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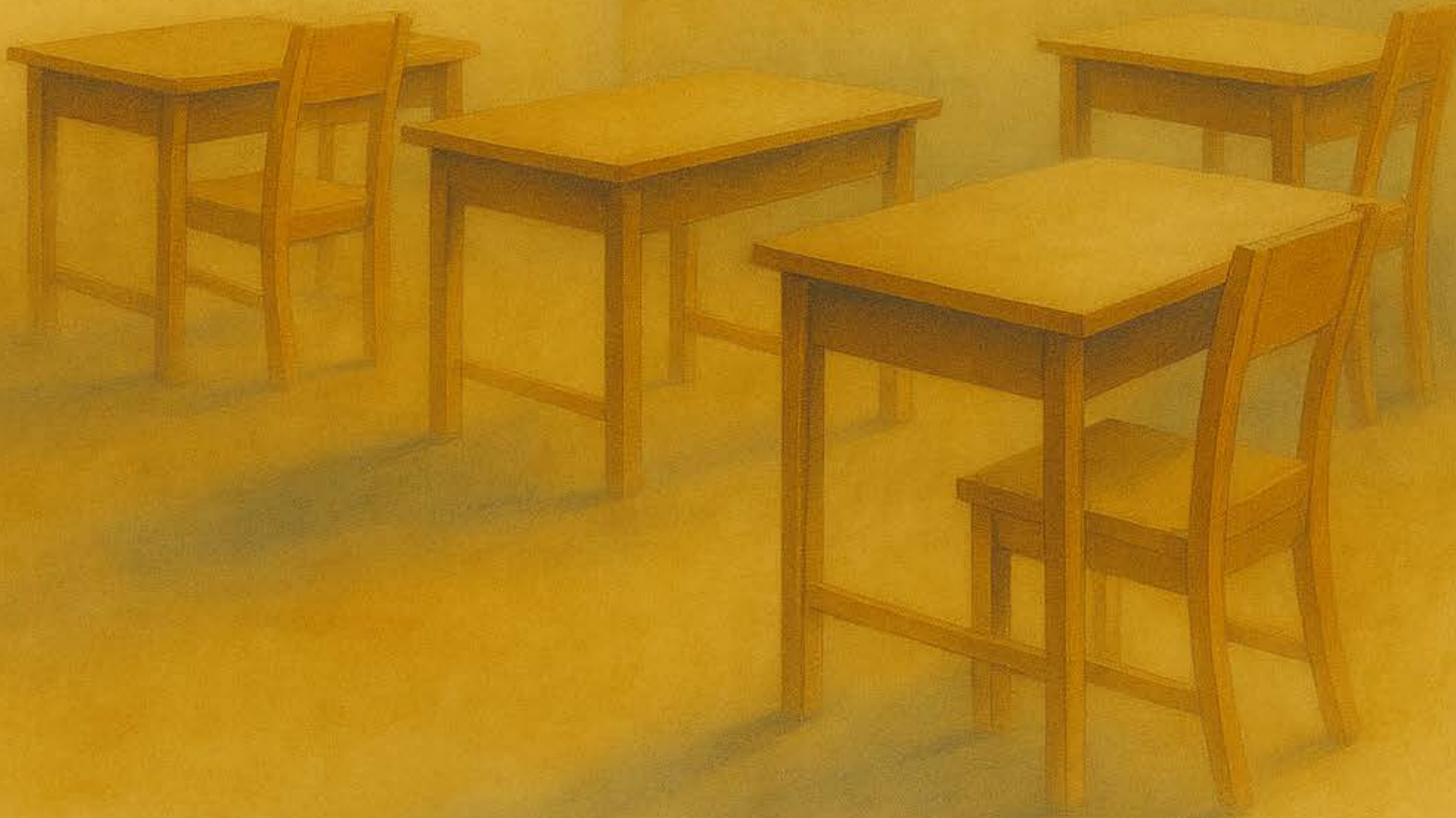

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From the Editor in Chief

In 2010, ELA started as a vision to publish scholarly works and provide a space to showcase research in educational leadership. After stepping away from ELA for just a bit, under Dr. Robyne Elder's care the journal flourished. So, to return home, as it were, is a great honor. I am grateful to Dr. Elder for taking the lead and maintaining the quality and rigor of the publication. We now live in a very different educational landscape and on a different platform, but ELA's spirit within this space remains. In this issue, the reader will see that the original vision still holds - researchers that look at challenges facing schools and society at large, through a critical, human, and educational leadership lens on teacher mental health and wellbeing; Canadian schools and their leaders' efforts to use the lens of social justice and equity; and a case study focused on the theories of Dewey, Freire and Bourdieu to inform policy and practice in school reform. Ethical leadership remains an important thread in the manuscripts: a call for strong moral, ethical leadership in our institutions of higher education for schools considering AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS); the importance of expanding support when confronting mental health challenges; the experience of sustaining and leading with Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) that can be emotionally and pscychologically costly; how teacher leaders (TL's) still need to be part of the voices for change and for informing reform as well as policy; and how teacher inexperience is an issue related to students' disciplinary outcomes. I believe, as the Editor-in-Chief of ELA, each of these manuscripts not only adds to an important conversation about educational leadership at the intersection of dynamic challenges in our society at large but also adds to a deeper understanding of the leadership we must enact to meet our complex and rapidly changing reality.

Welcome to the Fall 2025 issue of The Journal of Educational Leadership in Action (ELA)—and I hope you consider submitting a manuscript for our special editor edition Spring 2026. It's good to be home.

Warm regards,

Dr. Lynda Leavitt, Editor-in-Chief, The Journal of Educational Leadership in Action (ELA)

Mental Health Awareness for Teachers: A Review of the Literature

Jerry R. Burkett
College of Professional Education
Texas Woman's University

Abstract

Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which an individual realizes their abilities and can cope with the normal stresses of life (Bohare & Tiwari, 2020). These individuals are productive in their work, life, and communities. These people can manage their mental health challenges which can range from high to low (MHFA, 2020). Research is showing a growing need for expanding mental health support in K-12 schools. Schools are in a unique position to address today's mental health crisis among members of the education community. (Mcluckie et al., 2014; National Association of School Psychologists, 2015; Ormiston et al., 2021). In a study of 180 school teachers, nearly 50% scored about the threshold for depression and correlated their mental health to the demands of their job (Borrelli, et al, 2014). Poor mental health in educators is associated with high job demands and low support. Longitudinal research has indicated that educators struggle with burnout, alcohol consumption, and depressive symptoms (Schonfeld et al., 2017). Early intervention strategies and awareness education can prevent mental health symptoms from getting worse even before the individual needs to seek professional treatment (MHFA, 2020).

Introduction

Teaching is a demanding profession, and it requires individuals to navigate a complex web of academic, social, and emotional responsibilities (Zhang & Yu, 2007). Consequently, many teachers struggle with poor mental health, burnout, and low wellbeing, which can have serious consequences for their job performance, workforce retention, and their students' learning and achievement. Schools are in a unique position to address today's mental health crisis among members of the education community. (Mcluckie et al., 2014; National Association of School Psychologists, 2015; Ormiston et al., 2021). Research highlights the necessity for expanded mental health support in K-12 schools, emphasizing the critical role of educators in these efforts. Mental health represents a state of wellbeing where individuals recognize their capabilities and effectively manage the normal stresses of life. These individuals remain productive in their work, personal lives, and communities, and can handle varying levels of mental

health challenges (MHFA, 2020). However, in a study of 180 school teachers, nearly 50% scored about the threshold for depression and correlated their mental health to the demands of their job (Borrelli, et al, 2014). Longitudinal studies have revealed that educators often face challenges such as burnout, alcohol consumption, and depressive symptoms (Schonfeld et al., 2017). Implementing early intervention strategies and awareness education can help mitigate the worsening of mental health symptoms before professional treatment becomes necessary (MHFA, 2020).

As more research related to mental health and education begins to emerge, it is essential that these conversations become amplified, and an emphasis placed on school leaders to look for ways to support the mental health and wellbeing of educators. Studies show that with proper care and treatment, people with mental health challenges can improve their condition and recover (MHFA, 2020). As we enter a post-COVID-19 world, and work with educators who struggle with mental health challenges, school leaders can learn ways to support teachers and principals with early intervention techniques.

Review of the Literature

Teaching is a rewarding profession; however, national data indicate that it is also highly stressful, with chronic stress linked to adverse health outcomes (Harmsen et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2016; von Haaren-Mack et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). Mental health is crucial for daily functioning, impacting various areas such as work performance and the ability to manage job-related stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Gray et al. 2017)). The World Health Organization (2006) defines mental health as a state of wellbeing where individuals effectively manage the normal stresses of life, allowing them to work productively and contribute to their community. The teaching profession, including university life, is characterized by high stress and burnout rates, which can adversely affect mental health (Geving, 2007; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Teachers face considerable demands, including high expectations to effectively manage classrooms and contribute to student learning gains (Fontana & Abouserie, 1993). These tasks become even more challenging with large class sizes, diverse learning needs, and variability in school-wide resources and funding. Given these occupational demands, it is unsurprising that teachers experience significant levels of stress. Teacher stress is pervasive, with high levels reported universally across countries and grade levels (Fontana & Abouserie, 1993). Teacher stress refers to negative emotional experiences, such as frustration and depression, which arise from occupational demands like adapting the curriculum to meet diverse student needs and managing behavioral challenges in large class sizes (Kyriacou, 2001). Grasping the factors that influence teacher retention within the educational environment is crucial for maintaining a workforce of skilled and motivated educators. This literature review explores research on teacher retention, mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic, causes of burnout, the role of leadership support in supporting teachers' mental health,

and potential intervention strategies to support educators' mental health. Each of these themes is a key factor in ongoing research related to mental health and the education community.

Teacher Retention

Teacher retention refers to PK-12 educational settings and keeping teachers employed year after year. High teacher turnover rates are disruptive to schools leading to increased costs for district leaders. Studies have shown that several factors affect teacher retention, including the teacher's work environment, level of responsibilities, professional development opportunities, work and professional life balance, administrative support, and competitive salary pay scale (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Doherty, 2020). Currently, teacher retention rates continue to be a significant issue. Teacher attrition is notably high early in their careers, with one-third leaving within three years and half of novice teachers exiting the profession within the first five years. In contrast, more experienced teachers tend to stay in the profession longer than their less experienced counterparts (Billingsley, 2004; Boe et al., 1997; Lindqvist et al., 2014; Shen, 1997).

Teachers' motivation to remain in the teaching profession is enhanced in a supportive environment (Harrison, 2020). Their well-being, job satisfaction, and dedication improve when principals lead by encouraging collaboration, empowering teachers, and providing them with learning opportunities (Williams, 2018). Teachers who feel valued and supported are more likely to stay in the profession (Shell et al., 2023). Additionally, a positive school climate combined with a strong relationship with colleagues and students can enhance job satisfaction and reduce the likelihood of teacher turnover (Doherty, 2020). Principals and school leaders who provide clear communication, recognition, and faculty support can impact teacher morale and teacher retention. Numerous studies have shown that supportive leadership styles are associated with higher levels of teacher satisfaction and retention. Conversely, a lack of administrative support can lead to increased stress and burnout, contributing to higher turnover rates (Shell et al., 2023).

To keep teachers motivated, principals should foster a positive school culture, address issues effectively, communicate clear goals, ensure the availability of appropriate resources and curriculum materials, provide professional development opportunities, and set realistic workload expectations (Williams, 2018).

Teachers' Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite their continuous efforts to cope, teachers have experienced a decline in mental health (Asma-Ul-Ferdous & Shifat, 2020). The consensus is that anxiety, depression, and stress are the most common challenges during destabilizing situations like the pandemic. Anxiety manifests physical symptoms such as

increased excitement, muscle tension, panic attacks, and fear. (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Research indicates the importance of teacher interactions with colleagues, noting that isolation can significantly increase anxiety levels (Huang et al., 2020). Depression predominantly impacts mood (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), whereas stress is marked by continuous activation and tension, frequently resulting in irritability (Antúnez & Vinet, 2012). Stress emerges as a response to environmental demands and can trigger both anxiety and depression (Ruiz et al., 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on the mental health of educators. The sudden shift to remote learning, increased workload, and concerns about health and safety have created unprecedented challenges for teachers (Robinson et al., 2022). Recent studies indicate that the pandemic has significantly heightened teachers' susceptibility to stress, anxiety, and depression. Contributing factors include the necessity to adopt new teaching strategies, revamp learning materials (such as digitizing and ensuring accessibility), dealing with network connectivity issues, managing disruptions to work-life balance, and coping with potential COVID-19 infections. Numerous factors have been recognized as contributing to the mental health challenges faced by teachers during the pandemic. These factors include the increased workload from developing and delivering online lessons, the insufficient training and support for remote teaching, and the ongoing uncertainty regarding the pandemic's progression. (Robinson et al., 2022). Additionally, concerns about personal and family health and the safety of their own students have added to the stress experienced by educators.

