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Exploring Aspiring K-12 School Leaders' Understanding of Culturally Responsive School Leadership

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Abstract

This qualitative document analysis study analyzed 13 aspiring school leaders' assignments to explore their understanding of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL). A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze their papers, and five themes emerged. These were (1) leading by example, (2) showing care and support, (3) enhancing teachers' capacity, (4) ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and (5) building teacher-student relationships. The findings of this study showed that aspiring school leaders need more research-based strategies to lead their future schools using CRSL approaches. This study suggested that leadership preparation programs implement praxis-based learning and simulation to prepare future school leaders, arguing for collaborative work among school districts and leadership preparation programs in preparing CRSL.

Keywords: aspiring leader, culturally responsive school leadership, school leader

Introduction

Society establishes schools to serve the purpose of educating children. During the colonial era in the United States, the occupiers established schools to teach their children the Bible and societal roles. Then they started formal schooling in the newly established colony, forcing Eurocentric education on the colonized people (May & McDermott, 2021). According to Powell (2019), when the U.S. became independent, one of the founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, promoted education to develop individuals to run the government and perform civic duties. Another founding father, Benjamin Franklin, encouraged education for running

businesses. Later, Horace Mann of Massachusetts advocated for a common school to educate all members of society. Thus, the purpose of education depends on societal needs (Goldin, 1999). The school leaders (i.e., principals/assistant principals) are the most critical individuals who can implement society's agenda in the schools.

The current school community demographics in the U.S. differ greatly from those in colonial times. Now schools have a more diverse student population who are different in race, gender, culture, language, and socioeconomic status (Nishina et al., 2019). According to the United States Census Bureau (2015), culturally and linguistically diverse students would increase by up to 50% by 2020. Then the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023a) student data showed that in 2021, 22.4 million students were White out of 49.4 million enrollments in K-12 schools. Therefore, more than 50% of students were from non-White ethnicities. But NCES (2023b) teacher data showed that in 2021, 80% of public-school teachers were White. The questions arise: How do these teachers serve students from various racial ethnicities? How do these teachers guide students in following those students' cultures? The school leaders need to guide these teachers to serve every single student, but the challenge is that the school leaders are still rooted in a Eurocentric academic paradigm (Khalifa et al., 2019).

Therefore, the leaders cannot help classroom teachers break the Eurocentric monocultural structure that has existed for centuries. As a result, the schools cannot effectively serve diverse students of the multicultural society. Students from non-White ethnicity find themselves inferior as the established system alienate them. The purpose of schooling does not work here as the schools' activities do not reflect the diverse school community. The structural inequality that exists for the racial, gender, and socioeconomic minority student populations, leads to unequal outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2013). These unequal academic outcomes have been increasing the

achievement gaps among students based on race as the school leaders fail to show just leadership for each student as research shows that poor leadership directly impacts students' academic achievement and performance (Day et al., 2020; Goddard et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020; Naidoo, 2019; Netolicky, 2020).

Gümüş et al. (2022) discovered reasons for the achievement gap between White and other students; they found that the school leaders could not show just leadership in a school, and thus students from marginalized backgrounds had poor outcomes in math, science, and reading. The underserved student population is deprived of equal education rights due to the school leaders' unjust leadership. Lash and Sanchez (2021) argued that school leaders should work with the community to meet the needs of each student to reduce the achievement gap. Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) said that school leaders should remove structural barriers for the marginalized student population and implement Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to reduce the achievement gap in diverse schools.

School leadership matters for student achievement (Wu & Shen, 2022). To reduce the achievement gap, school leaders must remove the opportunity gap, change school culture, and break the structural inequalities to create safe and equal space for each student. Unfortunately, many school leaders are morally distressed as they know the right actions to take for their students but do not do them as they accept the external pressure to implement a particular group's agenda (Stelmach et al., 2021). As a result, students from diverse communities do not get the opportunity to learn in a safe and free environment. These students often consider themselves inferior because they do not feel valued and welcomed in school. To be a leader for all students at a school in a diverse community, leaders need to serve the diverse needs of the diverse students (Okilwa et al., 2021). The school leaders must be connected with the school

community and be a part of the community. Mayger and Provinzano (2022) identified school leaders as community leaders to show Culturally Responsive School leadership for the school and the community.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)

The concept of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CSRL) encompasses a broad spectrum of leadership behaviors that influence school culture, structure, and teacher efficacy with the aim of enhancing student outcomes. Khalifa et al. (2016) describe CSRL as a form of leadership behavior that has an impact on school culture structure and teacher effectiveness to improve students' outcomes. Similarly, according to Arar et al. (2019), CSRL is characterized by a leadership style that upholds high standards for all students while empowering diverse and marginalized students and their families. In addition, Hollowell (2019) argues that CSRL involves the role of the school leader in fostering inclusive practices across racial and socio-economic differences. Meanwhile, Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) emphasize that CSRL promotes equity in racially and linguistically diverse schools through attentive care and the cultivation of relationships within the school community.

Similarly, Genao (2021) defined CSRL as actions of school leaders that equitably benefit teachers' and students' cultures in teaching and learning. This means that culturally responsive school leaders strive to integrate and respect diverse cultural backgrounds in educational practices to create an inclusive learning environment. Johnson (2006) found that school leaders who demonstrated CSRL acted as public intellectuals, curriculum innovators, and social activists within the school community. This involvement led to positive changes in the school community by addressing cultural and social issues, promoting innovative teaching methods, and advocating for social justice. Viloria (2019) defined CSRL as a leadership practice that involves leveraging

student and community cultural wealth to impact students' success and foster their agency. This suggests that culturally responsive school leaders recognize and utilize the cultural assets present in students and their communities to promote academic achievement and empower students in their educational journey. In summary, Culturally Responsive School Leadership encompasses leadership behaviors that honor and leverage diverse cultural backgrounds, promote social activism and innovation in education, and empower students through the recognition of their cultural wealth.

Foster (2023) said that to understand each student and to show empathy and care, school leaders must embrace CRSL, and this kind of support can bring a positive result to underserved students' academic achievement. The school leader must be a leader for each student, teacher, staff, and parent. Leaders must understand and value students' individual cultures to create an inclusive school culture. When students from an underserved community feel loved and welcomed, this school culture will motivate each of them to engage in learning. Peterson (2022) found that school leaders must validate diverse students' cultures to meet their needs and give them equal opportunities to grow up academically and socially. As a school community member, each student deserves the appropriate opportunity to learn and thrive regardless of their identity. Encouraging each student and engaging their voices in the school community is essential to establish an inclusive school environment (Hollowell, 2019). Thus, it is essential for each school leader to show and implement CSRL in their schools.

People who aspire to be school leaders attend preservice leadership preparation programs in universities to earn a degree in school leadership for administrative (i.e., assistant principal/principal) certification. The programs teach them about school leadership styles, strategies, and implication policies. They then implement their learning during their tenure as

school leaders. Mette (2022) said preservice leadership preparation programs should develop aspiring leaders' sociocultural awareness to help them deal with culturally diverse school environments. Thus, leadership preparation programs can have a significant impact on school leadership. Yamashiro et al. (2022) argued that leadership preparation programs must develop Culturally Responsive School Leaders for the diverse student population.

Purpose Statement

This study aimed to investigate how aspiring school leaders perceive and utilize culturally responsive and socially just leadership (CRSL) during their preparation for a leadership program. It delved into the strategies employed by aspiring leaders and their potential impact on future schools. The study's findings hold great promise for enhancing the training of aspiring leaders within the program. Additionally, the outcomes can play a crucial role in assisting school districts in establishing a leadership pipeline that prioritizes CRSL in their educational institutions.is study focused on aspiring leaders' CRSL strategies and their implications for their future schools. The findings of this study can be beneficial for the leadership preparation program faculty members as they prepare aspiring leaders. The results will also benefit school districts by creating a leadership pipeline focusing on CSRL for their schools.

Theoretical Framework

Khalifa (2021) identified four basic principles of CRSL from his two-year ethnographic research, and these are (a) being critically self-reflective, (b) developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curricula, (c) promoting inclusive and anti-oppressive school environments and (d) engaging parents and community contexts. Khalifa (2021) described critical self-reflection as a leader's critical analysis of their own work in school. The leader must

know who they are, about the people they serve and analyze how they are doing. The leaders must develop teachers' knowledge and skills of diverse cultures and culturally responsive pedagogy and incorporate various learning materials in curricula. Leaders must be aware of the structural inequalities that negatively affect the education of students of color and how to remove those barriers to promote an inclusive school environment. Khalifa (2021) emphasized home-school relationships. This means that leaders must recognize the family community as equal partners in students' learning to connect family and community in school activities. This study used Khalifa's (2021) four principles as a framework to examine whether the aspiring school leaders had an understanding of those areas to show CRSL.

Research Question:

What CRSL strategies or dispositions do the aspiring leaders identify, and how do they plan to implement them in their future schools?

Method

The data for this article was based on aspiring school leaders' written responses about CRSL. Thus, a Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) was used for this study. QDA is a systematic review of printed and/or electronic records to examine and interpret to infer meaning, develop understanding, and produce empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Morgan (2022) identifies QDA as a reliable research method because it enables the researcher to analyze various types of documents to discover latent and explicit meanings from the studied documents. According to Wach and Ward (2013), QDA is a research method that systematically and rigorously analyzes written documents impartially and consistently. Mackieson et al. (2019) describe QDA as a more dependable method among the qualitative methods to conduct research where the researchers have a minimal scope to show bias. Wood et al. (2020) define QDA as a

qualitative approach that elicits meanings from documents using careful and structural reading of the documents. QDA was used as the sole research method, as its only source of data was documents.

Data Collection

The data was originally a written assignment for a course in the Educational Administration and Supervision program (i.e., a K-12 school leadership preparation program) at a university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The program has two credential options: Master of Science Degree (36 credits) and Post-Master Certificate (18 credits). The candidates who aspire to be school administrators or leaders must have a teaching license and at least three years of classroom teaching experience to get admitted to this program. If the candidates already have a master's degree, they can do the Post-Master Certificate program. Upon successfully completing the program, the candidates earn Administration I certification (i.e., Assistant Principal) and need to take the Praxis II exam to be a principal.

The assignment was for a course about school leadership. The question was as follows: "Describe at least four leadership strategies with examples showing Culturally Responsive School Leadership practices. How will you motivate the teachers and staff in your school to practice your strategies?" The instructor provided resources such as Brown et al. (2022), Johnson (2007), Khalifa et al. (2016), Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012), and Rheaume et al. (2021). The candidates could use any resources and submitted their responses in the program's Learning Management System. After the semester, one of the researcher's course instructors earned Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and asked permission from the candidates to use their papers in research. Thirteen out of 15 candidates permitted use of their documents. The list of

candidates is given in Table 1 with their pseudonyms. All the candidates were in the Post-Master

Certificate program. To keep their identities anonymous, pseudonyms were used.

Table 1

Participant List

Name	Experience (Years)
Amsterdam	21
Brasilia	14
Cairo	10
Dubai	13
Edinburgh	15
Fuji	27
Havana	14
Kyiv	23
London	27
Madrid	6
Manila	21
Panama	14
Sydney	12

Data Analysis

This study used QDA as a method, and documents were the only data source. Therefore,

an inductive thematic analysis was used to finalize themes and infer generalizations from data.

The researcher adopted Applied Thematics Analysis (ATA) from Mackieson et al. (2019).

Mackieson et al. (2019) originally developed the framework of ATA to analyze Victorian

Parliamentary debates. The framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Applied Thematic Analysis
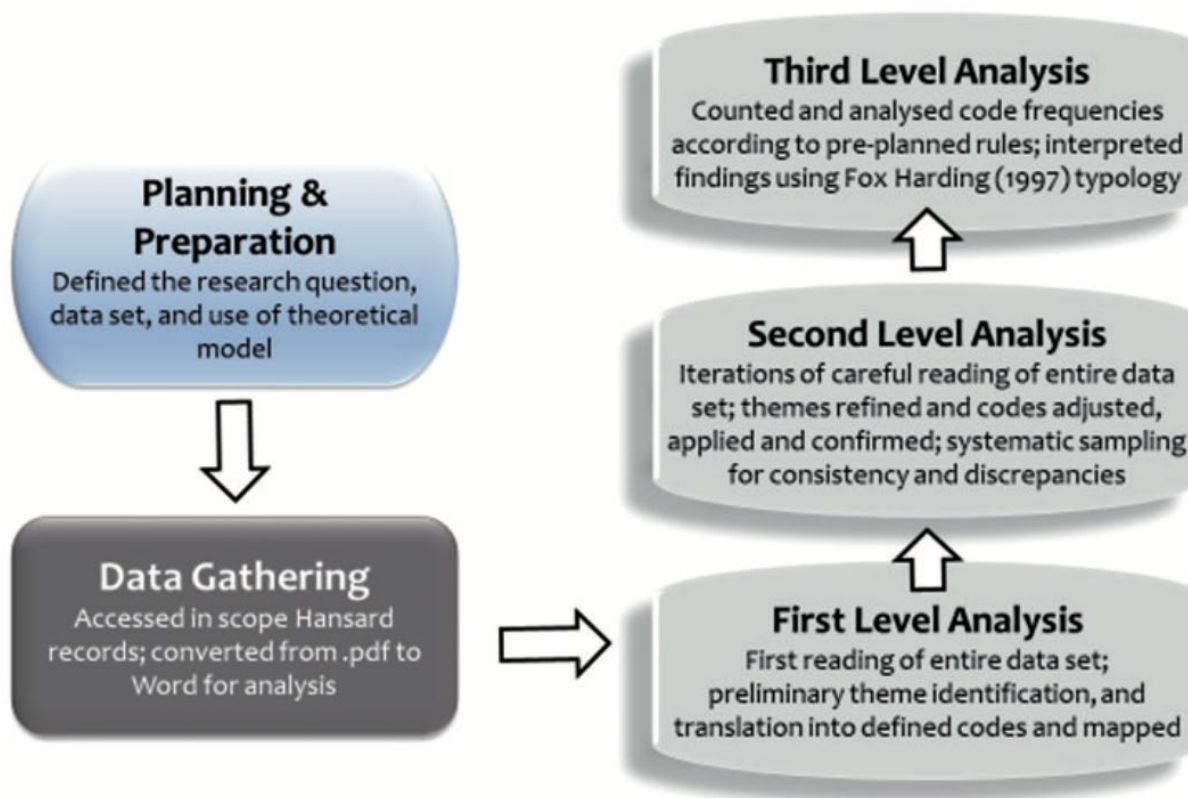
Source: Mackieson et al., 2019

The framework in Figure 1 shows a five-step process: planning and preparation (research design), data gathering (collecting documents), first-level analysis (identifying initial themes), second-level analysis (categorizing themes), and third-level analysis (finalizing themes). Adopting this framework, the researcher developed a four-step framework to analyze the data and finalize themes. These were: gathering documents, first-level reading (identifying initial themes), second-level reading (categorizing themes), and finalizing themes (counting frequency).

