds of students breaking, particularly as it relates to schooling. (p. 378)

In other words, Wozolek (2018) makes the assertion that many administrators and teachers engage in thinking that by merely being optimistic that their minimal efforts to engage the LGBTQ+ students in their school as a seen minority, listen to the students affected by this marginalization, or utilize pre-existing policies in procedures established more as a legal scapegoat and not as a protective measure towards a vulnerable population of their school environments, they are, in fact, ‘dealing’ with the problem at hand, but in reality are not doing anything impactful.

To remedy this, Heasley and Crane (2010) suggest that “queer theory, queer research, and queer awareness can provide an impetus for schools to again take a leadership role in cultural change” (p. 11). Similarly, Pennell (2017) points to the need for a “queer pedagogy:” instead of focusing on merely the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students in heteronormative spaces, teachers and administrators must examine and challenge the underlying issues in the educational system that allow homophobic and transphobic environments to exist in the first place. This happens primarily through targeted PD that reveals how the traditional educational environment sets up heteronormative expectations from a young age, and these expectations are pervasive and ubiquitous throughout the child’s entire school career.

Pennell (2017) shared an approach to showing educational professionals just how pervasive this is through a PD session entitled “Heteronormativity Scavenger Hunt,” in which those in attendance are tasked with finding examples of heteronormativity within their school. Such examples given by the author include

posters for dances that only depict heterosexual couples, only gender-segregated bathrooms, gender-segregated clubs and sports, and personal pictures behind teachers' desks that only depict heterosexual couples. These examples can be non-tangible as well, such as overhearing staff ignore homophobic or transphobic comments. Teachers then discuss and compare the findings of their scavenger hunt activity, and PD then shifts to equipping teachers with actionable ways to consciously dismantle heteronormativity within their school's culture.

O'Donoghue and Guerin (2017) noted that while general unease towards discussing LGBTQ+ issues among teachers and students was a barrier to responding to and preventing homophobic or transphobic bullying, the lack of PD was a leading cause of this unease. Van Leent (2017) similarly reported, "Because of unclear policies and procedures, lack of pre-service and in-service training and lack of support from school administrators, teachers are left to grapple with their personal beliefs and school and wider community expectations in charting a way forward" (p. 451).

Research Questions

In order to investigate student perceptions among college-aged individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ as to what their experiences were while attending secondary school, a study was conducted to address this issue: What strategies can educators use to better engage and collaborate with LGBTQ+ teachers in order to assure that their unique needs and concerns are being addressed, regardless of the school's administrative policies regarding LGBTQ+ issues?

Three research questions guided the interviews:

1. How do LGBTQ+ students describe themselves and their experiences in secondary school?
2. How do LGBTQ+ students experience their teachers' effectiveness as inclusive educators and allies in the classroom?
3. What type of training and professional development do LGBTQ+ students believe is needed to ensure that school professionals have the confidence and skills needed to support an inclusive secondary school experience?

METHODS

To research the secondary school experiences of LGBTQ+ students, a study was conducted in which selected participants were interviewed utilizing a semi-structured open-ended format. Data was collected through

a phenomenological qualitative research design. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were collected from college-age individuals who identified as LGBTQ+ and resided in the Mid-Atlantic United States.

Participants

To attract participants to the study, a recruitment flyer was disseminated on the campus of the researcher's university. Participants that saw the recruitment flyer and then contacted the researcher were informed of the purpose of the study to ensure their fit and willingness to be considered for an interview. Not enough participants responded to the on-campus recruitment flyer, so snowball sampling was utilized to source more potential interviewees.

Twelve participants were selected for the study. While all participants identified as LGBTQ+, they represented a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities as well as secondary school types. The average age of participants was 21, with a median and mode of 20. Five subjects identified as cisgender, whereas seven participants identified as transgender, genderqueer, or nonbinary, or used more than one label to describe their gender identity. Five participants identified as being gay or lesbian, whereas six identified as being attracted to multiple genders or did not specify. Almost all the participants identified as attending secondary school in the suburbs, whereas one described their school's area as 'small town' and one described theirs as 'large city.' Whereas nine participants identified their ethnicity as only "white," one participant identified themselves as Hispanic, and two identified as being of mixed ethnicity.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, an Interview Protocol was followed for each participant. The interviews were conducted over Zoom (www.zoom.us). The protocol's interview questions were asked, with follow-up prompts given to gain more robust responses when necessary. Following the collection of all data, the recorded interviews were then transcribed by a third-party service. All transcriptions were anonymized prior to being sent out for transcription and double-checked against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. The researcher then coded all themes and sub-themes. The researcher kept a Researcher's Log for transparency and was audited by an outside auditor periodically to ensure trustworthiness. Themes that emerged in the data were organized and analyzed against existing literature.

In all, nine themes and 41 subthemes were identified in the data. This paper focuses on one of the identi-

fied themes, labeled “Heteronormativity.” A full analysis of the results, as well as a list of the Interview Protocol questions used, can be found in Mencarini (2022).

RESULTS

The topic of heteronormativity was reported by six out of twelve participants in the study. For example, one participant spoke of their middle school experience, explaining, “Everybody just assumes automatically you’re straight, so they don’t assume you could be anything else. So you don’t really try to be anything else, but it just didn’t feel natural.” This heteronormativity was either overt or unspoken but was felt by many participants and was often present in school policy or practice. For example, one participant told of their GSA’s struggle to change the color of the graduation gowns away from being divided by gender as was tradition: “The boys were in maroon, the girls wore white, and we had a huge thing... We finally got it changed after twelve years.”