Anxiety can be a serious detriment for both employees and employers, specifically in the occupation of teaching (Jones-Rincon & Howard, 2018). A number of demographic, occupational, and psychosocial factors were associated with anxiety disorder in public school teachers. Numerous studies (Bauer et al., 2006; Bellingrath et al., 2009; Borrelli et al., 2014) have found an association between occupational and psychosocial factors and anxiety symptoms and diagnoses in teachers. Although various demographic, occupational, and psychosocial variables were significantly associated with anxiety disorder criteria, causation and directionality cannot be determined. Goddard, O'Brien, and Goddard (2006) found that teachers in their first two years of teaching experience lower levels of supervisor support, face increased work pressure, and have less managerial control over their curriculum. Furthermore, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization rates peak after 15 months of teaching. These symptoms often contribute to increased rates of anxiety disorder and other psychological issues (Acquadro Maran et al., 2015; Jensen et al., 2009). Studies have shown that teachers with higher levels of perceived stress and lower physical quality of life are more likely to meet the criteria for anxiety disorder (Paramasivam, 2015). The SF-36 Medical Outcomes Health Survey (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992) highlights that quality of life is a component of overall wellbeing. Teachers with high resilience to occupational stressors tend to report better overall health perception and greater job satisfaction.

Those who perceive their health in a positive way are typically less neurotic, experience fewer physical illnesses, and feel less tired compared to others (Pretsch et al., 2012).

According to a longitudinal study, elementary school teachers experiencing higher levels of stress and more symptoms of depression tend to create classroom environments that are less conducive to learning (King & Kokores, 2017). Notably, students who started the school year with weaker math skills and had a teacher with more depressive symptoms showed the lowest rates of achievement (McLean & Connor, 2015). When teachers experience elevated levels of stress, children tend to exhibit lower levels of social adjustment and academic performance (Hoglund et al., 2015; Khasawneh, 2020).

Teacher Burnout

Freudenberger (1974) introduced the concept of burnout syndrome, describing it as "a state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by one's professional life" (p.160). He explained that burnout, whether professional or personal, occurs when an individual becomes exhausted due to excessive demands on their "energy, strength, or resources" (p. 159). Burnout is defined as a state of mental or physical stress and exhaustion, which can result in mistakes and difficulties in both daily and professional life (Hayes et al., 2022; DeGraves et al., 2024; Du et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024). Employees who are overworked and subjected to high-stress environments with minimal compensation over extended periods tend to experience burnout (Borrelli et al., 2023, DeGraves et al., 2024; Du et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024). Burnout can result in both short-term and long-term effects on the body and mind, including depression, emotional exhaustion, insomnia, job turnover, and even suicide. (Borrelli et al., 2023, DeGraves et al., 2024, Du et al., 2024, Hämmig, 2024).

Extensive research has identified several factors that contribute to teacher burnout, including heavy workloads, long hours, lack of administrative support, and emotional demands of the job (Agyapong et al., 2022). Experiencing these stressors often results in exhaustion, resentment, and a reduced sense of personal achievement, which are key indicators of burnout. In most professions, occupational stress is linked to the intention to quit. Teachers who report daily or weekly stress are more likely to indicate higher rates of attrition. (Billingsley, 2004; Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Kyriacou, 1987). Research indicates that newer teachers face considerable stress, and multiple studies reveal that about half of them leave the profession within their first five years (Haberman, 2007; Shakrani, 2008; Shen, 1997). School location can also impact stress, with teachers from schools in urban communities reporting higher stress levels than other regions (Haberman, 2007). Additional stressors in the teaching profession include overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, heavy workloads, and encroachment on personal time. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) investigated both

direct and indirect factors influencing teachers' motivation to leave the profession. They discovered that a lack of belonging, and emotional exhaustion acted as mediators in the relationship between job satisfaction and the desire to leave the teaching profession. A stressful work environment has been linked to a higher incidence of stress-induced illnesses among teachers. As a result, teachers report experiencing more physical health problems, such as hypertension, headaches, and cardiovascular disease, as well as mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and somatic disorders, when compared to other professions (Dworkin et al., 1990; Yang et al., 2009). Teachers often report a lower quality of life, and a shorter life expectancy compared to individuals in other professions (Shakrani, 2008; Yang et al., 2009).

Concerns around educator mental health have intensified in recent years, as studies continue to highlight widespread stress, burnout, and emotional fatigue within the teaching profession. Although RAND's 2023 State of the American Teacher survey indicated some improvement from the pandemic's peak, teacher well-being remained notably lower than that of other professions, with 58% reporting frequent work-related stress (Doan et al., 2023). This persistent disparity underscores the ongoing challenges faced by educators in maintaining emotional resilience. By 2024, a national survey found that 60% of educators reported burnout and 22% had difficulty coping, underscoring the persistent strain on the profession (Effective Educator Development, 2024). These challenges are compounded by increased workloads, limited time, and the emotional toll of supporting students through trauma and behavioral issues.

In response to growing concerns about educator well-being, many schools and districts have expanded their mental health supports—but significant gaps still exist. A 2023 report from RAND found that while about 75% of teachers had access to at least one type of mental health resource, only half felt those resources truly met their needs (Doan et al., 2023). To help close that gap, new legislation like the s*upporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act* (H.R. 4120) was introduced in 2025. The bill aims to fund evidence-based programs, peer support networks, and training efforts designed to build resilience and reduce the stigma around seeking help (U.S. Congress. House, 2025). Some states are also stepping up. In Texas, school staff are now required to complete mental health training that focuses on trauma-informed practices and early intervention (Texas Education Agency, 2025).

Despite ongoing efforts to support educator well-being, systemic challenges remain entrenched. The American Psychological Association (Effective Educator Development, 2024) emphasizes that wellness initiatives must be approached as comprehensive, long-term commitments at the schoolwide level, rather than as superficial or temporary solutions. Scholars highlight the importance of protecting instructional time, minimizing administrative overload, and promoting transparent, bidirectional communication between educators and school leadership. As institutional awareness increases and policy frameworks adapt, meaningful

progress will depend on sustained investment, cultural transformation, and a collective commitment to prioritizing the mental health of educators—key agents in shaping educational outcomes.

However, the majority of studies done on burnout in the teaching profession have concentrated on the burnout rate according to teaching level and the three dimensions of burnout; emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Dopmeijer et al., 2022). To some extent, they consistently showed that symptoms of burnout were higher among teachers at the secondary level than among teachers in elementary schools (Anderson & Iwanicki, 1984; Burke & Greenglass,1989; Feitler & Tokar, 1982; Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982; Schwab et al., 1986).

Burnout often arises in negative work environments and can severely affect employees' mental health, in addition to harming the school and student achievement. Often, symptoms are not realized nor are they commonly verbalized by individuals. Ultimately signs and symptoms are manifested through behaviors. School leaders should provide support during the early stages of burnout to prevent long-term effects.

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Leadership Support

Leadership support encompasses the guidance and instruction provided by individuals in leadership roles within a school campus or district, spanning PK-12. This includes instructional coaching, professional development, resource coordination, operations management, and student services. Research indicates that teachers who lack administrative support are more likely to leave the profession compared to those with high administrative support (Thibodeaux, 2014). Additionally, Podolsky et al. (2016) found that administrative support is frequently cited as the primary factor influencing teachers' decisions to leave or remain in the profession or at a particular school. The literature highlights the strong links between teacher retention and motivation, leadership styles, and the level of administrative support (Manyok, 2015; Flores & Shuls, 2024; Lochmiller et al., 2024). These elements are interconnected and collectively shape the educational environment. Effective leadership is vital for enhancing teacher retention. Flores and Shuls (2024) suggest that a positive school culture, coupled with strong professional development, teacher autonomy, and supportive administration, can promote teacher retention. Teachers exhibit self-determination when principals inspire, respect, acknowledge, and consider their needs. In contrast, in environments where leaders emphasize failures or provide negative feedback, teacher motivation diminishes (Williams, 2018).

Strong leaders who understand the infrastructure of a department or organization and are skilled at improving conditions to support an efficient and integrity-driven

work environment can significantly decrease the likelihood of burnout and turnover (Borrelli et al., 2023; Du et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024).

Vari et al. (2018) studied the role of school leadership in motivating and retaining teachers. They emphasized that improving the quality of the school leadership can impact teachers' job satisfaction. Shuls and Flores (2020) explored teacher retention policies in highly effective school districts and found that promoting teacher voice, supporting teacher induction, and implementing thoughtful development programs were key factors in retaining teachers. Their research suggests that successful schools often adopt these practices, even without explicit teacher retention policies. Valdes-Gonzalez (2024) used thematic analysis to indicate that leadership style, organizational culture, and intrinsic motivators are key factors in determining teacher retention. To mitigate negative outcomes such as burnout, strategic leadership methods should be employed to ensure staff feel supported. A supportive leadership team that upholds ethical standards fosters trust, which in turn positively impacts employee engagement and motivation (Borrelli et al., 2023; Du et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024).

Impact of Poor Mental Health on Teachers

Research consistently demonstrates that declining mental health among educators undermines their professional efficacy. For instance, Bader (2024) reported that nearly half (48%) of K–12 teachers experienced a deterioration in mental wellbeing that they perceived as impairing their instructional capabilities. Dabrowski et al. (2024) further identify that the prevalence of superficial or poorly resourced wellbeing initiatives often exacerbates teacher workload and contributes to feelings of inadequacy and burnout. Such a mismatch between the demands placed on educators and the supports provided heightens their vulnerability to emotional exhaustion.

The interdependence of educator and student wellbeing is well documented in recent literature. Dabrowski et al. (2024) found that high levels of teacher stress correspond with diminished capacity to cultivate the positive teacher–student relationships essential for student engagement and mental health. Conversely, educators who effectively manage personal stress foster more supportive learning environments, thereby enhancing student outcomes (Dabrowski et al., 2024). K12 Dive (2022) similarly cautions that stressed or anxious teachers may lack the attentional bandwidth to recognize and address emerging student mental health concerns, compounding challenges within the classroom.

Current policy and practice often prioritize student mental health interventions while overlooking the parallel needs of educators. Dabrowski et al. (2024) argue that assigning teachers the role of mental health guardians without adequate training or resources increases their isolation and risk of burnout. This situation is mirrored internationally, where Patrick et al. (2024) report that 46.8% of Australian educators are contemplating departure from the profession within a year due to mounting pressures, a trend exacerbated by declining enrollment in

teacher preparation programs. Addressing educator mental health through comprehensive, sustained support is therefore imperative not only for teacher retention but also for cultivating a stable, effective educational environment.

Intervention Strategies to Address Mental Health for Teachers

To address the potential mental health challenges faced by teachers, several support and intervention strategies have been suggested. These include offering professional development opportunities centered on mental health, providing access to mental health resources and counseling services, and fostering a supportive school environment that promotes open communication and collaboration (Robinson et al., 2022). Additionally, implementing flexible work arrangements and encouraging self-care practices can help teachers manage stress and prevent burnout. The adverse effects of teacher burnout are far-reaching, impacting not only the mental health of educators but also potentially harming the classroom environment, student wellbeing, and academic performance.

A growing body of evidence suggests that fostering collegial relationships among educators is vital for promoting wellbeing and reducing emotional exhaustion associated with the teaching profession. Recent initiatives have focused on enhancing the relational climate among educators, emphasizing the significance of trust and connectedness within educational settings. This focus is particularly critical in light of the emotional demands placed on educators, especially during periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where solidarity and collegial support were deemed essential for coping with increased challenges (Patrick et al, 2024).

Given the seriousness of burnout, implementing preventative measures is crucial. These measures include fostering a positive work environment through team engagement exercises, ensuring proper staffing, and clearly defining work roles and responsibilities (Borrelli et al., 2023; DeGraves et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024). Some organizations have adopted holistic approaches to prevent burnout by encouraging self-care strategies including breathing exercises or meditation and increasing teacher accessibility to therapy. Other organizations hold recognition and inclusion events to show their appreciation for their teams. By developing a school culture where it is acceptable to ask for help during physical or emotional challenges, leadership can reduce stressors that lead to burnout (Borrelli et al., 2023; DeGraves et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024).

Several factors contribute to teacher stress, with school-related issues like negative student behavior (e.g., disrespect, inattentiveness) being significant predictors of teacher burnout across all grade levels (Beltman et al., 2011). While school climate impacts teacher stress, heightened teacher stress may also influence the school climate, often leading to elevated levels of staff absenteeism,

early retirement, and turnover in the profession (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008, Gray et al., 2017).