Figure 2

Finalizing Process of Themes

```
Gathering
documents      →   Collecting documents.

First-level
reading        →   Reading each document carefully and identifing
                   possible themes.

Second-
level          →   Re-reading each document, adjusting, and
reading            categorizing themes.

Finalizing
themes         →   Counting the frequency of each theme and
                   finalizing.
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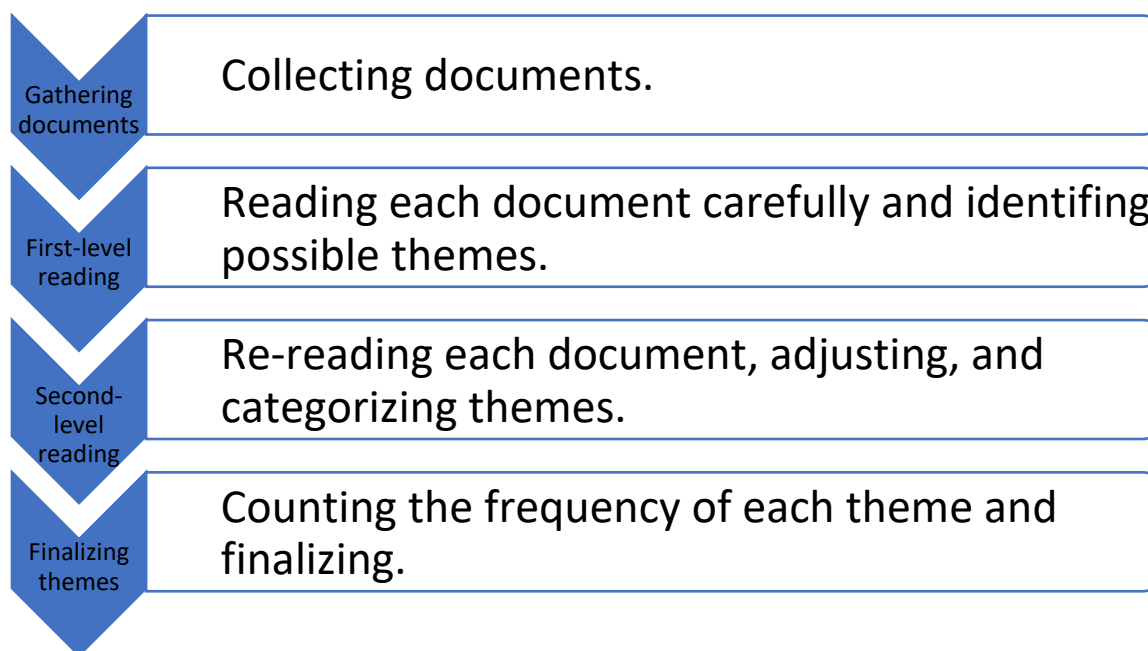
After the thematic analysis, 11 themes emerged. The researcher intended to describe only the top four themes in the result section, as the assignment question was to show four CSRL strategies. However, one theme had seven frequencies, and four themes had six. Thus, the top five themes are discussed in the result section.

Table 2

Themes and Their Frequencies

Theme	Frequency
Leading by example	7
Showing care and support	6
Enhancing teachers' capacities	6
Ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and instruction	6
Building teacher-student relationships	6
Connecting family and community	5
Promoting inclusive school climate	5

Visibility in the community	3
Self-reflection	3
Developing a shared vision	2
Promoting equity	1

Results

Five themes emerged from the data; these were (1) leading by example, (2) showing care and support, (3) enhancing teachers' capacities, (4) ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and (5) building teacher-student relationships. Each is discussed in the next section.

Leading by Example

Leading by example was the top theme based on its frequency. Seven out of thirteen aspiring leaders wrote about it. They wanted to role model culturally responsive practices for their teachers and staff so that they could show the same to their students and community. Cairo said that she wanted to show her teachers and staff how to effectively remove bias: "As an administrator, it is my responsibility to model the behavior of acceptance that is expected from staff, students within the school environment. This requires one to relieve themselves from bias so they can be effective." Like Cairo, Manila also wanted to show her colleagues how to identify and remove bias to implement CRSL in school. She wrote:

> School leaders must embrace their role in mitigating, disrupting and dismantling
> systematic oppression and embody what it means to work personally, interpersonally and
> institutionally. By modeling care, commitment, communication, and relationship
> building, culturally responsive school leaders can manipulate and facilitate staff to

achieve the vision of the school. Leaders must help teachers identify their own beliefs and biases.

Dubai shared her idea of modeling critical thinking at her future school to show CRSL. She wanted her teachers and staff to follow her and implement critical thinking in their teaching. As she said, "Another strategy that will support my leadership in culturally responsive teaching is supporting critical thinking. I will be sure to provide modeling to all staff members so that they can be culturally responsive in their teaching." Edinburgh identified showing examples as an important task for the school leaders to motivate colleagues to practice CRSL. She said, "Modeling CRL is also a very important component of leadership in a school." Havana mentioned modeling culturally responsive practices to enhance her colleagues' skills in inclusive teaching approaches for diverse students. She said, "Modeling cultural responsiveness as a leader will help encourage staff to develop the skills necessary to successfully engage with a diverse group of students."

Madrid went beyond merely showing examples. Along with her examples, she planned to include other teachers' best practices to motivate all teachers and staff. She mentioned that "having a teacher share a best practice in department meetings is another great way to motivate teachers and to highlight something positive that the teacher is doing." Sydney wanted to be a role model some practices of CRSL for her colleagues so that they would do the same in her school. She said, "To motivate the teachers to practice different strategies of CRSL, like empathy, communication, self-awareness, and relationship, I will first lead by example."

Showing Care and Support

Six out of 13 aspiring leaders identified "showing care and support" as an essential part of implementing CRSL in their schools; they specifically wrote about showing care and support

for their students. They had different strategies for doing this, like providing support for student learning, making the best decisions for students, giving students a feeling of care and welcome, providing opportunities for language-minority students, and showing empathy. As Amsterdam wrote, "The cultural and linguistic experience a student brings to the table means they may not learn like everyone else. As a leader, I need to provide support for teachers who cannot engage these learners."

Cairo wrote about making sound decisions that would help every single student. She also wanted to show care, giving her students space to feel valued in the school community. She wrote, "I will show care being able to make sound decisions based on what is best for the students is the number one priority." Edinburgh wrote about supporting and nurturing all stakeholders in her school. She also wanted to show care through her communication with students. She mentioned, "We must support and nurture all stakeholders. Having them feel they are cared for and appreciated makes all the difference. Caring for others also includes how we communicate with them." Kyiv wanted to show her care and support in developing relationships with students and their families. She mentioned language minority students and family members who feel inferior due to their language barrier. She intended to show support by developing her school into a trustworthy place for them. She wrote:

> Care must be shown for the relationship to flourish fully. Many minority students and families feel like they do not have a voice in school. Due to their language barriers and/or cultural differences, they often are apprehensive about allowing schools to help their children. As a leader, I will be responsible for showing these families that the school cares and can be trusted.

Milan wanted to show her care and support in developing relationships with every member of her building and community to encourage contribution to each student's success. She wrote, "A culturally responsive school leader has every person's best interest at heart, is supportive, and makes everyone feel welcome. They build relationships with every stakeholder that decreased anxiety, encouraged participation, and laid the foundation for success for all students." Sydney took a different strategy to showing care and support. She intended to visit students' families in the school community along with her colleagues. She wrote, "Knowing the students and their community will help create an empathetic leader. To accomplish this, I would have the staff do community tours or walks to allow the staff to see where our students are coming from."

Enhancing Teachers' Capacities

The aspiring leaders were interested in enhancing their teachers' knowledge and skills in regards to culturally responsive practices. Different aspiring leaders had different strategies for doing so. One wanted to organize professional development (PD), one wanted their experienced teachers to teach new teachers, and others wanted to provide continuous feedback to the teachers about their skill development in culturally responsive practices. Like Brasilia said, **"**Leaders need to provide PD to teachers to learn how to use students' home experiences in their classrooms. Teachers need to learn how to meet students' needs." Fuji was very specific in developing her teachers' knowledge and skills in practicing culturally responsive practices. She intended to arrange PD for her teachers to analyze the dominant culture, learn about diverse cultures, and eliminate their bias. She wrote, "CRS leaders continually evaluate the extent of dominant cultural norms that are prompted in their school system and plan professional development

accordingly. Teachers' bias, fear, and lack of cultural awareness impede their ability to foster equitable learning environments."

London identified her school's diversity as a strength and intended to educate her teachers and staff about diverse cultures and culturally responsive pedagogy. She wrote, "Our differences make us stronger." Madrid also wanted to organize PD for her teachers. In addition, she planned to implement mandatory weekly and monthly meetings to ensure that teachers were consistently educated about culturally responsive practices. Manila focused on providing teachers with consistent feedback and recognition of their work regarding culturally responsive practices. She wrote, "Teachers become motivated to keep doing good things with consistent feedback, reinforcement, and recognition of their efforts." On the other hand, Panama took a different approach other than PD to develop teachers' knowledge about culturally responsive practices. She wanted her skilled and experienced teachers to guide her novice teachers in forming an internal collaborative approach. She wrote, "I will have new and tenured teachers work together to increase the knowledge of new teachers."

Ensuring Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Instruction

The aspiring leaders also emphasized culturally responsive curricula and instruction. They preferred to include diverse cultural representation in the curricula so that students could see themselves as a part of the school community. Dubai shared her intention to include students' cultural and ethnic representation in the curriculum to make it more inclusive and culturally responsive. She shared examples of how to do it writing, "We cannot always have little white boys and girls in our clipart or picture books. It is critical that we provide students with books that they can relate to." Fuji went much deeper into her strategies for implementing culturally responsive curricula and instruction. She identified culture as a vehicle for students to learn and

emphasized incorporating social culture into the curriculum and instruction. She wrote, "Culturally responsive teaching goes beyond utilizing the students' culture as a vehicle for learning. Multicultural education requires content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social culture."

Havana mentioned educational changes and how to develop teachers' skills in culturally responsive instruction. She was also interested in including diverse views in school curricula to show high expectations to all students. She wrote:

Attributes of culturally responsive teaching include educators having the capacity to invoke and bring about educational change, affirming the views of a variety of diverse students, having a greater understanding and the ability to engage in sociopolitical consciousness, encompassing deep compassion for students, especially those of marginalized groups, the belief that all students have the capacity to learn, thrive, and succeed.

Kyiv mentioned revisiting existing curricula to make sure that students could see themselves in the curricula and that teachers implemented culturally responsive classroom instruction. She wrote, "Equity audits on existing curricula require the persistence of the school's leadership and staff members. Students need to be able to see themselves in the instruction being taught." For culturally responsive teaching, London focused on hiring teachers from diverse backgrounds and communicating to local universities an emphasis on diversity in teaching and learning. Manila wrote about including students' cultural representations in school curricula, and how teachers need preparation to use these curricula to ensure students' success. She wrote, "The curriculum should incorporate the history, values, and culture of the school community; and the

curriculum must be relevant to students' lives, and teachers need to have access to professional learning on integrating culture with the curricula."

Building Teacher-Student Relationships

The aspiring leaders also identified the teacher-student relationship as an important aspect of culturally responsive practices at school. They understood that relationships between teachers and students would be beneficial to both by engaging in a more interactive teaching and learning process. Amsterdam said, "It is very important to require teachers to have morning circles where they not only build relationships with students but where they use social stories to help with behavior or cultural issues that may be happening in the classroom." According to Brasilia, teacher-student relationships are essential to developing a better classroom environment for learning. She wrote, "I always say that relationships are the foundation of anything, let alone leadership. It is important to get into students' hearts." For Dubai, a teacher-student relationship was essential to developing trust. This relationship gives teachers an opportunity to learn more about their students' cultures, and students, in turn, feel safe and valued. She wrote, "If teachers build strong relationships with students and their families, the rest of the interactions will be smooth because they are built on trust."

Edinburgh also identified teacher-student relationships as essential to culturally responsive practices in schools. Helping teachers learn about students and their cultures can remove the cultural barriers between teachers and students. She said, "Building relationships reduces the anxiety of teachers and students, creates spaces that have a foundation built on trust and respect and knows where students come from and what they may have been through." Similarly, Kyiv described teacher-student relationships as a safe space for students to share their backgrounds. She mentioned that conversation between teachers and students helps develop a

trusting relationship. She wrote, "It is essential for teachers to take time and talk to the students. Students appreciate when minor details are known about them. These tiny conversations will lead to trust." Sydney said leaders' relationships with students and school personnel were necessary to develop an inclusive school culture. She also shared some strategies to develop those relationships. She wrote, "To be inclusive, we could have an assembly, morning announcements, or use morning meetings to help connect the different cultures to develop relationships with our students."

Discussion

This study intended to explore K-12 aspiring leaders' understanding of CRSL strategies. The research question was, "What CRSL strategies or dispositions do the aspiring leaders identify, and how will they implement them in their future schools?" The theoretical framework was Khalifa's (2021) four basic principles for CRSL that he developed from his two-year ethnographic study on CRSL. These are (1) being critically self-reflective, (2) developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curricula, (3) promoting inclusive and anti-oppressive school environments, and (4) engaging parents and community contexts. This study used aspiring leaders' written assignment on CRSL as data that was analyzed using a thematic analyzing method. The final themes were (1) leading by example, (2) showing care and support, (3) enhancing teachers' capacities, (4) ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and (5) building teacher-student relationships.

Khalifa (2021) identified school leaders' self-reflection as the first principle for implementing CRSL practices. He described self-reflection as the foundation of CRSL and how a leader must use it in every aspect of schooling. A school leader must be self-reflective of their work and also of others'. Leaders need to analyze their own work to identify oppressive

structures like bias and deficit thinking about students of color and students from low socioeconomic status. The leaders can change their students ' lives when they show the courage to alter bias and deficit thinking. Mun et al. (2020) found that teachers' deficit thinking about marginalized students led them to differentiate resources and implement unfair policies and practices for those students. Without being self-reflective, a school leader cannot identify those unfair and biased practices to give underserved students an equitable school culture for learning and growing up academically and socially. Therefore, school leaders must take the initiative because a school leader's leadership style significantly impacts school culture (Arif et al., 2019; Day et al., 2020; Kalkan et al., 2020).

The result showed that self-reflection was not a top theme because the aspiring leaders did not consider it and its importance. Only three out of thirteen aspiring leaders mentioned it in their paper, which suggests that some of them have an understanding of its importance. One of the aspiring leaders, Fuji, said, "Leaders must be able to reflect on their own beliefs and biases, make necessary adjustments and then model that belief system." Similarly, Panama said, "As a leader, I can start by asking myself what policies, practices, and structures prevent an equitable learning environment." Also, Sydney wrote, "We all come with biases, and to not have those biases affect how you interact with your students and staff, the biases need to be addressed." A school leader cannot develop an equitable learning environment for all students without analyzing and reflecting on bias and deficit thinking about marginalized students. It is essential for aspiring leaders to think about the "self-reflection" principle of CRSL to analyze and identify the invisible barriers in order to remove them from their schools to establish a sustainable, equitable school culture. From this study, it cannot be generalized that aspiring leaders have a

good understanding of the self-reflection principles of CSRL, as most of them did not write about it.

Khalifa (2021) identified "developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curricula" as the second principle of CRSL. Likewise, this study found it as one of the top themes, with six out of thirteen aspiring leaders writing about it. Khalifa et al. (2016) said that school leaders must have the courage and knowledge to determine the inequitable school curricula patterns that lead to marginalized students' disenfranchisement. This study found that less than 50% of aspiring leaders understood this concept well. For example, Dubai wrote, "I will also ensure that the books in kids' hands have characters that look like them. We cannot always have little white boys and girls in our clipart or picture books." She talked about equal ethnic representation in the school curricula so that students feel included in the school.

The aspiring leaders wrote from their experiences what they saw in their schools and curricula. They noticed how a school leader could make a positive difference in equalizing curricula. Fuji, an aspiring leader with 27 years of experience, wrote, "Culturally responsive teaching goes beyond utilizing the students' culture as a vehicle for learning. Multicultural education requires content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction." Through her self-reflection, she realized the importance of culture in education. This suggests that aspiring leaders with years of classroom teaching experience have the real picture of unfair school curricula for marginalized students. As they have a deep realization of this fact, they are more likely to enact change in their future schools. Khalifa (2021) also said that creating community-based epistemology in the school curricula is a part of CRSL. However, the current study did not find any aspiring leaders who preferred community-based epistemology in school curricula.

Besides inclusive school curricula, culturally responsive teaching practices are similarly essential. Genao (2021) defines culturally responsive teaching as a practice that starts with the beginning of reflecting on teachers' own biases and committing to removing possible prejudices while teaching. A school leader should take the lead in implementing a strategy to eliminate teachers' bias in teaching. Less than 50% of the aspiring leaders wrote about the importance of culturally responsive instruction in their schools and leaders' role. Havana talked about the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices and developing teachers' capacity to implement culturally responsive approaches in their teaching. Khalifa et al. (2016) said culturally responsive teaching approaches could be achieved by recruiting and retaining culturally responsive teachers. Aspiring leader London echoed the same in hiring diverse teachers in her schools. She said, "A CRSL strategy I will begin with focuses on the recruiting and retention of a culturally aware and diverse staff." As such, the aspiring leaders had a good understanding of ensuring culturally responsive curricula and instructional approaches in their schools to give their diverse student body a safe space for learning. However, only six out of thirteen aspiring leaders wrote about this principle of CRSL.

Khalifa (2021) identified developing inclusive and anti-oppressive school environments as the third principle of CRSL. An inclusive school environment is a safe physical space for all students and a place of social and emotional safety for them. Kendall (2018) defined inclusive school culture as a school environment for all students to interact with each other and learn from each other's cultures. However, leaders' personal beliefs, values, and norms are essential to establishing an inclusive school culture (Bush, 2021). DeMatthews et al. (2021) stated that school leaders cannot create an inclusive school environment because of undue social influences from the dominant group. Therefore, leaders must be self-reflective to dismantle the oppressive

influence of the dominant culture. Khalifa (2021) said that a school leader must understand the power and privilege that exist in a school. The leader should not overlook the oppressive practices and must have the courage and honesty to confront and push back against such practices. Thus, aspiring leaders must have knowledge and skills on how to establish and sustain an inclusive environment.

This study did not find creating inclusive school culture a top theme, as only five out of 13 aspiring leaders wrote about it, but they wrote excellent strategies for creating an inclusive school environment. Fuji wrote about how a school leader could seek and use diverse perspectives and prioritize the needs of each student. London wrote about celebrating cultural diversity in school to enhance cultural awareness of all. Sydney wrote about cultural differences and how a leader could accommodate all differences and create an inclusive environment. Though some aspiring leaders shared their strategies for creating an inclusive environment, their thinking was not aligned with the research-based approaches mentioned in the previous paragraph; only 38% of aspiring leaders showed some knowledge about culturally responsive curricula and instructional practices.

Engaging family and community context in school was the fourth principle developed by Khalifa (2021). The author suggested a community-based epistemology to introduce community context and community-based issues in the curricula. A school leader cannot create a community-based epistemology without knowing and connecting to the school community. Family and community member should have free access to school leaders and should have the space to share their thoughts, culture, and history. Engaging family and community was not a top theme in this study, as only 38% of aspiring leaders shared their understanding of it. However, those that did shared very effective strategies to connect the community. Amsterdam shared an

event at her school where the parents and community members enjoyed dinner with the school leaders and teachers. She wrote, "Last week, our school hosted a family game night where family and community members enjoyed dinner and various games. When we have those fun together, memories and connections are built with the school community."

Khalifa (2021) emphasized "establishing a social capital network" in the school community as part of connecting family and community. The author described the benefit of such a network, saying that this type of network is an encouragement for marginalized families to feel valued and accepted. One aspiring leader, Brasilia, wrote, "Many families do not feel welcome in schools. They see school as a building where their children go, not a place where families are valued." Thus, leaders need to realize the truth about marginalized families' feelings regarding school buildings and find a way to minimize the gap. Khalifa (2021) shared two examples from his ethnography. For one, he saw schools arrange monthly breakfasts for families where teachers and family members talked about social issues, stories, and culture instead of students' academic performances. Another example he shared was when school leaders and teachers hand-delivered student report cards to their homes. School leaders need to find various ways to connect the school's family and community members. However, this study found that most of the aspiring leaders of this study did not prioritize family and community context in their CSRL strategies.

Students' academic advancement is the primary focus of schooling. Students, regardless of their background, deserve equal opportunities to thrive. School leaders need to create this opportunity for each student. As Choi et al. (2019) stated, school leadership practices matter for school culture and students' academic performance. The findings of the current study explored aspiring school leaders' understanding of CRSL for their future school culture, but the findings

showed that four out of five final themes did not follow the CSRL principles developed by Khalifa (2021). Only one theme—"ensuring culturally responsive curricula and instruction"— matched the author's second principle, and yet only 46% of aspiring leaders prioritize it. Ultimately, it can be generalized that aspiring leaders need more research-based learning and practices to develop them as culturally responsive leaders.

Conclusion

The four core principles of CRSL as defined by Khalifa (2021) were not reflected in the findings of this study. The first principle, "self-reflection," was the foundation of CRSL. School leaders must be reflective in every aspect of schooling, like ensuring culturally responsive curricula. The leaders must identify the unequal cultural representation in the curricula and in teachers' practices. Without a thorough equity audit, a leader cannot figure out the inequalities in the school curricula. A leader must be reflective on the student population and their culture to find out the gaps in the school curricula. Then, the leaders need courageous approaches to solving the problem. Without being self-reflective, leaders cannot identify biases and prejudices about students of color. Leaders must be reflective in connecting families and communities. They must analyze their practices in dealing with parents from underserved communities, like parents who cannot speak English and those who hesitate to come to the school building. Leaders must be critical in analyzing school culture to make it inclusive. They need to analyze the common practices and what is ideal, and how to bring the culture to an ideal environment. Therefore, leaders' self-reflection is paramount, and yet was absent in the findings of this study.

This lack does not mean that the aspiring leaders had little knowledge about being self-reflective in every aspect of schooling. They had years of experience and reflections on their schools' common practices. They also wrote about some good examples. Some of their analysis

and reflections were eye-opening and should be analyzed more deeply. However, their reflections were not as extensive as Khalifa (2021) described. They are preparing themselves to take charge as school leaders in the future and need some research-based knowledge and practices in their learning in the leadership preparation program. They also need praxis-based learning and simulation to enhance their skills in CRSL.

Aspiring leaders are in the leadership preparation program to get their license to be school leaders. So, the program must take the initiative in developing the candidates as culturally responsive leaders. The program faculty must be reflective and revisit their coursework and instructional practices. The course content must be research-based and practical. The faculty may need professional development to learn more about CRSL. Neighboring school districts and the leadership preparation program must work together to find out best practices and approaches for CSRL. The program faculty should visit nearby schools to learn more about the school culture and context. The school district and the leadership preparation program must put the K-12 students first to prepare Culturally Responsive School Leaders for every single student.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the data was limited as only the candidates' assignments were used for document analysis. Second, there was no opportunity to check whether the candidates wrote the assignments from their own experiences or whether they used other resources to complete the assignment. Third and finally, there was no observation of candidates' activity on CRSL.

Scope for Future Studies

The findings have opened the scope for future studies. A qualitative case study could be conducted for the same group of aspiring leaders at the end of their program to check their

progress. Another qualitative case study may be beneficial to assess program faculty's effectiveness in developing culturally responsive school leaders. Finally, a quantitative descriptive study may be conducted in the neighboring schools to discover their common practices regarding CRSL.

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How Do Teacher Perceptions and Biases Affect or Influence Student Behavior

Benjamin K. Keohane

Abstract

The purpose of this research project and professional development series is to shed light on the influence and effect that teacher biases, perceptions, and interactions have on student behavior. Often, teachers become apprehensive when exceptional students attend their class. This notion is amplified if the student is accompanied with a behavior intervention plan or a disability that manifests as externalizing behavior. In many cases, teachers report a lack of proper training in behavior mitigation strategies that extend beyond common, general education practices. If schools are to promote an inclusive environment, all teachers require the background knowledge to properly implement and adhere to behavior intervention plans to create a safe, efficient learning environment for all.

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) theorized that six constructs influence individual behavior in humans. These constructs are utilized to determine human behavior based on a perceived result or product of learned behavior. Thus, I theorize that The Theory of Planned Behavior can be used to possibly predict behavior in students much like B.F. Skinner's Behaviorism theory. Combining these theories can help to analyze external factors, namely teacher interactions and perceptions, that could influence adverse behavior in students. I have found that preconceived notions can affect teacher-student interactions. Weiner's Theory of Attribution (1985) outlines the effect that positive teacher-student interactions have on identifying and referring students for special education and mental health services as well as the willingness of adolescents to seek assistance.

Teachers can become hyper-vigilant of typical behavior of students at the middle school level. I theorize that if educators are aware of target behaviors, it can cause typical behaviors to be identified as adverse behavior resulting in office referral or punitive styles of punishment where strategies like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports would be more appropriate. Calling unnecessary attention to behaviors in the classroom can possibly result in an increase of disruptive behavior and negative student-teacher interactions.

Keywords: perceptions, biases, student behavior

Research Questions

What are the perceptions of students as well as teachers of behavior contracting, teaching self-regulation strategies through modeling, and PBIS for behavioral de-escalation and prevention, and how does the implementation of these strategies affect the classroom environment as well as student-teacher relationships?

What is the effectiveness of implementing behavior contracting, teaching self-regulation strategies through modeling, and PBIS as behavior strategies for de-escalation and prevention over a 4-week period in the middle school setting?

Context and Rationale

Context and Setting of My Work

This school is a southeastern, large suburban middle school with roughly 1,300 students and 62 full-time teachers. All teachers are certified, and the administration staff consists of one principal, four administrators, and three counselors all serving each grade individually. Administrators serve as vice principals of their assigned grades as well as assisting with discipline, buses, lunch, grades, and testing. Teachers are typically positive in interactions between staff and students. The student body consists of 44.5% minority enrollment with 20%

Asian or Pacific Islander, 13.7% Black or African American, 6.7% percent Hispanic or Latino, 3.7% two or more races, and 55.5% Caucasian.

The overall attitude of the school is generally positive. There are minimal instances of bullying that have been reported and the administration treats teachers and staff with respect. When it comes to student discipline, faculty and staff employ the *Responsibility Centered Discipline* (RCD) model. This framework is a way to talk through problems with students to help them understand the effect their actions have on others and find alternatives to adverse behavior in the future. This program has been successful when it is implemented correctly with fidelity. There have been problems in the past with teachers not believing in the framework and not implementing it because they feel like it is replacing consequences or letting students off too easily. When the data for disciplinary actions is analyzed, there is a reduction in high-magnitude aggression and altercations between students that cannot be resolved. There will be times where consequences are necessary, but RCD and Professional Crisis Management (PCM) help to minimize these types of interactions with prevention, de-escalation, and social emotional learning.

How my Research Question Relates to my Work Context

The goal of this project is to improve teacher and student behavior in educational settings. There has been a major shift in society regarding discipline at home and at school. It seems as if societal standards are not being taught or upheld resulting in more crime and adverse interactions. Many of the students I work with do not have a strong or positive male role model in their lives, and I would like to fill that void while in the school setting. Most of my work involves social emotional learning and coping with everyday life. If I can reach these students

and help them at school, they could take those strategies out into the real world to better themselves not because that is what is being asked of them, but because they want to.

Many teachers still believe that punitive punishment will shape behavior, but it is clear this isn't the case. From my experience, students feel as if the consequence of their behavior means nothing and does not affect those around them. When it comes to completing schoolwork and meeting expectations, they act as if the consequences are more agreeable than the task at hand. It comes down to the standard functions of behavior: to avoid or to obtain. If acting out means they get to avoid an undesirable task or person, so be it. There are also times where disruptive or adverse behavior is a sign of an unmet need. Many students will disrupt to distract from their shortcomings. Instead of viewing the behavior itself, teachers and staff need to take the student's situation into account. At the same time, when teachers are aware of a behavioral disability, they tend to draw more attention to typical behaviors because disruption is expected. This leaves students feeling like they have a target on their back. In some cases, they are not wrong. It is difficult to better yourself if everyone around you expects the worst. This also creates a deficit between praise and punishment. It leaves children feeling like teachers only criticize rather than support and recognize or celebrate growth.

Why is This a Worthwhile Topic for a Professional in my Situation?

There is a disconnect between addressing adverse behavior and promoting social emotional growth in students. The proper implementation of de-escalation and prevention strategies can reduce disruptive behavior in students. Combining these strategies while working with educators to overcome their potential biases toward students with behavioral disabilities will elevate education entirely. The dissemination of this knowledge and experience can help all teachers and school staff as well as students for a more effective mode of education academically

and socially. I want to help education professionals understand that helping students in their social emotional growth and coping skills can teach them strategies to use beyond post-secondary education. If there can be a balance between promoting social emotional learning and appropriate consequences, more children can grow up to be educated, functioning members of society.

Literature Review

Introduction

In this literature review, I will highlight the correlation between teacher behavior or biases and student behavior by examining teacher perceptions of exceptional students within the field of secondary education. I aim to identify a connection between teacher perception or biases and adverse student behavior in that teacher behavior can influence student behavior. This will add to existing literature by covering the Theory of Planned Behavior in relation to behaviorist theory and real-world classroom experience. The Theory of Planned Behavior proposes that human behavior can be predicted using six social constructs: perceived behavioral control, perceived power, subjective norms, social norms, behavioral intention, and attitude (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In this fashion, the six constructs can influence learned behavior and the perceived result of said actions. As discipline and education have undergone a shift accompanied by societal changes, educators must find a way to mitigate adverse behavior and create a learning environment that is conducive for all stakeholders involved. Few studies have been performed to investigate the effectiveness of The Theory of Planned Behavior in the classroom. In 2018, Burns et al. conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of the Theory of Planned Behavior through an examination of the instructor-confirmation-interaction model. They concluded that positive teacher-student interaction along with application of the Theory of Planned Behavior

could work to mitigate adverse student behavior and improve student-teacher relationships. Their study outlined three sets of beliefs (behavioral, normative, and control) which can influence an individual's behavior through the evaluative process (Burns et al., 2018).

Importance of Professional Development in Behavioral Intervention Strategies

Standard disciplinary sanctions have become counterproductive (Underwood, 2020). Students have become more enthralled with the results of their behavior rather than the implication. The consequences are more agreeable than the task itself. For instance, students will cause disruption to avoid an undesirable task regardless of the consequences. Therefore, educators must find a way to help students become more responsible for their behavior and the effect it has on others. Students with disabilities are twice as likely to be referred for disciplinary actions than their non-disabled peers (Underwood, 2018). In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education set a goal that 50% of disabled students would receive 80% of their direct instruction in the general education classroom. More recent data showed that while 57% of disabled students met this goal, only 37% of students with diagnoses of Emotional Disturbance met the same goal (Evans et al., 2012).

A 2012 study found that more than 50% of special education teachers that taught students with emotional disturbance could identify triggers, used social reinforcement, changed interactions with students, and reinforced desired behavior whereas only 41% of general education teachers reported that they used reinforcement of desired behavior often or very often (Evans et al., 2012). This shows that there is a need for professional development and education of general education teachers to properly meet the social emotional needs of students diagnosed with emotional behavioral disturbance to shape their behavior for the better. During their 2012 study, Evans et al. found that regular education teachers consistently marked an inability to learn

as the primary defining factor impeding learning with inappropriate behavior as secondary in students with emotional disturbance while special education teachers noted relationship problems as their secondary. This could show that special education teachers are more attuned with their students because of formal training and experience (Evans et at., 2012).

Professional Perspectives and Issues Around Behavioral Intervention and Teacher Biases

Research has shown that socio-emotional skills, particularly adaptability, motivation, and self-restraint, are key factors that could determine adult outcomes in students which means that educators should understand how their behavior affects their students' development across both academic and non-cognitive areas (Jackson, 2019). This can also apply to behavior. Teachers must realize and be taught how their behavior affects their students. In the case of this study, teacher behavior, perceptions, and attitudes can influence positive and adverse behavior. Teacher impact on non-cognitive skills is ten times more influential on a student's long-term success compared to test scores (Jackson, 2019). Test scores capture a small snapshot of a teacher's effect on potential student success.

The expectations and perceptions of teachers have a significant contribution to students' academic outcomes and academic self-esteem (Williams et al., 2020). In previous studies, students placed in a "low expectation" group were aware of the expectations and stated they noticed their teacher's low expectation in terms of their behavior toward the students (Williams, et al., 2020). The same goes for students with behavioral disabilities like emotional behavioral disturbance. Based on personal experience, these students understand the stigma that goes along with having a behavior intervention plan. They have noticed that teachers treat them differently whether that be more support or being overly vigilant to seemingly typical behaviors of a middle school student. Students that are perceived as hostile or oppositional by teachers run the risk of

being labeled, and these stigmas are communicated to the student in a multitude of ways (Williams et al., 2020). Classroom behaviors that are possibly influenced by teacher perceptions can either deteriorate or stimulate the classroom learning environment (Williams et al., 2020).

Standards that Support My Project

The Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Code of Ethics outlines standards for educators to meet the needs of all students ethically and effectively. Every code applies to how a special education teacher should compose themselves and interact with others, but codes 3, 6, 7, 8, and 12 apply directly to this project. Code 3 states, "Promoting meaningful and inclusive participation of individuals with exceptionalities in their schools and communities" (CEC, 2023). Teacher biases and preconceived notions about students with behavioral disabilities violates this code because inclusivity means all students are welcome, as appropriate, regardless of their academic or behavioral history. Code 6 states, "Using evidence, instructional data, research, and professional knowledge to inform practice" (CEC, 2023). Educational professionals must use evidence and research-based practices to efficiently instruct students and mitigate behavior. Experience should not inform practices considering that each exceptional student's case and circumstances are unique. Code 7 states, "Protecting and supporting the physical and psychological safety of individuals with exceptionalities." Code 8 states, "Neither engaging nor tolerating any practice that harms individuals with exceptionalities" (CEC, 2023). Targeting or being hypervigilant of students with behavior plans does not protect their psychological safety. It harms the student. Code 12 applies directly to the purpose of the PD section of this project. It states, "Participating in the growth and dissemination of professional knowledge and skills."

The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) Response to Intervention - Behavior (RTI-B) framework states, "Tier III interventions promote positive school climates by ensuring

that the students with the greatest support needs receive a level of support that allows them to thrive in school…Interventions should focus on teaching and strengthening pro-social behaviors that will benefit the student long term, while simultaneously decreasing challenging behaviors in the short term" (TDOE, 2018a p.42). This framework goes on to explain that exceptional students should be educated to the highest extent possible in the general education classroom with their non-disabled peers. The Council for Exceptional Children's Professional Standards for Special Education mirror these statements with standards of their own that cover aspects of only using evidence-based practices, refrain from using aversive techniques, supporting positive and pro-social behavior, and creating safe, culturally responsible, and effective learning environments to fulfill needs and stimulate students to aid in developing positive self-concepts (CEC, 2023).

Relevant Educational Theories

Fishbein and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior outlines six constructs that influence behavior in individuals. Perceived behavioral control, perceived power, and outcome are the main theoretical focus of this project and professional development series. The perceived outcome as well as the perceived power and control of the students can influence their behavior. Individuals act or react based on an intended outcome (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). For example, if a student intends to avoid an undesirable task, the student may disrupt class or get in trouble because the perceived outcome is either being removed from the class for disciplinary purposes or waste time to distract the teacher from completing the task. The perceived control or power would be the student's perception of how much control they have over the situation based on their level of disruption. The six constructs also work to outline behavioral beliefs of the evaluative process: behavioral, normative, and control (Burns et al., 2018). Students utilize the

evaluative process to determine the amount of control they have based on the exhibited behavior and past experiences.

B. F. Skinner's Theory of Behaviorism was derived to explain how independent variables can be analyzed to predict and control behavior (Delprato & Medgley, 1992). During his study of operant (voluntary) behavior, Skinner found that individuals utilize past experiences to determine their behavior. When it comes to the classroom environment, explicit rules and expectations specify an environmental consequence of displaying certain behaviors (Delprato & Medgley, 1992). Consequences can be positive or negative. This term does not mean the punishment of adverse behavior. Instead, the consequence is the exact result or what happens directly after an exhibited behavior. For example, when students create disruption, the consequence could be obtaining peer attention or avoiding an undesirable task. Much like The Theory of Planned Behavior, this is the perceived outcome based on past experiences. Skinner went on to explain that manipulation of stimuli or the environment surrounding individuals can influence and alter behavior (Delprato & Medgley, 1992). In the scope of this project, teacher biases and teacher behavior serve as the independent variable that can alter or influence student behavior.

Theoretical Basis for Professional Development in Behavioral Intervention and Teacher Biases

Teachers have reported a lack of training, knowledge, and confidence when it comes to responding to student behavior, and this could be the driving force behind many teachers leaving the education profession (Carroll et al., 2023). Carroll and her colleagues (2023) also noted that this uncertainty could lead to under-utilization or removal of school-based behavioral support services resulting in more punitive disciplinary actions. Another common factor could be teachers' lack of motivation to act in support of students with behavioral disabilities which can

result in a failure to recognize behaviors as an unmet need requiring mental health services (Carroll et al., 2023). If teachers fail to support their students and recognize behaviors for what they are, it can lead to problems behaviorally and academically as well as hinder the school's ability to provide necessary services. For example, if a student with ED feels as if their needs are not being met or that their teacher does not support them, this could lead to further disruptions and adverse behavior. In 1980, B. Weiner theorized that an emotional responses and positive support can lead to an increase in willingness for students to seek outside help. In short, teacher attributions could become the mediator between accessing supportive responses and student behavior (Carroll et al., 2023).

Weiner's Theory of Attribution has been used to analyze adverse behavior in students. Results show that many teachers attributed misbehavior to internal (attitude, work ethic, etc.) or external (home life, living situation, etc.) factors rather than school or teacher-based influences like instruction model or perceptions (Carroll et al., 2023). The Gateway Provider Model states that teacher decision-making is based on four factors: structural characteristics (characteristics of the school or district), student predisposition (race, gender, potential risk factors), enabling factors (availability of services), and student's need for services (Carroll et al., 2023). In terms of student behavior or disruption, these factors can influence a teacher's frequency or ability to request behavioral intervention or special education services (Functional Behavior Assessment, Behavior Intervention Plan, IEP, etc.).

Potential limitations include "outlier" students that do not conform to the theoretical patterns established for students with emotional behavioral disturbance, hardline educators, and a lack of literature connecting teacher behavior to adverse student behavior. Considering that emotional behavioral disturbance is said to be a disability of "unknowns", there could be

instances that disprove behavioral interventions or their efficacy. Cases like these could cause teachers to lose sight of the end goal or disagree with interventions that are proposed. Hardline educators that continue to believe in the older methods of mitigating adverse behavior like punitive punishment could cause resentment amongst educators resulting in a lack of belief in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and cause teachers to question the fidelity of the professional development series. Most literature addressing teacher behavior and biases highlight the connection between positive teacher interactions rather than adverse teacher behavior possibly influencing disruptive and undesirable student behavior.

Developmental Characteristics of the Learner

Characteristics of Teachers as Learners

The purpose of the professional development series, *Shaping Student Behavior,* is to aid teachers in developing a deeper understanding of emotional disturbance as well as how teacher perceptions or biases can influence student behavior. Based on experience and teacher interviews, teachers are more comfortable with students with autism spectrum disorder because it is a more widely known disability that comes with many strategies that can typically be generalized for most students with ASD. With emotional behavioral disturbance, there are many unknowns and unpredictability. Teachers become apprehensive when they are met with unfamiliar aspects of education regarding mitigating student behavior. The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) defines emotional disturbance as exhibiting one or more characteristics including:

> (a) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health
>
> factors. (b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with
>
> peers and teachers. (c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal

circumstances. (d) A general persuasive mood of unhappiness or depression. (e) A

tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school

problems. (TDOE, *2018b, p.5*).

The vernacular used creates nervousness in teachers because it outlines that these students have

difficulty with interpersonal relationships and self-regulation. Many teachers can get through to

typical students by forming healthy relationships. These students are not typical. So, this

becomes an issue and teachers do not feel like they can form that relationship resulting in a

failure to attempt from the beginning.

This professional development session will also provide behavioral strategies to shape

student behavior rather than punitively punish. From first-hand experience, shaping behavior

helps students become responsible for their behavior and understand the effect it has on others.

Part of shaping behavior is understanding the possible causes. Behavior can come about due to

an unmet need. If a student does not feel safe or supported, this can result in disruption or a lack

of trust. When needs are being met, students are more likely to seek help or think introspectively

about their behavior (Carroll et al., 2023).

Professional Consensus on Best Practices in Professional Development

Professional development sessions should create opportunities for teachers to critically

think and reflect on their own practices in the classroom (Weidenseld & Bashevis, 2013). This

professional development session will require teachers to think introspectively about their own

potential biases toward students with behavior plans. The focus should be on the significant

value that professional development provides regarding student achievement rather than hours

required for licensure or renewal (Weidenseld & Bashevis, 2013). Teachers can become fixated

on the amount of hours needed to meet district requirements for PD or FLEX credit. This creates

an ulterior motive to the purpose of professional development. The aim of the sessions is not to keep teachers longer or make them do more. It is to help them grow as educators to better serve students and inform practices. When educators are more worried about fulfilling a requirement, they lose focus on skills and knowledge that proper professional development can provide. When teachers lose this focus and become disengaged in professional development, it can lead to apathetic feelings, burnout, rebellious attitudes, and an aversion to learning opportunities (Weidenseld & Bashevis, 2013).

Much like professional learning communities, professional development is driven by three main ideas: a focus on learning, collaborative culture and responsibility, and results orientation (DuFour et al., 2016). In this case, the teachers are the learners, and the focus is learning to become better educators. Teachers must take responsibility for their practices as well as their students' achievement while also working collaboratively. The end goal should be the desired result of student achievement, and in this case, increased pro-social behavior and responsibility in students.

Summary

Students must be supported regardless of predisposition and disciplinary history. Teachers need to take a deeper look at their own practices to identify areas for refinement. Education is not only about student behavior. It is also about teacher and staff behavior. The school environment should be one built on positivity, safety, and support of physical as well as social emotions. If students feel targeted, they do not feel safe. If students do not feel support, needs are not being met which can be the underlying cause of disruption and adverse behavior. When this is the case, it is not the students' responsibilities to make the proper changes. The teachers and staff must look inward to make the necessary changes on their end. It is the school's