Six participants mentioned feeling that their school experience exhibited an intolerance or lack of accommodation for non-cisgender student identities. For example, one participant noted that their school policies made it feel “like segregation at a certain point,” explaining that to them, it felt like administration was saying, “Well, we don’t have accommodations for you, so we’re just going to throw you over here, so we don’t have to think about it or address it.” However, they posit that the lack of accommodation creates a barrier to coming out, and that “you might find that you have more non-binary students if you start providing accommodations and being open and accepting to your students.” When a second participant decided to wear a chest binder, “people commented on it and then I never wore it after that.” Another participant described their peers’ sentiment at school, which caused them to experience “a huge panic attack for hours”: “I think...some of them...were viewing me as a woman who uses they/them pronouns and not actually nonbinary, and now this time they were viewing me as a woman who, you know, is a man.” A fourth participant described an interaction with their principal, who told them he had “never met a man pretending to be a woman before” and that he “didn’t know how many policies that he had set for trans men would apply to me” because of this. A fifth participant pointed out that there seemed to be a double standard within heteronormativity, wherein non-heterosexual identities were allowed, but non-cisgender identities were not:

Advocating for yourselves, talking about your identity—you know, you could be gay—but saying an identity, something like pan, people didn’t understand. Being trans wasn’t really understood. You got bullied for it...as long as you were quiet enough about it, you were allowed to be that and date other

people, but advocating for yourself was really pushed down on.

Five participants mentioned feeling that their school experience exhibited an intolerance or lack of accommodation for non-heterosexual student identities. One participant noted, “being gay was fine as long as you weren’t loud about it.” Another participant described their school’s dance policy, noting “you had to have a date and there were rules for who you could bring to the dance and who you couldn’t...you can [only] bring a date of the opposite gender.” Two participants specifically spoke about heteronormativity with regards to their health class. One noted that “anytime we talked about marriage or babies, it was always a regular couple between guys and women.” Another noted that “there wasn’t so much of a gay aspect to [health class]. It was...heteronormative...there wasn’t anything inclusive towards gays.”

Six participants mentioned the need for more queer issues to be discussed earlier and with more frequency in schools. This also includes increased PD for educators. One participant said, “I think talking with real trans people, maybe some sensitivity training, anything along those lines would be greatly helpful for teachers.” Another mentioned increased training “on a school policy level, making sure that teachers and students are aware of a non-discrimination policy and what it means for your employment and for consequences for students, if there’s any sort of harassment regarding gender identity.”

This also includes education for parents, community, and other stakeholders. One respondent noted, “I think that there should be more ways to educate...parents of students who could possibly come out or have already come out. There needs to be more resources for that because they also weren’t educated.” Another said, “I just think they need to not think of it as a taboo subject. I think there needs to be more discussion of LGBTQ things in class.” This is, according to another participant, because then schools would “be able to prevent uncomfortable and uneasy settling into them when they’re younger, [and] it’ll be easier for them to transition into who they are.” Mirroring this, another participant spoke of the need to “expose [all students] to the real world, and people are going to be LGBTQ. You can’t say they’re not real. We just need to treat it as if it’s a normal thing just as everything else is in school.” Lastly, as an instruction to teachers, one participant said, “Be supportive of their sexuality, be supportive of who they are...of their name...of their pronouns...support the kid for what situation they are in. They’re still exploring themselves. They’re still trying to figure out who they are and who they’re to be.”

Additionally, four participants discussed the need for school curricula to have more LGBTQ+ representation. One participant said that specific classes on LGBTQ+ history should be taught: “I would say there need

to be more classes specifically for LGBT history, LGBT policies, anything like that.” The other three participants mentioned inserting more overt LGBTQ+ content into other content areas. For example, one said, “I think they need to start implementing LGBTQ identity and education into the system in certain classes. We have required units when it comes to black history month. We don’t have anything for queer people.” Another mentioned the “Don’t Say Gay Bill” (Parental Rights in Education Act, 2022), suggesting that teachers who are prevented from overtly teaching LGBTQ topics could still find other ways of acknowledging LGBTQ+ identities within the classroom, such as “well, it’s an LGBTQ author, but we’re not focusing on that– wink, wink, nudge, nudge, you know?” Another participant spoke of using queer inclusion to combat hegemonic heteronormativity so that more diversity is represented in the classroom:

Everything that’s taught is heteronormative. And I feel like they don’t include the queer community. It’s like they don’t exist...I feel like if you just keep a heteronormative way of thinking, it’s going to stay that way and nothing’s going to change. I feel like if you actually start to put forth the effort that you want to change and put that into a curriculum for students, they would be open to it as well and they can be more knowledgeable of it.

Discussion

Watson (2021) writes, “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” (p. 5). In order to challenge this cultural hegemony, The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has adopted a set of standards aimed to increase educator awareness of these patterns of disenfranchisement in an attempt to ameliorate them. Pennsylvania’s amendments to Chapter 49 of Title 22 of the Pennsylvania Code (Certification of Professional Personnel, 2022) include the following provisions for CR-SE, adopted April 23, 2022:

Amendments to § 49.14(4)(i) require educator preparation program providers to deliver instruction that includes competencies, coursework, and field experiences in professional ethics and CR-SE, inclusive of mental wellness, trauma-informed approaches to instruction, cultural awareness, and technological and virtual engagement, for all educators. (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2022, p. 2455)

The Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium (PEDC) is a “grassroots organization of PK-12, higher

education, non-profit, and government leaders striving to increase the number of teachers of color as well as culturally-responsive and sustaining educators in Pennsylvania” (Center for Black Educator Development, 2021). In April 2021, PEDC released *The Pennsylvania Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education Competencies*, focused on the implementation of CR-SE. CR-SE is defined in the Pennsylvania Code as follows:

Education that ensures equity for all students and seeks to eliminate systemic institutional racial and cultural barriers that inhibit the success of all students in this Commonwealth—particularly those who have been historically underrepresented. CR-SE encompasses skills for educators including, but not limited to, approaches to mental wellness, trauma-informed approaches to instruction, technological and virtual engagement, cultural awareness, and emerging factors that inhibit equitable access for all students in this Commonwealth. (Certification of Professional Personnel, 2022)

Regarding CR-SE, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education approved the following statement in 2020:

Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education requires a genuine commitment to equity for all students. At the core of CR-SE is an anti-racist undertaking that aims to eliminate the systemic and institutional barriers that inhibit the success of all Pennsylvania’s students—particularly those who have been historically marginalized. A Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education encompasses skills for educators, including, but not limited to, approaches to mental wellness, trauma-informed approaches to instruction, technological and virtual engagement, and any factors that inhibit equitable access for all Pennsylvania’s students. (Cole-Malott et al., 2021, p. 2)

The nine PA CR-SE competencies encourage reflexivity: the process of questioning one’s own unexamined assumptions about a particular belief or set of beliefs. Reflexivity requires “the interrogation of implicit bias and actively countering those biases when and where they are identified. Reflexivity asks you to step away from your thinking and to determine how your actions, beliefs, and practices shape outcomes as an educator” (Cole-Malott et al., 2021, p. 3).