Mindfulness and stress management-focused professional development programs enhance teachers' ability to maintain present-moment awareness in a non-reactive way, enabling them to connect with their own experiences and with others with ease, patience, and kindness (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Roeser, 2014). Skills are developed through a series of exercises, including body scans, breath awareness, meditative movement, enhanced emotional awareness, and the cultivation of positive emotions towards oneself and others. Well-designed studies have demonstrated both psychological and physiological benefits, as well as improvements in the quality of teaching and wellbeing (Roeser, 2014; Weare, 2014).

Finley and Jones (1986), using a sample of Australian teachers, found that factors associated with acute psychological distress varied depending on the teaching level. For both elementary and secondary teachers, student discipline problems were linked to psychological stress. However, lack of colleague support was a risk factor specifically for elementary teachers, while insufficient supplies and equipment were identified as risk factors for secondary teachers.

Mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and enhance well-being (Hoffman et al., 2010). It involves cultivating a mental state of nonjudgmental awareness of present moment experiences, including sensations, thoughts, bodily states, consciousness, and the surrounding environment, while fostering openness, curiosity, and acceptance (Hoffman et al., 2010).

Conclusion

By understanding the factors contributing to mental health challenges and implementing effective support strategies, schools can create a more resilient and supportive environment for educators. This can lead to improved outcomes for both teachers and students. Teacher mental health is a critical concern with far-reaching implications for educational outcomes. Effective leadership plays a crucial role in creating supportive work environments, implementing intervention strategies, and promoting a culture of openness and support. Intervention strategies such as professional development in mindfulness and stress management, providing access to mental health resources, and creating flexible work arrangements can help mitigate stress and prevent burnout. By addressing these issues, schools can enhance teacher retention, improve classroom environments, and ultimately, benefit student wellbeing and academic performance. In addition to leadership initiatives and intervention strategies, fostering a school culture that prioritizes the mental health of teachers is vital. This includes recognizing and addressing the unique stressors that educators face, such as workload, student behavior, and administrative demands. Schools should

promote open communication, allowing teachers to voice their concerns and seek support without fear of judgment. Professional development should not only focus on academic excellence but also on equipping teachers with tools to manage their mental health. By creating a comprehensive support system that includes access to counseling services, peer support groups, and mindfulness practices, schools can cultivate a resilient teaching workforce capable of navigating the challenges of their profession while maintaining their wellbeing.

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Teacher Inexperience and Student Exclusionary Discipline Consequences at Texas Large-Size High Schools

Harry William Thompson, Cynthia Martinez-Garcia, and
John R. Slate

Sam Houston State University

Abstract

In this statewide, multiyear investigation, the relationship between teacher inexperience levels and student discipline assignments into in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and DAEP at Texas high school campuses with an enrollment of 2,000 or more students was addressed. An analysis of each discipline placement was conducted for the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years. Statistical analyses revealed the presence of relationships between teacher inexperience and student disciplinary consequence assignments. Students were more likely to be assigned to an exclusionary discipline consequence when higher percentages of inexperienced teachers were present than when higher percentages of experienced teachers were present. Implications and recommendations for future research were made.

Keywords: Discipline, Classroom management, Suspension, Teacher experience, Enrollment size

Introduction

In the first three years of entering the public education sector, teachers new to the profession need more professional coaching and reinforcement. (Guarino et al., 2006; Pogodzinski et al., 2013). As of the 2015-2016 school year, 43% of the teaching workforce in the United States had less than 10 years of experience (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Novice teachers have also let it be known they feel most vulnerable to prevent and handle difficult student behaviors in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2009). The National Center for Education Statistics (2022) stated teachers with less than three years of professional experience reported being able to manage various aspects of student behavior with less confidence compared to their more experienced colleagues. Thus, this low self-efficacy in classroom management could lead to higher stress levels. According to Marzano (2003), when teachers are stressed, difficult behavior situations tend to be handled in a reactive and punitive manner, thus a negative classroom environment.

Teacher Experience and Student Discipline

The approach less experienced teachers use in their classroom management efforts differs from the approach of more experienced teachers. Less experienced teachers view classroom management as an issue of behavior and controlling the students, whereas more experienced teachers have a style geared toward relationships, collaboration, and management of instruction. Thus, the teacher should worry less about controlling student behavior and focus more on whether compelling learning is taking place (Milner & Tenore, 2010; Sokal et al., 2003).

According to Feng, 2010; Greenlee and Ogletree, 1993; Meister and Melnick, 2003, evidence exists that efforts by urban school educators to reduce or stop the number of Black student suspension disparities could be related to the lack of experienced teachers on the campus. In addition, Caples and McNeese (2010) suggested the longer a teacher has been teaching in the classroom the more they lean on more profound techniques to manage their students, thus decreasing the need to have students removed from the classroom. Buck and O'Brien (2005) indicated as a teacher gains more years of professional experience their students' academic achievement increases, which includes implementing effective classroom management strategies. Kwok (2017) stated participants in his mixed methods study of first-year teachers described how their beliefs and approaches to classroom management evolved from a behavioral approach to a more academic and relational approach by the school year's end. A greater focus on positive student relations by novice teachers can have a greater influence on academic achievement and reduce the amount of time spent on classroom management. Williams et al. (2020) conducted a study during the 2015-2016 school year using OSS data from North Carolina to examine correlations between the experience level of teachers and rates of suspension for Black middle school students. Based on their research, Williams et al (2020) stated that it was possible to predict the number of OSS placements for Black students based on the percentage of teachers with less than three years of experience. They further suggested that student-teacher programs should provide clinical experiences in a more diverse setting on a frequent basis. In addition, they recommended that future researchers should investigate the effect of veteran teachers' relationship with Black student discipline outcomes from a negative correlation standpoint and correlate these results with the percentage of novice teachers within the same campus (Williams et al., 2020).

A host of research studies conducted about the development of classroom management skills within teacher preparation programs are available. Beginning teachers consistently demonstrate classroom management as one of their lesser-developed pedagogical skills upon entering the profession (Headden, 2014; Langdon & Vesper, 2000). Classroom management is also an area in which new teacher candidates feel the preparation program they attended before beginning their professional career is largely ignored (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; LePage et al., 2005; Veenman, 1984). Novice teachers felt little preparation was provided to them to handle the challenging behaviors of students (Westling, 2010).

Albrecht et al. (2009) stated teacher candidates have less preparation in classroom management than they do any other pedagogical skills further emphasizing in the early years of their careers, the need for developing positive relationships and networks with veteran teachers that could provide support and assistance to succeed.

Professional development has been used to further enhance classroom management skills of classroom management for teachers. However, based on previous research studies, teachers do not implement classroom management techniques because they do not have sufficient coaching and follow-up to institute techniques learned into their teaching portfolio (Begeny & Martens, 2006; Freeman et al., 2014; Goodson et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020). Specifically, professional development for less experienced teachers (i.e., novice teachers) is not likely to provide them with the skills needed to implement rewarding classroom management (Reinke et al., 2015).

Teacher Retention and Student Discipline

McDonald (2018) stated a well-known fact about teachers and their longevity in the profession in his article. Within the first five years of professional service, half of all new teachers to the profession of public education in the United States will leave their position. More recently, Bryner (2021) provided a review of the literature explaining some of the reasons why teachers leave the profession including salary and benefits. However, teachers also leave the profession because of safety and student discipline concerns. Teacher turnover rates are higher where the safety of the school and discipline are major concerns (Katz, 2018). According to the Report on Indicators of School Crime and Safety (Irwin et al., 2022), 10% of teachers reported being threatened by an attack from their students during the 2015-2016 school year. Six percent of teachers reported being attacked during the same year. Fresh off the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Education Association conducted a poll in which 28% of the respondents, including novice teachers, stated the pandemic would make them more likely to retire or leave the teaching profession (Flannery, 2020). *CBS News* (Lewis, 2020) reported shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools across the United States, it was the first time during the month of March 2020 a school shooting was not reported. Retaining novice teachers in urban schools can be a difficult chore. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students and minority students are educated by less experienced teachers in a manner that is disproportionate to White students in a more prosperous setting (Mason-Williams, 2015; Palardy, 2015). Teachers working in urban schools are more likely to find working conditions in which they do not have access to adequate funding. In addition, teachers in this urban setting have increased workloads with fewer resources needed for the classroom (Fall & Billingsley, 2011; Schernoff et al., 2011). Despite additional funds provided through Title I to urban schools, urban school districts still struggle to provide the resources needed for teachers in the classroom (Mosenkis, 2014;

Ushomirsky & Williams, 2015). Given this information, Bettini and Park (2021) offered several suggestions to maintain novice teachers in urban schools. Among the suggestions included were scheduling informal observations at the beginning of the school year of the teachers by campus administrators and providing a network of support from other teachers and administrators in the building. These suggestions could provide both opportunities for novice teachers to gain a better understanding of administrator expectations and give them the additional support they need.

Exclusionary Discipline

In Texas, Black students comprised 12.6% of student enrollment, but they received 22.8% of in-school suspension (ISS) placements, 30.6% of OSS placements, and 20.7% of Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) placements during the 2017-2018 school year. White students comprised 27.5% of Texas student enrollment during the same school year, received 22.8% of ISS placements, 15.1% of OSS placements, and 21.8% of DAEP placements during the same school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Hispanic students made up 52.7% of Texas student enrollment and received around 50% of ISS placements, about 51% of OSS placements, and 53.6% of DAEP placements in the 2017-2018 school year. In the last 40 years, there has been a disproportionate increase in the number of Black students who have received discipline consequences resulting in their removal from the classroom (Berger, 2003; Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba, 2004, 2013; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). According to the most recent data available from the Office of Civil Rights through the U.S. Department of Education (2018), Black students account for 15% of public-school enrollment across the country, and yet they are the recipients of 25% of all out-of-school suspensions (OSS) cast forth by local school districts.

Research studies have been conducted to analyze these statistical anomalies. Hilberth and Slate (2014) analyzed discipline data of middle school Black and White students enrolled in Texas public schools encompassing Grades 6-8. They discovered Black students were 2.2 times more likely to be assigned an ISS discipline placement and 4.7 times more likely to receive an OSS placement compared to their White counterparts in all grades. They suggested school administrators should thoroughly analyze and disaggregate the data to possibly develop interventions used by teachers in the classroom as a proactive step to reduce students being sent out of the classroom for a discipline related incident. Of note, Tajalli and Garba (2014) stated as the White student population increases in a school district, the number of Black students receiving a disciplinary action disproportionately increases as well. These researchers provided the possibility that this phenomenon may occur because a "whiter" district may have White administrators issuing consequences and may use racially biased judgments when interpreting minority student misconduct.

To reduce exclusionary discipline consequences, restorative practices or alternative methods toward student consequences is an approach used in by some public schools. Gregory et al. (2018) conducted a study to find out if student racial discipline disparities receiving an OSS placement would decrease if restorative interventions were used for student misbehaviors. Restorative practices are used both as a preventive measure to student misbehaviors and as a practice after the student infraction has occurred. Gregory et al. (2018) analyzed over 9,000 students' discipline records in Colorado during the 2014-2015 school year. Their data suggested there is a less likely probability a student would receive an OSS placement across all racial categories. However, the researchers stated further investigation should be conducted to verify if the restorative practices used was balanced across all student races (Gregory et al., 2018).

Student Discipline on Academic Achievement and Graduation

Removing a student from their regular educational environment for discipline issues has adverse effects on student academic achievement and high school graduation. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2021), the unemployment rate of people without a high school diploma in 2021 was 8.3% compared to 6.2% with a high school diploma. Also, stated in the same report was that the average weekly earnings of those individuals with a high school diploma were almost $200 more per week compared to those individuals without a high school diploma. Lenderman and Hawkins (2021) analyzed the results of exclusionary discipline on students and its relationship to high school graduation rates of 1,669,391 first-time Texas students in Grade 9 between 2011-2014. They concluded Grade 9 students placed into DAEP had a graduation rate of 44% within four years. Lenderman and Hawkins (2021) also stated the graduation rate for the same cohort dropped to 25% when a student was placed into DAEP more than once during their first year of high school. Of the students within the cohort who did not receive any of the exclusionary placements to DAEP, 84% of them graduated from high school in four years. The researchers further stated education administrators should be mindful of the long-term effects of exclusionary discipline policy implementation on the Texas economy (Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021).