responsibility to help students feel safe and supported. At the middle school level, it is not practical or logical to expect adolescents to create their own safe, supported space. That task lies with educational professionals who acquired the training and knowledge to create efficient, functioning members of society. Behaviorist theories highlight the environment around behavior and how it influences results. Teacher behavior has a direct influence on student behavior and achievement. Exceptional students need more support in different ways. Often, these students have a history of being let down or have experienced a pattern of treatment that led to anxiety, nervousness, and rebellion. They have not been supported because of the stigma that surrounds their disabilities. These feelings are amplified when they are met with less than supportive attitudes. If there is a pattern of behavior for students, educators need the ability to analyze and evaluate their own behavior and perceptions to create a more welcoming environment for learning.

Schools and educators should implement teacher and personal bias training during in-service days before the school year starts. This will bring the entire school together as a unit in a workshop form. If hours permit, schools can have faculty meetings, or portions of these meetings, as a check-in on personal bias work. This could also come in the form of questionnaires that can be sent out regularly throughout the school year to keep the idea of teacher biases at the forefront of educators' minds. As the school year progresses, and into the summer months, districts can offer more in-depth bias training involving more data and information that pertain to specific disabilities and topics like emotional behavior disturbance and societal influence on students. FLEX or PD hours can be used as incentives for taking part in these training courses. Teachers that continually put in the work necessary to change student perceptions can be highlighted in faculty newsletters or recognized through reward systems.

Action Plan and Results

My action plan consists of three phases: initial teacher surveys, professional development series, and post-PD interviews/surveys and data collection. The initial anonymous teacher surveys are given to teachers at random across multiple grade levels and content disciplines. These questionnaires are comprised of questions regarding students with diagnoses of Emotional Behavioral Disturbance and Autism Spectrum Disorder:

1. How comfortable are you with having students with Autism in your classroom?

2. How comfortable are you with having students with Emotional Behavioral Disturbance in your classroom?

3. Are you more comfortable with students with Autism or Emotional Behavioral Disturbance?

4. Please briefly explain your answer to question #3.

5. Do you become apprehensive when you receive a student with a Behavior Intervention Plan? If so, briefly explain.

6. Have you had any formal training on behavioral intervention? If so, briefly explain.

The questions ask recipients to rate their comfortability of EBD and ASD from very comfortable to very uncomfortable. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather teacher perceptions of students with ASD and EBD as well as their feelings on students with Behavior Intervention Plans and any formal behavior intervention training. When prompted to explain, teachers are to provide insight to their response to possibly gain a better understanding for their mode of thinking.

PD Session Outline

Once information from the initial surveys is analyzed, I designed a three-part PD session to address feelings of apprehension as well as teacher perceptions, behavior mitigation strategies, and Emotional Behavioral Disturbance. The first session addresses the effect that teacher perceptions have on students, common behavior mitigation strategies, and an introduction to EBD including definitions, possible causes, and strategies for addressing target behaviors in students. The second session takes a deeper dive into the world of EBD and provides opportunities for 1-on-1 assistance for teachers. The third session is an overview of the first two sessions along with role-playing of real-world situations in a workshop format.

Results

Initial Teacher Survey

In response to the initial teacher surveys, 43% of teachers reported being very comfortable and 57% reported being somewhat comfortable with students with ASD. On the other hand, with EBD, 14% reported being very comfortable, 29% somewhat comfortable, 14% neither comfortable or uncomfortable, 29% somewhat uncomfortable, and 14% reported feeling very uncomfortable. When comparing ASD and EBD, 100% of teachers stated they are more comfortable with students with Autism. When asked about attitudes toward behavior intervention plans, 57% of teachers admitted feelings of nervousness and apprehension when students have behavior intervention plans with some reporting feelings of "dread". These results outline a voluntary bias against students with emotional disturbance and behavior intervention plans.

Post-PD Survey and Teacher Interviews

After the first professional development session, attendees were given an anonymous survey pertaining to presenter knowledge, delivery, teacher confidence, and future comfortability attending sessions and seeking help. Results are as follows:

1. Objectives were relevant and will help me respond to behavior in the future – 60% strongly agree, 40% agree.

2. The presenter stayed on topic, provided real-world experience, and facilitated the session effectively – 100% strongly agree.

3. I feel confident in my ability to implement strategies leaned in the PD session – 80% strongly agree, 20% agree.

4. I feel comfortable reaching out for help in the future – 100% strongly agree.

5. I would attend PD sessions on this topic in the future – 60% strongly agree, 40% agree.

After allowing teachers two weeks to utilize the information and implement the strategies outlined in the professional development session, teachers reported that they have noticed a more efficient learning environment in their classroom as well as students becoming more motivated and responsible for their schoolwork as well as their behavior. In classrooms in which teachers implemented pro-active and positive strategies for behavior mitigation outlined in the professional development session, office referrals decreased by 28% and repeat offenses decreased 32% compared to classrooms in which more punitive styles of punishment are employed.

Conclusion

Teacher perceptions and attributions can influence student behavior. This could be a positive or negative influence to stimulate or deteriorate a classroom (Williams et al., 2020). Stimulation leads to a more efficient, healthy learning environment whereas deterioration affects all students and their behavior in a negative manner. Positive student-teacher interactions lead to improved behavior and better learning outcomes whether that interaction is a response to adverse behavior or celebrating pro-social, appropriate behavior. When responding to disruption,

teachers should remain as positive as possible to aid students in recognizing how their choices affect others to make better choices in the future. The use of Positive Behavior and Supports to mitigate adverse behavior in students teaches children how to think introspectively about their learning, actions, and outcomes. When teachers utilize these strategies, problem behaviors decrease and student responsibility increases.

When teachers recognize potential personal biases, perceptions can change. Through professional development sessions and teacher education, educators can more effectively inform their practices to serve all students. Teacher interventions are required to reach this goal. In this fashion, perception and bias intervention work is done on the side of the teacher rather than the student as with most behavioral intervention programs. Teacher attributions are more influential on non-cognitive development compared to test scores (Jackson, 2019). When professional development sessions are implemented properly, teachers attend to learn rather than to earn. The majority professional development systems in education involve requirements of PD hours to earn monetary incentives. In this mode, teachers do not attend these sessions to learn and inform their practices, they attend to earn that incentive. Professional development should be used to add to a teacher's skillset. When educators lose sight of that goal and the importance of perfecting their craft, the profession becomes stagnant, and the students are the ones that suffer.

List of Terms

BIP – Behavior Intervention Plan – Behavioral plan that outlines how staff should react to the behavior of a particular student.

De-escalation – communication strategies and techniques used to stabilize an encounter or prevent potentially violent outcomes.

FBA **–** Functional Behavior Assessment – An assessment that outlines target behaviors of a student as well their frequency, duration, and intensity.

Functions of Behavior **–** the reasoning behind or the perceived outcome resulting in adverse behavior.

IEP **–** Individual Education Plan – An education plan designed to accommodate outline special education services to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

PBIS **–** Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports – A behavior mitigation framework with emphasis on positive supports rather than punitive punishment.

PD **–** Professional Development

PCM **–** Professional Crisis Management – A physical and verbal intervention system used to de-escalate potentially violent situations while also keeping students and staff safe.

Punitive Punishment **–** Disciplinary actions involving detention, suspension, expulsion, or any consequence that removes the student from an inclusive setting.

RCD **–** Responsibility Centered Discipline – A disciplinary model which emphasizes structured conversations to aid students in accepting responsibility for behaviors to shape future behavior.

RTI **-** Response to Intervention - An educational framework that helps to identify and supports students requiring additional academic or behavioral assistance.

Self-regulation – the ability to control one's emotions based on stimuli without external assistance.

Stakeholders **–** students, staff, families, the community.

Target Behaviors **–** Behaviors outlined in a students Behavior Intervention Plan that disrupt class or impede the learning of others.

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Perception of School Governing Bodies about Decentralisation of School Governance in Eswatini, Swaziland

Goodness X. Tshabalala and Ibiwumi Abiodun Alade

Abstract

The adoption of decentralisation as a reform in the administration of education sector in Eswatini has been a subject of debate due to its attending challenges. This study therefore examined the perception of school governing bodies about decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini, Swaziland. The qualitative case study is embedded in the interpretative paradigm, and it employed the Subsidiarity Theory (ST) as a framework for understanding the decentralization of school governance in Eswatini. Four research questions guided the study while purposive sampling technique was used to select five school principals from the selected schools who had served as principals for five years and above. Five chairpersons of school governing bodies also participated in the study. Data was generated from participants using semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed through thematic analysis and the findings revealed several challenges encountered by principals in the decentralization of school governance. The challenges include financial management, capacity building, decision-making, and accountability. The findings also revealed growth opportunities for those in leadership positions. The study concludes that since decentralisation offers benefits, it is recommended among others that capacity-building programmes should be prepared for school governing bodies to enable them to effectively execute their roles.

Keywords: decentralisation, governing bodies, leadership, school governance

Introduction and Background

The world over, different administrations often seek for different structures and approaches for the implementation of their policies, all to ensure effective management, increase

the participation of decentralised bodies, and enhance the actualization of the objectives specified in any stated policies. Decentralisation is thus one of the contemporary reforms being embraced by both developed and developing countries of the world, Eswatini inclusive. Decentralisation signifies a shift in power from a central authority to empowered local entities. This movement away from centralized control manifests in various sectors, fundamentally altering decision-making, resource allocation, and accountability structures. The concept extends beyond physical landscapes, permeating diverse realms like governance, business, and education. Through decentralization, local governments can gain influence over policies, budgets, and service delivery, shaping their communities more directly and project the development of the entire society.

Decision-making authority is dispersed across regional offices or individual teams, fostering responsiveness and adaptability. In education sector, schools and communities gain greater autonomy over budgets, curriculum development, and staffing, potentially tailoring education to better serve local needs. Decentralisation has been the key to education planning and reforms pursuing political, administrative, and financial goals. Most education reformers support a decentralized education management system (Bjork & Brrowne-Ferrigno, 2016; Currie-Knight, 2012; Fullan, 2000). However, the condition should be attentive to the core objectives of educational management to improve student learning outcomes (Harris, 2011).

School principals are among important figures in dispensing administrative and financial duties; however, it is not clear how useful it is when principals are given more autonomy (Jogezai et al., 2021). In the first place, it is more important to know whether they feel empowered through the decentralisation introduced in Balochistan province. It needs more exploration of resource management practices at the school level. In previous research, Diem et

al. (2018) evaluated the decentralization initiative from the central office to school-level leadership. It was a window that allowed more extensive school districts to reorganize into small school districts. This decision came because its need had been felt for an extended period. Thus, the long-standing desire was implemented through the decentralisation of education management. The elements of progress through decentralisation in the educational field have created interest among scholars and specialists, particularly as of late in the wake of high-stakes responsibility and the effect of massive-scale educational change programs (Fullan, 2009; Hargreaves, 1997; Harris, 2011; Levin & Fullam, 2008). However, there is a difference in opinions concerning the approaches toward educational management. Some favor a highly centralized management system, whereas others prefer a decentralized approach (Radzi et al., 2011; Yolcu, 2011). An array of research studies (Bjork & BrrowneFerrigno, 2016; Currie-Knight, 2012; Fullan, 2000) suggest a middle way to education management that is neither strictly centralized nor purely decentralized. Irrespective of the differences in opinion, it is established that decentralization of education has a prominent role in effective educational management aiming to attain students learning outcomes.

Different countries employ different decentralisation models in education (World Bank, 2004). For instance, Australia employs a federated system, granting significant autonomy to individual states and territories in education matters. School governance falls primarily under state jurisdiction, leading to diverse models across the country. Structures of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) vary but typically involve parent representatives, teachers, and community members. SGBs in this country often hold power over budgets, staffing, curriculum development, and school policies. Studies reveal both positive and negative experiences. Structures of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) appreciate increased autonomy but express

concerns about resource allocation, teacher shortages, and varying levels of support from state authorities.

India's model is multi-layered, involving Panchayati Raj institutions (local governments) and state-level bodies. School Management Committees (SMCs) comprised of parents, teachers, and community members. The SMCs often handle school infrastructure, budgets, and minor curriculum adjustments. Available literature highlight challenges like inadequate training for SMC members, limited financial autonomy, and political interference. However, positive impacts include increased community engagement and improved infrastructure in resource-scarce areas.

Kenya's decentralisation model involves devolving power to county governments who oversee education within their regions. School Governing Boards (SGBs) in Kenya are comprised of parents, teachers, and community members, who advise school management on various matters. In Kenya, SGBs often have limited decision-making power, primarily focusing on resource mobilization, infrastructure maintenance, and community engagement. Previous studies on the decentralization of education in Kenya point to challenges like inadequate funding, lack of capacity building for SGBs, and unclear roles and responsibilities.

Zimbabwe employs a centralized system with limited devolution to district and school levels. The country uses School Development Committees (SDCs) which is comprised of parents, teachers, and community members, they mainly serve an advisory role. The SDCs have minimal decision-making power, primarily focusing on fundraising and community engagement. Studies reveal frustration with limited autonomy and resource constraints. Positive aspects include enhanced community participation and local ownership in some communities.

Eswatini, like many nations, has been increasingly exploring decentralisation as a potential avenue for improved educational outcomes and community engagement. This involves

shifting decision-making power and responsibilities for school governance from the central government to local stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and community members (Dlamini, 2014). The school governing bodies in Eswatini comprise parents and the principal. Noteworthy is that teachers are not represented in the SGBs. While decentralization holds promising opportunities for increased responsiveness to local needs, improved participation, and potentially better resource allocation, it also presents unique challenges in the Eswatini context.

Governance of various sectors has varied levels of implementation across different departments and regions in the country including schools. The decentralization process involves various actors, including government officials, school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. Building capacity at the local level, ensuring equity and resource allocation, and balancing local autonomy with national standards are major concerns. Although, the obvious claim is that decentralisation increased community engagement, more responsive education systems, and improved educational outcomes as potential benefits, the arguments about the approaches to decentralization remain unabated among different stakeholders in Eswatini. Hence, this study was conceived.

Theoretical framework

The Subsidiarity Theory (ST) has been used as a lens in interrogating this study. The principle of subsidiarity is a complex, multifaceted concept with historical roots, philosophical underpinnings, and practical applications in various fields, including education. The core of the theory holds that decisions and actions should be taken at the most immediate or local level that is consistent with their effective resolution (Schmidt, 2007). This means power and responsibility are devolved from higher (central) authorities to lower (local) levels. Decisions are made closest

to the issue and those directly affected by it. Lower levels should have the capacity and resources to handle the issue effectively.

Proponents of subsidiarity theory (Schmidt, 2007; Shelton, 2003) argue that decentralisation can increase democracy and citizen participation leading to more responsive and effective solutions to local problems while at the same time fostering innovation and experimentation. Community responsibility and ownership can also be enhanced through decentralisation. However, challenges also exist about this theory including building capacity and competence at lower levels, ensuring equity and preventing disparities between regions or groups, balancing local autonomy with national standards and cohesion, and addressing complex issues that require collaboration across levels. As applied in this study, this theoretical framework will assist in analyzing decentralisation in Eswatini's school governance through the lens of subsidiarity by examining the extent of power and decision-making transferred to local communities and school committees. It will further explore the capacity of these local actors to manage schools, finances, and curriculum development.

Statement of the Problem

Despite ongoing decentralisation efforts in Eswatini's education sector, concerns remain about its effectiveness and potential drawbacks. The current centralized system grapples with issues like school communities often lack sufficient decision-making power, hindering their ability to address specific needs and tailor education to local contexts remain debatable among all and sundry. There is an unequal distribution of resources across schools, and limited fiscal autonomy at the local level can perpetuate inequities and hamper development in under-resourced schools. Building adequate capacity for effective administration and resource management at the local level is crucial for successful decentralization, but gaps in skills and

expertise present challenges. Ensuring transparency and accountability in decentralized systems requires robust mechanisms to hold local entities responsible for outcomes and prevent misuse of resources. Observe that while increased participation is a benefit of decentralisation, ensuring equitable and meaningful representation from diverse community voices remains a challenge. These factors raise concerns about whether decentralization is achieving its intended goals in Eswatini and whether current implementation strategies are optimized for success. It is on this thrust that this study focused on the perception of school governing bodies about decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini, Swaziland.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to explore the perception of school governing bodies about decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini, Swaziland. The specific purposes of the study were to examine:

1. whether decentralisation of school governance has empowered local communities in Eswatini in decision-making processes.

2. the effectiveness of the resources allocated and managed under the decentralised system.

3. the challenges encountered by school principals in the decentralised school governance system.

4. means of addressing the challenges encountered by school principals in the decentralised school governance system.

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in the study

1. How has decentralisation of school governance empowered local communities in Eswatini in decision-making processes?

2. How effectively are resources allocated and managed under the decentralised system?

3. What challenges are encountered by school principals in the decentralised school governance system?

4. How best can these challenges be addressed?

Significance of the study

The study aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities of decentralisation in Eswatini's school governance system. The findings might be used to inform policy recommendations for improving the effectiveness and impact of decentralization efforts. The research findings might also contribute to the broader body of knowledge on decentralization in education, with potential benefits for other countries facing similar challenges. The study findings would remain significant by unveiling information from educational managers and school governing bodies' chairpersons since studies are meagre on the managerial aspect of school decentralisation. The findings of this study might inform policymakers and academia about the outcomes of decentralisation from the perspectives of effective educational management. This study might help in identifying the effectiveness of decentralization, paving ways to strengthen government decisions to further educational management and administration reforms. The implications of this study might inform policy actors in the reform initiatives toward education management. Most importantly, the findings of this study might add to the current literature on decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini and in other contexts.

Methodology

Research paradigm

The interpretive paradigm was followed in this research. According to this paradigm, knowledge is socially constructed, and researchers attempt to understand phenomena by getting the meanings assigned by participants to the particular phenomena (Neuman, 2014). Since the information comes directly from the participants, it has been argued that the knowledge produced can be justified as true compared with other approaches (Sandberg, 2018). This approach advocates for the use of a variety of sources, data, and analysis methods in research to produce valid findings (Henning, Rensburg, & Smith 2013). These authors further stated that different views are taken into consideration in this paradigm since they are considered to help make meaning of the world. In this research, information was collected by obtaining data based on interactions with participants. From their beliefs, views, and reasons, the researchers were in a better position to make sense of the information from the participants in respect of their perceptions about decentralization fostered in this study.

Research approach

Qualitative research was used in this study. This method allows data to be collected in the natural settings of social actions (Henning, Ransburg, Smith, 2004).Thus, participants were visited in their schools for data generation. Using the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to go into the field with an open mind to obtain valuable information on decentralization. This gave the study the potential to produce comprehensive findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2016). In qualitative research, the context is deemed important as it influences behaviour and acts as a set of parameters with which the individual interacts and give relevant information to research focus.

Research design

A case study design was used because it allows for a selected case with a sample that is representative of the population to be used (Neuman, 2014). Logistically, it would have been time-consuming and costly to study the whole population; hence, identifying specific schools made the research more feasible. A case study has identifiable boundaries (Henning,2013). In this case, the study was only done with purposively selected school governing bodies. From the school governing bodies, only principals and chairpersons participated in the study.

Sampling and sampling techniques

For this study, purposeful sampling was used. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2016), purposeful sampling chooses samples that are likely to have rich knowledge and information on the topic under investigation. In this case, this type of sampling helped the researchers choose participants who were in a position to give information relating to decentralisation in school governance. The participants chosen were relevant and knowledgeable about the topic under study. The criteria included participants with at least five years of experience as education managers. By engaging participants who were knowledgeable about the topic, the researchers had the opportunity to produce trustworthy findings.

Research Instrument: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to collect the data. Principals and chairpersons from the selected schools were interviewed. The interviews took place after school to avoid disrupting school activities. The use of interviews was preferred in this research because interviews are flexible and can be used with even illiterate participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2016). Vague responses were given, and participants were probed further to clarify what they meant. Non-verbal responses and reactions were noted during the

interviews and were used in data analysis (Neuman, 2014). The researcher took down field notes during interviews. These notes helped to record information that was not verbalized but that was relevant to the topic. Field notes also helped the researchers remember valuable information and later used in data analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically through coding and categorizing. Data were divided into small units of meanings, which were systematically named according to the meanings the researchers assigned them (Neuman, 2014). Codes were designed for each question on the interview sheet. These groups of codes were then grouped according to similar meanings to form categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2016). Each category was therefore made up of codes with the same or similar meanings. Categories were further analyzed and put into patterns called themes. A theme is an explanation of the findings of the research derived from the categories that were created. Some information from the field notes was a reflection made in the field during data collection. Analysis was done as soon as the data were collected to ensure that the researchers used all the relevant data necessary for the research before forgetting.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

To ensure credibility, the researchers made sure that sufficient data were collected. The researchers spent time interacting formally and informally with school governing bodies to gain more insight into decentralisation. Preliminary findings were given to participants to comment on and check if they were in line with the views they gave to the researchers. Participants were also asked to check the correctness of the findings before they were finalized.

Dependability

The researchers ensured that the findings were dependable by asking other experts to check the research interviews to get an accurate report. The data were also verified to check whether they agreed with themes that emerged from the participants' information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

To ensure the confirmability of the research findings, participants were requested to audit the findings to ensure they were a true reflection of what they said (Nassaji, 2020). The researchers made efforts to go into the field with an open mind to strike a balance between what was expected and what was real. This helped to eliminate any form of bias and helped the researchers stick to the purpose of the study. Participants were given more time to speak while the researcher listened to ensure that more information came from them (Nassaji, 2020).

Transferability

Although qualitative data is generally not transferable, rich information and a detailed description of the applicability of decentralization in the management of schools were gathered. This was done to ensure that data could be transferred. Sufficient data can truly reflect the state of decentralization in Eswatini. The researchers made efforts to carefully and thoughtfully interpret the data to make it convincing and transferable. Primary data was also included in the final report to provide enough details for the data to be authentic.

Ethical considerations

To carry out this study, ethical clearance was sought from the Ministry of Education in Eswatini. Participants were given consent forms, and the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to them. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants were also explained.

Findings

The purpose of the study was to explore the decentralisation of school governance in Eswatini schools as perceived by School Governing Bodies (SGBs). This section presents the key findings of the study. Drawing upon the insights revealed through the interviews, this section unpacks the narratives of the participants presenting them thematically.

Themes

Financial management

Financial management emerged as a key challenge for school governing bodies under decentralisation. Participants expressed difficulties navigating the complexities of budget allocation and resource management, often citing a lack of expertise and training. They struggled with securing consistent funding, particularly in underprivileged areas where community fundraising proved difficult. Moreover, balancing long-term infrastructure needs with immediate operational expenses posed a constant dilemma, adding pressure to their decision-making process. The pronouncements below are informative in this regard:

Participant 1: *"Managing our budget is tough. We lack expertise and training, and funding isn't always consistent."*

Participant 4: *"Raising additional funds from the community is difficult, especially in underprivileged areas."*

Participant 9: *"Balancing long-term needs with immediate expenses under financial autonomy is a constant struggle."*

These findings highlight the crucial need for capacity building and tailored financial support systems to empower school governing bodies and ensure the effective utilization of resources under decentralised models.

Decision-making

The task of decision-making within decentralised school governance reveals a web of complexities. Reaching consensus amongst governing body members themselves proved challenging, especially when different priorities and perspectives came into play. Participants also alluded to external pressures, feeling obligated to prioritize local authorities' agendas over the specific needs of their school community. Further compounding these difficulties, limited access to accurate data and relevant expertise hampered their ability to make well-informed decisions, potentially putting the quality of education at risk.

Participant 10: *"Reaching consensus within the governing body can be challenging, especially with competing priorities."*

Participant 5: *"We sometimes feel pressure from local authorities to prioritize their agendas over the school's needs."*

Participant 6: *"Limited access to data and expertise makes informed decision-making difficult."* These findings raise concerns about the need for effective conflict resolution strategies within governing bodies, robust communication channels with external authorities, and accessible resources to enhance data analysis and knowledge sharing, ultimately ensuring collaborative and informed decision-making that caters to the best interests of the school community.

Accountability and transparency

The findings revealed that fostering accountability and transparency within schools proved to be a multifaceted challenge. Concerns regarding the potential misuse of locally managed funds loomed large for some participants, highlighting the need for vigorous mechanisms and clear financial reporting practices. Maintaining accountability extended beyond finances, as participants expressed the delicate nature of holding fellow members, teachers, and

administrators accountable for their actions. This shows the importance of establishing appropriate frameworks and procedures for addressing performance concerns while building a culture of shared responsibility. Additionally, Participant 10's point emphasizes the communication gap that can arise between governing bodies and their communities. Effective communication strategies for conveying decisions and financial information transparently are crucial for building trust and maintaining community engagement under decentralized models. Overall, these findings call for attention to strengthening accountability structures, fostering a culture of shared responsibility, and implementing transparent communication strategies to ensure public trust and the responsible use of resources in decentralized school systems.

Participant 5: *"It's hard to ensure transparency when funds are managed locally, raising concerns about misuse."*

Participant 8: *"Holding ourselves and others accountable, including teachers and administrators, can be delicate. It strains relationships"*

Participant 10: *"Communicating our decisions and finances effectively to the community requires better strategies."*

These findings call for attention to strengthening accountability structures, fostering a culture of shared responsibility, and implementing transparent communication strategies to ensure public trust and the responsible use of resources in decentralised school systems.

Capacity building and support

The call for robust capacity building and support emerged as a recurrent theme. Participants expressed a strong desire for training and resources to bridge skill gaps in key areas like financial management, leadership, and project management. Participant 1 further emphasized the potential of collaboration and knowledge sharing between governing bodies,

fostering a network of mutual learning and support. Participant 2 echoed this sentiment, highlighting the potential benefit of government-led initiatives like mentorship, technical assistance, and monitoring to bolster their capabilities. These findings underscore the crucial role of ongoing support systems in empowering governing bodies to navigate the complexities of decentralised governance effectively. By prioritizing capacity building through comprehensive training, fostering collaborative networks, and implementing targeted support programs, policymakers can equip governing bodies with the tools and knowledge necessary to thrive under decentralized education models.

Participant 10: *"We need training and resources to develop our skills in areas like finance, leadership, and project management."*

Participant 1: *"Collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst governing bodies in different schools would be immensely helpful."*

Participant 2: *"Government support through mentorship, technical assistance, and monitoring could greatly benefit us."*

These findings reveal the crucial need for providing support and empowering governing bodies to navigate the complexities of decentralised governance effectively. By prioritizing capacity building through comprehensive training, fostering collaborative networks, and implementing targeted support programmes, policymakers can equip school governing bodies with the tools and knowledge necessary to thrive under decentralised education models.

Discussions

The narratives of the School Development Committees (SGBs) paint a picture of decentralisation as a journey troubled with both opportunities and challenges. While offering the

potential for autonomy, responsiveness, and community engagement, it also presents complex

hurdles that require careful consideration and strategic solutions.

Financial management: Budgetary woes emerged as a central concern. Participants grappled

with limited expertise, inconsistent funding, and the delicate balance between long-term needs

and immediate expenses. This highlights the urgent need for capacity building initiatives that

equip governing bodies with financial management skills and secure predictable funding streams,

particularly in underprivileged areas.

Decision-making: Reaching consensus within governing bodies proved challenging due to

competing priorities and external pressures (King, 2018). Limited access to data further

hampered informed decision-making. To address this, fostering effective conflict resolution

strategies, establishing clear communication channels with external stakeholders, and providing

access to relevant data and expertise are crucial steps.

Accountability and transparency: Concerns about potential misuse of funds under local

management underscored the need for robust oversight mechanisms and transparent financial

reporting practices. Additionally, fostering a culture of shared responsibility across governing

bodies, teachers, and administrators requires clear frameworks and procedures for addressing

performance concerns. Finally, implementing transparent communication strategies is vital for

building trust and maintaining community engagement.

Capacity building and support: The call for training and resources in areas like finance,

leadership, and project management resonated strongly. Collaboration and knowledge sharing

amongst governing bodies were also seen as valuable tools (Pernia, 2017). Furthermore,

government-led initiatives like mentorship, technical assistance, and monitoring were viewed as

crucial support mechanisms. Prioritizing capacity building through training, fostering

collaborative networks, and implementing targeted support programmes are essential for empowering governing bodies to navigate decentralization effectively.

Conclusion

While decentralisation offers benefits, these findings reveal challenges faced by school governing bodies. Addressing these challenges requires an approach that focuses on building financial management skills, nurturing informed decision-making, ensuring accountability and transparency, and providing support through capacity-building initiatives. By working collaboratively and prioritizing the needs of governing bodies, stakeholders can create an environment where decentralisation empowers schools to deliver a quality education that serves the community's unique needs. The study's findings remain significant regarding the decentralisation of educational management in Eswatini by portraying the actual implementation through the perspectives of SGBs and enlightening the related literature. The literature review highlights the potential of decentralization to improve educational outcomes through increased local engagement and responsiveness. However, significant challenges remain in Eswatini related to resource allocation, capacity building, community participation, accountability and effective delivery of services by respective stakeholders of education. .

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends:

- School governing bodies should be equipped with financial skills to ensure transparent and adequate financial reporting.

- There is a need to develop clear accountability frameworks, implement transparent financial practices, and engage the community in oversight and decision-making.

- Offer training and establish mentorship programmes, and creating knowledge-sharing networks for school governing bodies

Recommendations for Further Research

There is a need for more up-to-date studies analyzing the current state of decentralisation in Eswatini's education system. A deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by diverse communities and schools is crucial for tailoring effective solutions.

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Effective Elementary School Leadership: Does Teacher Perception of Leadership Effectiveness Matter to the Academic Performance of Elementary School Students?

Goldy Brown III & Tina Salzman

Abstract

The current study investigated one research question regarding the potential school leaders have in increasing student outcomes in low socioeconomic elementary schools. Based on teacher perception, are certain aspects of effective leadership more vital to the success of low socioeconomic elementary schools than others? The findings show that a school leader's ability to build a productive school climate may have a more exigent connection to student outcomes in low-socioeconomic elementary schools than in elementary schools with a majority of affluent students.

Keywords: school leadership, low-income students, effective leadership, Title 1 schools

Introduction

Teachers directly impact student achievement by providing instruction. Their perception of how effectively their school leader supports their efforts is an effective way to measure a school leader's ability to impact student outcomes in elementary schools (i.e., Leithwood et al., 2020). We measure the effectiveness of school leaders in elementary schools by surveying teachers within their buildings. Extant studies have concluded that effective leaders can impact student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2020). However, the scholarship has not identified conclusively if a classroom teacher's perception of their school leader's effectiveness correlates to high-performing elementary schools; whether this quality is more important in schools that service capable students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds; or whether certain aspects of their leadership are more vital than others in increasing student

outcomes for lower-socioeconomic students. Given that principals influence school quality in so many areas, leadership is clearly vital to schools. Evidence suggests that the impact of successful leadership is "considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). Branch et al. (2012) further suggested that "principal skill is more important in the most challenging schools" (p. 27). This study seeks to further our understanding of what school leaders do in high performing Title I elementary schools in comparison to the work of school leaders in high-performing, affluent elementary schools by using data from teachers surveyed in 40 elementary schools in 5 different states to answer the following research questions:

1. Based on teacher perceptions, are certain aspects of effective leadership more vital to the success of low socioeconomic elementary schools than affluent elementary schools?

Literature & Framework

To date, studies have concluded that principals have an effect on student learning (Bartanen, 2020; Chiang et al., 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Grissom et al., 2015), with Leithwood and coauthors (2004) suggesting, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5). More recently, this claim was fortified by (Grissom et. al., 2021), which concluded that principals do matter partly due to the scope of their influence across an organization. While ongoing discussion has considered whether principals have an indirect impact on student learning (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Witziers et al., 2003) or a direct one (Hallinger & Heck, 1996), effective leadership has been found to matter for student achievement as well as for other student outcomes such as attendance (Bartanen, 2020) and discipline (Sorensen et al., 2020). In this context a survey was developed with

questions in the following four categories, identified as ways school leaders improve student achievement:

1. Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers

2. Building a productive school climate

3. Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities

4. Managing personnel and resources strategically

These categories were chosen based on analysis of 30 years of literature on school leadership conducted by Grissom et al. (2021). These themes were identified in the literature as pertinent to what effective school leaders do in high-performing schools.

Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers

Forms of engagement with teachers that center on instructional practice, such as teacher evaluation and instructional coaching, and establishing a data-driven, school-wide instructional program to facilitate such interactions. Tasked with leading and managing complex organizations, school leaders draw upon expertise and a broad set of skills to support instruction (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Efforts to influence instructional practices require leaders to engage teachers in dialogue focused on instruction and instructional practices (City et al., 2009). Further, leaders must demonstrate the skills necessary to identifying high-quality instruction and provide targeted, instructionally focused coaching feedback (Garet et al., 2017; Grissom et al., 2013). Useful feedback helps teachers develop strategies to improve their classroom practices, which are positively associated with increased student learning (Wayne et al., 2016).

Building a productive school climate

A leader's ability to impact the school climate is also associated with increased student achievement (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). According to Tagiuiri et al. (1968), climate

comprises the physical aspects of a school, the characteristics of individuals within the organization and their relationships, and the culture or shared set of beliefs about the organization. Principals create and sustain a strong school climate by carefully growing their understanding of the school and community—specifically of their needs, norms, beliefs, and values (Klar & Brewer, 2014). Drawing upon this knowledge, principals work to develop an organization in which teachers and students feel valued and supported (Jacobson et al., 2007), build a climate of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), and cultivate overall awareness of the community as they embrace responsive leadership practices based on the broader community (Klar & Brewer, 2014).

Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities

Strategies that promote teachers authentically working together with systems of support to improve their practice and enhance student learning. Similarly, principals affect learning outcomes by creating and maintaining a culture that supports professional learning and collaboration. Through their beliefs and actions, principals shape conditions and internal organizational structures that promote teacher learning and reflection, align professional learning with school goals, build trust (Youngs & King, 2002), and allocate resources to support professional development (Borko et al., 2003). However, professional development alone falls short of improving teaching and learning at scale (Elmore, 2004). Increasing teacher capacity through professional development may be more successful when paired with opportunities to engage in collaboration with colleagues (Stosich, 2016). Principals can foster a culture of learning by providing frequent, formal, focused opportunities for collaboration around instructional improvement. Strong principal leadership that supports teacher collaboration produces schools with a stronger sense of collective efficacy (Goddard et al., 2015).

Managing personnel and resources strategically

Processes around strategic staffing and allocation of other resources. The biggest factor in this area is hiring high quality staff (Engel & Finch, 2015; Perrone & Meyers, 2023) and providing common planning time for teachers through effective scheduling and finances that allow for authentic teacher collaboration, to plan lessons that are data driven (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sun et al., 2016).

Method

Sample

This study gave a 50-question survey to teachers in 50 elementary schools in four different States in the United States, from June 2021 through December 2023. Twenty-five of the schools are labeled affluent schools where >75% of their students are not receiving free and reduced lunch (HPES) and 20 of the schools are low socioeconomic schools where >75% of the students are receiving free and reduced lunch. Free and/or reduced lunch is based on family income (BRTS). Twenty-five of the affluent schools based on State Assessments over the previous three years are considered high performing elementary schools. In addition, 25 of the low socioeconomic schools scored better than the State average on their State Assessments. Thirteen, recently received Blue Ribbon School Awards and are nationally recognized as the highest performing low socioeconomic schools in the nation. In total, $n = 916$ teachers were surveyed. HPES had $n = 405$ respondents and BRTS $n = 511$ teachers were surveyed. The number of years that the principals in each school had been serving in their buildings was between five and eight years. In addition, it is important to note that the average year that each school leader had spent in their building in each of the two categories are: in BRTS 6.4, HPES,

7.60. All of the schools had enrollments between 300 and 450 students. The average enrollment in each category was: BRTS 392, HPES, 424.

Sources of Evidence

All 50 of the elementary schools were considered high performing, a 6-point Likert-type scale was used for each question. The survey results were transferred from Qualtrics to SPSS. Mean, standard deviations, and scale reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) were computed for all variables measured by the teacher survey. In order to answer the research question, a multi-variant regression was ran between the mean scores of school leaders in all four schools. Correlations were calculated using SPSS, MANOVA, and a multi-variate regression.

Reliability & Results

To report the results, a Cronbach's alpha was conducted to measure the reliability of the survey. Tests were run on respondents' answers in each of the four categories of questions, from each of the four types of schools. All survey questions derived from the 655 teachers surveyed. Table 1 shows the results. As this table indicates, the scale exceeds accepted minimum standards of reliability (R=>.70; Nunnery & Bernstein, 1994). Mean responses to the scale ranged from the lows of 4.75 to 5.92, the standard deviations of responses were all relatively low (.866 to 1.876), indicating a substantial agreement among respondents' scores.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Scale Reliability of the 50-Question Survey

School Leaders	M	SD	R	N of Items
Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers (E)				
BRTS	5.65	1.095	.77	48

HPES	5.75	.866		

Building a Productive School Climate (B)

BRTS	5.92	1.344	.76	52
HPES	4.75	1.265		

Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities (F)

BRTS	5.23	1.155	.75	52
HPES	4.85	1.257		

Managing personnel and resources strategically (M)

BRTS	4.72	1.205	.72	48
HPES	5.15	1.876		

Note. Table 1 presents the Mean scores of Blue Ribbon Title Schools (BRTS) and High performing elementary schools (HPES), the Standard Deviation, and the reliability score of the survey from the Chronbach alpha test.

Below describes the results of the correlation coefficients (Table 2) or (r = scores). R scores that = 0-.19 is regarded as very weak, 0.20-0.39 as weak, 0.40-0.59 as moderate, 0.6-0.79 as strong and 0.8-1 as very strong correlation.

Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers

This section had 12 questions. Teachers were asked about the quality of feedback their school leaders gave them on teacher evaluation, if the school leader had a clear expectation of what quality education is and communicated it to the teacher, could fairly and adequately measure the effectiveness and improvement of instruction, and could use data to drive instructional improvement. The effect that the principal's ability to engage in instructionally

focused interactions with teachers showed a strong impact on student achievement. In (BRTS) the positive impact on student outcomes was (r = .80) and in (HPES) the impact was (r = .78).

Building a productive school climate

   This section had 13 questions. Teachers were asked questions regarding their level of trust for the school leader, whether or not that had a say in the decision making processes, the overall school climate of the building they worked in, and how collective the decision making process was between students, teachers, parents, and community, as well as the effectiveness of the shared vision and whether or not there are practical steps to move the school towards it. The effect that the principal's ability to build a productive school climate showed a very strong correlation in (BRTS), (r = .87). It had a moderate impact in (HPES), (r = .52).

Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities

   This section also had 13 questions. These questions centered on the effectiveness of collaboration time teachers get in schools. Teachers were asked whether or not they had adequate time to collaborate, did the school leader provide appropriate resources (substitute teachers, was the data presentable, organized, and appropriately desegregated) to make the collaboration time effective, and were decisions made by teachers from the collaboration appropriately supported by the school leader. The effect a principal has on facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities showed a moderately positive correlation on student achievement. For BRTS, (r = .59) and for HPES, (r = .55).

Managing personnel and resources strategically

   This section had 12 questions. These questions centered on the school leader's effectiveness in hiring new staff, scheduling to support teachers job demands, support staff's effectiveness in supporting the classroom, utilizing the school budget to provide effective

resources, and overall support of the personnel in the building. The effect a principal has on managing personnel and resources strategically, showed a positive correlation on student achievement, but much weaker than the other four categories. For BRTS, (r = .38) and HPES (r = .26).

Table 2

Correlation Analysis of School Leadership and Student Achievement (SA)

Category	.2	.3	.4	.5	.6	.7	.8	.9
1. BRTS (E)	.16	.02	.14	.12	.02	.04	.14	.80**
2. HPES (E)		.15	.22	.15	.09	.13	.16	.78**
3. BRTS (B)			.15	.16	.22	.15	.19	.87**
4. HPES (B)				.20	.19	.27	.22	.52*
5. BRTS (F)					.22		.18	.17	.59*
6. HPES (F)						.11	.22	.55*
7. BRTS (M)							.20	.38*
8. HPES (M)								.26*
9. SA								