For example, Cole-Malott et al. (2021) delineate the following as a marker of Competency 3 of the PA CR-SE standards, “Design and Facilitate Culturally Relevant Learning that Brings Real World Experiences into Educational Spaces”:

Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Educators intentionally challenge their own beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors regarding the knowledge and backgrounds of dominant and non-dominant social groups. They think critically about the nuances of culture, identity, and other social markers and

how they manifest themselves in curricula and other educational materials, including visual and structural representations. (p. 8)

The PA CR-SE standards also apply to LGBTQ+ students as a historically marginalized identity group in need of equitable treatment under Chapter 49. For example, PA standard CRSE 1.A notes that an educator must “reflect on their own life experiences and membership to various identity groups (race, skin color, ethnicity, gender identity, age, nationality, language, class, economic status, ability, level of education, sexual orientation, and religion)” [emphasis added] (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022).

Therefore, administrators may wish to ensure that as they adopt the updates to 22 Pa. Code § 49.1 (Certification of Professional Personnel, 2022), they are making a conscious effort to include LGBTQ+ identities and voices in their curriculum and PD planning. This author recommends investigating options for PD that allow educators to challenge hegemonic heteronormativity as it has existed unencumbered and unchallenged for decades. As Pennell (2017) suggests, this can be done in small, actionable steps during district PD in-service days.

Aside from school administration’s efforts to incorporate CR-SE standards, teachers possess the ability to take immediate, actionable steps to address LGBTQ+ inequalities, as well as other intersectional issues, directly within their classroom. Every teacher can choose to examine their beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews and ask themselves questions about who is helped, hurt, or overlooked by their action (or lack of action) in every situation that arises within the classroom: such is the goal of reflexivity. As Dr. Myeshia Price, Senior Research Scientist at The Trevor Project, noted, “Although our data continue to show high rates of mental health and suicide risk among LGBTQ young people, it is crucial to note that these rates vary widely based on the way LGBTQ youth are treated” (The Trevor Project, 2022, p. 7).

If we apply the Gallup poll data from Jones (2022) to the current cohort of students in grades K-12, it can be assumed that a significant portion of any secondary school cohort will ultimately identify as something other than cisgender or heterosexual, whether or not they have processed this self-analysis yet at their current age. Because there is no predicting who in our classrooms will ultimately identify as LGBTQ+, nor can we predict the future as to how this identity will manifest with each individual, it is unlikely that we as educators can ever fully know how our day-to-day actions, words, and environments will impact the students that move through our care. Therefore, given our knowledge of intersectional issues, educators must choose to meet the needs of all students, regardless of personal beliefs or administration-orchestrated PD opportunities.

However, educators can also make several assumptions about the students in their class that have already come

to identify as LGBTQ+ from the available data and literature, and that these students may have experienced the following any number of times, or to any degree of severity:

- Lost friends when they came out, or live in a situation where relatives, communities, or even caregivers, are hostile towards their LGBTQ+ identities.
- Heard slurs directed at them, or have been the receiving end of pointed physical or verbal abuse due to their identity.
- Experienced bullying, harassment, or other abuse that they do not feel comfortable talking about for fear of retaliation, prejudice, or lack of action by people who could do something to stop it.

More broadly, educators can assume that there are students in their midst who are struggling with deep questions of identity and the uncertainty of what will happen if and when they voice these concerns out loud, even to a trusted individual.

In short, educators do not know what they do not know regarding their students. Choosing to enact practices that accept students for who they are and celebrate diversity lowers these barriers and allows for positive relationship growth with every student. Considering all the current legislation regarding LGBTQ+ identities in schools across the country, as well as the uncertainty about how policies moving forward will affect the expression of those identities or the individuals that espouse them, responsive and inclusive educators and administrators are needed more now than ever before. It is therefore both appropriate and timely that the CR-SE Standards adopted by PDE be utilized to ensure meeting the needs of all learners within the Commonwealth, including those who identify as LGBTQ+.

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Reflective Journaling for Educators' Social and Emotional Wellness

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that stress for teachers is prominent in today's educational system (Cigala et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2021; Hood, 2018; Jones et al., 2013; Schmoyer, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Stone, 2021). Additionally, the current educational system lacks appropriate support of care for teachers' social-emotional wellness to combat these stress-related issues (Herman et al., 2021; Schmoyer, 2020; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Stone, 2021). Utilizing reflective practice is one such strategy that can strengthen actions in stressful situations (Disu 2017; Jones, 2013; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018). The experiential learning theory focuses on the process of reflecting on experiences and transforming learning based on those reflections for new outcomes. This research explored educators' use of reflective journaling to understand their perceptions of utilizing this strategy to support their social-emotional wellness. By examining teachers' lived experiences, the study revealed qualities teachers develop to support their social-emotional wellness.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher stress is prevalent in today's educational systems in the United States and globally (Cigala et al., 2019; Herman, et al., 2021; Hood, 2018; Jones, et al., 2013; Schmoyer, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Stone, 2021). Teaching has been reported to be among the highest stress levels among occupational groups, the lowest level of job satisfaction, and one of the most stressful jobs in the United States, with teachers recounting unprecedented levels of stress several days a week, even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Herman et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2013, Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Stress factors can negatively impact teachers' Social-Emotional Wellness (SEW), resulting in absenteeism issues, attrition rates, and professional longevity (Hood, 2018; Steiner & Woo, 2021). Additionally, high levels of repeated stress lead to impaired quality of teaching and relationships (Herman et al., 2021; Hood, 2018; Stone, 2021).