In a broader study of public high school students across the nation related to ISS, high school dropouts, and grade point average, Cholewa et al. (2018) analyzed the data of 11,860 Grade 9 students in the fall of 2009 and followed their data through the spring of 2013. Students receiving an ISS placement had a high school dropout probability of over 5% compared to students who did not receive an ISS placement at a 1.21% dropout probability. They documented the grade point average of Grade 11 students who received an ISS placement was 0.40 grade points lower than their peers who had not received an ISS placement. Reasons for the academic outcomes related to the ISS placement have not been well

established because little research on analyzing ISS practices in schools exists (Cholewa et al., 2018). This lack of research into ISS practices includes both the normal procedures and expectations of regular classroom teachers to communicate with the students temporarily removed from the classroom and the instructional expectations of the staff member working in the ISS classroom. Fabelo et al. (2011) raised the argument school districts lack specific written guidelines for ISS classrooms, insufficient training of the staff supervising the ISS classroom, and a lack of consistency in the manner classwork was passed along to the students in the ISS room.

Smith et al. (2021) tracked 380,826 students using data from the Texas Education Agency Public Information Education System through the spring of 2017 who were Black, White, or Latino beginning in the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 school year, had not been retained since the first grade and took the Reading and Mathematics sections of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). They discovered students who were placed in ISS on three occasions had a 30% chance of falling short of a passing level on one of the two TAKS assessments. Further, as the number of ISS placements increased, White students performed on the TAKS in a more similar fashion as Black and Latino students who received an identical number of ISS placements. Smith et al. (2021) emphasized educators should be sensitive to the number of ISS placements given to students who struggle academically as the reception of such a consequence can hamper academic projections of racially and ethnically diverse students. An understanding of the relationship between an ISS placement and academic achievement can assist school leaders and state legislators in explaining to teachers and parents the need to keep students in the classroom as much as possible to maintain a path to student academic success. As well, this gap in academic achievement could support the implementation of proactive teaching techniques and restorative behavior practices (Smith et al., 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Removing the student from the normal classroom environment for discipline purposes and placed into ISS, OSS, or DAEP can have negative consequences on student academic achievement, leading to a lower probability of high school graduation or lower achievement exam scores such as the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness exam (Lenderman & Hawkins 2021; Smith et al. 2021). Additionally, Black students in Texas classrooms receive a disproportionate number of placements into ISS, OSS, and DAEP compared to their White and Hispanic counterparts (U.S. Department of Education 2018). The less experienced teachers are in the classroom, the more likely they will have difficulty carrying out effective classroom management and student discipline (Headden, 2014; Langdon & Vesper, 2000). In urban schools, it is important to keep more experienced teachers in the classroom as they could be an ingredient needed to reduce the number of student suspensions as a discipline consequence

(Feng, 2010; Greenlee & Ogletree, 1993; Meister & Melnick, 2003). The disproportionate practice of school discipline consequences with students of color could place them on a direct path to the criminal justice system (Rios, 2011).

The problem, however, is that most of the existing research on student discipline is about the disproportionalities of students removed from the classroom by ethnicity/race. The existing literature is lacking regarding relationships between student discipline and the professional experience levels of teachers. Greater emphasis should be placed on preparing teachers for classroom management and establishing relationships with students, which could lead to a decrease in the removal of students from the classroom. This study is needed to demonstrate the need to retain teachers in the classroom. Within the first five years of professional service, about 40% to 50% of new teachers leave the workforce and venture into a different profession. To be clear, these new teachers who leave the workforce within the first five years do not include the teacher who moves from one position within a school district to a different position within a different school district (Ingersoll 2003; McDonald 2018). Keeping more teachers beyond five years of professional experience could lead to an inverse relationship between classroom removal and academic achievement, greater gains in academic test scores coupled with fewer discipline consequences of students leading to classroom removal. By reviewing data on teacher experience and student discipline placements (i.e., ISS, OSS, and DAEP) in Texas, public school leaders can ensure that an adequate focus is being placed on discipline placements and academic achievement and dropout rates of Black students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the relationship between the experience level of teachers on large-size high school campuses and student discipline placements of ISS, OSS, or DAEP in Texas. Specifically examined were the percentage of teachers with more than six years of experience in the classroom or less than six years of experience in the classroom during the three school years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019). As such, an analysis was conducted to see if relationships were present between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements.

Significance of the Study

Few researchers have analyzed the removal and placement of students into an exclusionary environment and the connection to the overall teaching experience level of high school campuses based on enrollment size. In this study, the relationship between the experience levels of high school teachers and the exclusionary discipline placements of students was examined. The goal was to take a broader analysis of campuses to see if less veteran-established campuses

based on student enrollment size were more likely to have more student discipline placements.

Due to the continued increase in student discipline placements, educational leaders need to reevaluate the educational practices and determine ways in which retention of teachers in schools can be improved and techniques applied to reduce the number of students removed from classroom instruction for disciplinary consequences. Many, but not all, of the schools analyzed in this article are located within urban communities. Given the existence of urban schools within this article, disciplinary practices in urban schools more often reveal harsher disciplinary consequences toward a larger percentage of minority students (Rios, 2011; Shedd, 2015).

Results from this multiyear analysis could also shed some light on the need to train and assist less experienced teachers in the classroom in classroom management. Novice teachers entering the teaching profession felt the preparation they received toward classroom management was lacking in exposure during their teaching certification program. (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; LePage et al., 2005; Veenman, 1984). Implementation of classroom management techniques in a teacher's tool kit could be lacking because the instruction they received through professional development was less than ideal (Begeny & Martens, 2006; Freeman et al., 2014; Goodson et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020). Establishing the relationship between teacher inexperience and student removal for discipline consequences may assist school and district administrators and teacher preparation programs to alter their actions and trainings to address teacher retention and implementation of effective classroom management techniques in urban school settings.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study: (a) For traditional high school campuses during the 2016-2017 school year, what is the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into in-school suspension at large-size high schools?, (b) For traditional high school campuses in the 2017-2018 school year, what is the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into in-school suspension at large-size high schools, (c) For traditional high school campuses in the 2018-2019 school year, what is the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into in-school suspension at large-size high schools?, (d) For traditional high school campuses in the 2016-2017 school year, what is the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into out-of-school suspension at large-size high schools, (e) For traditional high school campuses in the 2017-2018 school year, what is the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into out-of-school suspension at large-size high schools?, (f) For traditional high school campuses in the 2018-

2019 school year, what is the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into out-of-school suspension at large-size high schools?, (g) For traditional high school campuses in the 2016-2017 school year, what is the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into Discipline Alternative Education Program at large-size high schools?, (h) For traditional high school campuses in the 2017-2018 school year, what is the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into Discipline Alternative Education Program at large-size high schools?, and (i) For traditional high school campuses in the 2018-2019 school year, what is the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into Discipline Alternative Education Program at large-size high schools?

Method

Research Design

A non-experimental, quantitative, causal-comparative research design (Johnson & Christensen, 2020) was used for this inquiry. Archival data from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System were analyzed in this study. As such, the dependent and independent variables had already occurred and cannot be manipulated. In this study, the independent variable was the experience level of teachers (i.e., teachers with less than six years of professional experience and teachers with six years or more of professional experience). The dependent variable was the number of students who received an exclusionary discipline consequence (i.e., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and DAEP) during the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years.

Participants and Instrumentation

Participants in this study were Texas public high school students enrolled and assigned exclusionary discipline consequences in Grades 9-12 on large-size campuses with at least 2,000 students or more during the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years. Henceforth, these campuses will be referred to as large-size high schools. Exclusionary discipline of students was in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and DAEP. Exclusionary discipline is defined as removing the student from the regular classroom environment (Texas Association of School Boards, 2022). In-school suspension is a disciplinary action upon where a student is removed from the regular classroom and placed into a separate classroom within the same campus for a full day or part day, not to exceed three consecutive school days (Texas Education Agency, 2023; Texas Education Code, 2023). Out-of-school suspension is a disciplinary action upon where a student is removed from the regular classroom and prevented from attending school for a full day or part day, not to exceed three consecutive school

days (Texas Education Agency, 2023; Texas Education Code, 2023). The last example of exclusionary discipline is called DAEP, a temporary educational setting in which a student is expelled or placed in either an on-campus or off-campus DAEP during the current school year or as a continuation from the previous school year for a disciplinary reason (Texas Education Agency, 2007, 2023). The teacher's experience level will be less than six years of experience and six years or more years of experience. A Public Information Request was submitted and satisfied by the Texas Education Agency. Statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software.

Results

Data Analysis

Prior to conducting correlational procedures, scatterplots were generated and were determined to be indicative of bivariate linear relationships. Next, data normality was checked, and all variables were determined to be within the range of normality (i.e., +/- 1; Slate, 2023). Because the underlying assumptions were met for all variables, parametric correlation procedures, specifically Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients, were calculated to answer the research questions**.** In this section, results will be presented by school year. Findings will first be discussed for in-school suspension, then for out-of-school suspension, and finally with DAEP placements. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for in-school suspension assignments. Revealed in Table 2 are the correlations that were calculated to address the previously mentioned research questions.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Average Number of Exclusionary Discipline Consequences by School Year for Large-Size Texas High Schools

School Year	ISS		OSS		DAEP	
	M	*Mdn*	*M*	*Mdn*	*M*	*Mdn*
2016-2017	364.68	317.00	172.88	144.50	73.00	64.00
2017-2018	349.51	305.00	172.15	151.00	72.52	64.00
2018-2019	356.07	310.50	182.85	163.00	81.09	71.00

Table 2

Correlations Between Teacher Inexperience and Exclusionary Discipline Consequences by School Year for Large-Size Texas High Schools

School Year	ISS	OSS	DAEP
	r	*r*	*r*
2016-2017	.35	.44	.27
2017-2018	.20	.27	.13
2018-2019	.26	.39	.30

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Experience for Large-Size Texas High Schools

School Year	0 to 5 Years of Experience	6 or More Years of Experience
	M(%)	*M(%)*
2016-2017	33.25	66.75
2017-2018	35.59	64.41
2018-2019	33.84	66.16

Results for In-School Suspension for All Three School Years

Prior to calculating correlations, descriptive statistics (i.e., *Ms* and *Mdns*) were calculated for the average number of in-school suspension assignments by teacher years of experience. As revealed in Table 1, the average number of in-school suspensions ranged from a high of 364.68 in the 2016-2017 school year to a low of 349.51 in the 2017-2018 school year. The median number varied from a high of 317.00 in-school suspensions in the 2016-2017 school year to a low of 305.00 in the 2017-2018 school year.

With respect to the 2016-2017 school year, a Pearson *r* was calculated and yielded a statistically significant result, $r(260) = .35$, $p < .001$, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into in-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements into in-school suspension overlapped 12.25%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of in-school suspensions.

For the 2017-2018 school year, a Pearson *r* was calculated and yielded a statistically significant result, $r(265) = .20$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into in-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements into in-school suspension overlapped 4.00%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of in-school suspensions.

Concerning the 2018-2019 school year, a Pearson *r* was calculated and yielded a statistically significant result, $r(272) = .26$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into in-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements into in-school suspension overlapped 6.76%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of in-school suspensions.

Results for Out-of-School Suspension for All Three School Years

Prior to answering the research questions for out-of-school suspension, descriptive statistics were calculated by teacher years of experience. As revealed in Table 1, the average number of out-of-school suspensions ranged from a high of 182.85 in the 2018-2019 school year to a low of 172.15 in the 2017-2018 school year. The median number of assignments ranged from a high of 163.00 in the 2018-2019 school low to a low of 144.50 in the 2016-2017 school year. Revealed in Table 1 are the descriptive statistics for out-of-school suspension assignments.

Regarding out-of-school suspension for the 2016-2017 school year, a Pearson *r* was calculated and yielded a statistically significant result, $r(258) = .44$, $p < .001$, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into out-of-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements into out-of-school suspension overlapped 19.36%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of out-of-school suspensions.

With respect to the 2017-2018 school year, a Pearson *r* was calculated and yielded a statistically significant result, $r(268) = .27$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into out-of-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements into out-of-school suspension overlapped 7.29%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of out-of-school suspensions.

Concerning the 2018-2019 school year, the Pearson *r* yielded a statistically significant result, $r(275) = .39$, $p < .001$, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into out-of-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements into out-of-school suspension overlapped 15.21%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of out-of-school suspensions.

Results for DAEP Placement for All Three School Years

Descriptive statistics were computed for the average number of DAEP assignments by teacher years of experience prior to correlation calculations. The average number of DAEP assignments ranged from a high of 83.00 in the 2016-2017 school year to a low of 72.52 on the 2017-2018 school year. The median number of DAEP assignments varied from a high of 71.00 in the 2018-2019 school year to a low of 64.00 in the other two school years. Delineated in Table 1 are the descriptive statistics for DAEP assignments.