Note. Table 2 attempted to present the impact each category had on Student Achievement (SA) in the 25 affluent elementary schools (AES) and the 25 Low Socio-Economic Elementary Schools (LSEES). Also, ** p<.01 & *p <.05P<.01 ** P<.05 *

Discussion

According to teacher perceptions, are certain aspects of effective leadership more vital to the success of low socioeconomic elementary schools than others?

Leadership effectiveness in all four categories is important to create a high-performing elementary school, regardless of the economic status of the student body. All categories showed a positive impact on student achievement, which is in line with previous research. Within the schools in this study however, the two categories teachers found most important were engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers (BRTS; $r =$. 74 & HPES; $r = .78$). With regard to low-socioeconomic schools, it appears that the ability to build a positive school climate is the most important component to having a high-performing school that services a majority of capable low-socioeconomic students ($r = .87$), according to the teachers surveyed in this sample. Also, based on this sample, it appears that effective school leadership is more vital in lower socioeconomic schools than affluent schools, to raise student achievement. We come to this conclusion based on the fact that in all four categories, school leaders in BRTS, scored higher than school leaders in HPES.

In most organizations, the most talented employees are rewarded with the greatest challenges and compensated accordingly. Students in low-socioeconomic categories continue to lag academically behind affluent students. Isenberg et al. (2022) found that low-socioeconomic students are less likely then affluent students to have effective teachers. All students must attend quality schools with effective educators. Closing skills, achievement, and opportunity gaps is nothing more than a cliché if policies do not attempt to get the most highly qualified educators to teach the most challenging students. This study shows causal evidence that having effective school leaders in elementary schools, especially Title 1 schools, is crucial.

State and Local Policy Implications

State and local school decision-makers should abide by the following:

1. Develop a framework for what a quality school leader, specifically in a Title 1 school, looks like in order to identify the most qualified personnel to navigate these challenges.

2. Effective school leaders who meet the criteria should be given the task to lead Title 1 schools.

3. Moving ineffective leaders in other positions to leadership positions in Title 1 schools should not be an option, regardless of the political pressure decision-makers may face to do so.

4. Decision-makers should *significantly* compensate effective personnel in Title 1 schools. Doing so should be a priority so as to incentivize effective teachers and school leaders to work in lower-socioeconomic schools. These should be the highest paying jobs within our K12 system.

School Leadership Preparation Programming Recommendations

In preparing leaders, significant progress is needed. Decision-makers of school leadership preparation programs may consider including the differences in school leadership in demographically different schools in their program standards (i.e., low-socioeconomic vs. affluent areas, rural, urban, small town, tribal, and suburban, to name a few). Perhaps most important in the effort to build future leaders, ample time should be dedicated to building a positive school climate and engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers.

Further Research

A similar study surveying teachers on school climate may be of interest, considering that the leaders in BRTS had a significantly higher mean than leaders in HPES. This course of research could strengthen findings regarding a leader's ability to build a positive school climate

in a low-socioeconomic school. Also of interest for future research is determining the most critical aspects of building a positive school climate in low-socioeconomic elementary schools compared to more affluent schools. More studies comparing school leadership strategies in different contexts would also be valuable (effective school leaders in rural, urban, small town, tribal, or suburban areas). Is there a difference in the most important attributes of an effective school leader who services children within different school contexts?

Limitations

The most significant limitation to this study is the authors only looked at teachers' perceptions and only compared economically diverse schools. Other factors such as race, gender orientation, language learners, and students with learning disabilities were not categories identified in the sample. These factors have a major impact; however, it was challenging to find comparable schools in these categories nationwide who would agree to participate in this sample.

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Symbols for Schools: Types of School Nicknames, How They are Formed, and Implications for Leaders

Andrew Hudacs

Abstract

School nicknames are powerful symbols representing the shared values and culture of their respective communities. This descriptive mixed method-study attempts to illuminate patterns in current school nicknames and examine ways that school leaders and communities approach changes to their nicknames. Nicknames from 1,108 postsecondary schools were identified and analyzed with mixed methods to form a classification system that was then used to measure relationships between nicknames and school characteristics. A thematic text analysis of institutional nickname descriptions shows that the origins of nicknames vary, both in their inspirations (from presidential committees to sports journalists) and their process of selection (from repeated usage in the community to student votes). The results of the study may serve as a resource for school leaders seeking to change their current school nickname.

Keywords: school symbols, leadership, nicknames, higher education, organizational culture, mascots

Introduction

Almost every high school, college, and university in the United States has a nickname to reference its community of students, faculty, alumni, and athletes who carry affiliation with the institution. These nicknames are often used as a source of pride among community members, as well as inspirational labels for school teams engaged in athletic or academic competitions. Although the use of nicknames has become commonplace when informally referencing different school communities, nicknames are often overlooked as meaningful symbols. However,

nicknames can draw significant attention when they are deemed offensive and questioned for their appropriateness to represent community members.

Symbols can be effective components of school leadership strategies for the purposes of school improvement (Gordon, 1992; Özdilekler et al., 2017). Yet there is very little scholarly research that examines nicknames as symbols for education institutions or considers how these symbols change. The small amounts of research related to school nicknames have primarily focused on the identification of mascots for athletic teams. As Franks (1982) notes, collegiate nicknames have historically been related to their athletic team names and colors. A more recent study by Zeitler (2018) created a taxonomy of team names and mascots for secondary schools that intersects with biological classifications.

This concurrent, mixed-method study explores the formally recognized school nicknames of post-secondary education institutions and the processes used to form or change their nicknames. The results of the analyses contribute to the literature about theories of organizational culture and socio-onomastics through the examination of nicknames as dynamic artifacts, socially constructed to represent school communities. The results will have practical applications by illuminating patterns in current nicknames and ways that school communities and their leaders approach change.

Furthermore, this study is significant because school nicknames, mascots, and their respective imagery have become controversial at many schools, often because of offensive symbolism related to race, ethnicity, or national origins (Nuessel, 1994; Riede, 2001; Spencer, 2008). Several post-secondary and secondary schools have been prompted to change to their nicknames because of concerns from their community members and professional associations (Hofman, 2005; National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2005; Spencer, 2008).

Moreover, the study is timely because many states are moving forward with legislation that will ban nicknames deemed to be racist or offensive (Nieberg, 2021; Wilson, 2021). This paper can serve as a resource for school leaders cultivating a culture of equity in their schools by finding powerful alternatives to outdated nicknames and understanding how other institutions have navigated these changes (Stolp, 1994).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to develop a classification system for understanding the different types of college nicknames, how they can be categorized, and how they are created. The classification system will provide a framework for both researchers and school leaders to apply to nicknames as cultural symbols for school communities. Furthermore, the study examines the different processes used to create school nicknames, which may serve as a resource for school leaders seeking to change their current school nickname.

The following research questions will be addressed in this study:

1.) What are the different types of school nicknames in post-secondary institutions?

2.) How do the different types of nicknames for post-secondary institutions vary by institutional characteristics (e.g. student enrollment, regional location)?

3.) How do narratives in public-facing documents describe how higher education institutions arrive at their most current nickname?

Literature Review

Schools are complex organizations with cultures and symbols that are both a product of and a representation of their respective communities. The organizational culture of schools includes the shared values, understandings, and sensemaking by community members, which is part of an ongoing, proactive process of reality construction (Morgan, 2006). Symbols play an

important part of a school's culture because they are collectively recognized by the school community, and they capture the imagination to represent a distinctive aspect of the organization (Morgan, 2006; Stone, 2002). A symbol can be anything—an image, word, object, logo or even an event—that stands for or represents something else (Stone, 2002). The symbolism of school nicknames relates with rituals, images, and traditions that embody the culture of schools (Schein, 2010). The use of nicknames sets the identity of community members apart from their neighbors, as well as evokes powerful emotions (Connolly, 2000; Lawson & Philips, 1985; Slowikowski, 1993; Zeitler, 2018). As they apply to sports teams, most fans expect nicknames to express characteristics such as power, speed, heroism, or courage (Nuessel, 1994).

The use of school nicknames and mascots in the United States has a long history with post-secondary institutions and their respective sports teams (Franks, 1982; Nuessel, 1994). Mascots, which are commonly associated with nicknames, have been documented since the early 19th century as people or things that bring luck to players or performers at athletic competitions or other events (Slowikowski, 1993). According to sports historian Rader (2009), the increased involvement of students in athletics during the mid 1800's fostered a transformation of school spirit on college campuses. Accompanying the growth of collegiate sports, especially football, was the use of nicknames and visual symbols to reference athletic teams and their schools (Craswell, 2015; Guiliano, 2015; Nuessel, 1994). The advancement of spectator sports in higher education played a prevailing role in developing college communities socially, through the forging of ties between students, faculty, alumni, administration, and society's upper class (Guiliano, 2015; Rader, 2009). As the school and sports team nicknames were continuously used and associated with the school communities, they became an essential part of a school's identity (Connolly, 2000; Toglia & Harris, 2014).

Because school nicknames are social constructions with meanings that are negotiated, challenged, celebrated, and sometimes rejected by school communities, leaders must be prepared to facilitate the relationship between these symbols and community members. School leaders often inherit their institution's nickname with its history and perceptions by the community. The nickname may be a resource for advancing an agenda, fulfilling a mission, and supporting a positive school culture (Stolp, 1994). Also, the nickname may threaten the organizational culture, or only represent a sub-culture, and fail to express the character of the entire school community (Morgan, 2006; Schein, 2010). As school communities change over time, it is understandable that the shared understanding of its symbols also changes (Morgan, 2006; Schein, 2010).

Theoretical Frameworks

This study utilizes two theoretical perspectives to address the three research questions. First, the study uses socio-onomastic theory, a subset of the discipline of onomastics, to create a classification system for institutional nicknames. Onomastics is the "study of the origin, history, and use of proper names" (American Name Society, 2024). First defined by Hans Walther in 1971, socio-onomastics includes the study of different variations of proper names within different contexts, while also considering the name bearer, the name giver, and the name user (Ainiala & Östman, 2017). Socio-onomastic theory "takes into account the social, cultural, and situational domains in which names are used" and how they are applied to all types of names, such as commercial names, personal names, or place names (Ainiala & Östman, 2017, p. 2).

The classification system developed for this study focuses on the nickname and does not include the associated logos or mascots. This approach extends from Zeitler's (2018) taxonomy of school athletic team names and mascots by framing the nickname categories around language-based labels and their meanings.

The construct and definition of nicknaming for this study is borrowed from Leslie and Skipper's (1990) work on socio-onomastic theory. In accordance with their three recommendations for future research, this study follows the methodological approach to first, study nicknames and their origins within specific examples; second, analyze data according to proposed classification categories; and third, identify the conditions when the nicknames are used. These recommendations served as a guide for developing a typology of nicknames among higher education institutions.

For the second theoretical perspective, this study utilizes symbolic-interpretive organizational theory to examine how symbolism and imagery are both instruments and products of organizational culture. Symbolic-interpretivism is based on the premise that organizational realities are socially produced from the multiple interpretations of the shared experiences and symbols within the organizational community (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). Symbols can be anything that "represents a conscious or an unconscious association with some wider, usually more abstract, concept or meaning" (Hatch, 1993). Language, including nicknames, is an important vehicle for analysis because it is through words that reality is constructed, modified, made sense of, and communicated (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006).

Furthermore, as Morgan (2006) and Stone (2002) elaborate, symbols and images are tools for leaders and managers to use for shaping the culture of an organization. Organizational cultures are woven through a shared system of meaning, where behaviors and images are interpreted to reinforce or reestablish the meaning (Morgan, 2006). As organizational theory is described by Hatch (1993) and Schein (2010), symbols could be anything, including both the artifacts themselves or the ways they are produced through the dynamics of culture. Nicknames are a unique subject for analysis in this regard because they serve as tools for organizational

leaders. They may be used in their existing form or changed to advance a leader's agenda. This study will explore how nicknames reflect organizational subcultures and consider the context for changes to institutional nicknames.

Data

The data set for the classification of nicknames in this study is the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) listing of all higher education institutions for Divisions I, II, and III in school year 2020-2021. The data set was provided by the NCAA and included the school's name, nickname, athletic division, status as a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), and status as a private institution. Three of the cases were not academic institutions and did not have nicknames; these were removed from the data set. A total of 162 cases did not have nicknames listed, so the researcher reviewed the official website for each institution and manually imputed the nickname. One institution did not have a nickname (Hollins University) and was removed from the data set. In total there were 1,108 institutions with nicknames included in the final data set.

A second data set used for the analysis was the 2018 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, the most recent data available (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). This data set included the following additional variables for identifying different types of institutions: Fall 2017 Full-Time Equivalent enrollment (full-time plus one-third part-time), urban-centric locale, residential setting classification, Hispanic Serving Institution, women's colleges and universities, region of the country, combined SAT composite score in the 25th percentile, and ACT composite score in the 25th percentile.

Lastly, information about the academic institutions and their respective nicknames were retrieved from publicly available websites accessible through the Google search engine. The

primary sources for text retrieval were the college or university's official website or athletic

website, and school sponsored or affiliated websites, which included alumni associations, blogs,

library archives, and school and student news media. Other web-based sources were from

nationally affiliated news and sports media, athletic conferences, and athletic fan organizations

associated with the school. Where available, the researcher retrieved data from up to three

websites to corroborate details, descriptions, and stories. The type of information retrieved from

websites verified the formal nickname, information about the creation of a nickname, and

descriptions of the intended meaning of nickname.

Although nicknames are often associated with mascots and logos for school athletic

teams (Nuessel, 1994), this study only focused on the nickname as the unit for analysis. Only the

nickname itself was used because logos and mascots can be changed by the institution without

requiring a change to the nickname. This change could also include any associated use of the

nickname in school traditions or references to its community members (e.g. school anthem).

Methods

The type of analysis used for this concurrent mixed methods study is extensive and

intensive toponymy (Tent, 2015). Extensive toponymy is the study of place names with a large

or comprehensive number of cases; this provides breadth and extends the scope of the study.

Intensive toponymy refers to the intrinsic strength or fullness of the data collected and analyzed.

The extensive toponymy portion of this study utilizes statistical methods to examine the

frequency of different types of nicknames and the relationships between these different types and

a variety of institutional factors. This descriptive analysis provides a summary of the sample

population and is not predictive of a specific outcome, so no hypothesis tests were conducted

(Venkatesh et al., 2023). Intensive toponymy was used to examine documents to illuminate the process used for changing nicknames.

This study employs three modes of inquiry to answer the research questions. First, the researcher followed the guidance of Leslie and Skipper (1990) and Zeitler's (2018) taxonomy of school athletic team nicknames and mascots to develop a categorization and classification system for all school nicknames (Feng et al., 2020). When developing the classification system, nicknames were first categorized according to their root or core term, which was usually a noun. This process created main categories for all nicknames. Next, any nicknames with attributes, such as adjectives, descriptive terms, or virtues, were also classified into separate categories. The researcher did not classify attributes that were part of the noun in the nickname (e.g., River Hawks, Crimson Tide, Great Danes).

Next, the researcher created subcategories within each main category to provide a more specified classification for all nicknames. A total of 32 subcategories were created (see Appendix A). Cases with nicknames that could potentially have multiple meanings were reviewed on the institution's website for more details about the meaning or origins of the nickname. News articles or blogs publicly available on the internet, preferably hosted by the institution, were also used when information was not available on the school website.

The next phase of the study involved a descriptive statistical analysis for the frequency of nicknames by main category, subcategory, and attribute category. These analyses include frequency distributions and measures of the relationship between school variables, such as school enrollment, regional location, and admissions test scores using contingency tables and correlations.

Lastly, the qualitative analysis for research question number three started with the researcher taking a disproportionate stratified sample of nicknames from each of the main categories. The proportions varied from 100% of the smallest four categories to 20% of the largest two categories (People and Fauna). The sampling for each of the two largest categories was equal or greater than the sample size for the third largest category. Schools in the largest two categories were randomly selected through a random number generator in Microsoft Excel. The resulting random selection provided representation from all subcategories except for the subcategories Mythical Figures and Gender. The researcher randomly selected one case from each of these subcategories to allow for a comprehensive sample representing all subcategories. A total of 355 schools and 357 nicknames were part of the stratified sample. [1] A frequency table of nickname categories in the stratified sample can be found in Appendix B.

To collect data for the text analysis, the researcher performed a web search using Google to locate web pages and documents with descriptions of how nicknames were created and formed. The researcher limited the source of the web pages and documents to the official and affiliated websites of the institution, with a very limited exception for sources from local or national news media and college association websites (e.g. Chicago Tribune – Indiana State University Hoosiers, HBCU Library Alliance – University of the District of Columbia Firebirds) that provided supplemental information to the institutionally affiliated websites. Lastly, the researcher also searched within the institution's web pages describing the history and "About Us" menus for the nickname or mascot. These websites and documents were selected because of their credibility, representativeness, authenticity, and meaning (Morgan, 2022). Partial or

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[1] Schools with multiple nicknames were included in all sampling. Also, when multiple schools shared a nickname under a formal agreement, the collective group of schools were counted as one school.

complete descriptions about the creation of the current nickname were collected for 241 institutions.

Then, the researcher used thematic text analysis to determine the origins of the most recent version of each institution's nickname. The process began with an extensive review of the text, the creation of an etic coding scheme, identification of patterns, and the categorization and collation of codes (Creswell, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). Lastly, the researcher synthesized the collations of codes into themes by identifying the "significant concepts that link the substantial portions of data together" (Nowell et al., 2017).

Limitations

This study has limitations related to the volume and depth of information available for the text analysis examining how higher education institutions arrived at their most current nickname. Many higher education institutions do not post clear descriptions of the nickname development process. Those that do, often do not have many details of the decision-making process, which may have limited the variety of potential themes that could emerge from more rich stories of nickname creation. Also, some do not identify the authors of the text or the sources of the original story passed down over the years, or the text provided from higher education institutions or the sources of information provided to the media may be biased to tell a story befitting of the school's reputation. This may have limited the number of perspectives on each school's process or made it difficult to ascertain the veracity of a school's story. The researcher attempted to address these limitations by using a robust subsample of cases for analysis. Also, the researcher used data source triangulation when three or more sources were available to review for convergence of information about nickname creation stories (Carter et al., 2014; Creswell, 2013).

Results

Research Question #1: What are the different types of school nicknames in post-secondary education?

A complete list of all categories with definitions can be found in Appendix A. The researcher identified six main categories of post-secondary school nicknames in the data set with 32 nickname sub-categories. Table 1 outlines the frequencies of each nickname category and subcategory. The following is a list of the six main nickname categories with the frequency and percentage of occurrences in parenthesis: Fauna (614, 55.4%), People (333, 30.1%), The Supernatural (67, 6%), Natural Phenomena (61, 5.5%), Coined Terms (23, 2.1%), Inanimate Objects (15, 1.4%). Table 2 shows the frequencies of attributes for nicknames in the sample. A total of 39 institutions had dual nicknames, one for each sex/gender (e.g. Cowboys and Cowgirls). Eight of the institutions were HBCU and 24 were private schools.

Table 1

Frequency of Types of School Member Nicknames for the Total Sample, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and Private Higher Education Institutions

Main Category	Subcategory	Total Frequency	HBCU	Private
Fauna		614	38	328
	Wild	508	32	276
	Pets	56	3	29
	Livestock	41	3	18
	Extinct	3	0	2
	Customized	6	0	3
People		333	8	197
	Fighters and Soldiers	105	2	66
	Members of a labor force	82	4	38
	Settlers of a region	63	1	41
	Members of a religion	20	0	20
	Members of a place or region	19	0	6
	Behaviors and Lifestyles	11	0	6
	Indigenous and Native Communities	10	1	3
	Nobility	10	0	9
	Memorialized Institutional Leaders	9	0	7
	Mythical Figures	2	0	0
	Gender	2	0	1
The Supernatural		67	4	39
	Creatures	39	3	22
	Religious	21	1	12
	Figures	6	0	4
	Forces	1	0	1
Natural Phenomena		61	0	42
	Forces of nature	34	0	25
	Colors	13	0	11
	Extra Terrestrial	6	0	3
	Plants	5	0	2
	Geographic Features	3	0	1
Coined Terms		23	1	19
	Modified Institutional Name	17	1	16
	Phrases	3	0	3
	Made up words	3	0	0
Inanimate Objects		15	0	10
	Vehicles	6	0	3
	Weapons	4	0	4
	Tools	2	0	1
	Clothing	3	0	2
Total		1112	51	634

Table 2

Frequency of Types of Attributes to School Member Nicknames for the Total Sample, Historically Black Colleges or Universities, and Private Higher Education Institutions

Attribute	Frequency	HBCU	Private
Color	58	8	37
Aggression	20	0	13
Virtues	2	0	1
Activities	7	0	5
Context	10	1	4
Size	6	1	5
Total	103	10	65

Research Question #2: How do the different types of nicknames for post-secondary institutions vary by the type of institution?

The researcher analyzed the frequencies and correlations for the different types of schools according to the institutional variables. The results for HBCU and private institutions are in Table 1.

The researcher performed a Spearman's rho and Kendall's tau correlation to measure the strength and statistical significance of relationships between the type of nickname by main categories and institutional characteristics for private institutions, HBCUs, Hispanic Serving Institution, women's colleges and universities, fall 2017 full-time equivalent enrollment (full-time plus one-third part-time), urban-centric locale (rural vs. large city), residential setting classification, region of the country, combined SAT composite score in the 25th percentile, and ACT composite score in the 25th percentile. Overall, there were few significant relationships and all were very weak (r<0.1). The results are displayed in Appendix C.

Research Question #3: How do narratives in public documents describe how higher education institutions arrive at their most current nickname?

The results of the thematic text analysis identified two categories of codes within the nickname development process: 1.) Generating the idea of the nickname, 2.) Deciding upon or

adopting a nickname. The process for creating all nicknames included at least one theme from each of the two categories. None of these themes were mutually exclusive of each other in the process of nickname creation. For example, a school could have a committee that surveyed students for ideas and then made a decision, or narrowed the list of suggestions from the survey to three ideas which were then voted upon by the student body.

Within the first category, Generating the Idea of a Nickname, the four themes were: Solicitations from the School Community, Committees and Task Forces, Influential Leaders in the Community (ex. Lettermen, SGA president, football coach), and Reactions to Athletic Events (written and spoken). The Solicitations of Ideas from the School Community included methods such as surveys, polls, focus groups, contests, and town hall meetings. When Committees and Task Forces were the medium for idea generation, reports would describe the select group as the providers of the ideas, and ideas were then equally represented on a list. Ideas that came from Influential Leaders in the Community were frequently justified with a story or explanation for the reasoning behind the idea. Lastly, the theme for Reactions to Athletic Events were frequently explained with a story. Stories were generally based on a specific sporting event, such as a rivalry football game, and the subsequent reaction by sports journalists.

In the second category of codes, Deciding Upon or Adopting a Nickname, there were three themes identified by the researcher in the nickname formation process: Committees and Task Forces, Voting, and Repeated Usage. Committees and task forces often were employed by institutions and included a variety of members and numbers of participants. These groups would sometimes be portrayed as the sole decision-making body or the provider of a recommendation to a higher level of authority for a final decision of approval, such as the president or board of trustees. Voting by members of the school community often varied by those who were eligible to

vote and the organization managing the voting process. Often, eligible voters were the student body at the time of nickname creation; however, some schools opened the voting process to alumni, staff, and faculty. The voting process itself was operated in many cases by a task force or committee recognized by school administration, student associations, athletic counsels, or the school newspaper.

Lastly, the researcher identified three factors that frequently relate with the formation of nicknames: athletics, sports journalists, and the changed meaning of an existing nickname, so the nickname is a similar term to the previous nickname but has a different meaning than its original usage.

Summary of Results

This study analyzed the different types of nicknames used by post-secondary education institutions to describe their sports teams and school community by applying socio-onomastic theory to create a typology with six main and 32 subcategories. Next, the frequencies and distributions of school nicknames by institutional characteristics were examined to identify how they vary. Lastly, thematic text analysis was used to analyze how post-secondary institutions self-reported the process for creating their own nickname.

The categories of Fauna and People accounted for 85.5% of all nicknames. The remaining four categories each held between 1.4% and 6% of the cases. The analysis of relationships between the type of nickname and the type of higher education institution it represents revealed there is very little or no significant relationship. Furthermore, nicknames are typically created in two stages: first, by a process of generating nickname ideas; and second, by some method of deciding upon the nickname itself. Ideas for nicknames are generated through committees, influential leaders, remarkable reactions to athletic events by observers, or

crowdsourcing from members of the school community. Nickname decisions were made by committees or more widespread voting or adopted through repeated usage by a critical mass of people within the school community.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper provides a framework to understanding school nicknames as symbols for academic institutions and how they vary in both identity and formation across school communities. How school nicknames are crafted and created is a reflection of, or an influence on, the culture of an organization because they have a shared sense of meaning among its members (Morgan, 2006). The creation of school nicknames is an organizational change, which ideally represents a new reflection of a shared sense of meaning about the school community. Furthermore, nicknames should be inspirational to their community members through an added expression of the school culture within the nickname as a symbol.

Nicknames and how they are derived are important because the culture of the organization is preserved when the values, rituals, and norms of the organization remain active, shared, and constant during the process of changing the nickname (Morgan, 2006). This concept is exemplified in a statement made by the chair of the Board of Trustees for Amherst College— and college alumnus—Murphy (2016), when addressing the creation of a new official mascot and its related nickname. The new nickname and mascot replaced the previous unofficial mascot, Lord Jeffs, which was based on a nickname for the founder of the town, Jeffrey Lord Amherst (Amherst College, 2017):

> The aim will be to generate as much engagement as possible, and to find something— something organically associated with Amherst, reflecting our collective history—that we can all rally around. (Murphy, 2016, p. 2)

This explicit description of a mission to engage school community members in a process to search for a symbol with a shared sense of meaning demonstrated an attempt at reaching cultural preservation while establishing an inspirational collective identity.

However, the changing of a school nickname can also be understood as a mechanism used by organizational leaders for leveraging greater changes to both the culture and identity of an organization. Because the culture of the organization is grounded within the minds and emotions of its community members, changing the school's symbols is a lever for changing how the community sees itself (Argyris, 2010; Schein, 2010; Sackman, 1991). The change process is an effort to construct a new reality, which can be very complex. Furthermore, changes to the culture of an organization and its symbols can take a long time, if it ever happens at all (Argyris, 2010). An example of how difficult it can be is illustrated with the Cameron University (2022) Aggies, according to the University's alma mater webpage:

> For more than a century, the name has stuck, but not without a few challenges. In the 1920s, CSSA [Cameron State School of Agriculture] became the "Cowboys" for a couple of years before returning to the Aggie name. Then, in 1968, Cameron administrators wanted us to become the Cardinals as part of our transition to a university … but students would have none of it. As recently as 2003 it was suggested that the Aggie name no longer was an accurate way to describe a Cameron student. The school came unbelievably close to changing the name of its sports team to the Cavalry – until a wise alumnus noted that "it doesn't matter what you call us, we'll always be Aggies." (para. 3)

In this case, the enduring identity of community members as "Aggies" could not be entwined with changes to the academic institution transitioning from a college to a university.

Nor could different administrative leaders, with presumably different leadership styles and methods, foster a community bond with a new moniker.

The themes for generating ideas and selecting nicknames identified in this study illustrated a variety of leadership methods, as well as different relationships between school leaders and their communities. Furthermore, the methods of leadership for the nickname change process also varied widely. In a few scenarios, authority figures enacted a change process with limited engagement or input from community members. Instead, they crafted and/or chose the nicknames. As Heifitz and Laurie (1999) explain, an authority-oriented approach works in cultures that embrace technical fixes to problems. There were a limited number of cases for this type of leadership approach, and they generally involved school administrators, student representatives, or athletic coaches. They occurred when the nickname change was an adjustment to an existing nickname or when the institution or athletic teams were originally founded, and no previous nickname existed. In the situation when an original nickname was created during the founding of a school, it is possible that the culture of the organization was in its early development and key leaders in the school and athletic community were charged with crafting ideas for new symbols, such as a circumstance when the organizational culture was being shaped and constructed by the occupational culture of the school's leaders (Schein, 2015). One example is the naming of Mississippi Valley State University's (2020) Delta Devils, which is a blend of the school's geographic location in the Mississippi Delta and the football coach's input about the weather being "as hot as a devil" during a brainstorming moment with the athletic director (2020). Or, when the Stetson University Board of Trustees named the first football team the Hatters (Stetson University, 2022) in recognition of the business enterprise owned by the chair of the board, who also provided a financial lifeline for the transformation of DeLeland University.

In these two examples, the newly formed athletic teams did not have a prior nickname and a small group of school officials are credited with generating the idea. The moniker decided and declared by the administrating authorities in a relatively short period of time solved the problem of having sports teams without institutional symbols for intercollegiate competition.

On the contrary to an authoritarian leadership approach, several other institutions experienced nickname formation processes that reflected a more organic method, where the change process was motivated and heavily influenced by members of the greater school community. These organic processes demonstrated conditions where the "followers" hold the locus of responsibility for creating or changing a nickname. Community members involved in the process included students, sports enthusiasts, and professors, all of whom had enough connections within the community to allow their ideas to be shared. For example, at Misericordia University, a student athlete who was also editor of the student newspaper editor raised the issue of changing the school nickname. The student's persistence to discuss the issue eventually engaged professors, campus religious leaders, and other students in joining with the proposition (Robinson, 2016).

School cultures that require a more organic process to changing the nickname may see effective results from a contemporary leadership style, where the leader engages dynamic and reciprocal processes between different stakeholders to pursue a common goal (Komives & Dugan, 2010). One example is a servant leadership style, such as when the leader prioritizes the expressed interests of community members and enables them to achieve desired outcomes (Greenleaf, 1977; Komives & Dugan, 2010; Spears, 1995). Servant leadership allows power to be shared among contributors during the decision-making process while supporting the sense of community among its members (Spears, 1995). This approach emphasizes the importance of the

sociological level of leading cultural change in addition to working with individuals to accept and become part of the forthcoming changes (Argyris, 2010). Working across the individual and sociological level can help confirm a sense of commitment among the community members (Argyris, 2010).

Although there were examples of schools with change processes that clearly reflected either an authoritative leadership approach or an organic followership approach, the substantial number of change processes were somewhere in between; it was often a structured process crafted by institutional authorities that created methods for community members to generate ideas and weigh in on decisions. In many cases, a nickname or mascot committee consisted of representatives of the school community who were authorized to solicit ideas and select or recommend a moniker. Representatives were selected through a variety of methods, including committee or task force appointments made by administrators.

All of the factors in the nickname creation process, the tedious and the lively, are indicators of the culture of the organization and how it approaches change (Morgan, 2006). These factors may include who is allowed to have a voice in the process, the timeline for deliberation and decision making, the institutional authority overseeing the process, transparency of the process, and the release or sharing of the outcomes from the change process.

Future research on this topic could be taken in several different directions. First, future studies could investigate the extent that change processes represent the values of a school community. A study of this type could provide greater insight to the relationship between the beliefs and expectations of community members with the type of process the institution employs to change its moniker. This direction could also be extended into an analysis about the stability of a nickname over time and the use of the nickname when referencing the entire school

community. These types of studies would shed light on the effectiveness of a nickname change

process to represent the school and its culture. Additionally, an analysis of trends in the

categories of nicknames across all institutions over time may reveal which types of nicknames

are accepted more widely as appropriate for educational institutions. Lastly, future studies could

look at intuitional nicknames that are distinctly separate from the monikers and mascots for their

sports teams. Separate symbols within the same institution may indicate the type of relationship

athletic programs have with the academic or other institutional identity of the school community.

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Appendix A

Definitions, Descriptions, and Examples of Main Categories, Subcategories and Attributes of

School Nicknames[2]

Table A1. Categories and descriptions of school nicknames

Main Category	Subcategory	Definitions, descriptions and examples
People	Indigenous and Native communities	People who are/were indigenous or native to the area, or people who were indigenous to a different area but have an association to the location of the nickname. This also includes references to prominent leaders or figures in native and indigenous communities, as well as terms used as a general reference to indigenous or Native Americans. Examples: Catawba College Catawba Indians, Bradley University Braves, and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Fighting Illini.
	Members of a place or region	People who currently live in a certain location or community where the nickname is used. This includes people who are/were indigenous or native to the area, or people who were indigenous to a different area but have an association to the location of the nickname. University of Iowa Hawkeyes, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Islanders, and St. Edward's University Hilltoppers.
	Settlers of a region	People who settled an area, were not indigenous, and are identified by their heritage or ethnic background and not their newly settled location. These nicknames often refer to people of northern European heritage. The namesake is not directly related to a religion or occupation. Examples: New England College Pilgrims, University of Oklahoma Sooners, Cleveland State University Vikings, and University of Louisiana at Lafayette Ragin' Cajuns.

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[2] There is substantial overlap between school nicknames and their mascots; however, this study makes a clear differentiation between the two and only analyzes the words used for nicknames.

Members of a religion	People who are identified as members or representatives of an organized religion. These nicknames can also include roles or "rank" within a religious order. Examples: University of Pennsylvania Quakers, Marymount University Saints, and Wake Forest University Deacons.
Members of a labor force	People labeled for their employment in a certain industry or skilled trade. Employment could be from either legal or illegal activities. Examples: New Mexico State University Aggies, East Tennessee State University Buccaneers, Austin Peay State University Governors, and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Vaqueros. *Pirates are included in this category because the intent of their illegal activity is to gain a profit. Musicians and sailors are also included in this category because their skills are used in a trade as a primary method of employment.
Fighters and Soldiers	People who are labeled by their unique methods of combat, their identity as someone who fights, or their membership in a military or security force. Examples: St. Michael's College Purple Knights, University of Southern California Trojans, and Nicholls State University Colonels.
Nobility	People who have titles, roles, or hereditary rank as members of a political or social class system, including royalty. This category also includes immediate support personnel for nobility and royalty that bears an occupational title referencing nobility (e.g., Regents). Examples: Heidelberg University Student Princes, Kings College Monarchs, and Kenyon College Lords and Ladies.
Memorialized Institutional Leaders	Historical leaders of the institution. The name might be used in whole or part/abbreviation. Examples: Mount Holyoke College Lyons, Williams College Ephs, and University of San Francisco Dons.
Mythical Figures	People who are heroes or characters in myths or fictional stories. Examples: University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Tarzans and University of West Florida Argonauts.
Behaviors and Lifestyles	People who exhibit behaviors or lifestyles that can be used for identification. (The behaviors or lifestyles do not engage in profiteering, religious practices, athletics, military service or combat with another person.) Examples: Loyola University Chicago Ramblers, University of Idaho Vandals and Southern Arkansas University Muleriders and Lady Muleriders.
Gender	This category includes people who are labeled only by gender identity. An example is Arkansas Tech University Wonder Boys (for their male team members).

Fauna	Wild	A non-domesticated, non-extinct animal or group of animals. In many cases, the wild animals selected for the nickname live within the local habitat or are an exotic predator. Domesticated animals that have become feral are included in this category because of their identification as wild. Examples: Temple University Owls, Greensboro College Pride, and the University of California-Santa Cruz Banana Slugs.
	Pets	Domesticated animals that are specifically bred for companionship or pleasure, often specified by their breed. All domesticated canines are included in this category. Examples: University of Georgia Bulldogs, John Jay College of Criminal Justice Blood Hounds and Thiel College Tomcats.
	Livestock	Domesticated animals used primarily for agriculture, work, or performance that yields a profit or reward. Animals selected for this type of nickname (which includes poultry) may have an affiliation to the type of agricultural practices or industry in a local area. Animals used for racing or fighting are included in this category. Examples: University of Delaware Blue Hens, University of Texas-Austin Longhorn Steers, and Marywood University Pacers.
	Extinct	Any animal known to have once lived on earth, but no longer has any surviving members of the species. Examples: Amherst College Mammoths, Maranatha Baptist University Sabercats, and Purdue University-Fort Wayne Mastodons.
	Customized	This category includes animals whose identities or names were customized, but do not have any supernatural powers. Examples include the Anna Maria College Amcats, Loras College Duhawks, and Rogers State University Hillcats.
The Supernatural	Creatures	Animated, non-human beings with little or no verifiable evidence to prove their existence, currently or historically. Often, supernatural creatures are associated with a myth or tale that explains what they are. Examples: Seton Hall University Griffins, Drexel University Dragons, and St. Louis University Billikens.
	Figures	Beings that resemble humans but have special powers that are not found in the natural world, with little or no verifiable evidence to prove their existence, currently or historically. Similar to supernatural creatures, figures are sometimes associated with a myth or tale that explains who they are and the effects of their superpowers. Examples: Westminster College Titans and Erskine College Flying Fleet.
	Forces	Events, situations, or actions that cannot be explained by science. Sometimes supernatural forces are used to

		explain a phenomenon or event when logic or science is not sufficient. Also, similar to supernatural creatures and figures, supernatural forces are sometimes associated with a myth or tale. Example: Salem College-North Carolina Spirits
	Religious	Figures, creatures, and forces with superhuman powers that can be explained by the beliefs of one or more organized religions. Examples: Emmanuel College Halo, Duke University Blue Devils and University of California-San Diego Tritons.
Natural Phenomena	Forces of nature	Events or displays of energy that occur in the known universe. Forces of nature depicted in nicknames tend to be powerful events related to weather conditions; however, any natural force may fall into this category. Examples: Iowa State University Cyclones, Pepperdine University Waves, University of New England Nor'easters, and the South Nazarene University Crimson Storm.
	Colors	Visible colors on the color spectrum. Examples: Dartmouth College The Big Green, Harvard University Crimson, University of Chicago Maroons and Wellesley College Blue.
	Geographic Features	Natural features found on earth. Examples: California State University - Long Beach The Beach, Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania The Rock, and Whitman College Blues (shortened term for the Blue Mountain Range).
	Extraterrestrial	Objects found beyond the earth's atmosphere. Examples: Olivet College Comets, University of Illinois – Springfield Prairie Stars, and Arkansas Tech University Golden Suns (for female team members).
	Flora	Identifiable plants or parts of plants. Examples: The Ohio State University Buckeyes, Indiana State University Sycamores, and Lubbock Christian University Chapparals/Lady Chapparals.
Inanimate Objects	Weapons	Objects used to injure, defeat, or destroy. Examples: Ursuline College Arrows, Chaminade University of Honolulu Silverswords and Gettysburg College Bullets.
	Tools	A device or object that helps complete a task. Example: University of Toledo Rockets, Lasell University Lasers, and University of Massachusetts-Boston Beacons.
	Vehicles	Equipment that carries or transports something. Examples: Purdue University Boilermakers, Concordia College (New York) Clippers, and Newman University Jets.
	Clothing	Any garment or decorative pattern used for a specific type of clothing. Examples: Florida Southern College

		Moccasins, University of Akron Zips, and Carnegie Mellon University Tartana.
Coined Terms	Phrases	A single word of group of words expressed as a conceptual unit and used in place of a noun Examples: Georgetown Hoyas, California Lutheran University Regals (Female members) and Wells University The Express.
	Invented words	Words that are not part of any language and may be modifications of existing words. Examples: Virginia Polytechnical Institute and State University Hokies and University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Blugolds.
	Modified Institutional Name	An abbreviation or adjustment of the institution's actual name. Examples: College of Saint Benedict Bennies, Duquesne University Dukes, and Saint Bonaventure University Bonnies.

Table A2. Attributes of School Nicknames

Attributes	Definitions, descriptions and examples
Color	Any color on the spectrum; Example: The University of Tulsa Golden Hurricanes
Aggression	Terms for fighting, hostility, harmful intentions, or violence; Example: University of Notre Dame Fighting Irish
Virtues	Terms providing praise for outstanding qualities; Example: Immaculata University Mighty Macs
Activities	Actions by an object or creature; Example: Erskine College Flying Fleet
Context	Terms specifying a setting or place; Example: The Pennsylvania State University Nittany Lions
Size	Terms describing how large or small a creature or object appears; Example: Dartmouth College Big Green

Appendix B
Stratified Sampling for the Text Analysis

Main Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Stratified Sample
Fauna		614	126
	Wild	508	103
	Pets	56	12
	Livestock	41	8
	Extinct	3	2
	Customized	6	1
People		333	70
	Fighters and Soldiers	105	26
	Members of a labor force	82	18
	Settlers for a region	63	8
	Members of a religion	20	3
	Members of a place or region	19	5
	Behaviors and Lifestyles	11	2
	Indigenous and Native Communities	10	3
	Nobility	10	1
	Memorialized Institutional Leaders	9	2
	Mythical Figures	2	1
	Gender	2	1
The Supernatural		67	67
	Creatures	39	39
	Religious	21	21
	Figures	6	6
	Forces	1	1
Natural Phenomenon		61	61
	Forces of nature	34	34
	Colors	13	13
	Extra Terrestrial	6	6
	Plants	5	5
	Geographic Features	3	3
Coined Terms		23	23
	Modified Institutional Name	17	17
	Phrases	3	3
	Made up words	3	3
Inanimate Objects		15	15
	Vehicles	6	6
	Weapons	4	4
	Tools	2	2
	Clothing	3	3
Total		1112	357

Appendix C
Spearman's rho correlation of institutional characteristics with the main types of nicknames

Table C1: Correlation coefficients for the main types of nicknames and institutions located in rural areas or large cities

	People	Animals	Supernatural	Natural Phenomena	Objects	Coined Terms
Rural	0.018	0.014	-0.013	-0.031	-0.043	0.031
Large City	-0.038	0.004	0.030	0.021	0.021	-0.008

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table C2: Correlation coefficients for the main types of nicknames and Private Institutions, HBCUs, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) and Women's Colleges

	People	Animals	Supernatural	Natural Phenomena	Objects	Coined Terms
Private	0.028	-.082**	0.006	0.058	0.023	.075*
HBCU	-.069*	.084**	0.017	-0.053	-0.026	-0.002
Women's College	-0.045	-0.028	.080**	0.056	-0.016	0.028
HSI	0.043	0.001	-0.036	-0.016	-0.031	-0.013

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
†No data was available for Tribal Colleges

Table C3: Correlation coefficients for the main types of nicknames and residential classification

	People	Animals	Supernatural	Natural Phenomena	Objects	Coined Terms
Non-residential	-0.019	0.040	-0.037	0.004	0.014	-0.046
Primarily Residential	-0.035	0.011	.059*	-0.013	0.015	-0.010
Highly Residential	0.047	-0.040	-0.035	0.011	-0.024	0.044

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table C4: Correlation coefficients for the main types of nicknames, student enrollment, and admissions assessments

	People	Animals	Supernatural	Natural Phenomena	Objects	Coined Terms
Fall 2017 Full-Time Equivalent enrollment	-0.019	0.036	-0.016	0.026	-0.013	-.065*
Combined SAT composite score in the 25th percentile	0.033	-0.056	-0.034	.075*	0.018	0.021

ACT composite score in the 25th percentile	0.009	-0.052	0.013	.066*	-0.002	0.037

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table C4: Correlation coefficients for the main types of nicknames and region of the United States

	People	Animals	Supernatural	Natural Phenomena	Objects	Coined Terms
New England	-0.007	0.037	-0.033	-0.014	0.013	-0.048
Mid-East	-0.054	0.034	0.034	-0.029	0.029	0.025
Great Lakes	0.034	-.094**	0.014	.089**	.061*	-0.007
Plains	-0.032	0.015	0.018	-0.046	-0.008	.091**
Southeast	0.037	0.006	-0.032	-0.022	-0.032	-0.026