The current United States educational system lacks the appropriate support of caring for teachers' SEW to combat stress-related issues such as working conditions, student concerns, and outside factors (Herman et al., 2021; Schmoyer, 2020; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Stone, 2021). Approaches to building teachers' SEW are most effective if they include ways of coping with stress (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). When teacher training includes an emphasis on behavioral and emotional factors that may influence teaching and learning, they are more prepared to create and promote a positive school climate (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Therefore, utilizing a strategy that includes the practice of reflecting upon areas of stress from the past is critical to reacting effectively in future challenging situations, including reflective teaching, mindfulness, and journaling (Disu, 2017; Jones, 2013; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018).

An example of this type of strategy is the use of reflective practices, like journaling, to persistently think about actions (Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018). Reflective practices involve critical thinking and the commitment to growth (Disu, 2017). Incorporating intentional reflection into daily practice allows for effective responses to reactions in challenging situations (Jones et al., 2013). This reflective process helps the practitioner to learn about and understand the self (Allan, 2018). After all, "Teaching is not about what you do but who you are and become" (Allan, 2018, p. 269).

Reflective Journaling for Teachers' Wellness

Although not widely studied or utilized currently within education, using a journal with a specific focus

on regulating and managing emotions has also been a tool for consideration (Kremenitzer, 2005). However, reflective journaling has been recommended as a method for improving overall mental health in many areas, according to the literature. Journal writing can be used as a tool for an individuals' wellbeing as a step to supporting well-being while reflecting on both their own personal and professional life. Journaling helps to identify important insights into personal thoughts and actions (Allan, 2018; 2019; Disu, 2017; Dreyer, 2017; Gall, 2021; Goodman, 2018; Kelly, 2020; Kremenitzer, 2005; Leon-Henri, 2021; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018).

Experiential Learning

David Kolb's theory of experiential learning focuses on the four stages of learning from experiences, including concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation for people to learn from their experiences. The learning cycle with reflection is the key to continued growth in learning from experiences (Morris, 2019; Peterson & Kolb, 2018; Stevens & Cooper, 2009).

The first phase of experiential learning involves the focus on a relevant experience for the person in question. The next phase of reflective observation involves the focus of how it relates to previous learning and understandings. In the third phase of abstract conceptualization, connections are made to previous learning and ideas to decide how to apply the knowledge toward new ideas and experiences. Lastly, those ideas are applied to something new in the active experimentation phase (Morris, 2019; Peterson & Kolb, 2018; Stevens & Cooper, 2009).

PURPOSE

Despite the increased stress that teachers are experiencing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, methods for managing stress that affect teachers' SEW are not readily available or utilized (Cigala et. al, 2019; Herman et al., 2021; Hood, 2018; Jones et. al, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Schmoyer, 2020; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Stone, 2021). In a recent Teacher Wellness Index Report, 27% of teachers stated that they do not discuss mental health issues with others, and 74 % had difficulty switching from their role as a teacher to relaxing (Kelly, 2020).

There is a lack of training to support teachers' SEW (Jones et al. 2013; Kelly, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Jones (2013) states that support for intervention of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in schools focuses exclusively on students, rather than teachers. Additionally, there is little support for implementing the SEL pro-

grams for students and less training for teachers about their own SEW (Hood, 2018; Jones, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

When teachers are “trained in the behavioral and emotional factors that influence teaching and learning in the classroom, they feel better equipped to...promote a positive learning climate” (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 142). However, many teachers feel unequipped in these areas involving building knowledge and skills in SEL for their job, and more specifically, for themselves (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Cigala et al. (2019) suggest most training that exists is often generic, focusing on themes rather than relating to specific everyday situations and practices.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, phenomenological study was chosen, due to the nature of the problem of processes and procedures of journaling needing to be explored (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Individuals who use journaling to support their social-emotional well-being needed to be empowered to share their stories to add to the body of knowledge surrounding both journaling and coping skills for supporting social-emotional wellness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This type of research allowed the researcher to understand the contexts and settings participants use to address problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Method and Design

As a phenomenological study, this research focused on “the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 25-26). The study involved everyday experiences of teachers’ practices as they used journaling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the focus was that of teachers reflecting on daily experiences and journaling those reflections to make meaning. The researcher sought a better understanding of the reflective process educators undergo to gain an understanding of their social-emotional wellness through journaling and perceptions of the process through interviews with participants.

Within phenomenological research, the focus was “concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many... perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). These essences were derived from reflections of participants’ experiences, leading to understanding for meaning making to grasp “the very nature” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75) of the phenome-

non of reflective journaling for SEW (Moustakas, 1994). During this process, the experiences of the participants were described rather than explained (Moustakas, 1994). Although the essence of the experiences of the phenomenon of reflective journaling for wellness was not exhaustive, they were examined and reflected upon to be understood.

As an in-depth phenomenological study, virtual interviews of six participants occurred for data collection. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested a range of three to 15 who have experienced the phenomenon. Using this small number of participants who have experienced the phenomenon of reflective journaling for Social-Emotional Wellness described the meaning more deeply. This ensured the quality and consistency of the data. Creswell and Poth (2018), “knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee” (p. 163). This attempted to ensure an understanding of the participants’ points of view. This approach required a more structured analysis of data. Additionally, the individuals chosen must have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This meant that participants chosen must have already used journaling for mental health in order to understand their experiences.

Interview Schedule

Interviews with participants were planned within a two-to-four-week window. Interviews were conducted virtually, allowing for more ease for participants, as virtual meetings generally require a less strict time frame than face-to-face meetings.