For the 2016-2017 school year for DAEP placements, the Pearson *r* yielded a statistically significant result, $r(253) = .27$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between

teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into DAEP. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher experience and student placements into DAEP overlapped 7.29%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of DAEP placements.

With respect to the 2017-2018 school year, a Pearson *r* was calculated and yielded a statistically significant result, $r(260) = .13$, $p = .035$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into DAEP. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher experience and student placements into DAEP overlapped 1.69%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of DAEP placements.

Regarding the 2018-2019 school year, a Pearson *r* was calculated and yielded a statistically significant result, $r(265) = .30$, $p < .001$, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements into DAEP. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher experience and student placements into DAEP overlapped 9.00%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of DAEP placements.

Discussion

In this investigation, the relationship between teacher inexperience and student exclusionary discipline consequences of in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and DAEP on large-size Texas high school campuses in the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years was addressed. Teachers were categorized by their experience into two areas: (a) teachers with six or more years of experience (Experienced Teachers) and (b) teachers with less than six years of experience (Inexperienced Teachers).

Regarding in-school suspension, statistically significant relationships were established between teacher inexperience and in-school suspension for all three school years. More in-school suspensions were assigned when higher percentages of inexperienced teachers were present than when higher percentages of experienced teachers were present at the school campus.

With respect to out-of-school suspension, statistically significant relationships were established between teacher inexperience and out-of-school-suspension for all three school years. More out-of-school suspensions were assigned when higher percentages of inexperienced teachers were present than when higher percentages of experienced teachers were present at the school campus. Concerning students placed to the DAEP, statistically significant relationships were established between teacher inexperience and DAEP placements for all three school years. More DAEP placements were assigned when higher percentages of inexperienced teachers were present than when higher percentages of experienced teachers were present at the school campus.

Connections to Existing Literature

In this multiyear investigation, the average number of student discipline placements based on the experience level of teachers was established. Positive relationships were revealed between teacher inexperience and students assigned to an exclusionary discipline placement for large-size Texas high school campuses. In this study, 33% to almost 36% of the teachers had less than 6 years of experience. Few researchers in the extant literature have focused on the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline assignments. The longer teachers serve in the classroom, the more they will rely on established classroom management techniques allowing a misbehaved student to remain in their normal educational environment (Caples & McNeese, 2010). Williams et al. (2020) asserted it is possible to predict OSS rates of Black students from classrooms consisting of teachers with less than three years of experience at middle school campuses. Furthermore, it is also possible to reduce or stop discipline disparities among Black students in urban schools with more experienced teachers in the classroom (Feng, 2010; Greenlee & Ogletree, 1993; Meister & Melnick, 2003). The need to keep teachers in the teaching profession past the fifth year of experience is critical especially to be more experienced and better able to handle classroom student misbehaviors (Buck & O'Brien, 2005; Caples & McNeese, 2010; Williams et al., 2020).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Implications for policy and practice can be made from this study. School administrators are encouraged to disaggregate their discipline data regarding in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and DAEP data at their respective campuses. Campus leaders can address discrepancies in student discipline placements among their lesser experienced teachers, including but not limited to a mentor program with experienced teachers focused on student discipline and classroom management. State and local school district leaders should take necessary steps to maintain teachers in the profession past the fifth year of experience.

Given that a discipline placement to the DAEP influences high school graduation rates (Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021), school administrators should analyze their DAEP placement policies. University teacher preparation programs should analyze how they prepare new teachers for classroom management. In addition, those organizations that provide alternative teacher certification opportunities should evaluate how they prepare new teacher candidates to handle student behavior.

Recommendations for Future Research

As revealed in the trends of this statewide analysis, statistically significant relationships were documented in the average number of students assigned to exclusionary discipline consequences based on the percentages of inexperienced

teachers based on data from the three school years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers should conduct a similar study using three years of data after the COVID-19 pandemic beginning with the 2021-2022 school year. An analysis of the effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on student discipline should be conducted. A similar study about student discipline and teacher inexperience on Texas high school campuses with Grades 9-12 but with smaller student enrollments should be conducted. Piloting an investigation into the relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline at the elementary and middle school level is recommended.

Researchers should conduct a study between teacher inexperience and student discipline assignments in other states. In addition, future researchers should conduct a similar study as this one except focus on student ethnicity/race, not just the aggregate as analyzed with this investigation. Focused in this investigation was student discipline assignments based on enrollment as opposed to the geographic location. An analysis of student discipline assignments and teacher experience levels by geographic locales as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics is encouraged. Underlying reasons for other student discipline assignments, ones not included in this study, by campus enrollment based on the experience levels of teachers are encouraged to be investigated, especially within other states.

Conclusion

In this Texas multiyear investigation, teacher inexperience was established to be related to student discipline placements of in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and DAEP on Texas large-size high school campuses. Over the course of all three school years analyzed, higher exclusionary discipline placements were associated with higher levels of inexperienced teachers.

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Texas School Social Workers: Job Barriers, Supports, Satisfaction and Preparation Programs

George Padilla,
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
Velma D. Menchaca
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
Astrid Gandaria
Consultant

Abstract

A study examined the job barriers, supports, satisfaction, and preparation programs of Texas school social workers (TSSW). The study used a convergent parallel mixed method design to compare and discuss quantitative and qualitative data obtained through a survey emailed to 476 Texas school social workers. Data was gathered from 250 social workers. The findings highlight the need to better understand the role of TSSWs and improve university social work preparation programs. The implications of this study's findings on TSSW work barriers and supports and preparation programs can create major improvements to the preparation, job definition, and work environment of TSSWs, and more importantly, the maximum success of all Texas students.

Almost no research has been conducted on Texas school social workers even though in May 2020 Texas employed the fourth highest number of school social workers among all states (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2021a). Because of the impact education has on American lives (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021b) and the services social workers can provide (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2009), it is critical that the educational environment supports school social workers. Therefore, a study of Texas school social workers (TSSW) was completed in 2022 aimed at better understanding job barriers and supports Texas school social workers experience, their job satisfaction, and how social work preparations programs can improve to address the needs of TSSWs.

Keywords: Texas, school, social worker, responsibilities

Introduction

The purpose of social work is to enhance the problem solving and coping capacities of people; to connect people with systems that provide them with resources, services, and opportunities; to promote the effective and humane operation of these systems; and to contribute to the development and improvement of social policy (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2009). Social work focuses on meeting the needs and empowerment of people, especially those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. Although these needs of people in communal society have

probably existed since the stone age, social work has existed in the United States for over two hundred years (Okpych & Yu, 2014).
The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) defines a school social worker as:

> School Social Workers are trained mental health professionals with a degree in social work who provide services related to a person's social, emotional and life adjustment to school and/or society. School Social Workers are the link between the home, school and community in providing direct as well as indirect services to students, families and school personnel to promote and support students' academic and social success. (SSWAA, 2021a)

SSWA continues by defining school social workers' role in schools:

> School Social Workers are trained mental health professionals with a degree in social work who provide services related to a person's social, emotional and life adjustment to school and/or society. School Social Workers are the link between the home, school and community in providing direct as well as indirect services to students, families and school personnel to promote and support students' academic and social success. (SSWAA, 2021b)

In essence, a school social worker works in schools to provide social work services to a school community's members—students, families, and school staff—to promote and support schools' major goals of student academic and social success.

Phillippo and Stone (2011) present that school social work and the modern school began to develop contemporarily in the beginning of the 20th century. One of the oldest branches of social work (Sweifach & LaPorte, 2013), the practice of social work in schools began in the early 1900s when the role of the visiting teacher was created because of concern for disadvantaged students (Allen-Meares, 1988). The visiting teacher's primary focus was to facilitate communication and understanding between the school, families, and community and foster student welfare. The visiting teacher fulfilled a liaison role that drew greater importance with the passage of compulsory attendance laws (Allen-Meares, 1988). They focused on student attendance and behavior, informed families about academic requirements and community resources and educators about the circumstances and experiences of children coming to their classroom (Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020; Corbin, 2005). School social workers served as advocates for students and their families (Allen-Meares, 1988). New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Connecticut were the first states to establish the practice of school social work (Allen-Meares, 1994). Eventually, the school social worker took on the role of home-school-community liaison aimed at sensitizing school staff about the effect children's out-of-school lives had on their learning and school experience. SSWAA identifies six general areas of school social work services in schools:

- Related Services,
- Services to Students,
- Services to Parents/Families,
- Services to School Personnel, School-Community Liaison, and Services to Districts.

School social work does not bring social work into a vacuous organization, but into a complex and possibly irrational organization—the school. In 1991, Dane and Simmon described the school social worker context as a host setting, or "arenas in which social workers practice that are defined or dominated by people who are not social workers" (p. 208). They identified challenges for school social workers due to host setting: role ambiguity, marginalization, value discrepancies, and the devaluation of women as social workers.

Alvarez et al. assert that "Very little published research exists" on the relationship between school social worker efforts and student educational outcomes and between school social worker efforts and school district goal attainment (2013, p. 235). Allen-Meares and Montgomery (2014) emphasize this same condition exists globally. Alvarez et al. (2013) searched for research publications related to school social workers and school outcomes and found 384 related articles.

Forenza and Eckhardt (2020) continue to describe the current school social work research literature as "insufficient" with a "scarcity of empirical evidence concerning outcomes and service provision" (p. 101). They further note that outcomes of school social work are context-bound because of the high variance in job function and broad types of practices. Cuellar et al. (2018) noted that school social worker services can only be understood within each school community.

Teasley et al. (2012) present that research in school social work is needed to understand and improve the development of systemic methods for student problem solving. No research specifically focused on Texas school social workers (TSSWs) was found prior to 2020. The Steve Hicks School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin through the Texas Institute for Child and Family Wellbeing created the Texas School Social Work Network (TSSWN) to provide "Texas-specific guidance" (University of Texas, 2021, para. 2), "tools and research" (TSSWN, 2020, p. 26) for school social workers. TSSWN (2020) conducted a survey of Texas school social workers connected to the 2020 Texas School Social Workers conference through a flyer, social media, and newsletters. TSSWN received 212 completed surveys. Through this survey, TSSWN gathered many demographic, educational, and work characteristics of TSSWs.

By collecting state school district personnel data, Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2022) maintains a list of Texas school social workers. Padilla et al. (2023) acquired the most current available list from TEA for the 2018-2019 school year, edited it for duplications. A report was formulated with the following information regarding Texas SSWs' demographics and job environment: Texas region center location, campus type, ethnicity, gender, years of experience, degree earned, salary, community type, number of worksite assignments, district charter status, campus student demographics, campus Title 1 status, campus staff average work experience, campus state academic grade, and state student academic test results (Padilla et al., 2023).

There is a great need to explore and expand the knowledge and understanding of current TSSW job barriers, facilitators, job satisfaction, and how to improve school social worker preparation program. Continued research on TSSWs may advocate for the adoption of a school social work service definition and other supports at the state level. Effective research and state support will

ensure effective school social work that promotes student, staff, family, and community success now and in the future.

Methodology

A convergent parallel mixed-method design was conducted during the 2021-2022 school year. A survey, the *Wisconsin School Social Worker Survey,* was adapted with permission from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2021). The survey was developed with multiple-choice and open-ended questions and emailed to these TSSWs to obtain a more complete understanding of their job barriers, supports, job satisfaction, and improvement of social worker preparation programs (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2021; Randall, 2015). Open-ended responses related to job supports and barriers were categorized. Then, the categories were organized under general themes related to job supports and barriers.

Participants

The researchers utilized the edited TEA 2018-2019 school social workers list to identify currently available TSSWs' emails and 436 were identified. Of those 436 identified, two hundred and fifty school social workers completed the questionnaire anonymously and served as the basis for this study's data analyses on TSSW job barriers, supports, satisfaction, and improvement of preparation program.

Research Questions of the Study

The research questions of the study were:

1. What are job barriers and supports experienced by Texas school social workers?
2. What is the overall job satisfaction level of Texas school social workers?
3. How can social worker preparation programs be improved to support future school social workers?

Results

After analyzing the survey data, the participants identified the top three barriers and supports for school social work in their schools. The data was coded into categories and then grouped into general themes related to job supports and barriers.