Southwest	0.007	0.017	-0.054	0.043	-0.032	-0.040
Rockies	-0.004	0.009	0.050	-0.041	-0.020	-0.025
Far West	-0.001	-0.008	0.026	0.018	-0.034	0.028

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

CTE Can Be For Me: Middle School Counselors' Perception of Their Knowledge and Abilities to Guide Students in Career and Technical Education in the State of Texas

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Abstract

A renewed emphasis on career and technical education has guided the transformation of high school education to support alternatives to college achievement. Research shows that career identity development begins in middle school or earlier, though the literature is scarce when discussing career guidance at the middle school level. Through phenomenological interviews, this research attempted to understand the processes and perceptions of middle school counselors when discussing career and technology education with their students. This study revealed recommendations for district officials and those in academia to assist in creating more robust career development programs at the middle school level.

Keywords: CTE, career and technical education, career, middle school, program

Background

One of the most persistent critiques of the United States' educational system is that it does not provide feasible outcomes for all students and maintains a "college for all" mentality (DeSabato, 2022). As it stands, an overemphasis on the "college" part of College, Career, and Military Readiness (CCMR) standards leaves students with the view that they are limited to two choices - collegiate achievement or its absence (Russell & White, 2019). While career and technology education (CTE) has seen a fiscal resurgence in the United States (Center for Public Education, 2016), obstacles still exist toward its full implementation. Additionally, research is scant as to the benefits or drawbacks to starting such programs at the middle school level (Center for American Progress, 2020). This lack of discussion around fostering middle school CTE

programs contrasts with career interests developing as early as sixth grade (Akos et al., 2012). While federal priorities have begun to shift toward greater funding for middle school CTE opportunities (Hyslop & Imperatore, 2017) funding is not always utilized at the middle school level (Dees et al., 2012). While several states have collaborated to create standards, participation is voluntary, and enforcement does not necessarily align between secondary and postsecondary CTE standards (Advance CTE, 2023). Instead, the individual states have been mandated to implement meaningful programs yet left largely to their own devices in creating structures and templates for career and technology education. This independence has led to ineffective and unequal utilization of federal funding (Stone, 2017). For example, Texas follows these trends of over-emphasizing collegiate achievement in regard to the guidance offered to counselors around career counseling (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

Godbey and Gordon (2019) note that where training for educators in CTE exists at all, it is often inadequate. Educators and counselors often do not have sufficient exposure to the fields of student interests and are unaware of the market conditions of those fields to be able to provide students with realistic understandings of their career interests (Reddy et al., 2015). This lack of experience outside of the field of education compounds clear evidence that relational support for career decisions and support in career exploration are more important for career identity development than intrinsic traits alone (Ireland & Lent, 2018). It is within this context of this gap that an opportunity arises to understand how counselors process and perceive their abilities to help students choose CTE career strands. While funding has become available, there still exists room to ascertain the perceptions and efficacy of guidance counselors in how they advocate for and help students. The need for and benefits of high-quality CTE education are evident, as is the

critical role counselors can play in the process of enrolling students in those programs

(Verhoeven et al., 2018).

Texas CTE Landscape

While career and technology education have a long history in the United States, at the

state level several pieces of legislation have guided Texas' approach to CTE beginning in the

mid-2010s. House Bill 5 (TX HB 5, 2013) was passed in 2013, and the bill required that public

schools in Texas assign students to career clusters, or groupings of similar classes for their high

school graduation plans, that would help prepare them for postsecondary achievement in those

areas. These groupings are known throughout the student's high school career as their

endorsement, and it is noted on their transcripts upon graduation (TX HB 5, 2013). For example,

a student wishing to become a veterinarian might elect an endorsement in health sciences,

whereas a student wishing to become a lawyer might choose the law and public service

endorsement cluster (Texas CTE, 2017). This realignment of student's courses at the high school

level led to the creation of the 60X30 TX initiative by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating

Board, THECB, in 2015. This initiative provided a framework to meet industry and education

goals statewide of seeing 60% of Texans aged 24-34 earn a degree or industry certificate by 2030

(THECB, 2015).

In 2016, Texas Governor Greg Abbott established the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative, a

board that brought collaboration and resources from the Texas Workforce Commission, the

THECB, and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to further support equipping students for high-

wage, in-demand jobs (Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative, 2023). While the THECB implements

policy for higher education, the TEA governs primary and secondary education in the state.

Further guidance for CTE implementation was provided in 2017, when House Bill 18 was

passed. It required education for seventh and eighth grade students on high school endorsements and included discussions of CCMR standards following high school graduation (TX HB 18, 2017). The endorsements and discussions were developed as a result of collaboration with the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative.

More recently, systems to reward districts that met certain college and career readiness standards were developed under House Bill 3 in the 2019 legislative session (TX HB 3, 2019). Legislation during the 2019 session resulted in CCMR outcome bonuses that would provide a per-child bonus of several thousand dollars to districts who have a percentage of students graduating meeting either college or career ready *and* enrolling in a degree-granting institution or achieving an industry certification.

In 2022, THECB adjusted its 60X30 TX initiative to expand the age range of its goal from its initial focus on young people to now include achievement of Texans ranging in age from 24-64 years of age. The strategic plan was rebranded as Talent Strong Texas (THECB, 2022) and reconfigured to targeting career and academic readiness achievement gaps of middle and high school students through the aforementioned Tri-Agency apparatus (Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative, 2022).

While the State of Texas has directed considerable attention toward career and college readiness through legislation, to date no specific piece of legislation or initiative operating within the current THECB Talent Strong Texas or previous 60X30 TX frameworks include support or directives for counselors outside of requiring lessons to be delivered to students regarding careers and requiring them to provide cursory CTE resources to students. While mandates now require education in careers at the middle school level that are ostensibly aligned with industry

needs, untapped and undiscussed opportunities in CTE remain at the middle school level. It is within this context that the necessity of the study comes into view.

Rationale for the Study

Several legislative initiatives have precipitated a renaissance in terms of funding and importance for career and technology education, especially within the State of Texas (TX HB 5, 2013; TX HB 18, 2017; TX HB 3, 2019; Texas Education Agency, 2022; THECB, 2022; Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative, 2022). The State has begun pursuing such initiatives as Talent Strong Texas and aligning resources accordingly (THECB, 2022). However, the individuals within the school system most tasked with helping students develop their career interests and exploring career possibilities, school counselors, have largely been confined strictly to advocacy and education related to students' future collegiate enrollment (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Research shows that counselors, and middle school counselors in particular, often miss opportunities to connect students with CTE resources or courses (Advance CTE, 2018). This missed opportunity is despite the fact that counselors, regardless of educational background or personal exposure to CTE courses or careers, generally have a positive view of CTE and believe it can be beneficial for students in career achievement (Coleman, 2018; Thornburg, 2016).

Schools should begin the important task of understanding counselors' knowledge sets and processes in presenting students with the varied paths available to them. These paths include multiple avenues of gainful employment and career trajectories, as counselors are primary sources of career information for their students (Thornburg, 2016).

Postsecondary Avenues of Success

The multitude of career paths and interests available to students makes it difficult to plan for the plethora of options before them. While it may be an imperfect division, for the context of this study career outcomes are divided into three avenues of postsecondary success: (a) collegiate, (b) co-collegiate, and (c) non-collegiate. Figure 1 provides a graphic depiction of the three avenues of postsecondary achievement and the potential paths to each.

First, the avenue that has traditionally attracted the largest amount of funding and attention, especially since the No Child Left Behind era, is collegiate success. While appearing straightforward, there are numerous routes that an individual can take to collegiate success. For example, a student may enroll directly after high school into a two- or four-year college or university. They may also opt for immediate employment and decline to pursue college enrollment, deciding later to use collegiate achievement to pivot their career trajectory. While this tract garners significant attention and funding, only around 40% of 18-24 year-olds nationwide pursue this tract of collegiate achievement (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Next, there exists a co-collegiate option. In this option, students pursue college concurrently with the utilization of certifications or registered skill sets, such as being a welder while pursuing college. Or the student utilizes the armed forces to pay for college while serving as an enlisted soldier or training to become a uniformed officer. Co-collegiate options may occur immediately after high school or later in life. Students who pursue military enlistment may not necessarily become co-collegiate if they do not use their veteran benefits to pursue collegiate achievement. They may additionally use the military's career apparatus to transfer skills into industry certifications or skill sets, avoiding collegiate achievement altogether, which would fall into the third category to be discussed below. Data on achievement and enrollment in co-

collegiate options is scarce to nonexistent.

Lastly, a third option exists – non-collegiate achievement. This route is what would have been previously known as vocational educational attainment. In this scenario, students decline to pursue enrollment in a two- or four-year college but instead utilize trade or industry certifications or skill sets to pursue a career that does not require an associate's or bachelor's degree. This route might include an individual who pursues what could be considered more traditional routes of CTE, such as cosmetology or automotive professions, but would also extend to relatively new certifications and industries like cybersecurity or computer coding. In the current study, we consider military enlistment as a form of non-collegiate achievement, unless a student later utilizes their available benefits to pursue college, in which it would become co-collegiate. The percentage of high school students who pursue concentrations in CTE is generally low, at less than 40% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Figure 1

Postsecondary Avenues of Success
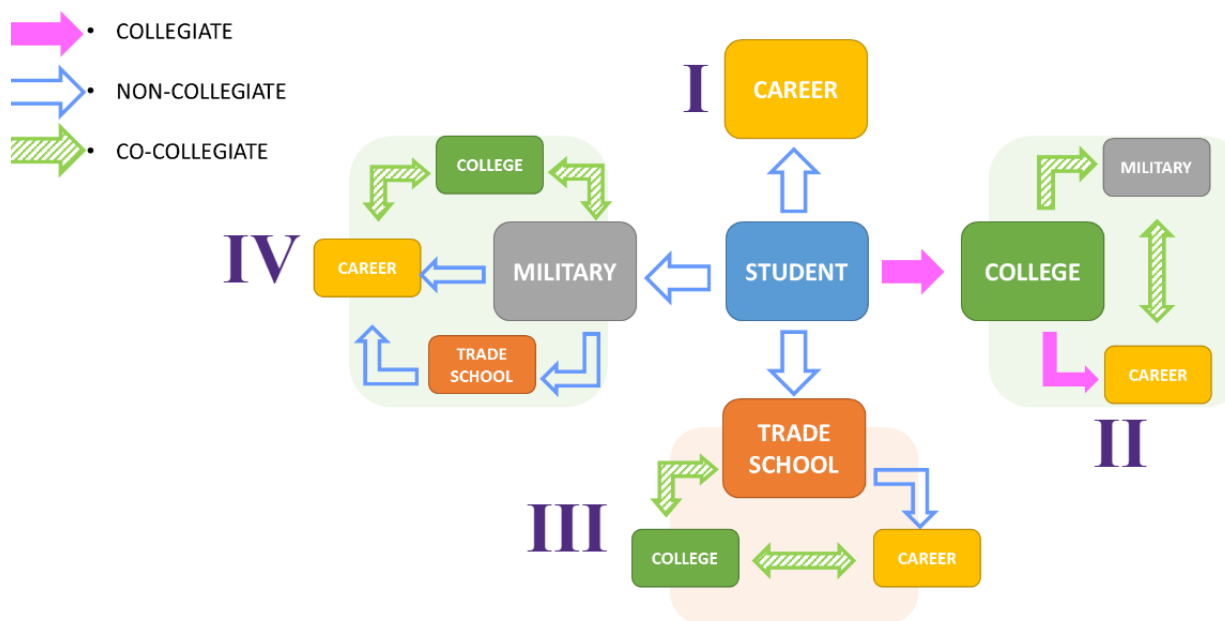
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the thought processes counselors use to guide middle school students toward career opportunities, and how prepared they feel toward supporting students in their pursuit of non-collegiate and/or co-collegiate opportunities. Answers were sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the thought processes counselors use to guide middle school students toward postsecondary career opportunities?

2. How knowledgeable or equipped do counselors perceive themselves to be to guide students to career opportunities outside of college?

Within the context of this study, career and technical education outcomes exclude military readiness from the CCMR framework, as Texas does not currently have direct access to military readiness outcomes (Texas Education Agency, 2022).

Review of Literature

History of CTE

The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 was the first federal initiative that formally recognized vocational training and directed funding toward pre-collegiate vocational training, focusing on agriculture, industrial trades, and home economics (Steffes, 2020). The George-Deen Act of 1936 increased funding from the federal government and provided funds explicitly for training teachers (Advance CTE, 2021). A relative lull in federal guidance remained until the 1960s, with the passage of the Vocational Educational Act in 1963, which for the first time included funding for disadvantaged or disabled students (Advance CTE, 2021). However, vocational education remained clearly geared toward students who were not seen as successful or academically apt enough to pursue collegiate endeavors (Malkus, 2019).

Amendments were made in 1976 to achieve gender equality in availability of resources and programming, but those goals remained largely unfunded mandates for which federal funds had to be matched by state dollars (Stevenson, 1976). The Vocational Education Act of 1984, known as the original Perkins Act, required that vocational programs educate individuals with disabilities and provide reasonable accommodations in doing so; it also required that vocational education be seen as "high quality" for all students served (Guo, 2022). With some modifications in amendments resulting in reauthorizing the act in iterations as Perkins II and Perkins III, the next major iteration of the Perkins Act, Perkins IV, was authorized in 2006. Perkins IV was the first instance in which "vocational" was formally dropped and "career and technical education" or variations of the phrase, became the norm in an effort to destigmatize this traditionally non-collegiate route (Malkus, 2019). Perkins IV also introduced the idea of programs of study and provided funding to coalesce CTE programs around these study areas (Advance CTE, 2021).

Perkins V, formally known as the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, was passed in 2018. For the first time, federal funding became available to assist students beginning as early as fifth grade in pursuing programs of study outside of, or in complement to, collegiate achievement. Additionally, states were required to submit four-year plans for implementation, and those plans required a local needs assessment (Advance CTE, 2021). As of the writing of this dissertation, no further authorizations or iterations of federal legislation have superseded, reauthorized, or replaced the Perkins V iteration of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act.

Necessity of Career and Technical Education in Middle School

With students beginning to develop career interests as early as sixth grade (Rose et al., 2012), engaging students in meaningful discussions of their possible futures and interests needs

to begin as early as possible. One of the perennial challenges of middle school, combating students' disengagement in the educational environment, can be met by increasing student's interest in the learned material and applying it to their real or possible future experiences (Godbey & Gordon, 2017). Akos et al. (2012) argue that "a direct relationship" exists between "the relevance of learned material to student-anticipated future needs and its applicability outside of the classroom environment." Even where vocational outcomes are not the end goal, increased participation in CTE courses can themselves increase student engagement and even lead to higher enrollment in college after high school (Dougherty et al., 2019). Akos et al. (2011) likewise posit that creating hands-on experiences help middle school level students retain information and increase student engagement during a period when student engagement begins to drop precipitously from elementary school highs. A study by Dees et al. (2012) showed benefits of early and often exposure to career education in geosciences – exposing students to career fields, many of which are very lucrative, that students might otherwise be unaware of. For students who are aware of these fields, exposure to experts and experiences can lower the intimidation factor that might otherwise dissuade students from attempting or pursuing those career pathways. This exposure is akin to STEM-oriented mathematics making engineering less daunting of a prospect for students. In creating opportunities for students to develop affinity and familiarity with career fields at an earlier age, students can begin to self-select for career interests and pivot away from fields that they know through their experiences are not their end goal. This is instead of waiting until an endorsement has been chosen in high school that might need to be shifted or changed due to late exposure to these courses. Even if students take courses that do not eventually lead to an endorsement or postsecondary plan, allowing students to encounter those courses earlier helps foster 21st century inquiry-based development skills. This benefit of

exposure through coursework is while also increasing the student's positive perception of the necessity and value of their education (Abbott, 2017).

Current Inadequate Options: Scarcity and Brevity of Middle School CTE

A major obstacle to high-rigor and high-value middle school career and technical education courses is that where the courses do exist, they are rarely aligned. As Godbey and Gordon (2019) discussed, the bridge between CTE and STEM curriculum offered at the elementary level, and the prerequisite skills necessary for CTE success at the high school level, do not exist. Instead, the federal government offers funding for vague mechanisms that each state is left to put together for themselves. In the United States, there is no overarching standard of what constitutes career-ready or certified. Instead, each educational agency is tasked with determining what is relevant to their local environment, developing relationships with companies to provide internship opportunities to their students, and deciding on qualifications to push their students toward in pursuit of whatever list of certificates or programs that agency deems beneficial for postsecondary success. In Texas, this is handled largely through the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative (Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative, 2022). Due to this lack of cohesion, most states default to exploratory courses at the middle school level.

Additionally, because these exploratory courses cover a wide range of material, many of these courses are taught by individuals who have little to no experience in the material being taught. As Akos et al. (2011) point out, exploratory courses are plagued by two largely unavoidable issues in their current state. First, teaching so much material that it would be impossible to find a teacher who could provide real-life experience to each part of the course. Second, CTE pieces that are embedded in the material are lost on the students because of the educator's lack of expertise in that particular field, coming from a largely education-only

background. These exploratory courses are often intentionally vague, and rarely align with any sort of national standards, where standards even exist (Stone, 2017). Middle school options remain scarce because the barrier to providing genuinely beneficial course offerings is so great that vocational education has been minimized down to a "last resort" for students who struggle academically or behaviorally (Hyslop & Imperatore, 2017). Any nascent attempts at incorporating career and technical skills into the middle school curriculum have, to date, largely relied on vaguely worded and impossibly broad courses that offer little value to students and instead communicate that career-focused education is only for those who struggle with traditional academics.

The Role and Perspectives of Counselors in CTE Pathways

While school counselors have more often been associated with such tasks as schedule creation, social-emotional lessons, and providing resources and counseling to students, another part of their duties includes career counseling. The national and Texas-specific associations for school counselors both incorporate career counseling as a necessary and foundational component of a comprehensive and effective counseling program (College Board, 2010; Texas Education Agency, 2018). However, career counseling continues to focus almost solely on collegiate achievement (National Association for College Admission Counseling [NACAC], 2016). Even here, counselor efficacy in regards to career education and planning (even when those careers are through collegiate achievement) remains low when compared to other counselor tasks in middle school (Sanders et al., 2017).

With counselors in a pivotal position to provide CTE exposure, their importance in helping students shape perspectives of their futures cannot be overstated. In fact, counselor's impact on the self-efficacy of students' careers through providing learning experiences and

decisional support is more positively correlated to student's success than a student's internal characteristics, such as grit (Ireland & Lent, 2018). Studies have shown that students begin to develop an awareness of different types of careers in elementary school, and that by high school begin selecting coursework that directs them to the futures they desire (Gibson, 2005; Pulliam & Bartek, 2018; Welde et al., 2016). Middle school has traditionally been used as an exploratory era in career development, even though students now can begin to take early coursework toward careers they feel aligned to (Curry et al., 2013; Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007). This area of exploration again accentuates the need and opportunity for middle school counselor intervention at this stage of development. Career counseling in middle school can help bridge the gap between what students find interesting, and what students would like to do in defining their postsecondary CCMR (Career, college, and military readiness).

Counselors as Generative Partners

School counselors have the opportunity to play a unique role in helping students chart their future career paths. The considerable overlap in developmental progression, identity construction, and career goal development that students go through during their middle school years offers counselors a unique and generative role in their students' development. Not only are counselors uniquely positioned to serve in a generative capacity, but research shows that by the nature of their level of development, their education, and the career-fulfillment role they chose in becoming counselors they are intrinsically motivated to do so (Doerwald et al., 2021). The current focus on college readiness skills, to the exclusion of other skill sets, leaves students with a significant gap in moving from adolescence toward adulthood (Symonds et al., 2011).

Family involvement in school is one of the best predictors of academic success for students (Hill & Tyson, 2009). However, involvement becomes increasingly difficult as students

move into secondary schooling given the larger number of teachers their student learns from, and the larger load of students their educators teach (Hill & Tyson, 2009). For students whose families lack resources to assist them, counselors are the logical non-familial individuals to help students with college and career preparation and exposure (Cyr et al., 2023; Munson et al., 2010). Counselor assistance in helping students develop individual graduation plans, such as those required by the Texas career cluster model (TX HB 5, 2013; Texas CTE, 2017) provides positive outcomes for students (Stipanovic et al., 2017). These positive outcomes include students putting forth more effort in school, picking more challenging coursework, and being more motivated to complete school (Stipanovic et al., 2017). Therefore, counselors have a unique and important role in helping students through personal identity development using the medium of career exploration and through collegiate, co-collegiate, and non-collegiate goal-setting.

Method

Research Design

A phenomenological study was conducted to seek answers to the research questions posed above. This method of research was chosen to help develop a comprehensive picture of what the participants' perspectives were, working within an already established system. Interviewing school counselors from districts that already have CTE programs in place allowed for a true practitioner's perspective while also working to minimize the possibility that some interviewees might be unaware of career and technology education programs in their districts specifically or in education at large.

Participation and Procedures

Participants were five middle school counselors working in schools within the state of Texas. Two participants worked in rural districts, and three worked in suburban/urban districts. Two participants had come to middle school from prior elementary school background, and three from middle school teaching. Four were female, and one was male. Three of the counselors had work backgrounds that involved experience outside of the education profession, and two of the counselors worked solely in the field of education becoming counselors.

Instrumentation

The semi-structured interviews were recorded using the online Zoom platform and hand-transcribed by the first author, verbatim. While questions were provided, responses sometimes led to similar, unscripted questions during the course of the interview. A copy of the interview protocol is provided in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

The data spiral approach as described by Cresswell and Poth (2018) was utilized to identify themes as they emerged from the transcripts. This methodology was then paired with descriptive coding as discussed by Saldaña (2021) in order to summarize passages from the transcripts into themes that could then be hand-categorized. Descriptive coding was used as the first round of two rounds of coding. For the second round of coding, pattern coding was utilized.

Results

Several themes emerged from the data, which were organized under the umbrella of the research question the themes most closely answered. Participants' responses were varied in some regards, but generally fell within broad categories under each research question. The open-ended question format of the conducted interviews allowed for trends to become noticeable while still maintaining the individuality of each participants' experiences within the systems they operate

daily. For instance, every counselor spoke of using interest surveys to help their students in career exploration, but some participants spoke fondly of them while others stated they recognized that the surveys were largely used as a substitute for their expertise that they felt they did not have. The participants' thoughts have been given voice below, broken down by each code and theme under the respective research question.

Emergent Themes

First Research Question

The first research question investigated the process by which counselors helped students navigate future planning in regard to the three options discussed in this dissertation: (a) collegiate, (b) co-collegiate, and (c) non-collegiate. In relation to the first research question, four themes emerged - time constraints, interest inventories, root reason discussions, and traditional route planning.

Time Constraints. In terms of time constraints, the interviewed participants consistently stated that they had a genuine desire to help students prepare for their future. Participants also universally acknowledged that it was not happening to the extent they would have liked. The number of tasks assigned to them and the time and resources available to complete those tasks left very little availability for future planning generally, and even less so for CTE-specific discussion and programming. For instance, one participant stated: "I wish that I could spend more time talking to kids about their future. [...] It's academic counseling, or it's social emotional counseling, and we just have a lot of kids with high needs right now."

Even when counselors had access to CTE lessons, the depth of the lessons was less than the counselors deemed sufficient for their student populations, and the tempo and programming of those lessons also found to be less than satisfactory. Another participant described feeling that

the exposure that both students and counselors had to the available CTE curriculum was minimal, saying "I wish I knew more about our [district's] employability and career class curriculum… and I would love to have more presentations, so to speak, from people in the field." Two participants both described their sense that even within the same district, expectations could vary widely even from campus to campus depending on the administrators and their expectations. A participant shared, "They can dictate just about any process they want, and that can be quite different than even similar schools or even within the same district. So we have to adapt to whatever we're thrown." A different participant stated something similar, saying "A lot of the career opportunities or CTE information is so district-specific."

What is clear from the interviews is that it is not for a lack of desire that discussions around careers and career skill development are not occurring or are occurring less frequently than desired. Instead, the will to have these conversations and guide students is present but the amount of time necessary to judiciously have such conversations has run into the varied and competing demands on the counselors. This creates a time deficit that the counselors spoke of continually having to battle against.

Interest Surveys. All counselors spoke of immediately utilizing an interest survey to help students discover possible career paths or to deepen their understanding of the breadth of possibilities within a particular career path that the student had chosen. One counselor likened these interest surveys to being a "matchmaker" service, where students were paired with careers they might be interested in based on the questionnaire results the survey software gave them. While the type of software program used for the purpose varied from district to district, each counselor spoke positively of the amount of information available to both students and their guardians regarding their inventory results. However, other than pointing students back to the

inventory program itself, counselors were unsure how to proceed with CTE-specific questions that were borne out of the inventory software.

What the use of these surveys reveals, is that counselors were eager to adapt and implement resources that were easy to use and directly accessible to both the students and their families. This is especially true with resources such as surveys that come within software suites, where the counselor's lack of CTE familiarity can be substituted or complemented by resources within the survey system.

Root Reason Discussions. The participants also all spoke of getting to the root reason behind a student's desire to pursue a specific career or trajectory, regardless of whether that trajectory included collegiate or non-collegiate achievement. One participant in particular said, "I think we need to find out what is a good fit for that student. I want the kid to find what works for them, and then give them the tools for them to make that decision." Participants spoke of using this information to guide both students and their guardians. While emphasizing their strictly advisory role in career planning, participants noted that using this information included advocating for CTE careers even where parents might be adamant about collegiate achievement for their students. One participant shared that when there might be differences between a student's and family's goals, they would still advocate for the student's best interests, asking the family probing questions such as, "Why do you want them to go to college? What is your outlook for them? How can y'all merge those?". That participant made clear that their responsibility at the end lay in aiding the student, saying "Ultimately, I felt like my job is to get the students where they want to be successful."

Even where the guardian and the student disagreed on the student's trajectory, all of the counselors found it helpful to try to discover the student's why. In some cases, the counselors

even went so far as to determine the guardian's why and see if they couldn't marry the student and guardian's visions for the student's future.

Traditional Route Planning. Of the participants interviewed, only one spoke of openly advocating for a co-collegiate option. One discussed co-collegiate options using the example of encouraging students in the band to think of pursuing the military, "playing an instrument so that they have their college paid for by the military." The other counselors had never considered the possibility and expressed a sense of unease or unpreparedness in advocating for co-collegiate future planning. One counselor stated bluntly that "No, I have not, though it's a great idea" in regards to co-collegiate planning. A different counselor discussed a desire for something of a flowchart, showing students "These are your options… here's what the college route looks like, and if you don't go, what options are there."

All of the counselors discussed a sense that CTE still had a stigma attached to it, though all spoke highly of CTE in general and expressed that the stigma seemed to be declining rapidly in their discussions with students and their guardians. While only one counselor discussed co-collegiate options, none of the counselors were opposed to such a planning method and some of the counselors later discussed that they would be interested in learning to incorporate it.

Second Research Question

The second research question focused less on how counselors guided students toward CTE careers and instead on how comfortable they felt in doing so. In this, three general themes emerged - a lack of familiarity with CTE generally and specifically, a desire for more community resources, and the counselor's background and experience with CTE.

Lack of Familiarity. Despite some counselors having a background that included time outside of education, all counselors expressed feeling unprepared to discuss CTE futures. Even

in districts that had a CTE center, counselors expressed frustration that the course offerings, course requirements, and availability of certifications changed at such a pace that they felt there was not an opportunity to ever develop expertise in discussing those options. One counselor discussed that even within an established CTE program, they were aware of instances where the desires of the industry leaders themselves differed greatly from what the CTE certification program had laid out as necessary skills for mastery. This participant shared their frustrations with this situation, saying "There's some misalignment big time between what schools are required to provide versus what the industry currently needs." This gap between the program's expectations and the desired outcomes of industry leaders made the counselor hesitant to confidently discuss even well-established programs within the district. Another counselor noted that while the district they worked in did provide curriculum it came too late in the year, with too many new pieces that had not been previously communicated, to be useful to students, families, and counselors in completing required high school planning.

This lack of familiarity with CTE in general, and with the programs and program requirements within CTE curricula in their specific districts, continually appeared in the survey as a source of frustration for counselors who otherwise felt they were very equipped to fulfill the other roles designated to the school counseling profession.

Community Resources. All of the counselors expressed a desire to see more communication and connection with community resources. Participants stressed that career days, interview opportunities, availability of videos explaining careers in terms that students understood and connected with, and other avenues of exposing students to careers and workers in those career fields would greatly increase their sense that they were effectively advocating for CTE careers in addition to collegiate achievement. One counselor, for example, expressed that

even just having banners in the hallways that alluded to other professions would be helpful in opening conversations about non-collegiate options for students. Two of the participants also discussed a desire for programs that counselors could take to learn about available options - a career day fair for counselors, for instance.

None of the counselors felt so secure in their CTE knowledge that they believed themselves more informed than the community members whose industries relied on the counselor's students having an adequate CTE curriculum. Instead, counselors continually spoke of wanting the students, and themselves, to develop deeper and more personal relationships with local industries and industry leaders, to ensure that their students had fair and accurate information to guide their future-planning processes.

Counselor's CTE Experience. The last theme involved counselors' CTE experience and how that impacted their confidence in discussing CTE options. Of the counselors interviewed, three counselors had previous career experience outside of the field of education. This familiarity with a wider range of careers led these counselors to express a higher degree of confidence in discussing CTE careers than their counterparts whose careers were maintained entirely within the field of education. One participant, whose background did not include experience outside of education, rated themselves at a "four or five" out of 10 on their comfort in discussing CTE options. This counselor noted that they would "not have enough resources to say, okay, let's find out what you need to do", stating "There's this frustration because I'm not up to date on every CTE program, and what they change from year, so I'm hesitant to give advice in depth about that type of thing."

Even the counselors who had experience outside of education acknowledged that that experience had become somewhat dated since pivoting their careers. While the counselors had

previously discussed arranging career and field days for the students, several of the counselors again wondered if those career days might also serve counselors themselves - allowing counselors to see and interact with the industries that their students could work toward careers in, so that they were more familiar with the community and the curriculum offered.

Discussion

While some of the themes that emerged from the data were unexpected, several of the themes were in line with expectations of results based on a review of the literature. Throughout the interviews with participating counselors, participants spoke of the motivation to do what was in their student's best interests, even if that wasn't collegiate achievement. They even spoke of a willingness to speak up against family expectations of the students in their care, in advocating alternatives that the family unit either opposed or had not considered for their student's future planning.

There remains ground to be explored in helping counselors fully embrace their generative role in career planning. With only one counselor openly aware of or advocating for a co-collegiate option, there is room to expand on helping students understand careers as a continually transitioning spectrum of options. Additionally, research has shown that what this particular counselor observed is not uncommon – a hyper-focus on specific collegiate achievement skills over other skill sets bares out the gaps that students express from adolescence into adulthood (Symonds et al., 2011).

Few of the counselors felt comfortable offering students advice for specific CTE career paths. This is of some concern; as previously discussed, counselors are a primary source of career information for their students (Thornburg, 2016) and counselors provide additional career guidance that complements or supersedes that of the student's family (Kolbert et al., 2021).

However, each counselor's desire to help expose their students to as many possibilities as possible was also coupled with a strong perceived proficiency in utilizing career exploration software that could meet those needs, at least on a cursory level. As Suryadi et al. (2020) observed, counselors are critical sources of vocational career guidance and without counselors helping students to fully explore those possibilities, students may fall short of their career development and potential.

As previously discussed, alignment between national and industry CTE standards and secondary CTE standards vary widely (Advance CTE, 2023). This lack of alignment was borne out in the discussion, and appeared through the interview results to be a direct cause of frustration and confusion that the lack of standardization made it difficult to feel confident in their ability to guide students, even in the few cases where resources and guidebooks were readily available.

We know that counselors are largely motivated by a deep sense of purpose to help students become well-rounded individuals (Doerwald et al., 2021), and that this motivation includes a desire to help students develop career goals (Coleman, 2018). Discussion on how counselors might more fully develop their sense of generativity, coupled with utilizing career development curricula to help students progress through the various models of psycho-social development are discussed in future recommendations below.

Recommendations

Based on study results, we provide recommendations below within four categories: (a) CTE professional development for counselors, (b) advocacy for CTE, (c) counselor curriculum, and (d) equipping students with course options.

CTE Professional Development for Counselors

All counselors interviewed discussed the importance of CTE education as a viable option for students. However, a majority of the counselors interviewed for this study stated that they did not feel prepared or equipped to help students navigate CTE pathways, and only one of the counselors had ever considered discussing co-collegiate options with their students. Given this, exposure to current CTE trends, local job needs, and available options for students would be prudent to develop as professional development opportunities for school counselors. Several of those interviewed wondered at the possibility if they could attend CTE career/job fairs, whose information they could then bring back to their campuses a la "train the trainer."

Advocacy for CTE

Counselors interviewed discussed that while they did not hold negative views toward CTE, they had all had at least one conversation they could remember where a student or family had negative views of CTE as a terminal pathway for the student's career future. Counselors thought that exposing students to more CTE futures, even in simple ways, might help to correct this stigma. When queried, several suggestions were offered. Some of the solutions included more frequently recurring and purposeful career fairs, where all students were given the chance to speak with several different speakers of their choice in local industries. Other solutions included posting banners and posters in the hallways that showcased different careers and having teachers post their licenses and certificates in addition to their college degrees in their classrooms. Another solution was listing possible certifications someone could earn on the way to achieving a career goal, such as listing phlebotomist as a job that could be pursued en route to becoming a surgeon. Regardless of the suggestions that arose from the interviews, every counselor stated that simple awareness of CTE programming in today's classrooms was a worthy goal in advocating for co-collegiate futures.

Counselor Curriculum

The majority of the interviewed counselors agreed that their professional coursework they completed to obtain their licensure was extremely light in regard to the career planning aspect of their official duties. However, each stated it was a topic covered when they pursued their licensure. The development of more in-depth resources to help counselors feel empowered to explicitly become career coaches is a potential topic for further research. This is especially in light of the State of Texas passage of SB 798 in June 2023 that removed the requirement of previous teaching/classroom experience for school counselors (Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

Equipping With Course Options

In regards to the implications of the research presented, there is also room for policymakers and district-level administrators to work toward making counselors conscious of co-collegiate avenues of success. The future of CTE lies not in "college or career", but instead in a *"yes, and"* approach that equips students with skills that will help them achieve career success regardless of the avenue(s) they choose. Development of strong CTE programs that not only reach down to middle school students but map out a plethora of possibilities for those students *and* connect them with visible role models within those prospective careers while *also* giving them the ability to begin taking meaningful coursework toward those careers are actionable steps that districts can take to truly make their students "future ready."

Conclusion

This study illuminated the thought processes that middle school counselors used to guide students toward CTE career pathways, and to see how effective or comfortable those counselors felt in guiding students toward those said pathways. Findings of this study found counselors expressing feeling eager, if poorly equipped, to help students navigate potential interest in non-

collegiate or co-collegiate career futures. This supports prior research that shows counselors are generally motivated to help students navigate career exploration (Coleman, 2018; Doerwald et al., 2021; Verhoeven et al., 2018).

This study revealed that counselors continue to face a plethora of competing interests that often minimize their ability to focus on helping develop students' career identities and proclivities, despite the important role counselors play in that career development and exploration (Dees et al., 2012; Kolbert et al., 2021; Suryadi et al., 2020).

While Texas presents itself as a unique case study for career and technical education, even before the added specificity of looking at middle school in particular, the themes that emerged through this phenomenological study are ripe for further exploration. By continuing to advocate for helping students and families explore all available options, even those that seem niche or new, and helping students adopt an approach to their futures that entertains a co-collegiate option, we can help set a greater number of students on a path to postsecondary success. We can show our students that "CTE Can Be for Me."

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Appendix

Interview Questions for School Counselors

Screener Questions:

1. Are you a certified school counselor in the State of Texas, as noted on your State Board
    of Certification (SBEC) certificate?

2. Do you work in a district that has a CTE campus or program? If not, has your district
    voted to approve such a program at a board meeting?

3. Are you a school counselor who primarily works with middle school (sixth through
    eighth grade) students in a public school in Texas?

Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been a school counselor?

2. Prior to becoming a school counselor, please describe your educational background and your work experience.

    a. Do you have personal or professional experience with CTE coursework or job experience?

3. What can you tell me about the career counseling requirements and guidelines of the Texas School Counselor's comprehensive counseling program model?

    a. Are there pieces of the model you wish were elaborated on, or given more attention? Why?

4. What can you tell me about the National School Counselor's comprehensive counseling program model?

    a. Are there pieces of the model you wish were elaborated on, or given more attention? Why?

5. A student walks into your office and states that they do not believe that college is for them.

    a. What would be your response?

    b. What do you believe is the response the school would like you to give?

    c. How would you handle a parent who was supportive of not going to college?

    d. How would you handle a parent who was not supportive of not going to college?

6. A student comes into your office and asks what options are available that aren't college. How would that conversation proceed?

7. You are meeting with a student to discuss their career paths as required. The student states they have no idea of what they want to do.

    a. What process do you follow?

    b. What resources do you use to navigate this scenario?

    c. What resources or processes would you like to have in this scenario that are not always available?

    d. What does communication with the student's guardian or family unit look like following this scenario?

8. How confident are you in your ability to describe non-collegiate options with students in depth?

9. How often are you able to incorporate CTE-specific lessons into the scope of the curriculum you provide your students?

10. What resources do you utilize when discussing non-collegiate options with students or parents?

11. What type of resources would you want to have when discussing non-collegiate options with students or parents?

12. What barrier(s) exist to implementing more CTE-specific lessons and discussions into the scope of your current role as a school counselor?

13. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would want to add?

14. Are there any individuals you could and would refer to be similarly interviewed

regarding these questions and this study?

Leading with Hope: A Grounded Theory Exploration of Trauma-Informed Leadership for School Principals

Christopher Bottoms, Robert J. Lynch, Shawn Ricks, and Julie Hasson

Abstract

Before the age of 18, 60% of U.S. youth are estimated to have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), with 1 in 6 experiencing four or more ACEs. This study sought to uncover the ways in which school principals understand and enacted ways to support students that have experienced trauma. Using grounded theory methods (n=15), we explored how school principals utilize trauma-informed leadership as a means to support students. The impact of this study may help in the revision of how school principals are evaluated, professional development for school principals, and the academic preparation for school administration candidates.

Keywords: educational leadership, trauma-informed leadership, school administrators, school principals, Hope Theory, grounded theory, qualitative research

Introduction

School principals play a critical role in the success and well-being of the students they serve. Considering continued social inequities impacting U.S. youth (Jackson & Holzman, 2020; Litvinov & Long, 2021), one of the most confounding challenges that face school leaders today is how to support students experiencing trauma. Research consistently illustrates how exposure to adverse experiences including, but not limited to, poverty (Silva-Laya, 2020), racism (Jackson & Holzman, 2020), homophobia and transphobia (Fields & Wotipka, 2020), abuse (Slade & Wissow, 2007), and or gun violence (Bergen-Cico et al., 2018) negatively impacts not only physical and mental wellness, but often has a deleterious impact on academic success.

Prior scholarship on ACEs has indicated that by age 18, over 60% of U.S. youth had experienced at least one ACE, with 20% experiencing at least four (Centers for Disease Control, 2024). These numbers greatly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention reporting 75% of high school students experiencing at least one ACE during the pandemic (Anderson et al., 2022). While childhood trauma was clearly an issue before the pandemic, addressing the outcomes of these circumstances is more important now than ever. Schools are uniquely positioned to mitigate the impacts of childhood trauma as they can offer safe spaces that not only support students' intellectual well-being, but also mental and physical health. Unfortunately, U.S. education remains woefully underfunded (The Century Foundation, 2020), leaving building-level educators stretched thin. One way in which schools have shifted their philosophies to better serve their students is through the adoption of trauma-informed practices (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014) in teaching and community building.

To date, much of the literature intersecting trauma-informed care and education centers on teacher preparation or training (Brown et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2019) and trauma-informed teaching practices (Crosby, 2015; Minahan, 2019). Yet, principals also have an important role to play in promoting student success and creating trauma-informed school environments. In a systematic review of two decades of research, Grissom et al. (2021) demonstrated how one standard deviation increase in principal effectiveness increases the typical student's achievement by 0.13 standard deviations in math and 0.09 standard deviations in reading.

Unfortunately, empirical inquiry into the use of trauma-informed care within school leadership is sparse at best. Despite the power and impact school principals have within their schools, and many times in their communities, there is a significant gap in understanding the role

of school principals in developing and maintaining a trauma-informed academic environment for students. To that end, the purpose of this study is to understand how school principals with some level of trauma awareness use such knowledge within their leadership practice. The school support provided was viewed from the perspective of the school principal.

Research Questions

Specially, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do public school principals come to understand themselves as trauma-informed leaders?

2. How do public school principals utilize trauma-informed strategies in their leadership?

Literature Review

Trauma is a complex phenomenon, and one for which a widely accepted definition remains in debate among scholars (Weathers & Keane, 2007). From a diagnostic perspective, trauma may be considered an event that threatens life or sanity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), yet other scholars have critiqued diagnostic criteria as too restrictive (Weathers & Keane, 2007). For example, such diagnostic criteria fail to account for situational factors that contribute to trauma responses including racism, homophobia, poverty, etc. These examples are not to be viewed as a comprehensive list, but instead offer an idea of the types of circumstances that are understood to be traumatic. May and Wisco (2016) explain that direct and indirect exposure to trauma as well as proximity to trauma, are important pieces of information when trying to understand experiences of traumatization. Considering these perspectives, this study considers trauma to be the, "...existence of a recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress..." (Weathers & Keane, 2007, p. 108).

School-Based Impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Research has shown childhood traumatic events may be linked to the health and well-being of the child when they reached adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998). *Adverse childhood experiences* (ACEs) have been studied through multiple disciplinary lenses including public health, social work, and education. Romano et al. (2015) showed that ACEs had a negative impact on the child's school success. Furthermore, the more stressors a child experienced, the more likely the child was to show a gap in academic performance and emotional well-being in the classroom. ACEs are traumatic events to which children are exposed. These events and/or circumstances can be physical/emotional abuse or other forms of neglect such as prolonged hunger and witnessing domestic violence. The number of ACEs a child is exposed to can have an impact on the child's physiology and behavior. Children experiencing chronic abuse and/or neglect are at a higher risk for trauma-related challenges. This is due to a constant fear of harmful events. Children in these conditions are likely to develop totally different views of the world and may adapt dysfunctional behavior patterns for relating to the world (Swick et al., 2013).