The focus of the interviews was to obtain specific data from individual participants, asking questions aligned with the study’s theoretical framework, experiential learning. Open-ended questions were used by the researcher, as they could “yield descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 120). Additionally, the researcher strived to talk very little beyond asking questions, therefore allowing participants to talk in excess about their experiences. Planned silence was used to allow participants time to reflect and determine the most significant information to share (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014).

Interview questions were chosen to examine participants’ reflections on their experiences, behaviors, feelings, and knowledge of the process of reflective journaling, (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, questions included both introductory and follow-up questions, with some deep probing questions as needed, (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014).

DATA ANALYSIS

First, field notes and answers to interview questions for each participant were summarized by highlighting sections, memoing notes of observations, and listening to the Voice memos while reading transcriptions, repeatedly. This process connected the voice to the words to listen for inflections of feelings and thoughts throughout the interviews.

A notebook was used to sketch out participants' answers to each question, sorting ideas from each participant based on the interview questions. These answers were and manually coded, then organized with comments and observations multiple times, horizontally, to ensure all thoughts and non-verbal impressions were accounted for. Notes were then rewritten vertically into a separate list, to look for commonalities for themes. This list was then rewritten multiple times to look for common threads as well as anomalies between the participants.

Validity and Reliability

Participants supported the validation of the study through member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this process, participants were asked to reflect on the data analysis and the accuracy that it is representative of their personal experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Adequate engagement in data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was also utilized. Throughout the interviews, participants were given adequate time to answer questions from different angles to reach saturation of findings.

FINDINGS

Participants for this phenomenological study were sought through posting on multiple educator Facebook group sites. Additionally, email and Twitter were added as ways to locate participants for the study. In all, six participants were located and agreed to participate. All are educators that currently journal for various reasons, but all journal for social-emotional wellness as part of their reflective journaling process. Although all are in the education field, a few do not follow the exact criteria originally proposed for the original study as K-12 educators. Participant 1 is a college professor, and Participant 4 and Participant 6 are currently in roles as principals (both principals are former K-12 educators). Participant-specific data presented in the research are represented in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant-Specific Data*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	F
Professional Role	College Professor	ELA Teacher	HS Math teacher	Principal; former teacher	ELA teacher	Principal; former teacher
Amount of Time Journaling	20+ years Since childhood	<5 years childhood, then adult	20+ years As Adult	<5 years As Adult	5-10 years As adult	20+ years Since Childhood

Theme-specific data presented in the research findings are represented in Table 2.

Table 2*Theme-Specific Data*

Initial	Posterity; Exploration	Self-improvement; reflection; Mental Health	Life experience; teaching	Life change; mental health	Teaching Ideas	Growth
Process/Techniq	Journal; free writing	Journal; free writing	Notepad; 4 questions	Gratitude & prompt journal	Journal; free writing; pictures, doodles, clippings	Electronic Day one App Prompts & Free write
Change in	X	X	X		X	X
Time of Day	Nighttime	Sporadic: as needed	Nighttime	Morning	Sporadic: as needed	1/ morning; 1/nighttime
Patterns Found	Self-improvement	organization	Mental Health	Mental Health	Mental health	Growth
Benefits	Implementing it daily	Self - Improvement	Mental Health	gratitude	growth	Mental health
Challenges	Action steps	Time to implement	N/A	Daily time	N/A	Time, where to start
Changes in Thinking	Focus on importance of	Strengthening writing & organization	Pause & Drink	Change thought patterns	Different angles	optimism
Changes in Action	daily writing	Love or writing led to teaching	Focus on positives	Focus on positives	Finding solutions	Negatives in journal only
Daily Use	X	X	X	X	X	X
Use for SEW	X	X	X	X	X	X
Use for teaching	X	X	X	X	X	X

When analyzing data, themes emerged based on the process in which questions were answered, aligned with the four stages of experiential learning theory. Findings related to these four areas include concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. For the concrete experience stage, findings related to the purpose and process of using reflective journaling. Within the reflective observation

stage, findings related to the benefits of journaling, and challenges to the process. For the abstract conceptualization stage, findings related to changes in ways of thinking and actions related to journaling. In the last stage, active experimentation, findings suggested several outcomes to wellness and impacts on teaching.

Several themes were discovered when inquiring about recommendations to others for reflective journaling for mental health. Participants discussed the importance of deciding and understanding personal purposes for journal writing. Determining these personal goals for reflective journaling leads to making the most appropriate decisions for the process. When asked about journaling techniques, Participant 1 answered the question by comparing it to the advice she had heard recently. “I’m not going to answer that for anyone. Because I believe that is a deeply personal thing. I’ll show you what I do. But I guarantee you’re going to do it differently.”

Participants also discussed the idea that because journals are personal there does not have to be one specific technique of what the writing should look like. Instead, they discussed the importance of the individual deciding the best methods for their purposes. Participant 4 suggested, “I would recommend a prompt book... something that you respond to. If you told me just to write every day, I wouldn’t know what to say.” All participants within the study discussed the importance of having a consistent routine with daily journal writing and in a posture that best works for the individual. The processes of journaling for each participant were unique and personal, each stressing the importance of individuals deciding their own best techniques based on goals and timelines.

One aspect that all individuals mentioned was the necessity for daily writing to have it successfully support goals. Additionally, several suggested having writing be part of a routine, by writing at the same time each day. Participant 2 suggested, “take time for [yourself]...sit in a comfortable place...and just block out the sound, if possible.” It was also mentioned by several participants that the amount of time used for writing does not need to be extensive. Participant 5 suggested determining “what’s manageable for you and your life and your timeline.” Some mentioned writing for five to ten minutes, while others mentioned writing one line a day. Participant 3 stated, “it doesn’t have to be long...you don’t have to write a book.” Participant 2 stressed the importance of not censoring yourself in your writing.