Job Barriers and Supports

One hundred TSSW respondents provided 126 different responses identifying the top three barriers for school social work in their schools. Responses were reviewed and coded for themes, and 22 themes were generated and identified as barriers. The top three themes most identified as the #1 barrier were Lack of Understanding of the School Social Worker role (17.5%), Lack of Administrative Support (16.7%), and Insufficient Number of School Social Workers in the schools (10.3%), constituting over 44% of all identified responses (Table 1). The top three

themes most identified as the #2 barrier were Lack of Support (29.3%), Lack of Understanding of SSW Role (18.7%), and Lack of Resources (12.2%), constituting over 60% of all identified responses (Table 2). The top three themes most identified as the #3 barrier were Lack of Support (18.4%), Lack of Resources (17.2%), Lack of Understanding of SSW Role (12.6%), and Poor School Culture (12.6%), constituting over 60% of all identified responses (Table 3). Collectively, among all #1, #2, and #3 barriers, the themes most identified as top barriers were: Lack of Support (64.4%), Lack of Understanding of School Social Worker Role in schools (48.8%), and Lack of Resources (35.7%). Evidently, almost two-thirds of TSSWs do not feel well supported in schools, almost one-half perceived a lack of understanding of the SSW role in schools, and over one-third believe they do not have the resources they need to conduct their job.

Table 1

Top Three Barriers for School Social Workers: Theme Most Identified as Top Barrier #1

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Lack of Understanding of SSW Role	17.5%		
Lack of Administrative Support	16.7%		
Insufficient Number of SSWs	10.3%		
Lack of Funding	8.7%		
Lack of Time	7.1%		
Lack of Parent Support	7.1%		
Lack of Resources	6.3%	Lack of Needed Resources	5.6%
		Transportation	0.8%
Assigned Non-SW Responsibilities	4.8%		
Lack of community resources	4.0%		
Number of Assigned Campuses	4.0%		
No SSW District Leader	3.2%		
Excessive Referrals	2.4%		
Conservative District	0.8%		
Language	0.8%		
Student Turnover	0.8%		
Communication	0.8%		
No Liaison Assigned	0.8%		
Lack of Teacher Support	0.8%		
Student Needs Not Met, Addressed, or Corrected	0.8%		

Table 1

Top Three Barriers for School Social Workers: Theme Most Identified as Top Barrier #1

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Lack of Community Support (Mistrust)	0.8%		
No Self Professional Development	0.8%		
Focus on Crisis and Not on Prevention	0.8%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	126		
Total Respondents:	100		

Table 2

Three Top Barriers for a School Social Worker: Theme Most Identified as Top Barrier #2

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Lack of Support	29.3%	Lack of Administrative Support	21.1%
		Lack of Parent Support (Mistrust)	8.1%
Lack of Understanding of SSW Role	18.7%	Lack of understanding of SSW Role	17.1%
		Students not Receptive to SW	0.8%
		Lack of Positive Image of SSW	0.8%
Lack of Resources	12.2%	Lack of Needed Resources	5.7%
		Access to community resources	4.1%
		Not Having a Clinical License SW	1.6%
		Lack in-house therapeutic counseling	0.8%
Non-SSW/LCSW Supervisor	7.3%		
High Caseload	4.9%		

Table 2

Three Top Barriers for a School Social Worker: Theme Most Identified as Top Barrier #2

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Assigned Non-SSW Responsibilities	4.9%		
Lack of Time	4.1%		
Access to Students	2.4%		
Multiple Campus Assignments	2.4%		
Insufficient SSWs	2.4%		
Lack of Funding	1.6%		
Focus on Crisis, Not Prevention	1.6%		
Lack of Multidisciplinary Collaboration	0.8%		
Self-Emotional Burnout	0.8%		
Poor School Culture	0.8%		
Poor Classroom Management Skills	0.8%		
Focus on Testing	0.8%		
Evaluation Issues	0.8%		
Impoverished Community	0.8%		
Lack of Understanding SEL Trauma	0.8%		
Language	0.8%		
Poor Communication	0.8%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	123		
Total Respondents:	95		

Table 3

Three Top Barriers for a School Social Worker: Theme Most Identified as Top Barrier #3

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Lack of Support	18.4%	Lack of Administrative Support	5.7%
		Lack of Parent Support	3.4%
		Unsupportive District Culture	2.3%

Table 3

Three Top Barriers for a School Social Worker: Theme Most Identified as Top Barrier #3

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Lack of Resources	17.2%	Integration of Trauma Informed Support	2.3%
		Lack of Parental Engagement Program	2.3%
		Students not Receptive to SW	1.1%
		Lack of Community Support (Mistrust)	1.1%
		Lack of Needed Resources	6.9%
		Lack of Parental Engagement Program	5.7%
		Lack of community resources	4.6%
Lack of Understanding of SSW Role	12.6%		
Poor School Culture	12.6%		
Lack of Time	6.9%		
Academic Priority Over Mental Health	6.9%		
Assigned Non-SSW Responsibilities	4.6%		
High Caseload	4.6%		
Lack of Funding	4.6%		
Impoverished Community	2.3%		
Access to Students	2.3%		
No SW/LCSW Supervisor	2.3%		
No School Resource Officer	1.1%		

Table 3

Three Top Barriers for a School Social Worker: Theme Most Identified as Top Barrier #3

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Number of Campuses Assigned	1.1%		
Student Unaware of Self Issues	1.1%		
Confidentiality	1.1%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	56		
Total Respondents:	71		

TSSW respondents identified the top three supports for school social work in their schools (Tables 4, 5, 6). Responses were reviewed and organized into categories then into general support themes. The themes most identified as #1 support were School Staff (34.9%) and School Administration (30.3%). The themes most identified as top #2 support were School Staff (38.5%), School Administration (14.3%), School Social Work Director (9.9%), and District (9.9%). The themes most identified as top #3 support were School Staff (38.5%), Collegial Culture (13.3%), District (13.3%), and School Administration (10.0%). Collectively, among all #1, #2, and #3 supports, the most identified top supports were: School Staff (95.1%), School Administration (54.6%), and (District 30.5%). Thus, school administrators can serve a major barrier to TSSWs, but they can also provide serve as a support.

Table 4

Three Top Supports for a School Social Worker: Themes Most Identified as Top Support #1

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
		School Counselors	19.3%
		School staff support	11.9%
School Staff	34.9%	Teacher Support	1.8%
		Attendance Clerk	0.9%
		Support in general	0.9%
School Administration	30.3%		
Peer SSWs	8.3%		
District	7.3%		
Autonomy	4.6%		
Resources	2.8%		

Table 4

Three Top Supports for a School Social Worker: Themes Most Identified as Top Support #1

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Referral System	2.8%		
Community Partners	1.8%		
Multidisciplinary Team	1.8%		
Regional Center Support	0.9%		
Information	0.9%		
Student Receptiveness	0.9%		
Funding	0.9%		
Respect for SSW Role	0.9%		
One SSW/School	0.9%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	109		
Total Respondents:	95		

Table 5

Three Top Supports for a School Social Worker: Themes Most Identified as Top Support #2

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
School Staff	38.5%	School Staff	20.9%
		Counselors	3.3%
School Administration	14.3%		
School Social Work Director	9.9%		
District	9.9%		
Resources	8.8%	Community Resources	4.4%
		Resources	4.4%
Recognition of SSW Position	7.7%		
Autonomy	6.6%		
Professional Development	5.5%		
Peer SSWs	4.4%		
School Culture	3.3%		
Increase in SSWs	1.1%		
Parent Support	1.1%		
Student Receptiveness	1.1%		
Multidisciplinary Team	1.1%		

Table 5

Three Top Supports for a School Social Worker: Themes Most Identified as Top Support #2

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Communication	1.1%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	91		
Total Respondents:	80		

Table 6

Three Top Supports for a School Social Worker: Themes Most Identified as Top Support #3

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
		School Staff	11.7%
School Staff	21.7%	School Counselors	10.0%
Collegial Culture	13.3%		
District	13.3%		
School Administration	10.0%		
Community Partners	6.7%		
Resources	5.0%		
Student Receptiveness	5.0%		
Peer SSWs Collaboration	5.0%		
School Staff	3.3%		
Funding	1.7%		
Professional Development	1.7%		
SW Leaders	1.7%		
Understanding of SSW Role	1.7%		
Region Center Support	1.7%		
Student Success	1.7%		
Autonomy	6.7%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	60		
Total Respondents:	55		

One hundred twenty-two TSSW respondents identified whom they sought advice related to their school social work. Responses were coded into categories and then themes (Table 7). The three top sources for advice sought by school social workers were Peer School Social Workers (35.6%), School Staff (24.7%), especially the school counselor, and Online Resources (15.6%).

Table 7

Source for Advice by School Social Workers

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Peer SSWs	35.6%		
School Staff	24.7%	School Counselor	18.0%
		Nurse/Health Specialist	6.8%
Online Resources	15.6%		
Personal Library	6.8%		
Supervisor	5.4%		
Psychologist	3.4%		
LCSW Supervisor	2.0%		
SW Supervisor	1.4%		
University Professors	1.0%		
Community	1.0%		
Social Work Mentor	0.7%		
Administration	0.7%		
Social Workers Outside Agency	0.7%		
LPC	0.7%		
National Association for Social Workers	0.3%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	295		
Total Respondents:	122		

Job Satisfaction

One hundred and twenty two TSSWs provided their level of job satisfaction (see Table 8). Two-thirds of the TSSW respondents indicated they were either “Very Satisfied” (33.6%) or “Extremely Satisfied” (32.8%) with their jobs. Only 7.4 % of respondents indicated they were “Somewhat Dissatisfied” or “Extremely Dissatisfied” with their jobs. However, almost one-fifth of the respondents (19.7%) were “Somewhat Satisfied.” Combining these lower three levels of satisfaction comprises more than one-fourth (28.1%) of the respondents as dissatisfied or not fully satisfied with their jobs. This should create great concern in schools.

Table 8

School Social Worker Job Satisfaction Level

Satisfaction Level	Count	Percent
Extremely Satisfied	40	32.8%
Very Satisfied	41	33.6%
Moderately Satisfied	8	6.6%
Somewhat Satisfied	24	19.7%
Very Dissatisfied	5	4.1%
Extremely Dissatisfied	4	3.3%
Total:	122	100.0%

One hundred and eleven TSSW respondents identified their biggest satisfaction with their job (Table 9). Responses were reviewed and organized into categories and them into general job satisfaction themes. The biggest job satisfaction identified was Helping Students with 75.9% of the responses, followed by Helping Families with 9.0% and then School Teamwork with 6.6%. The two biggest subcategories in Help Students were experiencing Student Growth/Success (34.0%) and Work with Students (23.1%).

Table 9

Biggest Job Satisfaction for School Social Workers

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Help Students	75.9%	Student Growth/Success	34.0%
		Work With Students	23.1%
		Student Graduation	5.2%
		Gratitude From Student/Families	3.8%
		Student Happiness/Smile	2.4%
		Improvement In At-Risk Students	2.4%
		Building Relationships With Students	1.9%
		Helping Special Education Students	0.9%
		Student Mental Health Improvement	0.5%
		Mentoring Students	0.5%
		Student/Graduate Associate Degree	0.5%
		Student Trust	0.5%
		Successful Case Management	0.5%
Helping Families	9.0%		
School Teamwork	6.6%	Building Relationships/Students/Teachers	5.7%

Table 9

Biggest Job Satisfaction for School Social Workers

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Helping Others	4.7%	School Team	0.9%
		Impacting Lives	3.8%
		Helping And Giving People Hope	0.5%
		Overcoming Crisis	0.5%
Helping Families	1.4%		
Support from Administration	0.5%		
Advocating SW	0.5%		
Improving Schools	0.5%		
Networking	0.5%		
SSW Peer Support	0.5%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	212		
Total Respondents:	111		

One hundred and three respondents identified their biggest dissatisfaction with their job (Table 10). Responses were reviewed and organized into categories and then into general dissatisfaction themes. The three most common dissatisfactions identified were Lack of Support for School Social Workers (30.3%), Lack of Understanding of the Role of Social Workers (18.1%), and High Caseload (14.2%). Within the Lack of Support for School Social Worker theme, the two biggest subcategories in Lack of Support were Lack of Support for Social Work by School Administration and State Education (16.1%) and Social Work Services Not Valued or Respected (11.6%). Again, lack of support by school administration emerges as a strong area of discontent among TSSWs.