ACEs also have a significant impact on a student's success in the educational environment. Differences in exposure to ACEs may contribute to academic inequities, leading to an achievement gap (McConnico et al., 2016). ACEs are related to achievement gaps because the populations of students that show achievement gaps also show exposure to ACEs. This achievement gap compels school and district leaders to provide support to students experiencing chronic trauma to make the classroom and school more inclusive.

There is also literature that suggests the initial ACEs study may not have gone far enough in understanding the experiences faced by different socioeconomic and ethnic groups. By

expanding the criteria used from the initial ACEs study, researchers have been able to include

racial discrimination, danger of unsafe neighborhoods, living in foster care, bullying, and

witnessing violence (Cronholm et al., 2015). The expansion of this research is the logical process

to determine how other life circumstances surrounding trauma impact the lives of children. The

expanded criteria for ACEs should be included in future research to learn more about these ideas.

Trauma-Informed Leadership

The literature on trauma-informed leadership is often ingrained in studies aimed at

creating a trauma-sensitive school or classroom. Research on trauma-informed school leadership

arose out of research aimed at trauma-informed care applied to school settings and is not a

specific field of inquiry, but complementary to studies involving trauma-informed practices

(Greig et al., 2021). Leadership theories, such as transformative and distributive leadership, have

been popularized in educational research and administrative preparation programs. These

philosophies lack a critical perspective regarding the lived experiences of trauma often present in

public schools. In postsecondary education, Lynch (2022) introduced the notion of trauma-

informed leadership as a new approach needed to lead such institutions in the 21st century. From

a K-12 perspective, trauma-informed leadership requires schools systems to address the mental

well-being of students. The United States has high rates of child poverty, with a limited social

net, meaning that economic security for families can have a tremendous positive effect, where

economic distress will have a tragic one (Shanks & Robinson, 2013). Trauma-informed leaders

emphasize the importance of increasing teachers' and institutional capacity in understanding the

effects of ACEs. Building the capacity of teachers to support students by gaining an

understanding of trauma and its impact on learning and behavior is critical. If teachers can

understand how important it is to establish and maintain positive, caring, and supportive

relationships with their students, they will be able to prevent some problem behavior. Understanding will also help to develop a sense of trust, security, and hope among their students that have been exposed to trauma (McConnico et al., 2016). It is through this understanding of trauma-informed practices, and the drive to implement them within the school, that a principal begins to understand themselves to be a trauma-informed leader.

Trauma-informed leadership strategies can also lead to school principals seeking opportunities for the school to partner with mental health professionals and community organizations. Larson et al. (2017) suggest that high quality, accessible, and culturally responsive mental health screening and treatment services are needed for children and adolescents, specifically within school settings. School-based therapy being provided by mental health professionals is an important intervention. While school counselors are not mental health professionals, it is important to incorporate them in the leadership decisions on how to provide tiered support for students that have suffered through trauma (Howell et al., 2019). Partnering with community organizations can also provide additional support to students that have been exposed to ACEs. Mendelson (2015) has discussed the success urban schools have had with partnering in communities using existing ties to workforce development programs. Community partnerships have proven successful in rural areas as well. The close ties felt in rural communities should be leveraged by school leaders to have a positive effect on students that have suffered from chronic trauma (Hartman, 2017). Partnerships with the local Rotary Club or area churches can help with providing mentors or buddies for students.

Hope Theory

During this research study it became evident that themes emerged that, when referenced through the literature, concern Hope Theory. The concept of hope is the idea that the future will

be better than it is today, and that people have the power to make it so (Hellman, 2021). Hope Theory was a concept first developed by Snyder (2000) and defined as being positively motivated by a sense of successful agency and pathways, with the plan to meet goals. Snyder's model is built from the ongoing mindset and determination of the individual. This model suggests that as a person faces adversity, the higher-hope individual would learn from the negative results to achieve their future goals. Later researchers refined the concept of hope as the convergence of three central tenets; goals, pathways, and agency (Baxter et al., 2017; Hellman 2021).

Methodology

The study's design utilized qualitative methods to capture the knowledge created through the interactions of the researcher and the participants of the study. Through qualitative methods it is the hope to develop a theory to understand the phenomenon experienced by school principals and trauma-informed leadership. Theory generation should be grounded in research, which is exactly what grounded theory does. Birks and Mills (2015) explain the evolving nature of grounded theory research due to the fluid, dynamic nature of the research methods used. The emergence of theory and explanation of a phenomenon comes after a process of deduction and reasoning.

Sampling & Recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposive criterion sampling techniques. Criteria for participation included: 1) serving as a public-school principal, 2) possessing more than a year of experience as a school principal, and 3) demonstrated knowledge of trauma-informed care within the context of education. To assess the third criterion, a questionnaire was included in recruitment materials assessing knowledge of trauma-informed care (See Appendix.). This

questionnaire was based on trauma-informed practices employed by schools, and based on research of what schools can do to be trauma sensitive. While not a specific criterion, care was taken to recruit principals from all grade levels, including elementary, middle, high, and non-traditional schools, such as early colleges. Such diversity in experience helped to triangulate specific leadership practices common across school contexts.

Participants were recruited via state and national listservs, as well as social media posts including Facebook. No compensation or incentives were provided for involvement, and the study was considered exempt from oversight by the Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board. Ultimately, a total of 15 school principals completed the study. According to Creswell (2007), 15-20 interviews are the minimum recommended for grounded-theory research. Most participants identified as white, with half identifying as men and half as women. Nearly half worked within elementary school contexts, with the average participant having 21 years of professional service. See Table 1 for a summary of participant demographics.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Data

Principal Pseudonym	School Level	Gender	Question Score	School Category
Principal Sonja	Elementary	Female	17	Rural
Principal Karen	Elementary	Female	20	Rural
Principal Ramone	Middle	Male	11	Rural
Principal Kerri	Elementary	Female	15	Rural
Principal John	Elementary	Male	16	Rural
Principal Nick	High	Male	18	Rural
Principal Laura	Elementary	Female	19	Rural
Principal Derek	Early C.	Male	16	Rural
Principal Serena	High	Female	13	Urban
Principal Jackie	Middle	Female	19	Urban
Principal Kimberley	Early C.	Female	18	Urban
Principal Alan	Middle	Male	22	Rural
Principal Emily	Elementary	Female	22	Urban
Principal Barry	High	Male	17	Urban
Principal Steve	Elementary	Male	19	Urban

Data Collection

The procedures in this study included common qualitative methods used in grounded theory such as semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and analytic memos. Each participant initially participated in a 60-minute semi-structured interview conducted over Zoom web conferencing, which was audio recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol covered two topics: leadership and trauma-informed practices. Memos were used to analyze data taken from the interviews in the moment and also from questionnaires and provide a written record of decisions made during the study. The memos served as a part of the constant comparative analysis needed for grounded theory research (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Upon completing initial interviews and review of memos, additional unstructured Zoom interviews were used to help with the comparative analysis of the data, and to develop the categories that are lacking in data (Birks & Mills, 2015). During this time in the research study, themes, and categories, were refined through further literature review to find that there were connections to current literature on Hope Theory. Categories explored during second-round interviews related to hope, resilience, and trauma-informed leadership. These interviews were also audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place in three phases: initial constant comparative, intermediate coding, and advanced coding. Initial analysis used constant comparative techniques to create several categories and subcategories (Table 2). Further refinement led to the creation of two key categories, *leading with hope* and *being trauma informed*. The story line technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was also used to provide a rich narrative to bring the research together in a way

that is more accessible to the reader and integrates the theory into the current body of literature surrounding trauma-informed practices, leadership theory, and Hope Theory.

Intermediate coding represented the next major stage of analysis. This intermediate coding connected the initial categories in a more conceptual way than the thematic coding used in the previous stage. The concepts developed were able to connect data that had previously been isolated in themes. Theory development was achieved through continuous refinement of the core category until further data and analysis failed to add new properties or dimensions to an established category, i.e. theoretical saturation.

Advanced coding helped provide a comprehensive explanation by allowing for variation in the research question. The storyline technique was again used to provide a narrative that explained the theory while at the same time allowed for variations, limited gaps, and proved the evidence was grounded in the research. By using theoretical codes, existing theories from leadership and Hope Theory were utilized to facilitate integration into the larger body of literature.

Findings

Analysis of participant interviews led to several thematic categories used to better understand trauma-informed leadership within school principals.

Leading with Hope

Leading with hope is an abstract idea that is a central concept to the trauma-informed leadership theory generated from this research study. This concept examines how the school principal is one of the central leaders of the school and how the school principal instills hope and resilience in the students and staff. *Leading with hope* means leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower (Figure A1). Helping

students find hope, or the understanding that their situation can improve, is a powerful

component of the theory of trauma-informed leadership that emerged from this research study.

Principal Nick was a veteran principal and his ideas for instilling hope were an important way of

utilizing the relationships principals build every day. Below, Principal Nick discussed the

importance of using these relationships with instilling hope:

> I think as a general rule, the more we can be with the kids, involved with the kids we can
>
> preach that message of hope when we know the kids a little better, when we've eaten
>
> lunch with them, you know, when we've clowned around with them a little bit in the
>
> hallway. Now don't get me wrong. I don't want to be their buddies. They have plenty of
>
> buddies. They need adults that they can respect, and yet appreciate hearing teacher stories
>
> about where they came from. I don't know how we could incorporate it even more, but if
>
> you've got staff members, who grew up in a rough situation, rough times, I think the kids
>
> learning those stories helps to give hope. But I think it's vital, when we lose hope, it's
>
> over.

Creating goals is also an important feature of the concept of *leading with hope.* Not only

is it important for the principal and staff to develop goals for the school but also instill the goal

of hope in students. Principal Kimberley discusses how this happens at her early college high

school:

> I think hope is everything. I think hope is what motivates not only us, but them
>
> (students) to keep going. I think it's that long-term goal, that long-term impact that we
>
> want to see that instills hope. That the things that we're putting in place for them are
>
> going to have a positive impact and be able to get them the resiliency strategies that they
>
> need to overcome their obstacles.

Principal Derek brings up pathways, another aspect of *leading with hope*. This involves helping students find a path that will help them achieve their goals and improve their current situation. He explains how instilling hope is an important part of helping students that have experienced trauma break the cycle of generational trauma.

Some students feel hopeless, but some see our place and we try to make it better. We try to share with them, hey, you can break that cycle. You can get out of the life that you are not liking at home. Possibly, take advantage of what we have here. Whether that's completing a degree and going on, or if you have a trade interest that you can get a diploma or certificate or even a degree in a trade area, be ready to work outside.

Leading with hope cultivates willpower. Hellman (2021) explains how as humans, we can only take so much defeat when it comes to working towards our goals. Principal Steve has a passion for his students' potential that was inspiring. This passion gave him a remarkable vision for his students. His description below of a child's 'hero journey' is an incredible message that aims to help students with overcoming the challenges they will face.

We are in on the origin story of a child's hero's journey. I believe that and therefore we have to convey a sense of hope for what we're doing is possible, and that what they will do, and what they will overcome, will be possible. I'm sure at some point, in his academic career, Martin Luther King wasn't the best of students, and dealt with the trauma of segregation and racism. Malcolm X dealt with all kinds of traumatic issues and wasn't the best of students and he probably would have been in our office for all kinds of reasons along the way.

Being Trauma Informed

Having the knowledge of trauma-informed practices and strategies impacts a school principal's capacity to be a trauma-informed leader. Another essential characteristic in this concept of *being trauma informed* is experiencing trauma. The principals in this research study provided details of how they have personally experienced trauma of varying degrees in their personal and professional lives. These themes are essential to the Trauma-Informed Leadership theory that emerged (Figure A1). The experience of trauma firsthand further reinforces the principal's sense of knowing what trauma is. The professional development of trauma-informed practices expands this knowledge, as well as provides the school leaders with insight on trauma that they personally may not have experienced.

The participants self-identified as trauma-informed and had varying degrees of knowledge of the impact of trauma within education. Many of the principals had received formal training on mental health, ACEs, and had a knowledge of the strategies some schools have found to be successful in making school trauma informed. Principal Alan describes why he believes it is important for his school to be trauma informed.

> I think being trauma informed and knowing the importance of being trauma informed, as a school leader, is more important now than ever. In our current state we have cases of trauma that are becoming more and more apparent and abundant in schools, and I think it's more important for me to be trauma informed. I was ACEs trained. When I was going through my principal internship, I planned to get my staff ACEs trained. They need to know the difference between an inappropriate behavior and one that is caused by trauma or could have been something that you know that they can't help because of that. We need to understand what the characteristics of those are and be able to recognize them and act appropriately.

The participants of this research study shared some of their own personal experiences in coping with traumatic events. Principal Sonja was deeply impacted by the events and/or circumstances surrounding her disabled brother's experience of bullying and struggling for services in his school.

> I think for me, trauma was personal, I have a handicapped brother. And so I remember my brother, he's older than I am, but I remember the struggles my parents went through his whole life and in public schools, and my parents fighting for his rights as a student and their rights as a parent. In my mind, when I see struggles of families that I deal with, I can always kind of hear my mom talking to my dad at home about just the struggle. My brother had a lot of health issues and then had some bullying issues, people made fun of him. And it was hard growing up, hearing those things, and seeing those things. So I try to keep that in the forefront of being a principal and a leader in just trying to be understanding of parent concerns. And especially through COVID.

Principal Karen was impacted by being a survivor of domestic abuse and seeing her children also experiencing the same. She says, "I've had two massive trauma events. My children and I are survivors of domestic violence, and I watched the effects through them." Our worldview is greatly impacted by our experiences in the world around us.

Toward a Model of Trauma-Informed Leadership in School Principals

While the themes themselves stand as separate foci of participant interviews, their relationship with each other lends to a model of trauma-informed leadership for school principals depicted in Figure A1. The model applies the ideas of a principal leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower. Also found within this concept are elements of distributive leadership (Hairon & Goh, 2015) and transformational leadership (Goktas, 2021). When combined with the school principal having the

capacity to understand trauma through experiences and professional development, trauma-informed leadership emerges.

Additionally, trauma-informed leadership can be seen when the inputs or concepts of *leading with hope* and *being trauma informed* come together by the actions of a school principal. *Leading with hope* is defined as leading systems that help students develop goals, find pathways to success, and reinforce student willpower. *Being trauma informed* is defined as having the capacity to understand trauma through experiences and professional development. The outcomes of trauma-informed leadership come to be support systems for all students, the creation of a trauma-sensitive school and safe school. An interconnectedness between the students and staff of the school can also be found because of trauma-informed leadership employed by the principal.

Connection to the Research Questions

I examined the school support provided to students impacted by trauma from the perspective of the principal in the hope of explaining a grounded theory of trauma-informed leadership. The aim of the research study went beyond description of the phenomenon and explained why trauma-informed leadership is important in education. To guide this study, I focused on two research questions. Note my findings as follows in relation to the research questions.

Question 1

How do public school principals come to understand themselves as trauma-informed leaders?

My data collected from the participants led to the realization that these principals were trauma-informed leaders. Principals come to this understanding through reflection on how they

lead their schools, support their students, and create systems with the aim that all students at their respective schools will be successful.

Principals have had experiences within their careers that have led them to this moment of understanding themselves as trauma-informed leaders, revealed within this research study. The school principals have experienced trauma in personal and professional capacities that has impacted how they react and administer school policies. These experiences have impacted how these principals have trained to learn trauma-informed practices and these practices have informed how the participants in this research study lead their school communities.

One of the most important concepts to emerge from this research study is the concept of *leading with hope*. This concept describes the efforts that these school principals have made to find ways for every student in their school to be successful. None of the principals in this research study were familiar with the parts of Hope Theory that have been applied in the generation of the theory of trauma-informed leadership generated from this research study. The analysis of data indicates how these principals utilize these concepts of goal making, finding pathways, and willpower in the ways they lead their schools. A characteristic of this concept of *leading with hope* is the compassion these principals show for all of their students, but especially for students that have faced adversity.

Question 2

How do public school principals utilize trauma-informed strategies in their leadership?

Principals that have participated in this research study have utilized trauma-informed principles in their leadership by the ways they have created systems of support within their schools. Each of the principals has worked within their school community to build an understanding for teachers, students, and parents of key characteristics of this research study.

These principals have worked to instill hope and resiliency within their students through different strategies discussed in the narrative above.

The participants' personal and professional experiences of trauma have informed how they lead their schools. Each participant has developed systems of interventions to support students impacted by trauma emotionally, socially, and behaviorally. These systems took the shape of intervention teams, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons, student mentor (sherpa) programs, and school discipline strategies that focused more on the student learning from inappropriate behavior as opposed to punishment. The resounding rejection of zero-tolerance policies, except for when applicable to the safety of the school environment, is an example of how student behavior has become more restorative than punitive in the schools of these participants.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how school principals came to view themselves as trauma-informed school leaders, as well as how they utilize trauma-informed practices in their work. Systematic investigation revealed that deep reflection is key in how principals lead their schools, support their students, and create systems with the aim that all students at their respective schools will be successful. Such reflection helped principals make meaning of experiences within their careers that have formed their leadership styles and philosophies. For example, school principals who have experienced trauma in their own lives reported how these experiences shaped their approach to their principalship. These experiences also spurred principals to obtain further training to learn trauma-informed practices and the impact of trauma in their school communities.

Additionally, while deep reflection, training, and personal trauma histories led principals to see themselves as trauma-informed leaders, it was through the concept of "instilling hope" that school principals helped students understand themselves beyond the traumatic circumstances they may experience outside of school. Through visibility, authentic relationship building, and empowerment, these school principals sought to inspire their students to dream big and connect with resources that may be of help.

The role of school principal has changed, beginning in the early 2000's. Previously, the school principal was more of a facility manager or administrator. The change of school administrator to school executive was reflected in the change of professional development and academic preparation for school principals. This research study may impact the standards used for evaluation, training, and academic preparation of school principals. This study is significant as it extends the current understanding of trauma-informed practice in schools beyond that of the teacher and classroom-level experience and to the leadership of school principals. It also extends the works of scholars such as Lynch (2022) and Hellman (2021) by examining trauma-informed leadership and Hope Theory through the lens of K-12 organizations. The theory of trauma-informed leadership that emerged shares common traits with current leadership theory used in education. Proponents of transformational leadership help their followers grow and become leaders themselves. This happens by responding to the needs of their followers, by empowering their followers, and facilitating a common set of objectives and goals for the team and the whole organization (Gotkas, 2021). The theory presented also fosters teacher leadership, by building teacher capacity for trauma-informed care, and developing the systems necessary for student success. This study also goes beyond a conceptual or theoretical framing of the issue through the systematic comparative analysis of school principal experiences.

Implications for Practice

An effort to reform school administrator standards to reflect the trauma that students have experienced is essential. COVID-19 cast a light on an area concerning trauma-sensitive schools that could help schools be more successful in supporting all students. Another practical application of the results of this study is the professional development of school principals to be trauma-informed leaders. Trauma-informed leadership can help school principals in understanding the difficult behavior sometimes exhibited by students impacted by trauma. This professional development will help principals understand how to develop support systems within the school that can offer interventions for students who need support in coping with trauma and stress. As the emerging theory contends, a trauma-informed leader must have the capacity to understand what trauma is and recognize it within the school environment. The other input of the theory maintains that the school principal must also provide the leadership necessary to foster and create systems in the school that will help students create goals, provide pathways for success, and support the willpower of students as they try to follow the pathways to accomplish their goals. Principals must recognize the necessity of leading with a hope mindset for students. That practical application would also transmit to staff and students through feedback loops within the school, distributed leadership for teachers and students, and the application of transformational leadership practices to the school culture and environment.

The academic preparation in university school administration programs must give principal candidates a clear picture of the everyday world of a principal. Being a trauma-informed leader requires building a framework of understanding for how a principal supports students' social, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing. School administration graduate programs should begin the process of building the principal candidates' capacity of understanding what

trauma is, how they can recognize trauma in the school setting, and how to recognize the trauma they have already experienced from their personal journey. Making these connections with principal candidates within an administration graduate program would have a great impact on the development of school administrators.

Implications for Future Scholarship

Future scholars may look at the role of trauma-informed leadership for school principals within their supervisory practice of staff and faculty. Further research needs to occur that will examine how the school principal's ideas and views as a trauma-informed leader are influenced by being in a rural school or urban school. The environment in which the principal is a school leader may have a profound impact on the way they view themselves as a trauma-informed leader. The role that race has in the application of trauma-informed leadership should also be examined in future research. Research could look at the effect institutional racism may have on how trauma-informed leadership is used, as well as how capacity for school principals of marginalized races can be increased.

Further research should also explore the role of principals' use of trauma-informed leadership practices in creating trauma-informed school cultures, as well as the work environment for teachers and staff. The application of the principles of Hope Theory may also be utilized to examine hope from the perspective of students, teachers, and student support staff counselors.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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In marrying the findings of this grounded theory with that of Hope Theory, this study underscores the importance of trauma-informed leaders within schools. This is particularly true for cultivating trauma-informed school principals. The institutions of our society must

understand that educators have seen dramatic changes to our public education system and adaptations to those changes are necessary. We cannot support our students academically if we do not support students holistically. Several of the participants of this research study made the point to mention how we cannot take the trauma away from our students, it is a part of who they are. What we can do as educators is change the way we work with them so that we can offer better support. That support must come from the top of the school. The school principal should lead with the idea of making the school environment the best for all the students. The school principal should look for ways to build capacity for trauma-informed strategies in the teachers and staff of the school. The school principal should lead with hope.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for Research Study Participants
Thank you for participating in this research study focused on school leadership and the impact it
has on school support for students that have been exposed to trauma and adverse childhood
experiences (ACEs). Please answer the following questions honestly.

Common Vocabulary:
Trauma – The person was exposed to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious
injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, in the following way(s): direct exposure;
witnessing the trauma; learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to a trauma or indirect
exposure to aversive details of the trauma, usually in the course of professional duties (e.g., first
responders, medics). (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – ACEs are traumatic events to which children are
exposed. These events can be physical/emotional abuse or other forms of neglect such as
prolonged hunger and witnessing domestic violence (Felitti et al., 1998).

1.What level of school are you a principal? (Elementary, Middle, High, Non-traditional)

2.Do you have experience as a principal at rural or urban schools, or both?

3. Have you had any academic experiences (for ex., college courses) involving the impact of
trauma on students? If yes, please explain.

4. Have you had any training or professional development on the impact of trauma on students?
If yes, please explain.

5. Do you know of school strategies that can help students that have been exposed to trauma and
ACEs be successful in school? If so, please list some.

6. Have you ever made decisions as a school leader that were impacted by the existence of
students exposed to trauma or ACEs, in your school?

7. What is the role of the principal in supporting students academically, emotionally, and
socially?

8. In your opinion, what impact do trauma and ACEs have on a student's success in school?

9. Why should schools help students that have been impacted by trauma and ACEs?

10. In your own words what is resilience, as it relates to students exposed to trauma?

11. How can the school community be more inviting and supportive for students that have been exposed to trauma and ACEs?

Table A1

Demographic Profile of Principal Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Years of Service	Grade Level
Steve	Male	Black	30	Elementary
Karen	Female	White	25	Elementary
Ramone	Male	White	8	Middle
Kerri	Female	White	17	Elementary
Nick	Male	White	28	High
Laura	Female	White	25	Elementary
Derek	Male	White	28	Early College
Serena	Female	White	25	High
Jackie	Female	White	9	Middle
Kimberley	Female	White	23	Early College
Alan	Male	White	18	Middle
Emily	Female	White	15	Elementary
Barry	Male	White	13	High
Sonja	Female	White	26	Elementary
John	Male	White	18	Elementary

Table A2

Themes as Categories and Subcategories

Category	Subcategory	Subcategory	Subcategory
Instilling Hope	Goals	Pathways	Willpower
Leading	Definition of Leadership	Leading from the Heart	What Leadership looks Like
Instilling Resilience			
Impacting School Culture	Sense of Belonging		
Experiencing	Personal	Professional	

Trauma

Being Trauma Informed	Trauma-Informed Practices

Figure A1

Model of Trauma-Informed Leadership in School Principals
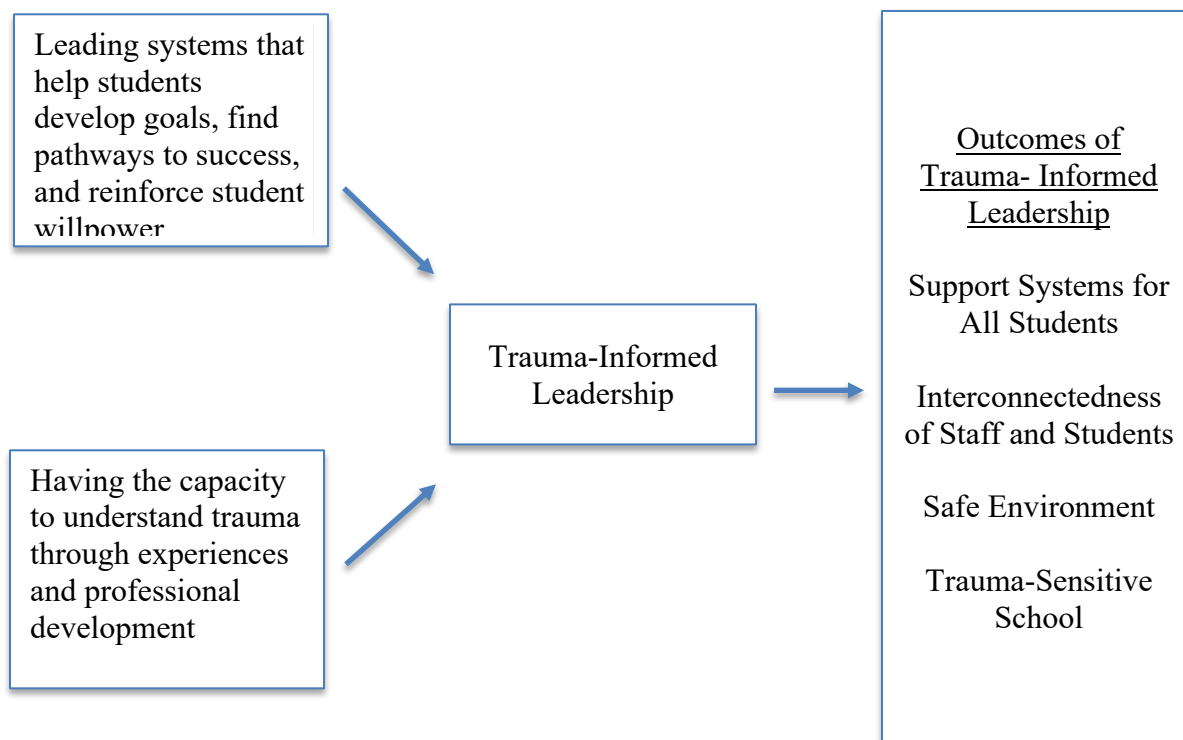
Leading Participatory Action Research (PAR) for Teacher Agency

Kimberly Hellerich

Abstract

Participatory Action Research (PAR) can benefit teachers and students. Based on student-led PAR projects utilized within the author's secondary classroom, student researchers provided instructional strategy recommendations based on student researchers' analysis of peers' survey responses. Yet without a transformative leadership approach, allowing for teacher agency and empowerment, PAR projects will not be successfully implemented. The author describes a set of teacher and leader dispositions that are expected to allow PAR projects to be successful.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research, leadership, teacher agency

Introduction

Various theories have shaped (inter)actions among teachers and students over time. Establishing strong relationships (Souers & Hall, 2019) and learning partnerships (Hammond, 2015) have influenced many educators with the aim of supporting students' learning successes. Relatedly, the origins of action research are associated with an active, new learning process for teachers, offering "empowerment" (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 21). Establishing new learning – based upon instruction and curricular decisions that lie within teachers' responsibilities – can contribute to bolstering classroom-based relationships. After all, the goal of action research is for teachers "to improve their practice and foster their professional growth by understanding their students, solving problems, or developing new skills" (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p.4). As teachers access action research within their classrooms, they can bolster relationships with students – all while experiencing empowerment and a sense of agency over their instructional decisions.

Notably, action research affords opportunities for teacher agency within educational settings. Yet without the support of transformative educational leaders, teachers will not successfully utilize action research as an effective tool. Within the research literature, aspects of transformative leadership include "attempts to effect both deep and equitable changes" and "a focus on liberation, democracy, equity, and justice" (Shields, 2010, p. 562). At its heart, transformative leadership aims to effect significant change within schools and intentionally strives to achieve equity and social justice. When leaders afford teachers agency and autonomy to explore action research within the classrooms, they can potentially establish more equitable learning experiences for both teachers and students.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Extending beyond action research, PAR involves students within the action research project – and it is not a new educational concept. At its core, PAR can legitimize students' capacities as students engage as researchers themselves (Mirra et. al, 2016), sharing their ideas for improved learning environments. Since students' voices can often be disregarded, PAR can provide various opportunities for them to directly influence their own experiences as learners. PAR allows students to "provide their insights into how and for what purposes they want to be educated" (Mirra et. al, 2016, p.4). Garnering insights and making instructional changes relies upon educators' valuing students' voices and is predicated on strong foundational student-teacher relationships within classrooms. Without trust (Hammond, 2015), students will not willingly engage in risks of articulating their ideas. PAR can foster learning partnerships (Hammond, 2015) via shared power.

(Re)examining the role of power is central for education (Welton et al., 2015). Educators have the power themselves to reconsider shifting focus to embrace adjustments based on student

input. PAR fosters opportunities for power structures to shift (O'Neill & McMahon, 2012) which can reveal students' presence as powerful (Cook-Sather, 2006). By engaging students to voice their opinions about their preferred instructional experiences, students gain power; their voices can be heard. Power shifts to students as they provide their "unique perspective on learning" and "actively shape their education" (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009, p. 22).

Having direct influence over instruction can positively affect students' perceptions of power. Fostering an authentic sense of power within students provides all students the opportunity to engage in activities that can directly change their educational experiences. Providing students with a sense of power depends upon teachers being provided autonomy to engage in PAR projects.

Still, if teachers engage in PAR, it readily associates with equity. "At its best, student action research engages youth, particularly underrepresented and disadvantaged youth" (Rubin & Jones, 2007, p. 364). Fostering opportunities for all student voices – particularly those of underrepresented youth – to have direct input into their learning environments is crucial. After all, seeking multiple perspectives is a commonly recommended equity-focused strategy (Hanover Research, 2017). Student-led action research can benefit all involved: students, teachers, and administrators.

A Teacher's Perspective

Developing learning partnerships (Hammond, 2015) is vital for student success as related to relationships and relevance. PAR can generate increased engagement within the framework of a learning partnership; as teachers rethink their instructional practices, their revisions serve as new and deeper communications with students (Rogers et al, 2007). Beyond relationships, relevance is key. Further, PAR activities also associate with relevance: they engage students in

student-conducted research with the intentional goal of affecting their school environments: these are "embedded in purposeful and authentic work" (Rubin & Jones, 2007, p. 367). True, authentic school-based action research can have a significant (positive) impact on classroom experiences for both students and teachers.

In 2018-2019, a student-led participatory action research project was conducted by the author within her ninth-grade classroom in Connecticut. From February 2019-June 2019, eight students individually selected an instructional strategy to be implemented within their English classroom. They each became the "expert" on their selected strategy. The collective strategies were brain breaks and physical movement activities; community circles; formative assessment; growth mindset applied to language; growth mindset applied to assessment; Socratic Seminar; mindfulness and stress; and in-person discussions. The student researchers determined how frequently their selected strategy would be implemented. They debriefed the implementation with me and suggested instructional adjustments to incorporate across all class sections. The student researchers generated strategy-specific end-of-year survey questions for their grade level peers to answer; they analyzed the qualitative and/or quantitative survey data and made recommendations for teachers to consider. They co-authored a paper entitled, "Student Researchers as Instructional Influencers: How Participatory Action Research Validates Student Voice" (Hellerich et al., 2021). This paper can be found under "Embracing Student Voice" at www.reframinginstruction.com.

Since the project focused on student voice, I wanted to gauge the student-researchers' perceptions of the PAR process, as related to their voice. When asked, "To what degree do you feel you were able to have your voice be heard?" the results revealed a strong sentiment of them feeling heard (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Student-Researcher Responses
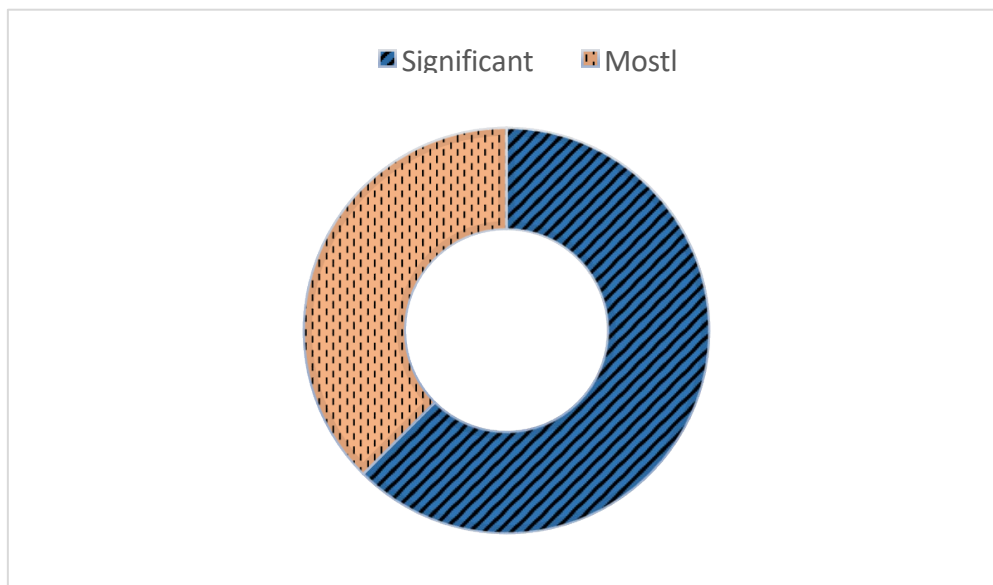
The research group's survey data revealed their feelings that they had a voice within the instruction occurring within their classroom. Beyond the research group, the collected survey data revealed the entire ninth grade students' collective perceptions on the student-selected activities they deemed successful. Teachers' willingness to share power with students is key (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Encouraging students to determine instructional approaches and strategies that work best for them can serve to guide teachers' instruction for years to come. These data results informed my planning and instructional delivery during the subsequent school year. I replicated the student-selected strategies, and garnered additional student perception data about the strategies' effectiveness at the mid-year survey in January 2020 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

PAR Student-Selected Strategies Influence Subsequent Instructional Planning
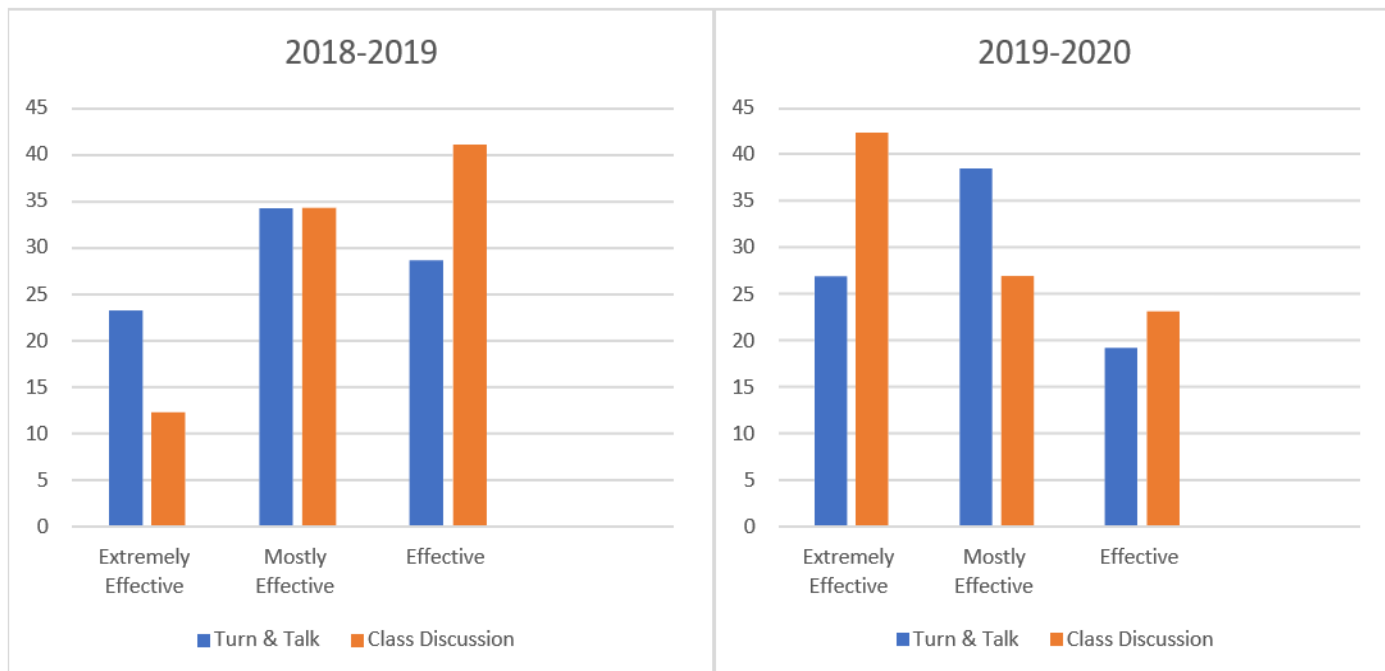
When examining student perceptions of how effective community circles were, the comparison results also indicated significant increases during the second year of implementation (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

PAR Student-Selected Strategies: Student Perception Data at Levels 4 and 5
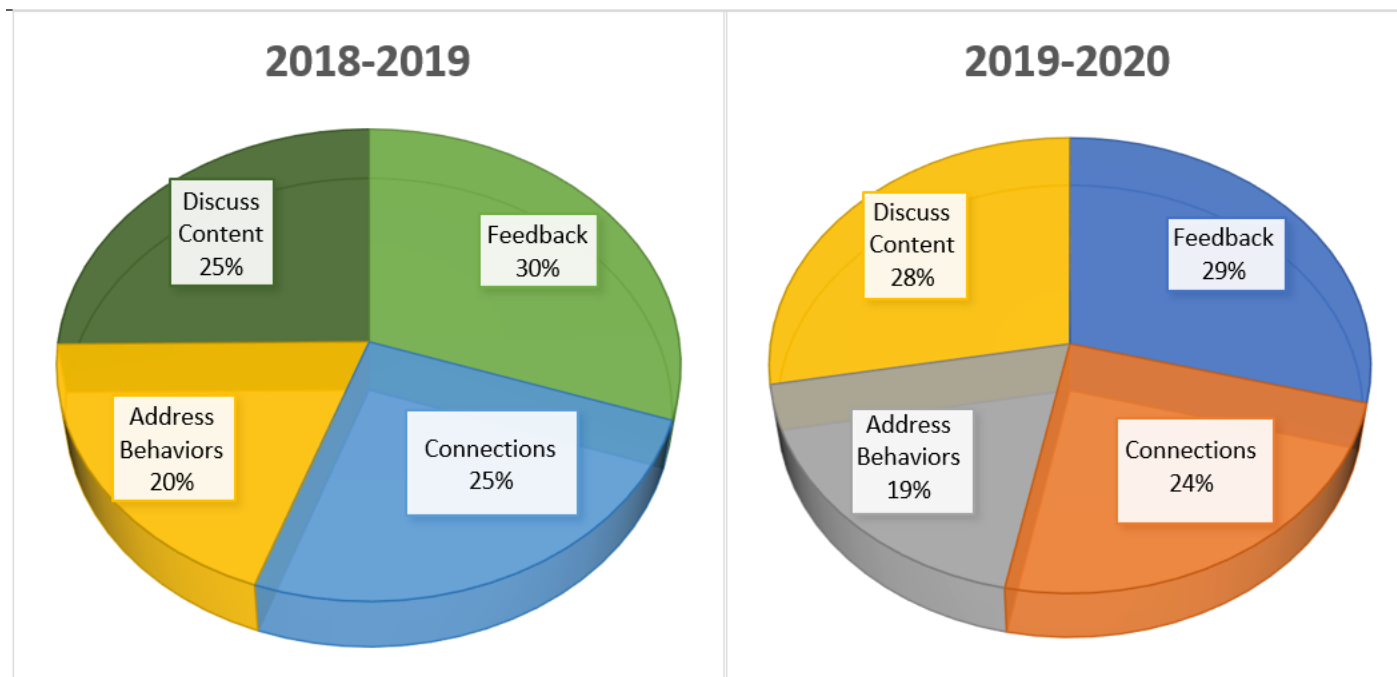
As noted within the collected data, my implementation of the student-researchers' selected strategies garnered even higher perceptions of effectiveness during the subsequent school year. I transparently shared the previous year's PAR project and the strategies selected by students; the open dialogue about my willingness to engage in PAR – and have suggestions directly influence my instruction – was intentionally planned.

In January of 2020, tenth graders (the student researchers) presented their findings to the entire faculty at their high school. They planned their presentation to include a PowerPoint, an interactive brainstorming session for professional learning communities (PLCs), and an exit slip to gather presentation feedback. The student researchers shared their selected strategy, relevant research from the literature, their data analyses, and their recommendations. Grouped in PLCs, teachers brainstormed ways they could incorporate the students' selected strategies, with the researchers rotating to address teacher questions.

Anonymous faculty member comments on exit slips included: "Thank you for reminding me of how important it is to incorporate varied strategies to motivate students" and "Very well articulated! I loved hearing your insight, it really made me pause and reflect on what I can change in my teaching." These reflections demonstrate the potential influence over staff from a student-led PAR project and presentation. This PAR project successfully transformed my implementation of instructional strategies and the students' presentation to the staff had the potential to influence all teachers within the building.

From a Leadership Perspective

Having served as a middle school administrator for 11 years before returning to the classroom in 2018-2019 as I pursued my doctorate, I can readily apply a leadership lens to the PAR successes my students and I collectively experienced. Rubin and Jones (2007) showcase benefits of student action research for leaders. Knowing that students "frame issues quite differently from school administrators" (Rubin & Jones, 2007, p. 371), when student co-researchers can contribute, they are "engaged in an authentic study of a relevant educational issue at their school site" (Rubin & Jones, 2007, p. 371). Recognizing students' varied perspectives is vital for educational leaders. Incorporating PAR encourages authentic research and values student voice both at the classroom and schoolwide levels.

Having experienced PAR myself, I believe educational leaders can benefit from the invaluable perspectives shared. Viewing PAR through a dual lens (as teacher and administrator), I espouse that leaders and their teachers should demonstrate several dispositions for PAR projects to flourish (see Table 1).

Table 1

Recommended Dispositions and Possible Actions by Leaders and Teachers

Recommended Dispositions	Possible Actions
Leader	
o Value shared power with teachers *and* students	o Honor teacher leadership and autonomy with PAR project topic
	o Empower teachers and students through PAR by elevating the equity-focused projects
o Demonstrate "pivotability"	o Flexibly embrace and enact suggested changes based on collected PAR data
	o Allocate necessary resources (creative scheduling and faculty meeting time for student presentations)
o Develop trust(worthiness)	o Dependably elevate the PAR projects' importance by showcasing projects – even if results are not as successful as the PAR group had hoped
	o Prioritize PAR projects as a vital responsibility
Teacher	
o Value shared power with students	o Empower students' voices to directly influence the way their school/classroom community functions
	o Embrace providing students power to change the class/school
o Demonstrate "pivotability"	o Enact student suggestions – exactly as articulated by students
	o Make implementation adjustments according to students' suggestions

- ○ Develop trust-based learning partnerships with student researchers

- ○ Value student voice by seeking their input

- ○ Engage in self-reflection so students can truly have authentic voice and input within their school/class environments

For the most part, Table 1 depicts my vision of how leadership and teacher dispositions mirror one another. Distinctions are delineated regarding the aspect of trust. For the leader, developing trustworthiness as perceived by teachers and students engaged in PAR projects will be critical. If PAR project groups identify an area within the school processes, protocols, or policies they deem important, educational leaders must elevate the project's importance by prioritizing it. Showcasing a PAR project's importance can be reflected when educational leaders honor the requested change, arrange for the PAR project group to engage in necessary discussions (such as a proposed policy change at a district level), or through transparent communication to share each project's progress (via newsletters, websites, parent communication, etc.). These actions can invite a sense of trustworthiness to be developed. Ultimately, PAR projects will be most successful within schools that are led by transformative leaders. PAR can serve as a tool by which leaders can foster a community that emphasizes student voice, equity, and social justice.

Final Thoughts

The success of PAR projects begins with educational leaders. If teachers are provided autonomy to engage their students in PAR projects, students are expected to benefit – as are teachers. From strengthened student-teacher relationships, to student empowerment, to teachers developing new learning that can directly influence their instructional decisions – the entire school community can benefit.

As defined by Shields (2010), transformative leadership "inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded" (p. 559). This interconnection can create equitable, authentic opportunities for *all* students' voices to be heard and directly influence their learning experiences. Transformative leaders can foster authentic learning opportunities within their schools via PAR – to the potential benefit of students, teachers, administrators, and the entire school community. The potential increase in student-staff relationships and accessing "engaging pedagogies and high expectations for all children" (Shields, 2010, p. 582) can demonstrate how transformative leadership and PAR interrelate. Ultimately, students, teachers, and educational leaders can transform school environments if PAR is embraced.

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Effective Leadership and Its Impact on the Educational Community

Betti Shahin, Susan Rowan, Toleen Mazloum, and Nadia Kawar

Abstract

Background: In the contemporary era characterized by globalization and rapid technological advancement, education is a paramount force driving human progress, with academic performance as an essential metric for its efficacy. Researchers have diligently investigated various factors affecting academic performance, encompassing environmental and student-centered variables.

Objective: This paper undertakes a distinctive exploration, directing attention to the nuanced impact of the principal's leadership on the overall performance of the educational community, including educators and students. Delving into factors beyond conventional metrics, such as the principal's leadership style, classroom size, teacher's salary, and faculty development and mentoring, this study unravels the complex dynamics that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the way principals' leadership shapes academic performance in this dynamic age of learning.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the principal's indispensable role in shaping the educational community involves adapting diverse leadership styles as the situation demands. Their strategies, spanning educator recruitment, resource allocation, and positive relationship building, profoundly impact the school environment, teaching effectiveness, learning outcomes, and students' achievements.

Keywords: Academic performance, education, educational community, principal leadership, teaching effectiveness

Introduction

Education is regarded as the foundation for all human endeavors in this age of rapid technological advancement and globalization. It enables people to gain the necessary expertise and knowledge to boost their productivity and, in turn, improve their standard of living (Farooq et al., 2011). This rise in productivity also creates new revenue streams, further bolstering a nation's economic expansion and social development. Fostering the evolution of a country begins with improving the educational system through student academic performance (Norhidayah et al., 2009).

Researchers have harbored a sustained curiosity in searching for the factors that markedly improve students' performance. They have classified these factors into environmental and student-based ones. The former covers the *principal's leadership style*, educational resources, and educator performance. However, the latter includes the student's intellectual capabilities, self-control, and aspirations (Rustiyah et al., 2021). Actually, the upper management leadership stands out as the most crucial factor impacting the general performance of the educational community, including both educators and students (Tedla & Kilango, 2022). While all other factors have been thoroughly examined in existing research papers, the primary focus of this paper is to delve into the intricate role of the principal's leadership in enhancing the performance levels of the educational community (both students and teachers) by incorporating issues such as class size, teacher's salary, and faculty development and mentoring. Unlike previous research papers that predominantly examine the impact of principal leadership on *either* student or teacher performance, our paper uniquely delves into the comprehensive influence of principal leadership on both students and teachers alike.

Leadership in General

Leadership, being intricate and multifaceted in nature, lends itself to diverse interpretations. This complexity has made crafting a universally accepted and contemporary definition challenging (Pardosi & Utari, 2021). In the literature review, definitions provided are contingent upon the focus and scope of the research being conducted. In general, leadership is defined as the process in which a leader shapes the behavior of his subordinates, fostering a collaborative and productive work atmosphere aimed at achieving organizational objectives (Winston & Patterson, 2006). It encompasses leading and directing individuals, making wise choices, and offering motivation to stimulate positive changes within an organization or community (Parveen et al., 2022). An effective leader who translates the school's mission and vision into actions is critical to a thriving educational community.

The Leader's Role

In the era of rapid technological advancement, educational institutions are confronted with numerous challenges that call for exceptional leadership. The highest leader in a school bears the responsibility for overseeing the overall functioning of the institution (Pardosi & Utari, 2021). His chief role encompasses supervising the day-to-day administrative tasks, directing instructional programs, and guaranteeing the smooth collaboration of diverse facets that contribute to the institution's overall prosperity and functionality (Abbas et al., 2020). The principal is also responsible for establishing budgets and cultivating relationships with the broader community. He is also accountable for hiring teachers, assigning them to programs, conducting performance evaluations, addressing the dismissal of ineffective ones, and offering developmental opportunities that foster teachers' continuous improvement and strengthen their skills (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Nevertheless, the principal assumes a pivotal function in construing and executing policies enforced by federal, state, or district authorities and conveying

evaluations on the efficacy of these endeavors, guaranteeing congruence with the comprehensive objectives of the educational system (Dhuey & Smith, 2018). To summarize, the principal plays a vital role in enhancing the general school environment, educators' efficacy, the caliber of learning, and students' academic achievement.

Leadership Style and Impact on the Educational Community

The principal's leadership style influences others within the organization to achieve the established goals. These styles exhibit a broad spectrum of variations and are typically classified according to the leader's perspectives, behaviors, and relationships with others (Maqbool et al., 2023). The most adopted styles by principals are "authoritarian (autocratic), participative (democratic), transformational (visionary), transactional (managerial), and delegative (Laissez-Faire leadership)," each with its distinctive approaches and implications for institutional dynamics (Sfantou et al., 2017).

The effectiveness of one style over another is debatable. Previous empirical studies have compared and evaluated different leadership styles for their impact on the performance of the educational community, yielding controversial results. However, the disparities in effectiveness observed across these studies are attributed to the diverse institutional characteristics inherent in each organization (Pardosi & Utari, 2021).