For the reflection aspect, participants recommended determining what the writing says to you and how it can help you in decision-making and future thoughts and actions. All participants discussed using journaling for teaching. Participant 6 suggested “marking after lessons and reflections because that form of journaling is a way to apply these skills to our profession that will benefit the children and...help us to become better educa-

tors for them.” All educators discussed the importance of journaling for social-emotional wellness. Participant 5 suggested, “take time to sit back and sift through...see where you can apply it...what is it saying to you?”. Participant 2 stated, “see how you’ve changed and grown...and dealt with different emotions and experiences. You know what works and what didn’t work, and you can better adjust for the future.”

The researcher explored educators’ use of reflective journaling to understand their perceptions of adopting this strategy to support their social-emotional wellness. Data analysis identified themes related to recommendations for journaling, including the need for journaling with purpose, process, and timing for it to be successful. Each of these major themes included in the research findings was discerned in all six interviews. All six participants interviewed cited the use of journaling to support their teaching. Additionally, all six participants cited the use of journaling to support their social-emotional wellness.

Additional themes emerged from the research including patterns found during reflection, benefits of journaling, challenges in journaling, changes in thinking patterns, and changes in action. Patterns from participants’ reflective process included utilizing reflection as a method for participants to “get thoughts out”, “feel better”, to know “where I’m going and where I’m coming from” and to “see...growth over...time” both in the day to day and during major life changes. All participants in the study noted patterns upon reflection of their journals that they used reflective journaling practice to work through thoughts, feelings, and changes to get back to focusing on required tasks.

Several benefits were discussed by participants including utilizing journaling to deal with stress, both personally and professionally, as well as a balance between the two. Participants in the study discussed using their journals to stay mentally healthy in thoughts and actions by finding areas of positivity, gratitude, and even prayer. Within this study, participants discussed changes in thinking by focusing on positive thoughts, conversations, and actions rather than negative known or unknown struggles. Participants shared ways of utilizing their journals to focus on innovations, brainstorming future teaching endeavors, as well as coaching through ideas. Others noted using journaling to support personal growth and ideas to share through professional development concerning ways to benefit their students. Participants in the study expressed the use of journaling to manage their anxiety, help themselves to feel better, see positives, create optimism, feel whole, have a place to think, keep themselves sane, help with sleep, and have a sense of calm.

Findings from the present study can serve to further inform literature regarding the importance of journaling for social-emotional wellness.

FINDINGS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Teacher stress is prevalent in our educational systems today, both in the United States and globally (Cigala et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2021; Hood, 2018; Jones et al., 2013; Schmoyer, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Stone, 2021). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching has been reported to be one of the most stressful jobs in the United States, (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Forty six percent of teachers reported high levels of daily stress, and 78% reported being physically, emotionally, and mentally drained by the end of the week (Stone, 2021). Seventy three percent of teachers claimed to be stressed “often,” 24% “sometimes,” and not one teacher said “never” (Hood, 2018). Another study claimed one in four teachers reported depression symptoms, as well as nearly one in four teachers stated the likelihood of leaving their jobs by the end of the 2020–2021 school year (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Lastly, in comparison to employees at other jobs reporting frequent job-related stress at 40%, 78% of teachers reported the same stress (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Unfortunately, the current United States educational system lacks support for teachers’ SEW to combat these stress-related issues (Herman et al., 2021; Schmoyer, 2020; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Stone, 2021).

Therefore, it is critical to identify and promote coping strategies for educators to turn to for combating these issues. This may be a recommendation for directors of teaching and learning, professional development coordinators, administrators, and student teaching supervisors to use within training and support of both new and experienced teachers for social-emotional wellness. Supportive practices are more effective when they include ways of coping with stress (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Reflective practice was found to be a critical strategy in supporting coping for effectively responding to future decision-making and actions (Disu, 2017; Jones, 2013; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018). Additionally, the reflective process helps to learn about and understand the self (Allan, 2018). Journaling is one such method of reflective practice that can support both outcomes (Allan, 2018; Disu, 2017; Jones, 2013; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018).

This study displayed a variety of outcomes of participants’ perceptions of utilizing reflective journaling to intentionally support their social-emotional wellness. Participants found several similar strategies when reflecting on their use of reflective journaling that should be noted. For the implication of this practice, having a personal purpose or goal for journaling is crucial, even though it may change over time. Additionally, practitioners should decide the process that works best for them when using reflective journaling, which may also change over time. No matter the purpose or process, implications suggest that it is worth the attempt to use reflective journaling to support social-emotional wellness for educators. All participants shared benefits, changes

in ways of thinking and actions, positive outcomes to wellness, and impacts on teaching. Although a few shared the challenge of finding the time to devote to the practice, they also shared the importance of doing it anyway.

LIMITATIONS

As a phenomenological study, this exploration focused on “the experience itself”, involving everyday occurrences of teachers’ practices as they use journaling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25-26). The purpose of this study was to understand the reflective process educators undergo to gain an understanding of their social-emotional wellness through journaling and perceptions of the process through interviews with participants. Therefore, it was crucial to find only participants that met these qualifications. Due to the specific nature of the requirements needed to meet the qualifications in this type of study, multiple sites could be utilized (Creswell, & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, even with the search within multiple sites, it was difficult to find participants. Several Facebook groups were sought, as well as adding in Twitter and email requests for participants. This showed a lack of educators either willing or having time to be interviewed. Therefore, the first possible limitation of the study may be the lack of appropriate participants revealed in the study and that only female participants responded to the request to participate.

Due to the nature of phenomenological research, the focus of this study was “concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many...perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (Moustakas, 1994, p.58). These essences were to be derived from understanding participants’ experiences, for meaning making (Cresswell & Poth, 2018) of the phenomenon of reflective journaling for SEW (Moustakas, 1994). As stated previously, within the search for participants, there was a possible limitation of perspectives from all facets of teaching. Examples of these perspectives are the lack of participants from other countries besides the United States, a lack of diversified participants, as well as participants that teach in elementary school or preschool. Additionally, a more diversified pool of participants would have allowed for greater knowledge affected by cultural, ethnic, and gender roles and perspectives. Having participants from these different outlooks would have provided a wider range of viewpoints.