Table 10

Biggest Dissatisfaction Among School Social Workers

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Lack of Support for School Social Worker	30.3%	Lack of Support for Social Work by School	16.1%

Table 10

Biggest Dissatisfaction Among School Social Workers

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
		Administration and State Education	
		Social Work Services Not Valued or Respected	11.6%
		Lack of Resources	1.3%
		Unsupportive System	1.3%
Lack of Understanding of Role of SSW	18.1%		
High Caseload	14.2%		
Lack of Understanding by Parents	5.8%		
Lack of Student Success	4.5%		
Administrative Duties	3.9%		
Compensation	3.9%		
Inability to Impact Systems	3.9%		
No SSW License	2.6%		
Lack of Understanding Student of Social Location in Schools	1.9%		
School Culture Issues	1.9%		
None/N/A	1.9%		
Paperwork	1.3%		
Lack of Documentation System	1.3%		
		Politics of the School/District	1.3%
School Culture Issues	2.6%	Unwillingness of Some Teachers to Change	0.6%
		Negative culture	0.6%
Lack of Professional Development	0.6%		

Table 10

Biggest Dissatisfaction Among School Social Workers

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Lack of Understanding of Public Schools by School Social Workers	0.6%		
Lack of Support for Students	0.6%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	155		
Total Respondents:	103		

School Social Worker Preparation Program

Ninety-nine TSSW respondents identified the program that prepared them to provide school social work services (Table 11). The highest response was the University (68.8%) with a master's program identified most frequently (25.8%). Notably, 13.3% of respondents indicated "On the Job" preparation, and 8.6% stated "None" or "N/A." Thus, over one-fifth of the respondents (21.9%) indicated that no program prepared them for their school social work job. More specifically, when responding to a question asking if their undergraduate/graduate program prepared them to provide school social work services (Table 12), 68.6% of 102 TSSW respondents answered affirmatively. Also, 16.7% answered "No" and 14.7% answered "Somewhat." Thus, almost one-third of respondents (31.4%) responded the undergraduate/graduate program only "Somewhat" or not at all prepared them to provide school social work services.

Table 11

Program Preparation for School Social Workers

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
		Master's Program	25.8%
		University	18.8%
University	68.8%	BSW Program	13.3%
		Internship	8.6%
		SSW Certificate	2.3%
On the Job	13.3%		
None/N/A	8.6%		
SSW Conferences	4.7%		
Self-Study	3.1%		
Networking	0.8%		

Table 11

Program Preparation for School Social Workers

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Director	0.8%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	128		
Total Respondents:	93		

Table 12

How Well Did Undergraduate/Graduate Program Prepare School Social Worker

	Count	Percent
Somewhat	15	14.7%
No	17	16.7%
Yes	70	68.6%
Total:	102	100.0%

TSSW respondents identified how the undergraduate/graduate program prepared them to provide school social work services (Table 13). The top three ways undergraduate/graduate programs prepared 79 respondents to provide school social work services were General Practice (30.3%), Internship (21.1%), and Strong Teaching on Multi System Practice (18.3%). Notably, 6.4% of respondents indicated the programs "Did Not" help them prepare to provide school social work services.

Table 13

University Social Work Program Preparation

Theme	Theme %
Generalist Practice	30.3%
Internship	21.1%
Strong teaching on Multi System Practice	18.3%
Did Not	6.4%
Informative Professors	6.4%
Graduate Mental Health Training	5.5%
Some Courses Helped	3.7%
Provided Resources	1.8%
Connected to Local Community Needs	1.8%
Well-Rounded Preparation	1.8%
Very Little	0.9%
Focus On and Working With Latinos	0.9%

Table 13

University Social Work Program Preparation

Theme	Theme %
Social Work Networking	0.9%
Total Percent:	100.0%
Total Responses:	109
Total Respondents:	90

Seventy-seven TSSW respondents provided recommendations on how higher education institutions can improve the preparation of school social workers (Table 14). With 81.1%, curriculum improvement was the top choice. The largest subcategories in Curriculum Improvement included School Social Work courses (16.8%) and Mental Health Preparation on School Social Work (16.1%). A distance away, continued connection after graduation between college instructors and students, such as mentoring, was the second highest recommendation with 6.3% of responses.

Table 14

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions to Improve Preparation of School Social Workers

Theme	Theme %	Category	Category %
Curriculum Improvement	81.1%	Courses & Prep Per Branch Of SW	6.3%
		School Social Work Courses	16.8%
		Mental Health Prep On School Social Work	16.1%
		More Hands-On	12.6%
		Service Learning Opportunities	7.7%
		School Environment	6.3%
		Documentation	4.9%
		Ethics	2.1%
		School Politics	1.4%
		Teaching on The Impact of Diversity	1.4%
		Special Education	1.4%
		Focus On Case Management	1.4%
		Include Substance Abuse In Curriculum	0.7%
		More Hands-On Experiences	0.7%
		Focus On Leadership	0.7%
		Update Student Issues	0.7%
	6.3%	Mentorship With Social Workers	4.9%

Table 14

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions to Improve Preparation of School Social Workers

Continue Connection Post-Graduation		Follow Up Post-Graduation	1.4%
Instructor Improvement	4.2%	Faculty Should Return to the Field Occasionally	1.4%
		Bilingual Faculty	1.4%
		Learn From Practitioners	1.4%
Specialized Speakers	2.1%	More Specialized Speakers	2.1%
SSW Advocacy	1.4%	Advocate For School Social Work	1.4%
SSW Certification	0.7%		
Paid Internship	0.7%		
Student-Centered Quality Instruction	0.7%		
SSW Certification	0.7%		
Continue Connection Post-Graduation	0.7%		
SW Department	0.7%		
None	0.7%		
Total Percent:	100.0%		
Total Responses:	143		
Total Respondents with Codable Input:	77		

Table 14

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions to Improve Preparation of School Social Workers

Total Respondent(s) With Uncodable Input:	6
Total Respondents:	83

Limitations

The previous report reviewed the study's limitations that included a 57.3-percent participation rate. While TSSW demographics was not the focus of this study, the demographics gathered by this study's survey were statistically consistent with the prior state TSSW demographics report (Padilla et al., 2023).

Summary And Implications

About two-thirds of the TSSW respondents were "Very Satisfied" or "Extremely Satisfied" with their school social work job. Only 7.4% of respondents were dissatisfied to some degree. Respondents identified their biggest job satisfaction was Helping Students, followed by Helping Families, and then School Teamwork. No doubt, Texas school social workers receive great satisfaction in helping students succeed.

TSSW respondents identified their biggest job dissatisfaction. The top three job dissatisfactions were lack of support for SSWs, lack of understanding of the SSW role, and high caseload. Within the lack of support for the school social worker, the two biggest subcategories were lack of support for social work by school administration and state education and social work services not valued or respected. These findings are consistent with the previous literature on school social worker job satisfaction. Pamperin (1987) found higher role conflict and ambiguity led to lower job satisfaction. Furthermore, Staudt's (1997) research study revealed school social workers with supervisors who were social workers were more satisfied with supervision than those with supervisors from another discipline. Additionally, in 2006, Agresta stressed past research has found significant relationships between role discrepancy and job satisfaction in social workers in general (Kadushin & Kulys, 1995; Marriot et al., 1994) and among school social workers specifically (Pamperin, 1987; Staudt, 1997). This study's results on SSW job dissatisfaction reaffirm past research. It is critical that school leaders recognize the causes of SSW dissatisfaction so they may specifically address them effectively. Schools must support SSWs, ensure the school staff understand their role, and maintain a reasonable caseload that

ensures success for students and staff. Job satisfaction is key to retaining well-trained and experienced SSWs.

TSSW respondents identified work barriers and supports to SSW practice. The top three barriers are lack of support, lack of understanding of SSW's role in schools, and lack of resources. School leaders must successfully eliminate these SSW work barriers especially by ensuring SSWs have a specialized mentor or advisor they can seek assistance from when needed. The top three supports of SSW practice identified are school staff support, collegial culture, and district and school administration support. School leaders must ensure these supports exist for all SSWs. Additionally, SSW respondents identified sources they sought for advice. The three top sources are peer SSWs, school staff, especially the school counselor, and online resources. It is critical that university social work instructors remain accessible to TSSWs for advice.

TSSW respondents identified the program that prepared them to provide school social work services. The highest response was the University, with a master's program identified the most. Notably, 13.3% of respondents indicated On-the-job preparation. Respondents described how their undergraduate/graduate program had prepared them to provide school social work services. More than two-thirds of respondents agreed their undergraduate/graduate program had prepared them to provide school social work services. However, 14.7% of the participants responded that their university program had somewhat prepared them, while 14.7% also indicated their university program did not prepare them to provide school social work services. While most school social workers provided positive comments about their college preparation to conduct school social work, there was a small group that did not find their college preparation sufficient. It is critical social work programs prepare future school social workers sufficiently well, so all Texas school social workers find themselves well prepared. Respondents revealed how their undergraduate/graduate programs had prepared them to provide school social work services. The top three ways were General Practice, Internship, and Strong Teaching on Multi-System Practice. Notably, 6.4% of respondents indicated the programs "Did Not" help them prepare to provide school social work services. Respondents provided recommendations for higher education institutions to improve the preparation of future school social workers. The top improvement involved Curriculum Improvement that included School Social Work courses, Mental Health Preparation on School Social Work, and teaching about the school environment. This last suggestion is critical because respondents commented that the negative side of the school and district political environment interfered with their services.

Conclusion

Many TSSWs find support in their jobs and about two-thirds of TSSWs are satisfied with their job. However, many also experience job barriers that may limit their job efficiency and job satisfaction. Just under one-third of TSSWs indicated their college preparation program somewhat or did not prepare them for their jobs. TSSWs can provide great support to schools given the right job environment and preparation.

Further study may explore how school social workers navigate the complex public education system to ensure compliance with social work ethical standards. Follow-up study may focus on whether universities are developing program improvements that incorporate recommendations

provided by TSSWs in this study to better prepare future TSSWs and what school leaders are doing to ensure a better understanding of the role of SSWs in schools and promoting job support and satisfaction for SSWs.

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Ethical Adoption of AI-based tools in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Tatjana Titareva, PhD, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden, tatjana.titareva@umu.se, ORCHID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9586-3018

Paul Mabrey, PhD, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, USA, mabreype@jmu.edu, ORCHID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3362-9740

Abstract

This study emphasizes the importance of ethical and human-centered leadership in the adoption of AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) in higher education. It argues for leadership that is mindful of system-level risks and ethical considerations in utilizing AI tools for student retention and administrative efficiency. The research fills a gap by identifying key leadership skills, qualities, and responsibilities necessary for the ethical adoption of AI tools. Through qualitative analysis with the help of focus groups, the study highlights the need for supportive and authentic leadership that engages stakeholders ethically, addresses equity, inclusion, data privacy, and mitigates the psychological impacts of AI tools. The findings advocate for a holistic approach to technology leadership, highlighting continuous AI literacy training and the importance of maintaining human oversight in AI technologies' evolving landscape, as well as emphasizing stakeholder engagement, awareness training, and the cultivation of an open and supportive technological environment. This work contributes to the discourse on technology leadership in higher education, underlining the role of leaders in navigating the complexities of AI tools' adoption while aligning with institutional and educational values.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; AI tools; higher education; early alert systems; leadership; ethical and responsible adoption

Introduction

Recent trends and challenges in higher education institutions (HEIs) globally, including the United States, have been the declining student retention rates and widening equity-based retention gaps. HEIs are also experiencing increased accountability pressures due to rising college costs affecting student families' budgets. Additionally, public funding has struggled to match these increasing costs, raising concerns about the quality and job market relevance of contemporary higher education (Bartlett, 2020; Kelchen, 2018). Lastly, while university resources have remained static or decreased, demands on HEIs have significantly increased (McGee, 2015).

To address the challenges above, HEIs have begun employing AI-based data mining and analytics tools. These tools monitor student progress, predict potential for success, and inform intervention strategies in case students are falling behind (Aybek & Okur, 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). In the last decade, administrators in HEIs started to use early alert systems (EAS) to detect preliminary signs of potential student attrition, augmenting university retention efforts by alerting HEIs administrators and faculty in advance (Dwyer, 2017). Technologies have significantly transformed our lives in recent decades, often enhancing efficiency both at work and personal lives. However, technology cannot be a stand-alone solution, it needs humans,

leadership and change of culture for it successfully to be implemented and used in organizations in the long-term perspective (Arroway et al., 2016; Colvin et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2019).

This paper claims that higher education, an ethical and human-centered endeavor, has to prioritize human-driven values when adopting technologies like AI-based EAS (Alexander, 2020). Technology emerges as a solution to challenges in student retention, affordability, and accountability in HEIs. However, beyond the technological aspect of any solution, it is important to consider leadership, ethics, and its impact on stakeholders. Effective leadership is essential for setting a shared technological vision, strategic goals, and securing stakeholder support, doing so ethically and responsibly. Recent literature highlights the importance of technology leaders' roles and skills in education for utilizing technological tools to address equity-based retention gaps and improve overall student retention (Anderson & Dexter, 2000, 2005; Miller, 2019).

During new technology adoption, leaders in this emerging AI Age are expected to combine technological knowledge with leadership skills (Hurt et al., 2014). They should focus not only on the technical aspects of tools' adoption but also on aligning with the university's vision, mission, and goals. This includes effective communication with internal and external stakeholders, and providing training and support for new technology use (Flanagan & Jacobsen, 2003; Hickman & Akdere, 2017; Miller, 2019). The adoption and utilization of educational technologies in higher education require a critical, selective, and strategic approach to technology adoption leadership (Jameson, 2013).