In the literature review, the comparison results were contentious, with one leadership style proving effective for one organization but not for another. To elaborate further, some researchers contend that the *autocratic* leadership style decreases the teachers' performance as it excludes them from the decision-making process, giving the principal full decision-making power. This lowers the teachers' job satisfaction, which negatively affects the students' achievements (Dursun & Bilgivar, 2022; Guanah et al., 2022; Imhangbe et al., 2018; Inandi et

al., 2019; Yusuf, 2012). On the contrary, other researchers believe that the *autocratic* style has a positive impact in situations requiring a decisive leader to guide through a crisis or for employees in need of direct supervision to complete their tasks. They claim that an authoritarian leader's clear commands leave no room for ambiguity during a crisis, providing employees with explicit guidance on what actions to take. Also, they affirm that this style achieves the highest productivity as the leader directly and firmly supervises their subordinates (Ahmed Iqbal et al., 2021; Basri et al., 2020; Okoji, 2016; Werang & Lena, 2014).

For the *democratic* style, most researchers agree that it enhances teachers' performance and, consequently, students' achievements. This is attributed to the efforts of the democratic principals to include teachers in the decision-making process and foster a friendly and collaborative working environment. Hence, there is a consensus that the *democratic* leadership style is considered optimal and should be considered as an alternative to the *autocratic* style (Agustin et al., 2021; Dursun & Bilgivar, 2022; Inandi et al., 2019; Mumford, 2006; Sarwar et al., 2022).

The *Laissez-Faire* style is named after the French term, which means "leave it alone" (Aungal & Masare, 2017). Some researchers certify that this style yields positive outcomes in the educational community, as the leader refrains from giving commands to subordinates and allows them to make all decisions. This approach fosters creativity and satisfaction and expedites decision-making as employees don't have to await approval (Ahmed Iqbal et al., 2021; Imhangbe et al., 2018; Wu & Shiu, 2009). From an alternative perspective, some researchers assert that the *Laissez-Faire* style is detrimental and ineffective, advocating against its use. Their point is that educators often perceive principals employing this style as inept or reluctant, and thus, they lose confidence in them. Additionally, this leadership style may lead to stagnation as the principal is

not actively pushing the employees forward (Adeyemi, 2010; Dariush et al., 2016; Gemeda & Lee, 2020; Yasir et al., 2016).

Some researchers claim that the *transactional* style contributes to better performance within the educational community. This is attributed to its structured approach of employing rewards and penalties, motivating teachers to strive toward achieving predetermined objectives (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Niță & Gutu, 2023; Saleem et al., 2022; Saravo et al., 2017). Conversely, others contend that this style is not as effective in enhancing creativity within educational settings and may contribute to burnout and low job satisfaction among educators (Chebonye et al., 2021; Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2021; Yasmin et al., 2019).

Finally, in the *transformational* style, the leader centers on motivating and inspiring their subordinates to attain higher performance levels by appealing to their vision, internal motivations, values, and goals. This approach reduces the requirement for ongoing performance and advancement monitoring. Some investigators believe that this style promotes the confidence and performance of teachers, supports collaboration between members, and positively impacts the overall organizational effectiveness (Jia & Jiang, 2018; Trigueros et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2005). Contrariwise, others assume that the *transformational* style risks losing sight of individual learning curves if direct followers are not given the required guidance to manage new responsibilities. They contend that this approach, without proper support, could potentially slow down decision-making processes and contribute to employee burnout (Guanah et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2022; Trigueros et al., 2020).

From the preceding discussion, it can be inferred that there is no universally optimal leadership style applicable in all situations. However, it is imperative for the principal to adeptly integrate various styles depending on the institute and subordinates' working styles. Recognizing

that not every organization can thrive under the same leadership approach underscores the importance of adaptability and strategic leadership.

Leadership Impact on Educators' Performance

Beyond examining the impact of leadership style on teachers' performance, as discussed previously in this paper, it is important to acknowledge other factors implemented by the principal that can influence teachers' effectiveness.

Classroom Size

Primarily, the leader bears the responsibility of overseeing the institutes' finances and resources. Accordingly, leaders often find themselves compelled to increase classroom size in response to various challenges, including school resources and classroom shortages, funding constraints, a lack of available staff, and the need to accommodate a growing student population. This shapes and enhances teacher performance. Handling a smaller group of students is typically less demanding than managing a larger one, as teachers encounter fewer behavioral problems, enabling them to dedicate more time and energy to teaching and less to disciplinary matters. Smaller class sizes enable educators to give each student the individualized attention they need, which helps them understand their needs better and provide instructions that are tailored to each student. This ultimately contributes to better academic performance and a supportive overall atmosphere. Additionally, teachers find creating participatory and interactive lessons in smaller classrooms easier, allowing for a more engaging learning environment. Also, teachers who have to deal with larger class sizes are prone to heightened stress and even burnout. These difficulties of overseeing larger classrooms affect teachers' morale and overall job satisfaction.

Therefore, given the leader's authority in determining classroom size, decreasing the class size emerges as a strategic approach to improve teachers' effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Despite practical reasons for a potential increase in class sizes, it is crucial to acknowledge the prospective impact on overall classroom dynamics. Consequently, finding a balance between resource constraints and maintaining an optimal learning environment poses a substantial challenge for principals in such circumstances (O'Brennan et al., 2014; Wang & Calvano, 2022).

Teachers' Salary

Addressing issues related to teacher salaries openly poses numerous challenges within schools and universities. Leaders do not directly manage individual teachers' salaries, as it is a function of the institute's board of trustees and chancellors. However, principals play a pivotal role in budget allocation within their schools. They can strategically allocate funds to prioritize teacher compensation and other benefits, thus enhancing teachers' effectiveness. Maintaining competitive and adequate salaries attracts and retains educators, motivates them, and fosters higher levels of job satisfaction. Fair compensation significantly impacts the caliber of education the teacher delivers, ultimately improving student outcomes. Also, higher salaries empower teachers to engage in professional development opportunities, thereby improving their teaching methods and strategies. On the other hand, salary disparities among educators can negatively affect their morale and make them actively pursue better opportunities. Disparities ultimately hinder the learning process by undermining retention rates and increasing faculty turnover. So, addressing fair compensation becomes pivotal in cultivating a productive working environment, fostering teamwork, and instilling a sense of value among educators. Additionally, teachers with insufficient salaries are more susceptible to higher stress levels and burnout, thereby impacting their overall performance (Hill & Jones, 2018; Pardosi & Utari, 2021).

Faculty Development and Mentoring

In the educational field, ongoing research and fast-paced technology underscores the need for continuous improvement in educators' performance, tools, and pedagogy. Evolving generational differences in the student population make it a necessity for continuous faculty development to keep up with rising needs. The awareness of diverse learning capabilities mandates educators to implement curricula using varied teaching tools and methodologies.

To address a variety of learning needs, principals can make sure that teachers have access to counseling or special education resources. This proactive approach fosters teachers' abilities to facilitate inclusive and fair educational opportunities. Effective leaders appreciate those needs and provide opportunities for mentorship and faculty development programs. This encompasses periodic mentoring and training sessions and workshops, group learning activities, or even opportunities to earn additional formal degrees or certificates in education. It is also the current leader's role to prepare for successors and future leaders. Furthermore, principals can cultivate a collaborative culture that fosters camaraderie and scholarship, where faculty members can exchange ideas and empower each other. This cooperative approach promotes group work toward efficient teaching. In addition, leaders can monitor the progress of their faculty through direct and indirect supervision and provide constructive criticism and feedback as necessary. This continuous feedback loop guarantees alignment with educational objectives and helps teachers hone their facilitation techniques.

It is crucial to emphasize the pivotal role of leaders in establishing a positive school culture that values cooperative education and ongoing development. In such a supportive environment, teachers are motivated to explore and use different teaching strategies and share successful practices. Reward systems, such as awards and promotions, recognize and motivate

faculty. Raising and allocating funds to support faculty to engage in all these opportunities is a tribute to an effective leader (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016; Widodo, 2022).

Leadership Impact on Students' Performance

While leaders in upper management positions may not directly interact with students, the influence of their leadership reverberates throughout the educational institution, shaping students' achievements through strategic planning and the implementation of daily and long-term decisions. As discussed before, the decision to reduce class size enhances student-teacher interaction, fosters greater student engagement in class activities, creates a more collaborative and supportive learning environment, and helps reduce student anxiety (Filges et al., 2018). Decisions regarding the recruitment and retention of effective educators, the creation of a safe and supportive work environment conducive to growth and opportunities for faculty, and the establishment of clear goals and a shared vision are paramount for achieving common objectives. By implementing these actions, leaders play a crucial role in cultivating an environment that promotes academic achievement and overall student success, ultimately leading to the improvement of communities. (Cotton, 2003; Berson & Oreg, 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of an educational leader in shaping the educational community's performance is paramount and multifaceted. The fact that not all organizations can be successfully led by the same strategy necessitates that leaders should have a diverse repertoire of leadership styles, adapting them to the faculty and learners' demands. Additionally, the measures and strategies implemented by the principal, including effective leadership, educator recruitment, resource allocation, and fostering positive relationships, significantly impact the overall institution environment, teaching quality, learning outcomes, and student achievements.

Acknowledging these multifaceted responsibilities emphasizes the pivotal role the leader plays in steering the educational community toward excellence.

However, further research is needed to discuss comprehensive training programs and professional development needed to equip educational leaders with the necessary skills, knowledge, and strategies to effectively influence both teacher and student performance.

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Unveiling the Socioeconomic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Academic Staff: A Qualitative Analysis of Financial Perspectives and Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

The study investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic affected lecturers' views on income and satisfaction in private Nigerian universities in Kwara State. It aimed to understand this impact as an opportunity for growth and resilience in the education system. Researchers asked four main questions and involved faculty members from various universities using purposive and convenient sampling methods. Results showed lecturers were generally satisfied with consistent salary payments and associated benefits, but the pandemic had diverse impacts on private universities: decreased spending, staff layoffs, reduced fee payments, and lower student enrollment. To enhance lecturer satisfaction, the study recommended exploring alternative income sources, ensuring financial stability, and planning proactively with policies to support staff and prepare for potential future crises. These measures aim to empower universities to navigate uncertainties more effectively.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, income and satisfaction, qualitative approach

Introduction

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been severe, resulting in significant measures such as lockdowns and social distancing in various countries to mitigate the virus's spread and prevent overwhelming of healthcare systems. While these actions successfully managed the surge in cases and ensured adequate space in hospitals, they adversely affected economic growth (Flaxman et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2020). The economic implications, including

job insecurity, have impacted people's well-being and disrupted daily routines and social connections. The reduction in social interactions may have heightened challenges in coping with negative circumstances, amplifying feelings of loneliness and monotony (Brodeur et al., 2021a; Brülhart & Lalive, 2021). Consequently, the unanticipated consequences of lockdowns and isolation might have led to higher welfare costs than initially estimated (Brodeur et. al., 2021b). However, these policy changes might have also instilled a sense of reduced infection risk, potentially alleviating concerns about personal health and that of family and friends (Fang et al., 2020).

Based on Guisan (2021), self-reported contentment showed a declining trend from 2016 to 2018, with scores dropping from 4.18 to 3.82 on a 10-point scale. The survey reveals that individuals in wealthier nations tend to report higher contentment levels compared to those in less affluent countries, showing a correlation between self-reported satisfaction and the GDP per capita. The factors influencing pleasure across 160 examined countries include income, economic growth, health, life expectancy, disability, freedom, culture, and societal aspects (Halilić & Tinjić, 2020). However, there's a noticeable lack of research on wealth and contentment in West African nations (Ngoo et al., 2021). Limited studies have been conducted in China and other Asian countries, and notably, no research has been carried out in Nigeria or West Africa as a whole. Some studies in India focused on the life satisfaction of elderly individuals, revealing a lower level of satisfaction among this demographic (Ibrahim et al., 2020). In Kerala, a study on older citizens found no clear disparities in life satisfaction between senior men and women (Ahn et al., 2007). Family support was identified as a significant factor influencing the psychological well-being and overall happiness of elderly individuals in rural Karnataka (Marpady et al., 2012). Additionally, life events were noted to have a substantial

impact on people's levels of satisfaction (Halilić & Tinjić, 2020). Since private universities in Nigeria are not supported financially by the Federal Government of Nigeria and are responsible to raise their own funding or income, in a highly competitive higher education market, they are thus faced with various challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges include, among others, low income generation, dwindling student admission, and lack of support from external bodies (Suleiman et al., 2022). As a result of the foregoing, lecturers in some private universities are faced with reduction in salary and other fringe benefits.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching socioeconomic consequences, affecting various sectors of society worldwide. The academic sector, including academic staff members, has faced significant challenges due to the pandemic's impact on higher education institutions. As academic staff navigate this unprecedented crisis, understanding the socioeconomic effects, particularly in terms of financial perspectives and job satisfaction, becomes crucial. While prior research has shed light on some aspects of this topic, a critical synthesis of existing findings reveals remaining gaps and emphasizes the need for a comprehensive study to unveil the complete socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on academic staff.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, is one of the challenges faced by private institutions in Nigeria. Private universities in Kwara State consistently pay the wages of the staff members who labor to guarantee that the university's policies and programs are implemented effectively, both teaching and non-teaching. It is against this background that this study aims to examine the lecturers' perception on income and satisfaction among Nigerian private universities.

Literature Review

In relation to the COVID-19 epidemic, a number of studies have demonstrated an increasing tendency, indicating that the pandemic and the containment efforts implemented have

had a financial impact that ultimately affects people's level of pleasure. Additionally, not much research has been done on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected professors' perceptions of their pay and level of pleasure. Le and Nguyen (2020), for instance, looked for a correlation between happiness and money. They discovered that compared to employees in the private sector, those in the public sector—where salaries are higher—have higher levels of income satisfaction. They also stated that there was a positive or negative correlation between income and job satisfaction. According to this study, employees who receive high compensation will feel good about their jobs or careers; Banks and Xu (2020) discovered that COVID-19 significantly affects psychological wellness, income, and contentment among the general public. Additional countries with comparable results are Spain (Losada-Baltar et al., 2020), the People's Republic of China (Wang et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020), and Japan (Yamamura & Tsutsui, 2020).

Padraza et al. (2020) looked into the links between income satisfaction, work satisfaction, and turnover among professionals in altruistic occupations like nursing, arguing that persons in such activities are motivated by satisfaction rather than money. Their findings revealed that work satisfaction adds progressively to the explained variance in the income satisfaction-turnover connection, and that income satisfaction impacts turnover motive differently. As a result, they asserted that nurses' jobs may motivate them more than their pay.

Also, Yuen (2020) looked at how a pandemic will affect public higher education. The report claims that the pandemic made one semester the most difficult one for college students in decades on American campuses. After the semester ended, public colleges and universities had to spend significantly more than the $7.6 billion in federal stimulus funds that were supposed to be given to them. Many public universities that encourage social mobility are at an existential threat unless Congress takes substantial new action. Furthermore, Adetunji (2021) concluded that

COVID-19 has had great implications on financial aspects of higher institutions. Some of the implications include low income generation, and reduction in student enrollment.

In a study on income variations and organizational outcome, Ngoo et al. (2021) investigated whether income variances across organizational hierarchies aid in the achievement of the organization's strategic goal and whether the variation affects employee performance. The extent to which income changes within a group was termed as income variation. A job, a team, a facility, or organizations were all referred to as a group in this context. They attempted to differentiate between different causes of income variation in their study and developed a typology of variation: vertical, horizontal, and overall variations. They came to the conclusion that the reasons for economic differences can have a huge impact on the outcomes.

In a related study, people who expect bigger monetary rewards in the future were less satisfied with their current income (Al-Samarrai & Benveniste, 2022). Furthermore, they discovered that income happiness appears to be more a function of where an individual currently places himself on the income scale in relation to where he believes he should be, rather than his absolute income level.

Vincent (2019) proposed that the influence of income level on performance is mediated by the effect of income level on organizational-based self-esteem. The hypothesis was based on the idea that an organization's amount of income communicates a sense of organization-based self-esteem, which in turn improves work performance. His findings revealed that employee self-esteem is affected by income level, which in turn affects employee performance.

Similarly, Ehsan (2018) stated that persons with a positive mindset appear to be more content with their earnings than people with a negative mindset. Ehsan also stated that both positive and negative affectivity are main drivers of job satisfaction, i.e., people's attitudes

toward their jobs. They discovered that perceived income-performance linkages account for larger differences in income rise satisfaction. Vincent (2019) posits that the influence of financial status on self-esteem obtained from organizations acts as a facilitator in the liaison between performance and income level to four different types of compensation such as income level, increased in pay, perks, structure, and administration. They hypothesized that distributive justice was linked to happiness with one's income level, whereas procedural justice was linked to happiness with perks, raises, and income structure and administration. They found that distributive justice was related to satisfaction with income level, procedural justice was related to satisfaction with benefits, raises, and income structure, and informational justice was related to income level, structure, and administration, while interpersonal justice was unrelated to income satisfaction, contrary to expectations (Easterlin, 2021). In many existing studies, the relationship between income and job satisfaction appears to be dynamic; yet, as previously stated, the results have been inconsistent.

Excitingly, Muffels et al. (2014) examined cross-sectional data over a six-year period for five countries and found that receiving performance-based rewards, such as pay raises and bonuses had a favorable impact on income system reactions. As a result, they suggested that adopting an income-for-compensation system might be the most effective way to increase income satisfaction. In concentrating on the impact of income on happiness, Latif (2016) analyzed two expansive components: adaptation and social examination, utilizing board information of British families (1991-2015), in United Kingdom. Latif's discoveries shows that transformation has more pertinence to the effect of income on joy, than social correlation. Likewise, the impact of income on satisfaction loses around two-thirds of its underlying impact, following four years.

Oshio et al. (2021) focused on the influence of comparative income to investigate the factors that influence individual satisfaction in three Asian countries: China, Japan, and Korea. Oshio's cross-country research produced a variety of findings: first, people are more careful in China (as in the U.S.) when discussing money matters with others when comparing individual income to family income, but this is not the case in Japan or Korea. This result makes sense when one considers that, in contrast to Japan and Korea, where income correlations are structured by family, China is an individual-situated society, much like the United States. Similarly, Jegede (2020) investigated students' perception of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education institutions in Nigeria. The study found that higher education institutions in Nigeria faced challenges especially during the introduction of lockdowns by the federal government of Nigeria. The challenges faced included inadequate planning for online learning, inadequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and a drop in income generation.

Stevenson and Wolfers (2018) noticed prior reviews on five cross-country datasets and observed that the connection amongst income and satisfaction is particularly persuading, and it infers that income has a significant effect on satisfaction, yet rather that different variables (perhaps including estimation mistake) additionally influence the public satisfaction totals. All things being equal, three of those five datasets recommend a genuinely huge connection among satisfaction and the normal logarithm of GDP per capital. Notably, the point gauges reveal a positive relationship between prosperity and income. The accuracy weighted normal of these five relapse coefficients is 0.45, which is equivalent to the prosperity GDP angle suggested in cross-sectional correlations between wealthy and impoverished members of the general public.

Li et al. (2014) concentrated on income, vital hereditary elements, family foundation, and satisfaction in China, utilizing what they call one-of-a-kind Chinese twins information in an

inside twin-pair-gauge to assess the impact of income on satisfaction. The researchers observed that the constructive outcome of income on satisfaction is higher than the impact of quality and family foundation. As per them, the rich are more joyful than poor people, fairly on the grounds that the rich people have higher income than the poor in essence. They further explored the cross impact of the income of twin kin and observed that twins have an inclination dislike towards their kin.

Likewise, an inquiry was made on the evaluation of the COVID-19 epidemic's effects on university education based on students' experiences and opinions (Kedraka & Kaltsidis, 2020). The crisis, they stressed, offers universities an opportunity to increase their use of digital technology for improved instruction and learning. Enhancing remote learning in higher education requires investments in digital infrastructure. The research findings indicate that appropriate planning and compensation should be implemented to support pupils' growth during pandemics.

Theoretically, this study is anchored on Easterlin (2021) income and satisfaction theory, which focuses on material aspirations, with regard to all time facets – past, present, and future. It makes the assumption that, in the early stages of their adult lives, persons from various socioeconomic backgrounds have similar material ambitions (Headey, 2010). This is because they can more easily fulfill their goals than people with lesser incomes, folks with higher incomes will therefore be happier. This shows the apparent positive correlation that Easterlin identified between income and satisfaction.

When income rises, while material aspiration remains constant, individual utility will improve, and they will be able to feel the positive effect of income growth. Conversely, if material aspirations increase, while income remains constant, the utility associated with a particular level of income will diminish, i.e., individuals will experience a diminishing return to

satisfaction (Grimes & Reinhardt, 2019). Easterlin (2021) assumed that material aspirations change over life in proportion to increase in income. Thus, stability in satisfaction is realized at the retirement ages, when income and aspirations increase at a considerable level of proportion. Hence, according to Easterlin (2021), this shows that this mechanism is reversible.

According to Easterlin (2021) theory, there is an inverse link between material ambitions and money, yet income varies directly with subjective satisfaction (Peng, 2021). This suggests a contradictory relationship between income and satisfaction. Growth in income allows people to own more goods, but it does not improve people's well-being for those with greater or lower incomes. This is due to the fact that it fosters a growth in material expectations that counteracts the beneficial effects of income growth (Pugno, 2019). The rising aspirations have a detrimental impact on subjective well-being.

The theory suggests that individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds initially have similar material aspirations. In the context of private universities during a pandemic, academic staff members may have diverse material aspirations, such as career advancement, research opportunities, access to resources, or financial stability. However, the pandemic's impact on university finances, reduced funding for research projects, and the shift to remote teaching may limit the fulfillment of these aspirations, particularly for individuals with lower incomes or those reliant on external funding sources.

Furthermore, Easterlin (2021) theory highlights the positive correlation between income and satisfaction. It suggests that as income rises, individuals can fulfill their material aspirations more easily, leading to increased subjective well-being. However, in the context of private universities during a pandemic, the financial challenges faced by these institutions, such as reduced tuition revenue or budget cuts, may limit income growth for academic staff. This can

lead to a diminishing return to satisfaction, as the ability to fulfill material aspirations becomes constrained by limited resources.

Additionally, Easterlin (2021) theory emphasizes the role of changing material aspirations over the life cycle. In the context of private universities during a pandemic, academic staff members may experience shifts in their material aspirations due to the changing landscape of higher education. For example, the increased reliance on online teaching and learning may alter career expectations or research opportunities. The theory suggests that stability in satisfaction is achieved when income and aspirations increase proportionally. However, the pandemic's disruptions may hinder the realization of these aspirations, leading to a potential decline in subjective well-being.

Again, the theory highlights the contradictory relationship between income and satisfaction. While income growth allows individuals to acquire more material goods, it may also foster increased material expectations that counteract the positive effects of income growth. In the context of private universities during a pandemic, academic staff members may experience heightened material expectations due to the changing demands of online teaching, research productivity expectations, or the need to adapt to new technologies. These rising aspirations, coupled with limited income growth or financial constraints, can have a detrimental impact on their subjective well-being.

In conclusion, applying Easterlin (2021) income and satisfaction theory to the specific context of private universities during a pandemic provides a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between income, material aspirations, and subjective well-being among academic staff members. The theory highlights the challenges faced by academic staff in fulfilling their material aspirations due to financial constraints and changing circumstances. It

emphasizes the potential diminishing return to satisfaction and the contradictory relationship between income growth and subjective well-being. By considering these theoretical insights, policymakers and university administrators can develop strategies to support the well-being and professional development of academic staff members in private universities during and beyond the pandemic.

Prior findings have explored the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic staff from different perspectives. Some studies have examined the sudden transition to remote teaching and the challenges associated with adapting to online platforms (Johnson & Brown, 2021; Smith et al., 2020). These studies have documented the increased workload, technological difficulties, and additional time demands placed on academic staff. However, these studies often focus on the pedagogical aspects of the transition, leaving gaps in our understanding of the financial implications and job satisfaction of academic staff during the pandemic.

Furthermore, while some studies have touched upon the financial aspects of the pandemic's impact on academic staff, they tend to provide limited insights. For instance, a study by Martinez et al. (2020) highlighted the financial strain resulting from reduced research funding and potential salary cuts. However, this study did not delve into the diverse financial perspectives of academic staff, such as the differential impact on early-career researchers, adjunct faculty, or staff with dependents. Understanding the nuanced financial implications is essential for developing targeted support mechanisms and policies.

Additionally, job satisfaction has emerged as a critical factor affecting academic staff's well-being and productivity during the pandemic. Several studies have explored the impact of the abrupt shift to remote work on job satisfaction (Brown et al., 2020; Williams & Smith, 2021). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often focus on general job satisfaction levels

without specifically examining the pandemic's unique stressors and challenges. Therefore, a more comprehensive analysis is needed to uncover the multifaceted dimensions of job satisfaction among academic staff during this crisis.

To address these gaps, this study aims to provide a critical synthesis of prior findings while offering a deeper understanding of the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic staff. By focusing on financial perspectives and job satisfaction, this research will employ a qualitative approach to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of academic staff members. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this study will explore the diverse financial challenges faced by academic staff, including salary reductions, increased caregiving responsibilities, and limited research funding. Furthermore, it will investigate the nuanced dimensions of job satisfaction, considering factors such as work-life balance, job security, and professional development opportunities.

The findings of this study will contribute to the existing literature by providing a comprehensive understanding of the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic staff. By synthesizing prior findings and addressing the remaining gaps, this research will shed light on the financial perspectives and job satisfaction of academic staff, which are crucial for developing targeted support mechanisms and policy interventions. The insights gained will inform institutional decision making and facilitate the design of effective strategies to support the well-being and productivity of academic staff during and beyond the pandemic.

In conclusion, while prior research has explored various aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic staff, there is a need for a more critical synthesis of findings, a clearer articulation of remaining gaps, and a stronger case for why this particular study is essential. By focusing on the financial perspectives and job satisfaction of academic staff, this

research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on this vital group. By unveiling the complete picture, this study will contribute to the literature and inform effective support mechanisms for academic staff in navigating the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic.

Therefore, the inference is that people's desire for more increases as they earn more, negating the intended impact of this on social welfare (Fanning & O'Neill, 2019). The goal of the current study is to ascertain how private university lecturers saw their income and level of satisfaction in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in light of the previous research.

Research Questions

The following questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What is lecturers' perceived level of income and satisfaction at private universities?

2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the material aspirations of academic staff in private universities?

3. What are the income dynamics and financial challenges faced by academic staff in private universities during the pandemic?

4. What are the measures that can be used to address the income dynamics and financial challenges faced by academic staff in private universities during the pandemic?

Method

The research design acts as a structured methodology that ensures accurate, unbiased, and cost-effective responses to research questions. Its role is vital in aligning the requirements for data collection and analysis with the study's objectives to confer significance to the research aim (Palinkas et al., 2015). Kothari (2017) defines it as the conceptual framework within which research operates. This design serves as a blueprint governing the methods for data collection,

measurement, and analysis. However, in this study investigating lecturers' perceptions of income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 outbreak in private universities in Kwara State, a qualitative approach through interviews was employed.

Population and Sampling Techniques

The research involved academic staff from five private Universities in Kwara State. The Universities include Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin; Landmark University, Omu-Aran; Summit University, Offa; Crown Hill University, Eiyenkorin, Ilorin; and Thomas Adewumi University, Oko-Irese, Kwara State. Participant selection was conducted through a combination of three sampling methods: stratified, purposive, and convenience sampling. Seven faculties were randomly selected, and the academic staffs were categorized into faculties such as Agriculture, Education, Health Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Law, Management Sciences, and Natural and Applied Sciences. Subsequently, ten lecturers were selected for the study by employing purposive and convenience sampling techniques. The table provided demonstrates the distribution of chosen participants across the seven selected faculties utilizing the stratified, purposive, and convenience sampling methods.

Table 1

Selected Participants Using Convenience Sampling

S/N	Faculty	Department	Selected Participant
1	Agriculture	3	1
2	Education	3	1
3	Health Sciences	4	1
4	Humanities and Social Sciences	8	3
5	Law	3	1

6	Management Sciences	4	1
7	Natural and Applied Sciences	5	2
	Total	30	10

Interview Protocol

One approach utilized in qualitative research involves conducting interviews, where a limited number of respondents are asked in-depth questions regarding their viewpoints on a specific subject. This method is advantageous for obtaining comprehensive and informed data related to research inquiries (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, an interview protocol named *The Interview Protocol on Income and Satisfaction (IPIS)* was devised to collect pertinent information from the participants for the study. Section A and Section B comprise this interview protocol. Section A focuses on the demographic information of the participants, encompassing details such as gender, age, marital status, job title, length of service, department, and religion.

Details on the specific interview questions and coding scheme

To gather in-depth insights from faculty members regarding income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic at private universities, the following interview questions were used:

Perceptions of Income and Satisfaction.

a. How satisfied are you with your current income and associated fringe benefits?

b. In what ways, if any, does your income level influence your overall job satisfaction?

c. Can you describe any specific factors or aspects of your income that contribute to your satisfaction or dissatisfaction?

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Material Aspirations and Satisfaction.

a. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your material aspirations and financial situation?

b. Have you experienced any changes in your level of job satisfaction as a result of the pandemic? If so, can you elaborate on those changes?

c. What specific challenges or difficulties have you faced regarding income and satisfaction during the pandemic?

Income Dynamics and Financial Challenges during the Pandemic.

a. In what ways has the pandemic affected your overall happiness or well-being?

b. Can you describe any challenges or obstacles related to income that you have encountered during the pandemic?

c. Have there been any specific issues or concerns that have impacted your satisfaction with your work or institution?

Strategies to Mitigate Income Dynamics and Financial-Related Challenges.

a. Have you employed any specific strategies or approaches to address the challenges related to income and satisfaction during the pandemic?

b. What kind of support or assistance from the university or administration would be most helpful in mitigating these challenges?

c. Are there any innovative solutions or practices that you believe could effectively address the income and satisfaction issues faced by faculty during the pandemic?

The coding scheme for analyzing interview responses included the following categories.

Income Perception:

a. Expressing satisfaction and contentment with income and associated benefits

b. Indicating dissatisfaction or concerns regarding income level or benefits

Impact of the Pandemic on Material Aspirations and Satisfaction:

a. Describing a decrease in income or financial difficulties due to the pandemic

b. Noting any changes in overall job satisfaction as a result of the pandemic

Income Dynamics and Financial-Related Challenges:

a. Indicating the emotional or psychological impact of the pandemic on happiness or well-being

b. Describing specific financial challenges or difficulties faced during the pandemic

Strategies to Mitigate Challenges:

a. Mentioning individual actions or approaches taken to address income and satisfaction challenges

b. Referring to support or assistance from the university or administration to alleviate challenges

Credibility and Trustworthiness of the Protocol

Credibility, as defined by Guest et. al (2012), refers to the extent to which individuals are inclined to accept the findings of a study. It involves offering objective evidence derived from participant responses and a comprehensive rationale that contributes to a deeper understanding and support for the study's conclusions. To ensure the validity of the IPIS, a preliminary version was reviewed by qualitative research experts specializing in educational management. These experts were tasked with evaluating the content included in the final version of the protocol to affirm its legitimacy. Additionally, a pilot study was conducted involving faculty members from another private university in Lagos State to authenticate the interview methodology prior to its implementation in the primary data collection process (Dikko, 2016).

Following the interview, the data was coded and transcribed based on the study's inquiries. Subsequently, the participant was provided with the written transcription of the data and asked to cross-verify it with their field notes to ensure accurate recording of their statements. An excerpt relating to the participants' perspectives on income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic is presented:

Earnings are referred to as *income*. It is frequently examined from both a macro and micro viewpoint. In general, he defined national income as the sum of the value of products and services generated within an economy over a specified time frame. Earned income is not included in income. He added that income is a vital instrument in our life since it allows people to satisfy their basic needs. This includes presents, pension allowances, retirement benefits, scholarships, et cetera. From a certain perspective, income is equal to the usual value of consumption, with no change in the way people perceive their wealth. This definition of income, he called Purchase Power per Person (PPP).

Data Collection Procedure/Analysis

The consent of the informants was obtained prior to data collection. The participants were informed the reason for undertaking research on professors' perceptions of income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following consent, an audio tape, pen, pencil, eraser, notepad, headset, digital camera, and laptop were used to interview the participants. Each participant's interview lasted between 15-20 minutes. In this study, thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data in accordance with the research questions that were developed to guide the inquiry.

Analysis

This section delves into the examination of data garnered through interviews with lead lecturers in Management Sciences in the selected private universities in Kwara State, focusing on their perspectives concerning income and satisfaction amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the analysis here aims to address the research queries formulated through interviews conducted by December, 2022. Moreover, this section ensures the comprehensive exploration of

the amassed data, aligning it with the study's established questions. After transcribing and

compiling the collected data, themes were systematically coded and categorized. Consequently,

Table 2 illustrates the unique codes assigned to the informants who participated in the study.

Table 2

Codes Assigned to Participants

S/N	Participant	Code Assigned
1	Agriculture	P1
2	Education	P2
3	Health Sciences	P3
4	Humanities and Social Sciences	P4, P5, P6
5	Law	P7
6	Management Sciences	P8
7	Natural and Applied Sciences	P9, P10

Source: Authors' computation, 2024

Furthermore, the following table shows the demographic information of the informants.

Table 3

Profile of the Participants

Participant	Sex	Marital Status	Age (years)	Position	Years of Experience	Religion
P1	Male	Married	50	Senior Lecturer	Over 8	Islam
P2	Female	Married	45	Lecturer 11	Over 5	Islam
P3	Male	Married	43	Lecturer 1	Over 4	Islam
P4	Male	Married	40	Assistant Lecturer	Over 3	Islam
P5	Female	Married	49	Senior Lecturer	Over 10	Islam
P6	Male	Married	37	Assistant Lecturer	Over 2	Islam
P7	Male	Married	46	Lecturer 11	Over 5	Islam
P8	Female	Married	49	Senior Lecturer	Over 9	Islam
P9	Male	Married	44	Lecturer 1	Over 4	Christianity

| P10 | Male | Married | 45 | Lecturer | Over 5 | Islam |
| | | | | | 11 | |

The profile of the informants broken down is shown in Table 3. The informants' profile includes their gender, marital status, age, position, years of experience, and religion.

Table 4

Synopsis on Codification of Transcribed Data

Theme One: Concept of income and satisfaction

    Sub-themes:

1. Meaning

2. Importance

3. Perceived level of satisfaction

Theme Two: Impact of income on satisfaction during the COVID 19 pandemic

    Sub-themes:

1. Reduction in revenue

2. Decline in students' performance

3. Academic and non-academic staff retrenchment

4. Low student enrollment

Theme Three: Measures used to address the challenges of income and satisfaction during the COVID 19 pandemic

    Sub-themes:

1. Proper planning

2. Adequate remunerations

3. Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

4. Aggressive policy mix

Source: Authors' computation, 2024

General Themes of the Study

The themes in Table 3 illustrate lecturers' perceptions of income and happiness during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the data codification, which was based on three research questions of the study. Figure 1 illustrates the general themes of professors' perceptions of income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1

General Themes on Lecturers' Perception on Income and Satisfaction During the COVID-19 Pandemic Among Private Universities in Kwara State
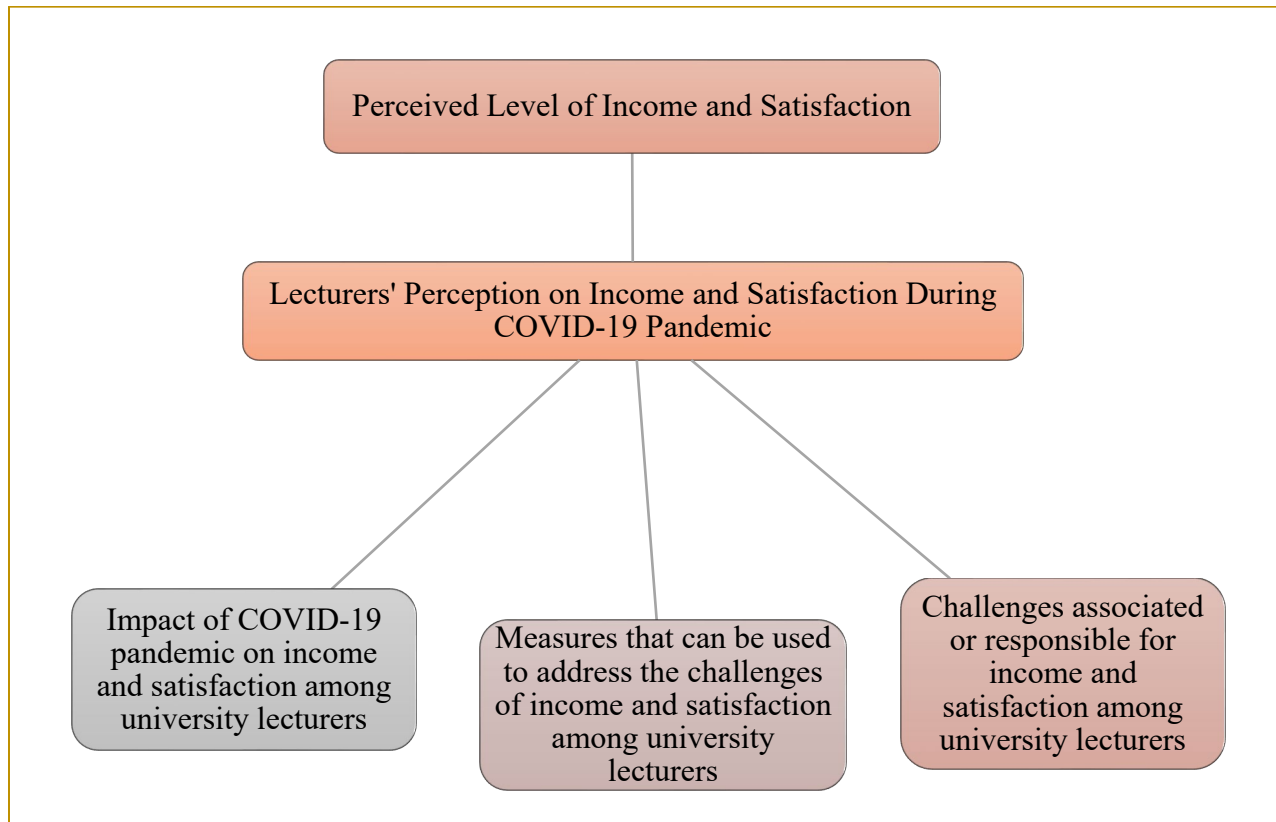
Research Question One: What is the lecturers' perception on income and satisfaction among private universities in Kwara State?

Based on research question one of the study, interviews conducted revealed opinions on what income and satisfaction constitute. Excerpts from P7 and P3 are given:

> *Income* is a phrase that describes earnings. Both a macro and micro perspective
>
> are frequently used to examine it. In general, he defined national income as the
>
> entire value of products and services generated in an economy during a
>
> specified time frame. Anything that is not earned is not considered income. It
>
> consists of pension allowances, gifts, retirement benefits, scholarships, and so
>
> forth; he further stated that income is an important tool in our lives, as it
>
> enables individuals to meet their innate universal needs. From a specific point
>
> of view, income is equivalent to the value of consumption that is regular,

without any alteration of an individuals' value of wealth. He termed this

definition of income *Individual Purchasing Power* (IPP). It is almost

unavoidable to include money, when talking about income. Money is the unit

of account, the means of payment and valuation, and the widely accepted

medium of trade, which explains why income and money are intimately

associated.

Also, P3 stated:

According to him, the process of meeting needs and desires results in

satisfaction. Furthermore, this process of fulfilling needs and wants is referred

to in economics as contentment. The ultimate aim of economic activity, which

arises from solving the underlying issue of scarcity, is to satisfy needs and

wants. Achieving fulfillment is essential to life itself as well. Moreover, the

researcher found that academics are content with regular salary payments as

well as other perks including meal stipends and top-up allowances, health

benefits, honoraria, etc.

Similarly, P2 stated:

Money received by an individual or organization as payment for labor, a good

or service rendered, or capital invested is known as income. Additionally, he

said that income includes anything that improves the household's quality,

whether it is regular or irregular, cash or non-cash, as long as it is received in a

liquid form that can be used right away. Consequently, an item is not

considered income if work is needed to turn it into spendable revenue. This

definition, to put it simply, is all about liquidity. He posited that satisfaction

from an accounting point of view has to do with fulfillment that is derived

from doing business with a firm, or product or service being rendered.

In addition, P6 revealed:

Lecturers are satisfied in terms of regular payment of salaries and other fringe

benefits (including top-up allowances, meal stipends, health benefits,

honorarium, etc.).

Furthermore, P8 and 10 defined income in terms of money balances when they posited:

Income is essentially the amount of Naira that a person has in their pockets and

on credit at a bank in the form of demand deposits and commercial bank

deposits. As a result, they defined income as the total of all currency and

properly adjusted commercial bank deposits. Furthermore, because it fulfills

several purposes, including those of a unit of account, a medium of exchange,

and a store of value, income is a difficult notion to define. They maintained

that satisfaction is the measurement that determines how happy an individual is

with a company's product, service, and capabilities. Similarly, P8 and P10

revealed that lecturers are satisfied in terms of regular payment of salaries and

other fringe benefits (including top-up and meals allowance, health benefits,

honorarium, etc.).

Based on research question two of the study, interviews conducted with the participants indicated

that income had an impact on satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kwara State

universities. For instance, evidence from P9 revealed:

The COVID-19 pandemic affected private universities negatively in the

areas of shortfall in revenue, low student enrollment, decrease in

expenditure levels, and academic and non-academic staff retrenchment. Similarly, the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic had a variety of effects on our revenue and, in turn, our degree of pleasure, including low student enrollment, an increase in unanticipated events, and the adoption of online learning. All of these had an impact on our happiness level and income. The information above describes the precise effects of COVID-19 on the pay and job satisfaction of lecturers in Kwara State.

In line with this assertion, P2 had this to say on the influence of COVID-19 on income and satisfaction in private universities:

The university faced the seemingly impossible task of making plans in a world where certainty is in short supply during the pandemic. Nobody could have imagined that a global pandemic like COVID-19 would wreak so much havoc across the world especially in the educational sector – but private universities are now getting back on track. On the other hand, the university was so seriously hit by the pandemic that it has to reduce its expenditures on supplies, staff, maintenance, and energy bills during the lockdown.

Maintaining these assertions, P5 maintains the following on the influence of COVID-19 on pay and satisfaction in private universities:

There is no need sugar-coating our words, the COVID-19 pandemic has grossly impacted our income and thus satisfaction level in the sense that most of our daily activities and routines were severely hampered and we

had to adjust to the new normal and the school in the process of adjusting

to the new normal had to make some germane and vital decisions for the

betterment of the school – such as reducing expenses, laying off staff,

adopting the online learning scheme, as well as purchasing and installing

some PPE at strategic locations within the school premises. All these had a

bounce back effect on our respective incomes and subsequently our
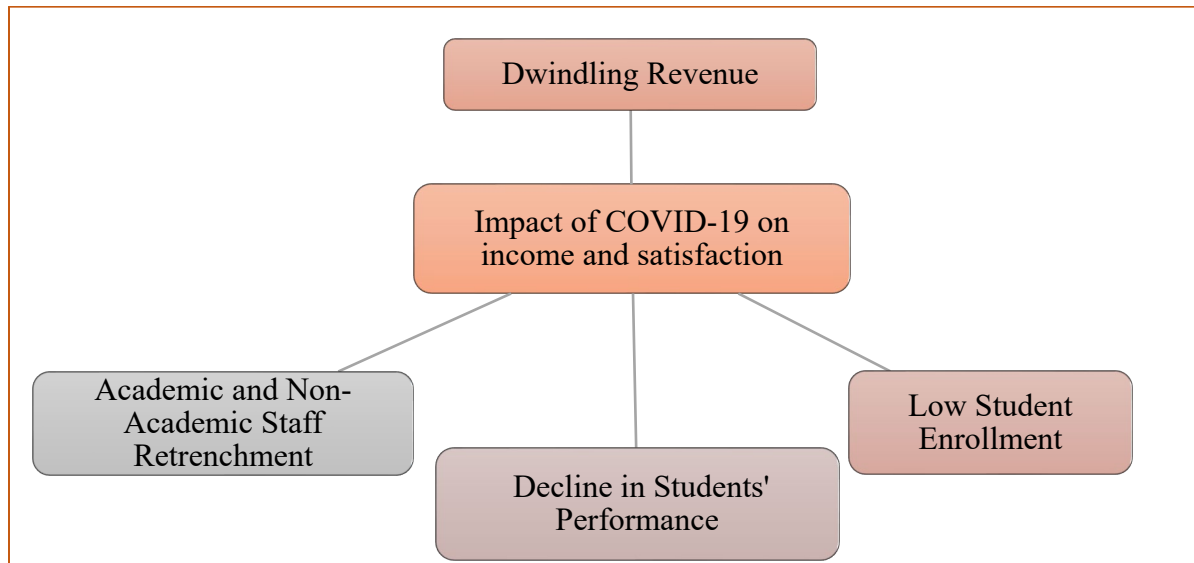
satisfaction.

P8 on the impact of COVID-19 on income and satisfaction in private universities maintains that:

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a curse rather than a blessing. Most

lecturers had conferences in various parts of the world during the pandemic

that were to be sponsored by school management but due to the pandemic

and subsequently the lockdown, the university couldn't make provisions

for such conferences in terms of payment of flight tickets and stipends for

the lecturers. These conferences would have added skills and new ways of

doing thing which would have been passed to the students for advancement

in their academic pursuit in life. As a result of the pandemic, such a feat

was not achieved and thus, advancement in skills and ways of doing things

was defeated, leading to sharp fall in students' performance in the long run.

Figure 2 shows the graphical representation of the impact of COVID-19 on income and

satisfaction in private universities.

Figure 2

Theme Two and Sub-themes on the Nexus Between Income and Satisfaction

Research Question Two: What are the challenges associated with income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic in private universities?

The views of P1 and P10 on challenges associated with income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic in private universities:

> The university as an entity depends solely on students' fees; the
>
> pandemic mesmerized the university in all areas. The students' fees are
>
> the only source of income accruing to the university, and at that timeas
>
> such it was really difficult scouring for revenue from other means,
>
> hence the retrenchment of staff. Another challenge that became a
>
> nuisance with the income and satisfaction in our schools was hinged on
>
> inadequate planning and non-payment of school fees by some students.
>
> Also, no one could have anticipated the COVID-19 pandemic as such it
>
> was difficult getting PPE readily available. All these points led to low
>
> income and dissatisfied staff. During the lockdown, we had lean

resources to cater for staff salary and this was due to the issue of

students who refused to pay as a result of the pandemic.