CONCLUSIONS

Being an educator comes with the overarching responsibility of being on the frontlines of decision-making and care that affects the future of our country and world. In today’s educational climate, teachers are com-

bating a substantial number of stressors in addition to the daily tasks ascribed, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. With these stressors and pressures, it is crucial to find ways to prevent and combat the negative effects that arise for our educators that impede best teaching practices. The United States educational system is not currently equipped with supporting our teachers with these escalating concerns. Therefore, we must seek methods to equip our teachers with tools and techniques to cope with their current realities. The use of reflective journaling of experiences within teaching and in the daily lives of educators is one such method that has been found to be successful (Allan, 2018; Disu, 2017; Dreyer, 2017; Ganado, 2021; Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Kremenitzer, 2005; Leon-Henri, 2021; Mohn, 2021; Montoya & Summers, 2021; Stevens & Cooper, 2009; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018).

Within the experiential learning theory, reflection is key to making meaning of experiences in the learning process (Disu, 2017; Morris, 2019; Peterson & Kolb, 2018; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). This cyclical process is continuous within our daily lived experiences. “Everything [in life] begins and ends in the continuous flux and flow of experience” (Kolb, 2009, p. 4). Using reflective journaling allows the writer to process these experiences productively. One participant stated, “my goal is to live out my life on paper.”

Journaling can be seen as an “inner dialogue, connecting actions, thoughts, and feelings” and “having a relationship with your mind”. (Goldberg, 1986, as cited in Ackerman, 2021, para.8; Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Participants stated examples of this internal relationship and dialogue beautifully.

- “I am transported when I am writing in this journal.”
- “A lovely place to go is in your journal.”
- “I am IN the journal.”
- My journal is “a way to talk to a friend”
- I am “most open in a journaling scenario and share all of my feelings.”

Writing down experiences helps to focus more clearly on the words and the meanings of those experiences (Leon-Henri, 2021). One participant shared how she believes the kinesthetic aspect of journaling helps to relieve stress. Another noted her mission of expelling negative energy through the writing process itself.

Prioritizing well-being with tools like journaling allows people to reflect on their personal and professional life, leading to many various positive outcomes, rather than negative effects that lead to stress, burnout, and other mental health conditions. These include the ability to manage emotions, feelings, and experiences, feeling calmer, decreasing stress levels, drops in depression and anxiety, better sleep, and increasing positivity,

social engagement, and building relationships (Allan, 2018; Bateman, 2021; Cigala et al., 2019; Disu, 2017; Dreyer, 2017; Gall, 2021; Goodman, 2018; Kelly, 2020; Kremenitzer, 2005; Leon-Henri, 2021; Nagy, 2017; Penning, 2018; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018). Participants in the study expressed the use of journaling to manage their anxiety, get themselves to feel better, see positives, create optimism, feel whole, have a place to think, keep themselves sane, help with sleep, and have a sense of calm.

According to Quinn (2020), “when something happens to us, we do not experience all of it at once. Experiencing is a process that takes place over time” (para. 4). This can be a positive or negative concept, depending on the experience. If the experience is negative, using the reflective process allows you to problem-solve and create solutions. Eden stated regarding the reflective process, “getting it out there just lets you think through it, unpack it, and then act on what you unpacked” to find solutions. To do this well, one must focus intently on the act of reflecting. As Mary Parker Follett once said, “Concepts can never be presented to me merely, they must be knitted into the structure of my being, and this can only be done through my own activity” (Follett, 1930, as cited in Peterson & Kolb, 2018, p. 226).

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**Focus on Relationships:
A Foundation for Minimalism in Our Schools**

Christine Köstlin • C.Y. Arnold • Tammy Musiowsky-Borneman

When considering a minimalistic approach to education, you may wonder about a good place to start your journey, or if this approach is even possible in such a cluttered profession. In the book, *The Minimalist Teacher*, we propose that teachers consider their purpose, what priorities are needed to meet the purpose, and what can be pared back. Our purposes in teaching can be many and varied. Young adults entering the profession may be beginning their careers in education because they have an interest in a subject, wish to share knowledge, or want to contribute to society (Munthe et al., 2022). Mid-career adults tend to spend less time in the distractions and minutia of teaching such as intensive lesson planning than their younger counterparts and focus more on the people in front of them (Shin et al., 2023). This may change depending on where one is in their current context and season of life.

Possibly the greatest purpose that keeps us focused on why we chose the education profession is relationship building. At its heart, teaching is a service profession and one that is grounded deeply in the people that we work with. Bahr and Mellor (2016) describe teaching as "...a role that...serves society for the greater public good" (p. 25). Concurrent to this, a meta-analysis conducted by Hattie's (2022) Visible Learning research places teacher-student relationships in the category of "potential to accelerate student achievement" with an effect size of 0.48 (the researchers found that influences above 0.4 were impactful on student learning). Yet, the above-mentioned research has also shown that nearly half of all teachers believe that they as unique individuals do not matter and are replaceable within their classrooms. The question that arises for us then is: How can we purposefully serve society if we neglect the importance of building relationships with those around us? In our teaching profession, experience has shown us that we are continuously adding more and more tasks to our already busy task lists. However, we argue that relationship building is not adding another task, but rather, a re-prioritization of the foundation of what we do each day. It is the anchor to effective teaching and learning in our schools. When situations are challenging, and when others ask for your commitment and connection in the most unloving of ways, it can feel hard to continue investing in the relationship. But the good news is that it is not a hard task.