P7 and P6 maintained:

Private universities are privately owned entities and thus they depend

solely on student fees. During the pandemic, however, the school was

shut, and online teaching was introduced. Part of the challenges

encountered were low student enrollment, subscribing to online

learning methods, and training staff on how to teach online via Zoom

and WhatsApp, among others. In the same vein, the major challenge

associated with our income and satisfaction is due to the fact that some

parents did not see it fit to pay the school fees of their wards/children.

This single act incapacitated the normal functioning of the university in

paying staff salary, which translated to inadequate remuneration of

staff. This singular act of negligence on the part of the students and

their parents led to dissatisfied and disgruntled staff.

Figure 3 shows the graphical representation of the challenges associated with

or responsible for income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic

among private universities in Kwara State.

Figure 3

Theme Three and Sub-themes on the Nexus Between Income and Satisfaction
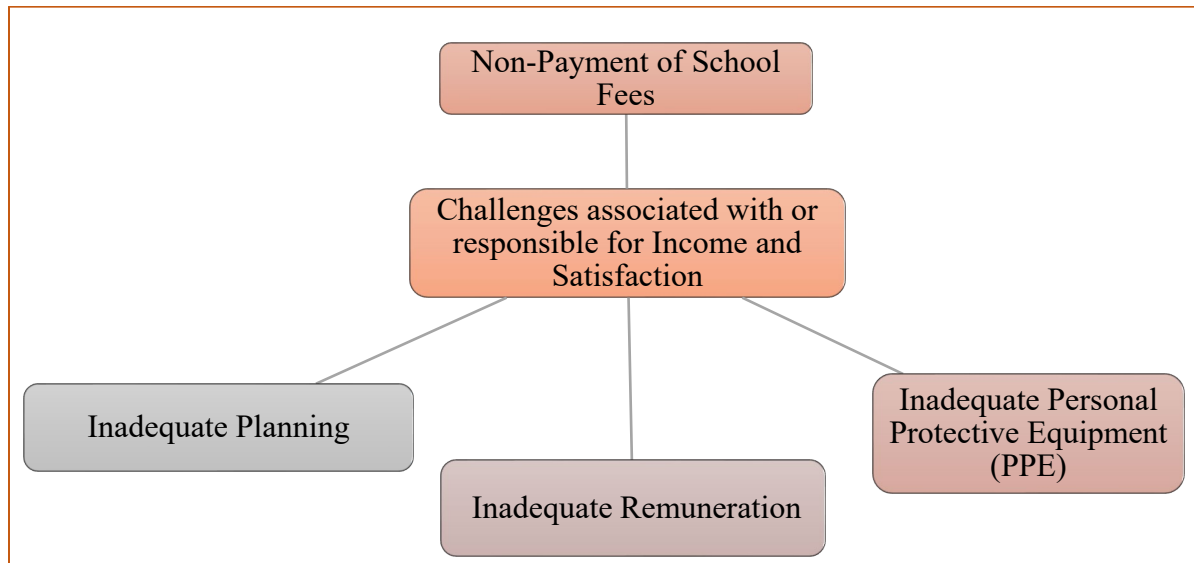
Research Question Four: What are the measures that can be used to address the challenges of income and satisfaction in private universities?

As per the trials that can be used to address the challenges of income and satisfaction in private universities, P4 and P3 asserted thus:

Private universities and other private schools in general should look

inward by channeling for another source of income for the university –

Alhamdulillah, private universities Pure Water factory as well as private

universities secondary school are already up and running. Furthermore,

cutting down on unwanted and frivolous spending, allocate a sizeablesum

of money to provide for PPE for possible reoccurrences in the

not-so-distant future and as well as embracing virtual learning by the staff

and students. Measures such as adequate planning and strong policy

documentation must be put in place for effective running of the

university. This is needed to ensure we have a good shock absorber in

case of any eventualities.

Input from P10 and P2 on measures to improve income and satisfaction in private universities:

Specifically, adequate and rigorous planning would go a long way in

averting such occurrences. Also, the management would have to continue

to invest in their staff so they will be able to compete competitively with

their counterparts in online teaching across the world. In the same vein,

the university would as a matter of fact cut down on its extravagant

expenses for rainy days. In summary, measures that can be used include

adequate planning, provision of PPE, adequate remuneration of staff, and

also, a policy (in terms of health benefits) should be put in place to ensure

that the staff is well catered for in case of any unforeseen circumstances

in the future.

Figure 4 shows a graphical representation on the measures used to address the

challenges associated with or responsible for income and satisfaction during

the COVID-19 pandemic in private universities.

Figure 4

Theme Four and Sub-themes on the Nexus Between Income and Satisfaction

Adequate Planning

Measures that can be used to address the challenges associated with income and satisfaction

Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Adequate Remuneration

Aggressive Policy Mix
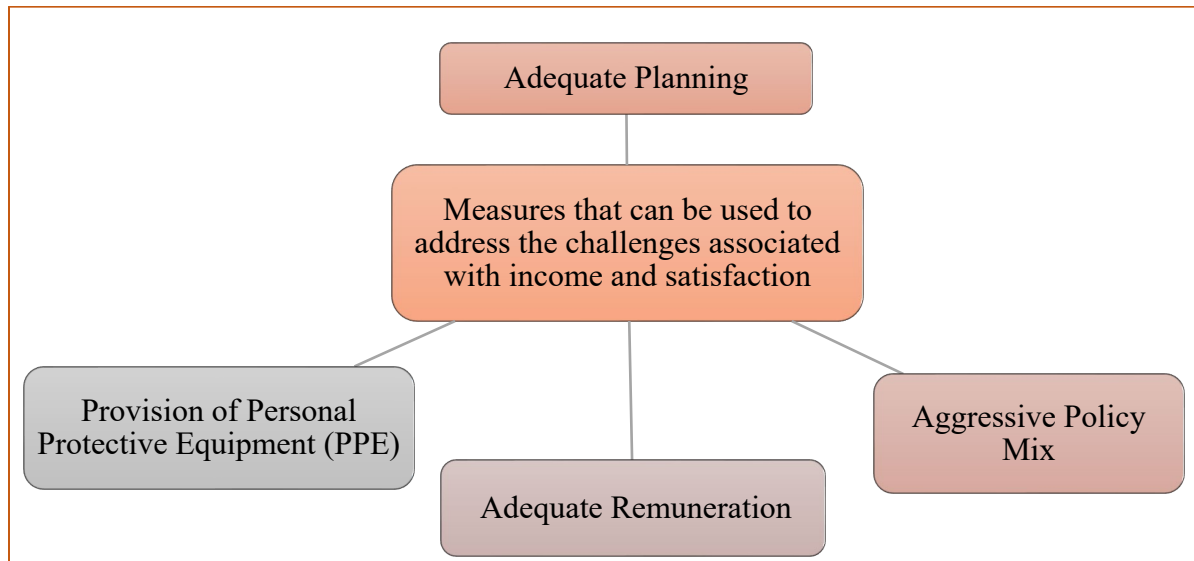
Discussion

The key findings of the study conducted at Kwara State University on lecturers' perspectives on income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic at private universities provide valuable insights into the impact of the pandemic on academic staff. Comparing these findings to prior studies enhances our understanding of the significance of the research.

The first research question explored lecturers' perceptions of income and satisfaction, revealing that they were content with regular salary payments and associated fringe benefits, indicating a direct correlation between income and satisfaction. This finding aligns with Stevenson and Wolfers' (2018) research, which found a substantial link between income and satisfaction. It also resonates with the work of Vincent (2019), which suggests that income levels influence organizational-based self-esteem, impacting performance. Furthermore, the association between income and job satisfaction highlighted in the work of Le and Nguyen (2020) supports the notion that income plays a crucial role in satisfaction.

The second research question examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on income and satisfaction at private universities, revealing adverse effects on institutions' revenue

due to decreased student enrollment and staff retrenchment. This finding is consistent with the work of Yuen (2020), which focused on the pandemic's impact on public higher education. Yuen's research also highlighted the financial challenges faced by colleges and universities due to the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

The third research question delved into the challenges related to happiness and income during the pandemic, identifying difficulties such as inadequate planning, remuneration, PPE, and unpaid school fees. These findings align with the work of Jegede (2020) on Nigerian higher education during the pandemic, which also identified issues concerning inadequate preparation for virtual education, insufficient protective gear, and declining revenue generation. The similarities in these findings indicate that the challenges faced by academic staff in private universities during the pandemic are not isolated but shared across different contexts.

Finally, the fourth research question addressed strategies to mitigate income and happiness-related challenges during the pandemic, suggesting solutions such as minimizing unnecessary spending, seeking alternative funding sources, and allocating significant funds for protective equipment, embracing virtual learning, planning, and adequately compensating staff. These findings align with the work of Kedraka and Kaltsidis (2020), which evaluated the pandemic's impact on university pedagogy, which advocates for the adoption of digital technology to improve remote learning in higher education.

Thus, the significance of the key findings lies in highlighting the importance of proactive measures and strategic planning in mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic on income, satisfaction, and educational institutions. The findings support prior research on the link between income and satisfaction, the impact of the pandemic on university finances, and the challenges faced by academic staff. By comparing these findings to prior studies, the research provides a

broader understanding of the implications and reinforces the need for effective strategies to address the challenges faced by academic staff in private universities during the pandemic.

Conclusion And Recommendations

The study concludes that lecturers' perceptions on income and satisfaction amidst the COVID-19 pandemic are positive in the sense that the lecturers were satisfied in terms of regular payment of salaries and other fringe benefits (including top-up and meal allowances, health benefits, and honorarium, etc.). This allowed private universities to remain in session even when other sister universities were shut down and closed due to the pandemic. In conclusion, the COVID-19 issue has created a lot of possibilities that should be fully utilized. Education, on the other hand, remains critical to the success of any nation and its people; even in the midst of a global pandemic, countries whose leaders prioritize education and knowledge are better positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that arise from the situation. Based on the identified challenges faced by academic staff in private universities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following specific and actionable recommendations can be made to address these issues and better support faculty.

Financial Support and Compensation

Implement transparent and fair salary policies that ensure regular and timely payment to faculty members. Explore alternative funding sources, such as grants or partnerships, to mitigate the impact of decreased student enrollment and revenue loss. Provide additional financial incentives or bonuses to acknowledge the additional workload and efforts required during the pandemic. Consider merit-based salary adjustments or promotions to recognize faculty members' contributions and motivate them.

Professional Development and Training

Offer comprehensive training and support for faculty members to adapt to online teaching and learning methodologies effectively. Provide resources and workshops on effective online pedagogy, instructional design, and technology integration. Foster a collaborative environment where faculty members can share best practices and innovative teaching methods. Encourage faculty members to participate in virtual conferences, webinars, and other professional development opportunities to enhance their skills and stay updated with the latest trends in their respective fields.

Health and Safety Measures

Develop and implement strict health and safety protocols to ensure a safe working environment for faculty members, such as providing PPE and sanitization resources. Establish clear guidelines for remote work arrangements, flexible schedules, and accommodations for faculty members with health concerns or caregiving responsibilities. Regularly communicate updates and guidelines regarding the pandemic to faculty members, addressing their concerns and providing necessary support.

Communication and Collaboration

Foster open and transparent communication channels between university administration and faculty members to address their needs, concerns, and suggestions. Establish regular faculty meetings or town hall sessions to provide updates, gather feedback, and create a sense of community. Encourage collaboration and interdisciplinary projects among faculty members to enhance research opportunities and productivity.

Well-Being and Work-Life Balance

Promote work-life balance by setting realistic expectations and workload distribution for faculty members. Provide mental health support services, counseling, and wellness programs to

address the psychological and emotional well-being of faculty members. Recognize and appreciate the efforts and achievements of faculty members through public acknowledgments, awards, or incentives. Establish mentoring programs or peer support networks to facilitate social connections and professional guidance.

Technology Infrastructure and Support

Invest in robust and reliable technological infrastructure to support online teaching, research, and administrative activities. Provide technical support and training for faculty members to effectively utilize online platforms, learning management systems, and communication tools. Ensure access to necessary software, equipment, and high-speed internet connections for faculty members working remotely.

Institutional Planning and Contingency Measures

Develop comprehensive contingency plans that address potential future disruptions, ensuring preparedness for similar crises. Enhance institutional planning to diversify revenue streams, reduce dependency on tuition fees, and build financial resilience. Continuously assess and update policies and guidelines to adapt to changing circumstances and incorporate lessons learned from the pandemic.

Direction for Future Research

This study used a qualitative approach to survey lecturers' perceptions of income and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic in private universities in Kwara State. As a result, this study suggests that a similar study be conducted in other private universities to confirm or refute the findings in this study. A focus group discussion (FGD) approach was used in this study, and numerous deans from different faculties at private universities were participants. As a result, additional research is required to involve other staff members in the unit. Furthermore,

since a mixed method approach could enable the collection of a substantial amount of data for the purpose of drawing conclusions and making generalizations, future researchers wishing to undertake this kind of research could do so because a qualitative method was employed to elicit information from the study's participants.

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Experiential Leadership Learning: Narratives of a Multiple Case Study of Mexican School Leaders Appointed to Indigenous Schools

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Abstract

Training and preparation of school leaders has an impact on the quality of leadership displayed in their readiness for the leadership practice. However, in Mexico the training and preparation processes for school leaders are unclear and lack uniformity. Commonly, school leaders learn to lead in their role without previous preparation for the position. This paper presents the findings of a study conducted through narratives that analyzed the leadership learning processes of novice and experienced school leaders. The study identified important learning experiences as the receptive observation, malleable observation, practical experiences of leadership, previous experiences in headship functions, and the formal exercise of headship as relevant in their leadership learning. Based on the findings, strategies are proposed to strengthen leadership learning taking into consideration initial teaching training, continuous professional development, and situated learning.

Keywords: experiential learning, leadership learning, school leaders, Mexico

Introduction

School leaders are considered key agents for school improvement and the academic outcomes students can achieve. Several studies have shown that the school leadership practice has an important influence in school efficacy. It has been demonstrated that school leaders' pedagogical and academic leadership positively impacts curriculum design and its implementation; the support of effective teaching and assessment practices; and meeting the needs of teachers, students and other stakeholders in the learning community (Waters et al.,

2003). The value of school leaders' practices in improving educational processes suggests the need of a strong previous preparation before their appointment so that they enact their role effectively (*Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación* [INEE], 2015). Pont et al. (2009) mention that international institutions such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommend improving the preparation and development of school leaders as doing so positively impacts their knowledge and the way schools are led and managed.

Despite the importance of school leaders, in Mexico the processes of preparation and development are not systematized and standardized. Teachers do not obtain leadership positions without proper and specific preparation. For several years up until 2013, the appointments to leadership positions in schools were conducted in two ways. First, through a point-based system that appointed tenured leadership positions based on three aspects: teaching seniority, academic preparation (masters and doctoral degrees), and professional development courses. Of these aspects, teaching seniority was the most important factor followed by academic qualifications, which usually were scarcely related to leadership preparation since the promotion system did not require training in educational leadership. Most school leaders currently appointed obtained their position following this point-based system.

The other way of access to headship was a direct appointment by educational authorities and was validated by union officials without following the point-based system as the official established criteria. This form of appointment was used regularly to fill temporary vacancies, and the time of appointment was indefinite. Direct appointment was usually based on the relationship that pursuing school leaders had with the teachers' union (Alvarez et. al, 2007). Both ways of appointment suggested that a good classroom teacher could be a good school leader without the

need of leadership training and preparation. However, in practice this was not always the case since school leadership roles require specific abilities for the position.

Sometimes appointments either by the point-based system or the direct method had little relationship with good teaching and leadership competency and more with the political work done in favor of the teachers' union. In the case of the point-based system, 50% of key staff for the office of promotion was mandatory for the teachers' union members. This resulted in many cases of participants with the most points not being appointed as school leaders because those participants did not agree with the union's political activities and practices (Slater et al., 2006). And, in the case of direct appointment, school leaders needed to be validated by the teachers' union. The influence of the teachers' union was great, as it had the possibility to mobilize thousands of teachers to campaign and to vote in an election, which gave the power to negotiate with the government. This is why the union always looked for mechanisms to influence the appointment of loyal school leaders in all schools.

However, in 2013 an educational reform was implemented that proposed a reorganization of the educational system, which included a new way to appoint school leaders and to limit the influence of the teachers' union. The new process of appointment considered an exam to guarantee competency for leadership positions and a two-year induction period (*Diario Oficial de la Federación* [DOF], 2013). This was seemingly an advancement regarding the appointment of school leaders as it eliminated the patronage practices present in the appointment of school leaders either by the point-based system or direct appointment. However, in spite of the 2013 system that currently dictates the procedures and criteria for leadership appointments, leadership preparation has not improved because the required qualification for teachers pursuing leadership positions is merely a teaching certificate.

In both approaches, the point-based system and the 2013 reformed method, preparation for leadership positions was and is not taken into consideration. Both follow the logic that a good classroom teacher would be a good school leader without need of specific preparation for the position. In this regard, Pont et al. (2009) point out that this approach is problematic because "it is important to build a strong knowledge base for school leaders because effective leadership will not emerge just from teaching experience" (p. 113). In this regard, Moorosi and Bush (2011) mention, "[the] less focus on [leadership] preparation means that there is a chance that schools are placed on the hands of unqualified personnel" (p. 71).

Current school leaders in Mexico appointed either by the point-based system, the exam, or direct nomination have not been required and/or offered leadership preparation, which means they learn to lead mainly in practice. They are offered a position with little and limited knowledge of how to enact it effectively. Thus, this study explored how school leaders in Mexico developed their leadership learning in conditions of limited preparation and the implications of this approach in their leadership development.

Related Literature

Professional and Experiential Learning

Traditional approaches in preparation and learning suggest that there are systematized processes that happen in a training institution that enables learning of specific practices of a profession before being appointed (Uribe, 2010; Gyssels, 2007). In most professions, it is expected to have a level of knowledge before being appointed. In this process, the professional and specialist identity is constructed through the domain of knowledge and criteria established by recognized specialists of the field. Another perspective proposes that professional learning needs to be viewed in an integral way considering the time practicing the profession. This

approach suggests that practical experience enables mastering of learning and acquirement of cultural codes built for those who practice the profession, as well as allows for the development of a professional identity (Brown-Ferrigno, 2003; Ducoing & Fortoul, 2013). In this approach, leadership learning is a process that happens throughout the professional life. Identity is built through the development of skills and the domain of standard knowledge set by the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which the profession is practiced. In this conception, professional identity includes the field's knowledge, the development of skills and abilities needed in the profession, the building of cognitive resources to access new knowledge and skills, the domain of several cultural codes, and the possibility to respond to the challenges of the field.

Taking into consideration the previous conceptualization, the fact that school leaders do not have specific academic preparation for their role does not mean that they do not have professional preparation. It is important to consider that in the Mexican case, school leaders are teachers who traded teaching for school leadership. They are adults with a history and a built form of learning (Gyssels, 2007). This means they are adults in professional development with many lived educational experiences. Baudouin (2009) proposes that experience is a key referent in preparation of adults since experience enables or limits the capacity to learn something new. This is something that differentiates adult learners from children. Experience is then a key element in the professional development of school leaders.

The term experience refers to two aspects. First to a specific situation that lives the subject in a space and determined time. The second refers to how through lived experiences the subject obtains learning, which keeps accumulating with previous knowledge. It could be understood experience as a synonym of the accumulation of empiric learning. However, in Western tradition, lived experience is relegated to a second place in professional learning (Marti

& Gil, 2012), as it appears unsystematic. Experience is given less importance in comparison to academic preparation based on theory, sometimes even being ignored, precisely for coming from a practice where problems are solved using common sense and not using a rigorous methodology.

In the theory of situated learning, experiences as anecdotal in specific contexts offer relevant learning. Situated learning proposes that learning and doing are two mutually inherent processes: knowledge is at the same time a part and the result of the action (Diaz-Barriga, 2003). In this sense, experience enables the improvement of practice and mastering of knowledge. This theoretical posture suggests the need of some conditions for learning to take place. A first condition proposes that learning is closely related to practical actions in real situations. In this scenario, experience has a relevant role in learning because it presents real, concrete, and expected challenges. These challenges enable meaning to be built of the lived experience and allow for the advancement in the appropriation of knowledge and understanding of what to do and how to solve future similar challenges. Another condition points to learning happening from the need to perform an activity previously identified that the person does not yet know. Learning is then a process of internal searching about something that we do not know. Learning happens in this process of internal searching regarding something we need to perform, an action, and also during interactions with others to find solutions for our knowledge needs (Wenger, 2001).

Another approach suggests that learning happens with the mediation of others. Nobody can learn a new practice only by themselves (Vasquez, 2011). In this approach, the guidance of an experimented person plus practice is needed. It is possible to identify the first two conditions in the leadership learning of school leaders in Mexican schools. They learn their role and

function during their practical experience, and they do it because they need to solve real situations their roles demand as challenges unexpectedly appear.

Situated learning is the product of a practical experience in real context that enables learning (Tiburcio & Jimenez, 2016) and in interaction with others. Leve and Wenger (1991) also emphasize how the context becomes an important learning resource. Regarding experience, it is relevant in the learning process of school leaders' roles and in building their identity because experience is the main source of knowledge in their professional development. However, due to the empirical source of learning that characterizes situated learning, this has been given little importance to the point that it is considered that school leaders in Mexico lack of knowledge to effectively perform their position. This is why it is important to understand the life stories of school leaders – to help identify the experiences they report as relevant to acquiring the elements that enabled them to improve and develop their leadership learning and processes.

Leadership Learning

Pertaining to leadership learning, it is reported as an effective experiential and active leadership learning approach (Zhang & Brundrett, 2010) in leadership development. "Active learning strategies integrate theory and practice and stimulate reflection" (Orr & Orphanos, 2011, p. 120). Cosner et al. (2018) specify that active learning implies the engagement in practical experiences where practice inquiry, reflection, and scrutiny take place and those experiences can be used later as a learning resource. Active learning supports leadership learning by allowing pursuing leaders the practice of leadership in authentic situations (Gray & Bishop, 2009), in which leadership learning happens during, through, and after practical experiences (Orr, 2020). Cosner (2020) points out that the most recognized active learning approaches for leadership development have been problem- and case-based learning, simulations, and action research.

Cosner (2020) calls these first-generation active learning approaches and identifies a next generation of active learning pedagogical approaches. The next generation of active leadership learning includes digital cases, digital simulations, and clinical simulations (Dexter et al., 2020); course-embedded and clinically enacted methodologies (Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019); and real-time job-embedded approaches (Honing & Honsa, 2020). An important aspect of leadership learning happens when there is openness to learn and individuals are in *learning mode,* which is defined as intentionally framing and pursuing each element of the experiential learning process with a growth mindset (Heslin & Keating, 2017).

Methodology

This work was conducted using a multiple-case design following the approach proposed by Stake (2006) to analyze in depth the leadership learning process of four school leaders, two novices and two experienced. Two main criteria were considered to select the cases: a) seniority in their role, and b) their current workplace's (school's) socio-economic location. The seniority aspect was determined considering the criteria reported by Garcia et al. (2010), who mention that a school leader could be considered novice for up to three years into the position and experienced when up to eight years. Regarding socio-economic criteria, parents' income level and years of schooling as suggested by the Mexico National Institute of Information and Geography were taken into consideration.

The study analyzed four cases, including two experienced school leaders (with more than five years in the position) and two novices (with less than a year in the position). For both the *experienced* and *novice* types, one was from the middle-class urban context and the other from the urban marginal. These two contexts were considered, as they constitute most public schools in the city where the study was conducted. A deep interview was used to obtain the life story that

narrated the development process experienced by each school leader. This methodology enabled us to obtain through their narrative their processes of leadership learning and development as they reflected and remembered past events related to their leadership learning.

Interviews were conducted as a recurrent cycle of three sessions. In the first interview the narrative focused on their preparation process, taking into consideration their initial teaching training. The second addressed their self-perception as school leaders. The information collected and analyzed from the first two interviews was used to build a schematic model called a *biograma* (Bolivar 2012), which was analyzed for verification with the participants in the third interview. A *biograma* is a schematic summary that synthesizes gathered information. The methodology proposed by Bolivar (2012) suggests sharing the *biograma* with the participants. This allows for completion of information, clarification of aspects or events, and addressing of gaps and doubts that might have arisen in the preliminary data analysis of the first two interviews.

The creation of the *biograma* made it possible to identify experiences that school leaders reported as relevant in their preparation process. Data analysis was conducted using the narrative biographic methodology also of Bolivar (2012) where fragments of the interview were highlighted in which participants described their relevant experiences regarding their preparation. These relevant experiences were previously identified in the *biograma*. This helped to analyze each fragment of the interview through both an open and a focused codification (Saldaña, 2016). Data analysis focused on the experiences that school leaders gave relevance to because they were challenging situations (Baudouin, 2009), and when they reported these experiences left learning for future performance in their role. Codification allowed us to create micro-essays through the narrative that followed two approaches: first, a chronological approach

described the order that experiences took place; next, an analytical approach explaining each relevant experience and the reasons participants considered them relevant.

Findings

Learning Experiences

Analysis of the preparation pathways that school leaders followed found that despite the lack of a systematic, standardized, and institutionalized process of learning about their function, there was evidence of progressive learning experiences. Learning experiences were events related to effective performance of school leaders that facilitated their development and effectiveness in their role. This study found two experiences that favored building the concept of a school leader. These experiences were *receptive experiences* and *malleable observation*. Likewise, two experiences were identified that facilitated leadership learning and the development of leadership skills useful for their role as school leaders. These were the *practice of leadership* and *previous experiences in headship functions*. However, a fifth experience was present at the center of their leadership learning process. This was the *practical exercise in their role* that promoted to rebuild their concept of school leadership and to internalize a new concept, knowledge, and understanding of their function, as well as helped them adopt and incorporate the cultural codes that identify school leaders. Each experience will be analyzed individually and complemented with extracts of the participants' interviews.

Receptive Observation

Participants reported that their first notions of school leadership were acquired through their initial observations in their role as students. They mentioned the experience they had as students influenced how they perceived the role of school leaders and the need to act according to the expected conduct from this authority figure. Meaning was built from the interactions they

as students had with school leaders as authority figures. These experiences were their first contacts with school leaders; hence, in those experiences they started to build their concept of school leaders and their role in relation to others at the school (e.g., teachers, administrative and support staff, parents, and students). This concept was internalized as unique, true, and what a school leader had to be, how they had to act, and how they had to perform to be perceived as effective. The following quote shows this receptive observation and how it is now brought to the present for a school leader when they perform their role:

> I remember when I was a little girl, just imagine that the headteacher visited a classroom! I was confused for a while. He was an authority figure, and you did not have close contact with him. When I started my appointment as a school leader, I realized that this position is not to be in the office all the time. Of course there are times you need to be in the office but not all the time.

This experience has been lived by many when they were students, but in the case of school leaders it was reported as important because this was a starting point regarding their concept of a school leader. They mentioned to have totally and partially adopted some of the traits they observed in these school leaders. The initial built concept includes several cultural codes, including the need to differentiate themselves as school leaders from teaching staff, to have a certain image that shows superiority regarding the rest of the learning community, and even to be differentiated in the way they dress. This conceptualization was built in their previous observation of several school leaders throughout their student life, resulting in their now-accepted image of what constitutes a school leader.

It is relevant that in the building of this image there was a process of observation without questioning or judging the person who represented the figure of school leader, and this built

image was accepted as valid and unique. Therefore, this experience is called receptive observation because participants just received and internalized information. In this experience the concept of school leader is something distant, something that belongs to another person, possessing unknown activities and functions. However, school leaders are perceived as authorities in schools. Here interacts the conceptualization and exercise of authority that the observed school leader displays. Later in their career, they as observer teachers and as pursuing school leaders integrated this initial conceptualization to their self-preparation repertoire.

There are also elements of leadership learning reported by participants that emerged from culturally identified codes – especially those related to the image that school leaders have to display to differentiate themselves from other members of the learning community. In the participants' experience, the idea built of what a school leader is influences the expected behaviors in the role. The most relevant experience of the receptive observation phase is the concept of school leader built from the lived experience and interaction with school leaders in their life as students. Likewise, the incorporation of role activities and expectations are influenced by these initial experiences that once they are appointed as school leaders need to assume.

Malleable Observation

This experience is usually lived during their role as teachers in the professional relationship with their school leaders in how they enact the position. Therefore, the interaction happens in an asymmetric relationship of power where they as teachers learning to be leaders have a minor hierarchy, but at the same time they can find support in their school leader to solve the challenges they face as teachers. Here, there is also a process of observation to the position of school leader; however, this observational experience is related to the received support from the

person in the leadership position. The teacher pursuing leadership applies a value discernment, either approving or disapproving of their school leaders' actions. They as teachers pursuing leadership roles thus rebuild their concept of school leader in relation to what a school leader should be. They integrate into their new concept those leadership actions that they approve of and eliminate the actions that do not favor future effective teaching or leadership.

Malleable observation enables reinterpretation of their school leader concept built from the previous receptive observation phase. The new concept could adhere in most part to the leadership practice conducted by a specific school leader or oppose firmly the practice of another. Or throughout their teaching experience they may have adopted features of several school leaders that they consider positive. However, in their leader concept, they may also consider features that should not belong and may try to avoid them later in their leadership practice. The following extract shows the reflection of a school leader and how she took elements of several school leaders while she was a classroom teacher to build her concept of school leader.

> I think I have built the concept of effective leadership in relation to the experience of school leaders I have worked with. When I started working, the school had an interim school leader who was very nice to everybody, but some teachers were harsh on him. Many programs implemented by the ministry of education failed because there was a lack of guidance in the implementation. There was even a time that teachers started to fight amongst themselves because of these programs. Later, I moved to another school where the school leader was very focused on the administrative aspect of the function. She knew the rules and law very well, what you as a classroom teacher had to do or should not do, but she never threatened you. She was a person that always arrived to the school very

early and left late. She was very responsible and the way she talked to you, her tone of voice. From her I started to have an idea of how I wanted to be as a school leader. Then, I moved to another school and the school leader was also a very nice person; I arrived in February, and I was pregnant, then I had my maternity leave. I came back in August, and she died in September. It was a very short time that I worked with her; however, she was a very good person. Everybody knew her in the community, and she had a very good reputation. Then, another headteacher was appointed, and he was absent very often. He used to leave the school in charge of a different teacher every time he was not going to come. A few weeks later, chaos started to emerge. Everybody felt that they were the assistant headteacher even though there was not an official appointment. Everybody felt like the boss. Remembering this school leader I would be ashamed if people said that I hardly ever came to the school.

In this experience pursuing school leaders are still classroom teachers and they also face challenges in their teaching practice. The solutions to these challenges also generate learning at the classroom and teaching level that participants acknowledge proves useful now that they are school leaders and can provide pedagogical guidance to teachers. In this experience, they as pursuing school leaders keep seeing themselves separate from the school leader role, and therefore, they know still little about the function although they already have some cultural codes that belong to school leaders. In countries with consolidated preparation models for school leaders this experience is relevant because one of the activities they engage is in 'shadowing,' the observation of an experimented and successful school leader. This activity enables future school leaders to build benchmarks of what school leaders should do and how to enact their role.

However, in the Mexican case, this experience lacks relevance and appears unnoticed, and in their pathway to headship they are limited to what they can observe in their school leaders.

Practical Experiences of Leadership

In these experiences, participants mentioned that they lived collaborative meaningful experiences before their appointment to headship, and in several of these experiences they assumed leadership roles either formally or informally. A relevant leadership learning aspect in these experiences was their introspective exercise to keep the characteristics of their personality that were useful to lead a group of people. At the same time, those experiences served as guidelines to follow when they were faced with leadership challenges. These experiences could be present alternatively with the previously described experiences of *receptive observation* and *malleable observation* in their pathway of leadership learning.

They reported the exercise and development of leadership for instance when they had experiences as the chief of class during their higher education studies, or the leader of a team in an assignment or activity, and later in their work as teachers' leaders. Such leadership experiences could have been outside the educational field, for example, participants reported leading in cultural and religious groups. The following extract shows how the performance of leadership functions before promotion to headship helped them to develop aspects of leadership that would be useful once they obtained their position as school leaders.

> I had leadership experiences as a student with the student council and with the youth group in my church. Later, I also developed my leadership with the experiences I had as a classroom teacher since as teachers we were always organizing. I participated often in the organization of civic, sporting, and cultural events. I think all those leadership experiences influenced the development of my leadership skills.

These experiences enabled the building of a concept and skills for the practice of school leadership. The concept of school leader is still a bit distant, but the leadership experiences help to build referents regarding how to persuade others to achieve common goals in a team. In some countries, with consolidated models of school leader preparation, there are talent identification programs. When teachers show leadership potential, they are invited to continue their preparation to be considered for a formal leadership position. However in Mexico, this is an aspect that does not have relevance in the selection of future school leaders.

Previous Experiences in Headship Functions

This experience is present when they as classroom teachers, besides their teaching activities, participate in tasks and activities related to the function of headship. This could happen because the school leader delegates several functions among the teaching staff or because the school leader considers that a specific teacher has the ability and knowledge to help him/her with particular activities. They as teachers have to perform activities that usually are duties of school leaders, such as leading the teaching staff in activities that improve student learning (but without being their entire responsibility). This experience enables them to learn the functions a school leader needs to perform from two perspectives. First, they observe and participate in effective leadership practices in which the teaching staff is organized as a collective to design and apply strategies centered on student learning. They also perform some actions specific to the headship position that school leaders delegate to teachers. This enables teachers to assume the role of a practical learner of school leadership, whether the extra tasks assigned to them are either related or little related to school leadership.

This role of practical learner is not a planned exercise, but it is relevant since it gives teachers an introduction and induction to the leadership function and contributes to their

visualization of themselves as future school leaders. The following extract shows a school leader that mentions how the leadership experience during her time as a classroom teacher helped her to develop leadership skills useful once in the position:

> I was appointed to the school as a teacher and probably he (the school leader) saw something in me, and he gave me the opportunity to help him in academic aspects and to organize teachers. And then, I realized that a school leader is not somebody that reads lessons plans and checks lists. We developed a close friendship and he used to tell me that school leaders do not just have to authorize lessons plans. But they need to know all the teaching process. He also often encouraged the teaching staff to make proposals to the School Council, and I remember we analyzed each of them. He also advised me to pursue headship; he saw leadership potential in me.

The practical exercise of leadership enables the development of leadership skills and supports the building of referents to enact leadership positions effectively. In this experience the figure of a school leader still is a concept that belongs to another person. However, they as teachers start to build an idea of how school leadership needs to be performed. In this experience, teachers pursuing headship changed their relationship with leadership because they perceived that through leadership they could influence and persuade others. Still the knowledge of the role and cultural codes pertaining to headship are limited. However, broadly speaking, this experience lacks importance for the preparation of school leaders for the Mexican context since not all pursuing heads live it. Only those who have a school leader who shares their leadership with the teaching staff could experience it. In this study we reviewed four cases and only one reported to have lived meaningful school leadership experiences in her time as a classroom teacher. Whereas in countries with consolidated models of preparation, leadership practice is an

aspect that pursuing school leaders develop and these experiences are introduced in their preparation programs.

These four experiences before their appointment as school leaders (*receptive observation, malleable observation, practice of leadership, and previous experiences in headship functions*) could strengthen the preparation of school leaders if they are lived as intentional experiences with the purpose to enable a better understanding of school leaders' roles and functions. These experiences also contribute to the development of leadership and administrative skills that favor the process of induction to the position. In this regard, there are some elements that enable preparation through the situated learning approach. However, these possibilities randomly appear for some pursuing school leaders,

Formal Exercise of Headship

This experience implies the formal enactment of the headship position, the performance of specific activities in the role, and solving challenges that arise once in the position. The leadership exercise in the role is an essential aspect of leadership learning for school leaders because when they needed to solve problems related to their role, they mentioned they had learning experiences. While previous described experiences give elements for building and appropriation of the concept of a school leader, this particular experience offers elements to reinterpret the previous conceptualization of headship.

This experience presents a process that enables leadership learning and a deeper understanding of headship. It enables school leaders to learn from three sources. First, they need to learn the specific functions and tasks of headship. Second, the enactment of headship helps them to develop skills and aptitudes – such as mediation, empathy, and assertiveness – needed to perform effectively. Third, they consolidate the development of the concept of a school leader

that they are still reinterpreting. Each school they work at as a school leader constitutes a unique experience in the practice of leadership, as each school holds particular conditions and circumstances that favor specific interactions between them and the teaching and supporting staff, parents, and students. To have different leadership experiences in several schools amplifies the possibility of leadership learning, knowledge, and seniority in the position (Wenger, 2001).

Learning experiences do not follow a standard continuum in the development process of school leaders. In all cases, leadership learning started with receptive observation and began to consolidate with the formal experience of headship. However, the emergence and sequence of other experiences could appear in a different order. Sometimes an experience is lived twice, and it is possible to have two experiences simultaneously. These experiences are important in the leadership development process as the main sources of learning for a school leader. On the other hand, daily and experiential knowledge is as valid as the knowledge product of research or established from rationality. These experiences offer referents to strengthen the process of development of school leaders.

Discussion

The process found has valuable elements that favor leadership preparation. Being the most important is "in situ" learning, which the leadership practice favors, as well as the creation of meaning through interaction with other members of the learning community. However, in their leadership development, how was described by participants, there were practical experiences without systematic reflection and without learning intention, which seems an incomplete learning processes. Although these experiences favored the improvement of their leadership practice, the lack of deliberate reflection process caused to go back to some already

overcame practices. Thus, their leadership development and practice in general had little changes and in moments seemed stuck, limited, and reduced.

The process of development described by school leaders includes potential elements that could be improved substantially. Being the most important includes the possibility to integrate a reflective and intentional guided practice (departing from a theoretical perspective) that promotes gradual and sustained changes to improve the leadership practice using activities such as observation, training, leadership practice, and mentorship. The conducted analysis found that teachers pursuing leadership perform observation activities in a non-systematic way and are limited to the possibilities that their current school leader offers, and not precisely a successful school leader. These teachers lack training activities with exception of those who had the chance to live some experiences of headship functions. Once in the position, they may also have a deficient follow-up process limited to just having to comply with what their school supervisor asks of them.

School leadership preparation and development needs to be improved with systematic preparation plus self-learning strategies – strategies that ensure incorporation of knowledge and also the development of skills and aptitudes needed to develop an effective leader. This study found certain elements that could favor the preparation and development of school leaders such as leadership learning based on practical experiences and the existence of incipient communities of practice.

A possibility for improvement would be the generation of networks for professional preparation of school leaders that promote effective reflective spaces for their challenges, problems, and progression (Nicastro, 2014). Practical participation generates several possibilities to build meaning where the practical experience is a departure point to solve challenges and

problems in the practice of leadership. The participation in professional networks of collaboration and mentoring could help to improve the process of preparation and practice of school leaders. Ideally such networks could be composed of interested school leaders committed to improving their practice. Ideally participants would be school leaders with different levels of experience, as well as those pursuing school leadership positions. This could favor exchange of experiences and building of meaning between novice and experienced school leaders.

Another possibility in the improvement of school leaders' preparation is to strengthen the processes of initial preparation of teachers and the professional development pathways for teachers and in-service school leaders. The findings of this study suggest that there are previous experiences that contribute to building the concept of a school leader and to developing some useful skills for headship. It also showed that previous experiences in headship are privileged spaces for learning the headship role/functions and building an effective leadership identity. Therefore, some strategies to strengthen the preparation of school leaders would be to offer intentional leadership learning experiences of *malleable observation* and *previous experiences in headship functions* to contribute in the building of a better leadership concept and in the development of useful skills for the position. Likewise, during the induction process, it would be useful to offer mandatory courses around the legal framework in education, mediation, and human relationships. In this sense, a preparation program taking into consideration the following suggestions/concrete actions made by the participants could be implemented:

- Conduct short exchange exercises for teachers pursuing leadership positions so that they have the possibility to work with recognized and effective school leaders. During their visiting periods, teachers could participate in specific actions assigned to them. These

visits could be structured in a way that teachers pursuing headship could observe and analyze the leadership practice of effective school leaders.

- Teachers pursuing leadership positions could participate in their schools designing and implementing projects that involve the participation of parents of children with low academic outcomes. Such projects should be part of the general school plan and should be implemented and evaluated during a school year period to determine strengths and areas of improvement in their work with parents.

- Participate in courses or workshops that address three central themes: knowledge of the legal and normative framework of education, mediation as a tool to solve conflicts, and human relationships. It is important to note that participants in this study mentioned these topics. These courses should promote a comprehensive analysis between theory and practical experiences.

- After a period in the leadership practice, new leaders could act as mentors for aspiring school leaders.

This study showed that the premise of learning in practice enables leaders to understand the process of leadership learning. This study also provides possibilities for the improvement of leadership development and practice. In this regard, the integration of the strategies described above could strengthen the process of preparation for school leadership.

Conclusions

The analyzed cases in this paper show what the theorists in situated learning establish regarding how experience contributes to learning. However, it would be important to ask about the type of leadership learning that is being obtained. Although it does help in the building of practical leadership learning that contributes to the development of competence, school leaders

experience this process alone and the lack of intentional reflection reduces it to an exercise in trial and error. Likewise, the results identified by the Mexico Ministry of Education found that during several years it has been privileged the preparation of school leaders in the practical exercise of the position, which has enabled development of a normative leadership style usually centered on managerial aspects (SEP, 2010). It is perceived as mainly an empirical leadership preparation process. The OECD has recommended strengthening the preparation processes to develop and improve the leadership practice (Pont et al., 2009). This recommendation was also suggested by the 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), which found that a fifth of Mexican school leaders have an experiential preparation to develop their skills for the position (INEE, 2015).

On the other hand, to improve preparation it is needed to take into consideration the suggestion made by Weiss (2016) regarding educational reforms that usually disregard the existence of a culture that include practices, relationships, and traditions that exist in schools and the educational system. In this view, radical reform is usually proposed, considering that before the implemented changes there was nothing, which causes the investment of time to interpret and implement it effectively. Taking this into consideration, the intent is not to entirely change the current process of school leaders' preparation, despite its limitations, but to strengthen it – recognizing the existence of positive aspects in the found experiences. This will favor that all teachers pursuing leadership positions experience them meaningfully since these experiences will be intentionally designed to enable leadership learning.

Finally, it is relevant that in this study, seniority was not related to the accumulation of learning experiences. Most previous lived experiences in the phases found before their headship appointment (receptive observation, malleable observation, leadership practice, and previous

experiences in headship functions) as those in the current exercise of the position are indeed related to the accumulation of learning resources that help leaders solve the challenges they face in their positions as school leaders.

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