Three Strategies to Invest in Relationships

How can we anchor our purpose when other items feel like priorities? Sometimes, investing the time we need to spend with our students and colleagues feels less important than other tasks on our to-do lists. However, we need to return to the necessity of these relationships. When our purpose is clear and valued by the communi-

ty, we can create a strong relationship culture. Here we can offer three ways to ensure this occurs:

1. Relax

Relaxing in general has strong physical and mental benefits. Relaxing and relationships may sound like a contradictory pair of words because we know how much time, energy, and effort must be invested in relationships to make them positive and safe. But what do we mean by relaxing into relationships? We are not suggesting that you fill your calendar with socials and coffee dates, or endless days of lunch with the teacher. Think about a less-is-more approach here. Through the development of the teacher's role, we associate everything that comes down to job requirements with the feeling that we have to deliver something - content, a task, a product. That does not apply here. Here, we need to realize that relationships do not develop instantly. They take time to grow into something that will provide people with what they need to feel safe. It becomes a beautiful process of growth. Relaxing means allowing relationships to develop naturally over time and at their own pace (Forbes Coaching Council, 2020) which can feel counterintuitive to the short amount of time we feel we have in a school year with our students. But relationship nurturing cannot be forced, personally or professionally. We must relax and enter a stage of allowing and showing a level of care that others can see as genuine. Studying theories of relationships beforehand or mastering certain tools is not required. When you keep in mind that you can build interactions naturally, you can relax. Less is more.

When considering how to relax into this less-is-more approach to relationships, we suggest that during your daily commute, you reflect on the time spent connecting with students and staff. Have you been able to make any tiny steps on the road to building relationships with those around you? A nod in the hallway, sharing a laugh by the coffee machine, or letting someone in front of you at the photocopier all contribute to building those connections without adding more to your plate.

2. Be You. Authentically you.

Having conversations with your students and colleagues about teaching and learning is part of daily life as an educator. However, it is possible to also offer insight into who you are and what you value. There are elements of our personalities that we cannot disassociate from because it is inherently who we are. These are the elements our students and colleagues need to learn about us to create connections. Our brain is wired to look for human connection. Our species is designed to connect and collaborate. Michael Platt, Ph.D., a biological anthropologist from the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine states that:

...we have the most complex and interesting social behavior out of all animals...

This social behavior is a critical part of our adaptive toolkit. It allows us to come together and do things that we wouldn't be able to do on our own. (Sukel, 2019)

Meaningful human connections will not be authentic if we merely play a role or are disingenuous.

Students are interested in who we are. They have so many questions and ask them at inopportune times. They are not asking to offend us. They want to know us. They are curious about this person that they spend a significant amount of time with almost every day; someone that offers support to them, asks them questions, listens to their ideas, and shares their thoughts. Allow time to let students know when something is on your mind.

Knight (2016) writes about being present when we are seeking to strengthen the emotional connections in our relationships. There are opportunities to teach empathy when you share that you had a difficult conversation with a friend the night before, and maybe you feel upset. Or you are still giggling about the chat you had in the staff room and you are feeling really good about it. These moments can be pivotal to strengthen connections.

All these feelings and actions are natural and we each experience them in some way. How you express, manage, and communicate your feelings and emotions with your students is an essential part of creating those bonds.

They will observe how you handle those feelings, so refrain from hiding or pretending that you are unaffected by something sad or funny. When your actions and words align, your students see who you are, and that fosters connection.

How do you know who you truly are? We tread cautiously when advising someone to be authentically themselves because this is a high-level internal task. However, to find out more about yourself, on a deeper level, we invite you to do a short meditation activity to release yourself from distractions. The first step to finding out what is going on inside your mind is to do nothing but listen to your thoughts. This will provide insights for you. It might seem easy for some and very challenging for others, however, we suggest starting with just five minutes per day. View this as a five-minute gift to yourself and perhaps add a minute each day to get to know yourself better. This task allows you to observe what is happening in your mind. You will be surprised about what you will learn about yourself and what you can bring to the relationships you are growing and nurturing.

3. Be Mindful.

Know your purpose. Hattie (2015) says, more important than knowing what we are doing is to know why. What do you know about your values? Have you ever really explored what they are? We may hold different values in different areas of our lives but think here about your values in your work life. What is of top importance to you?

In addition to our values, we are also influenced by what we believe. What are your beliefs about the school you work in, your colleagues, and your students? How about yourself, as an individual and as a teacher? Our values and beliefs are the foundation of the mindset attitude we bring with us. They have a tremendous influence on why you are doing things and doing things in a specific way. You are carrying your values and beliefs with you all the time. When there are conflicts or irritations at school, with colleagues or students, it often boils down to a conflict of values. Our values and beliefs determine our motives and intentions. Everything we say or do sends a message whether we plan it or not. You cannot not communicate. What we communicate to one student in a class is in some way communicated to everyone.

Take a plain piece of paper and draft a mind map. In the center of your mind map put the word “workplace”. Add values that are important for you in this context. You may choose to look at some popular value lists to help you identify yours. Having worked through this process a few times, you will know what your values are because they will resonate with you. Choose 10 to 15 initially and then narrow those down to the most important three to five values. Repeat the same task with the word “relationships” in the center of your mind map. Compare your three to five core values of both areas. Knowing what is truly important to you will help you to detect the core reason behind your decisions and actions. Being mindful to understand and know your why refocuses us on our ability to invest the time needed into relationships with those in our community.

Final Thoughts

The three tips above will aid us in beginning to build strong foundations of relationships in our school contexts. By not adding more tasks, but instead, relaxing, being you, and being mindful, we can have a sustainable approach to putting this effort into purposefully growing relationships. Once we have worked on building relationships, what could it then look like? How might we benefit in the long term? Strong relationships create a foundation of trust and respect. In this way, we can increase the positive interactions we have daily. Alongside this, we will be decreasing the focus on the negative. Strong relationships can also have an impact on student achievement and a culture of strong relationships will ultimately lead to more trust among stakeholders. Undoubtedly, the effort we extend in building relationships will be returned to us in the evolution of a working environment we all want to be a part of. Bringing our attention back to the relationships around us will bring us back to the purpose we have in our work. Each and every day.

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