This paper addresses the problem of system-level risks (such as technological disruption, financial sustainability, workforce development, access and equity, public trust and perception of value of higher education) and future uncertainties (e.g., technology advancements, labor market evolution, geopolitical factors, health and safety, regulatory pressures and changes) in higher education, particularly when AI-driven predictions in teaching and administration work result in unintended negative consequences (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2023), including academic integrity issues, equitable access, privacy and data access, overreliance on technology, ethical considerations, financial implications. The research aims to provide insights into the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to provide ethical leadership navigating the uncertainties and demands of the emerging AI age. By addressing these concerns swiftly, educational stakeholders can mitigate potential risks and enhance the positive influence of AI tools in higher education.

This study aims to expand on a prior quantitative study (Titareva, 2025) by conducting qualitative research to identify key technology leadership skills, qualities, and responsibilities for the ethical and responsible adoption of AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) in HEIs. The research is motivated by the increasing adoption of AI technologies in universities to address resource constraints and improve student success, while recognizing the need for a deeper understanding of leadership requirements in this context.

The study's significance lies in its contribution to the limited empirical research on technology leadership in higher education, focusing on the essential skills and responsibilities for implementing AI-based EAS, while considering ethical implications and stakeholder buy-in.

The paper is organized as follows: a literature review describing key concepts related to the study, the methodology section covering the qualitative data collection, analysis, and coding, followed by a discussion on the findings. Further, the paper addresses the implications for ethical technology adoption in higher education, identifies limitations, and ends with opportunities for future research and conclusions.

Literature Review

Understanding contemporary technology leadership in postsecondary education requires reviewing definitions and literature on: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and AI in education (AIEd), AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) and Technology Leadership (TL) in HE.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Artificial Intelligence in Education (AIEd)

AI encompasses a variety of technologies and methods, not just one. It includes machine learning, deep learning, neural networks, voice recognition, natural language processing, and analytical and predictive statistics (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). In this study, we adopt the OECD (2019) definition of AI as a machine-based system capable of making predictions, recommendations, or decisions that affect real or virtual environments, guided by human-defined objectives. This definition was chosen for its relevance to the central AI tool used in this study - AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) in higher education.
Further, Hwang et al. (2020) describe Artificial Intelligence in Education (AIEd) as the application of AI technologies or programs in educational contexts to enhance teaching, learning, or decision-making (p. 1). AI, including AIEd, merges disciplines like AI science, education, psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, sociology, and anthropology (Becker, 2017; Luckin et al., 2016).
For example, AI tools can help in writing, enhancing lecture plans, and streamlining the process of identifying, selecting, and customizing study materials for diverse student needs (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2023). Moreover, the University of San Diego has gathered over 40 examples of diverse AI applications beneficial to educational stakeholders, including personalization, tutoring, grading, meaningful and helpful feedback to students, as well as data and learning analytics, scheduling, facilities management, and others.

Additionally, to student-facing tools, AIEd technologies are increasingly being utilized in various administrative areas of university such as: admissions, advancement and marketing, student services, infrastructure planning, library services, and others (UNESCO IESALC, 2023). Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) point out that AI in Education (AIEd) has been an emerging field in both general education and educational technology. Despite over 30 years of research, the theoretical and empirical foundation of AIEd is still in its early stages. The public release of ChatGPT 3.5 by OpenAI in November 2022 (OpenAI, 2022) and its subsequent versions, ChatGPT 4.0 in March 2023 (Weitzman, 2023) and ChatGPT 4o in May 2024 (OpenAI, 2024), as well as other competing large language models by Microsoft, Google and Anthropic, has led some faculty and administrative staff in HE to explore AI applications to enhance their work. Therefore, empirical research in AIEd has gained critical importance.

AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS)

Machine learning algorithms powered by AI technologies have been a common tool in educational institutions for identification and forecasting of students' academic progress (Aybek & Okur, 2019) for around a decade. Examining online data from a student's first semester can help to highlight potential academic challenges of students. This enables timely interventions that assist in enhancing student progress (Akçapınar et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2006). These technologies produce student profiles for future performance predictions and flag students at risk of staying behind in academic progress. AI-based EAS are commonly used for identifying students at risk during their first year and predicting potential undergraduate attrition (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Further, by examining data related to student engagement in digital learning environments, such as learning management systems, AI-based EAS generates visual dashboards. These dashboards highlight each student's potential progress, providing advisors and faculty members with additional information that helps to take informed actions to decrease dropout rates and improve student retention (Araka et al., 2020).

Universities worldwide, including University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro in Portugal, University of Canterbury in New Zealand, Georgia State University in the US, and Universitat Oberta de Catalunya in Spain, are utilizing Early Alert Systems (EAS) for student retention (UNESCO IESALC, 2023). The global implementation of these technologies in HEIs is still in its early stage, but rapidly scaling alongside the growth in AI tools development and increasingly complicated concerns facing college students and higher education. Additional empirical research is needed on the leadership necessary for pursuing, implementing, and maintaining AI-based tools. The planning and integration of these tools, the cultural shifts necessary, and considerations for ethical and equitable implications may be even more important than the technology and tools themselves. Better understanding the concerns and perceptions of students, faculty, staff, and administrators can make or break any adoption of AI tools in higher education.

Technology Leadership (TL) in Higher Education (HE)

EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit association dedicated to advancing higher education through IT, emphasizes that artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the role of higher education (HE) IT departments, making them more mission-driven, agile, and responsive to global technology changes (Steinour et al., 2018; Qian & Huang, 2019). Consequently, the concept of University 4.0 has emerged, mirroring the technological advancements of Industry 4.0 (Asabin et al., 2019; Lapteva & Efimov, 2016; Lukovics & Zuti, 2017). University 4.0 represents significant transformational shifts in modern HEIs, recognizing new technologies not just as pedagogical tools but as part of global changes affecting various aspects of modern universities. Thus, in University 4.0, technology leaders should focus both on technology and higher education (Yuting et al., 2022). Critically, technology leadership will not just reside within IT offices, as has often been the case. Other areas of campus, like Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Advancement, and more will need to lead alongside IT in the age of AI. Furthermore, as Generative AI has increased access to these different AI-based tools, technology leadership will also need to take place outside of just senior leadership.

Research on technology leadership in universities is in its inception stage (Ratajczak, 2022). Technology alone is not enough to add value to higher education institutions. It demands leaders

who can guide a comprehensive digital transformation across the campus and encourage cultural change. This involves embracing emerging technologies like AI, blockchain, Internet of Things (IoT), and others. Such technologies transform activities and streamline processes aligned with the institutional mission, improving user experiences and overall satisfaction (Miller, 2019).

Initially, Anderson and Dexter (2005) described educational technology leadership as decisions, policies, or actions that enable effective use of information technology in educational institutions (p. 80). This concept involves strategies, rules, and actions by institutional leaders to integrate and use technology effectively, supporting educational goals across the organization. As the TL concept in HE is still new, not many commonly used validated tools exist in the field. Further, Yuting et al. (2022) adopted the measurement instrument of technology leadership (TL) in education developed by ISTE Standards for Education Leaders (ISTE, 2018) and validated it within the HE context in China. Their scale of TL in HE includes subscales of equity and citizenship advocate, visionary planner, empowering leader, systems designer, and connected learner. This conceptualization of Technology Leadership (TL) in Education shows that the distinction between strategic and technological leaders in education is blurring. They are becoming interconnected, with leaders, irrespective of their IT or non-IT backgrounds, requiring a mix of hard and soft skills and resources for technology adoption in educational settings (Chowdhury et al., 2023). This change highlights the importance of a comprehensive, collaborative approach to technology leadership in education.

Current technology adoption models suggest that for successful adoption of AI-based tools like Early Alert Systems (EAS) in higher education institutions (HEIs), leaders must foster collaboration among diverse HEI stakeholders. They should align actions with the institutions' strategic plans, create effective data management policies, and nurture a culture balancing innovation with operational stability (Colvin et al., 2015; Ferguson et al., 2014; Tsai et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2019).

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to identify the skills, qualities, and responsibilities necessary for higher education leaders to ethically and responsibly guide the adoption of AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) at HEIs. The qualitative focus of this study extends the quantitative data previously collected on technology leadership by the first author because. The previous research was not able to provide an empirical basis for what was necessary to manage and support the human and change element of technological transformation in the age of AI. Thus the current study collected data to address the research question: "What are essential leadership skills, qualities, and responsibilities for implementing AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) in higher education?"

In the earlier study, the author empirically tested a validated measurement instrument for Technology Leadership (TL) in Higher Education (Yuting et al., 2022), examining its impact on the Intention to Use AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) in higher education institutions (HEIs). The method involved surveying administrative staff, faculty, and leaders at different levels (n = 222) at James Madison University (JMU). A key finding was the significant role of the Empowering Leadership subscale of TL in HE. It suggested that educational leaders with empowerment skills who motivate their teams could positively affect the intention, and

potentially the adoption, of AI-based EAS tools in their HEIs. The qualitative data from this study supported this finding.

Sample

At the end of the previous study survey, respondents were invited to leave their emails if interested in participating in follow-up focus groups. Twenty-nine respondents provided their e-mails. Following the initial study's analysis, the two authors contacted these individuals, offering several time slots for focus groups (FG) via Zoom. The focus groups took place in October 2023, with a total of six participants. FG1 had one participant, an administrative staff member from a unit under Academic Affairs at James Madison University - JMU (Participant 1). FG2 included two participants – a center head and faculty member (Participant 2) and an administrative staff member from Academic Affairs (Participant 3). FG3 comprised three participants – a leadership representative from the Department of University Studies (Participant 4), an administrative staff member from the College of Integrated Science & Engineering (Participant 5), and a leadership representative from Student Affairs (Participant 6) at JMU. While the number of participants in this study is limited, the depth and richness of the data collected through extensive conversations provides a meaningful empirical value for academic community and practitioners. Each interview resulted in detailed personal narratives and specific examples that address the research question in meaningful ways. The participants demonstrated high levels of engagement and candor in discussing their leadership experiences, resulting in nuanced insights that might not emerge from a larger but more superficial sample.

Data analysis

To ensure participant anonymity, audio recording began after participant introductions. Avoiding video recording of the Zoom meetings ensured that participants' names were not captured on the screen. Any names mentioned during the focus groups and transcribed into a Word document were replaced with [Name of Interviewee]. The three focus groups were transcribed using Riverside, an automatic software (riverside.fm). The author manually analyzed the data, identifying unique and common themes and codes across all three focus groups. The findings from this analysis are presented in the following section.

Findings

The analysis of three focus groups involving six participants was based on identification of main themes and codes (Saldaña, 2021), an addition to the quantitative data analyzed in a previous study (Titareva, forthcoming in 2025). Given the small number of participants in each group and overall, the qualitative data analysis was coded by two coders manually. Each theme and code is substantiated by direct statements below from the focus group participants.

Theme 1. Technology Leadership skills, qualities and responsibilities useful during the adoption of new technologies, including AI-based EAS in HEIs

The need for Technology Leadership (TL) and the potential characteristics of TL required for navigating new technologies in times of uncertainty and rapid changes is the first and most important theme identified throughout the focus group (FG) interviews. Interview participants

described this type of Technology Leadership as encouraging and supportive; empowering people and processes; and leading with clarity.

Encouraging and supportive. Generally, leadership as a characteristic is described as being encouraging and supportive for followers and of navigating change. But what does this mean in terms of actual behaviors and within the context of the technological landscape? One participant richly described this type of leadership in summarizing technological leadership at the institution,

> There are several here that are actually using the AI to help with some of their projects. So, I feel very encouraged by them. Anything that I need or if I run into a problem with the technology I have going on my computer, they are right on it. It's fixed and they're always encouraging us to take classes to learn. Very encouraging [leadership]. They are in, they are constantly encouraging us to better ourselves, to learn more, to participate, to take whatever classes we think that we need … they are more than supportive. Participant 1

Note how Participant 1 identified leadership and not just a technology leader. Technology Leadership was not necessarily someone leading by title, but in their behaviors, relationships, and communication.

One leadership behavior shared is that one leads by example, actually exploring and experimenting with AI themselves. This is especially important in this technological context as leadership needs to signal that exploring and learning with new AI technologies is fine. For example, no one should be punished for using AI tools if the leaders themselves are using and integrating AI tools into their work and lives. Participant 1 echoes this sentiment on the importance of leadership in the uncertain technological landscape later in the discussion, "Especially now, right now, because it's at the beginning edges of it, I think that they need to be instructed as much as possible on how to use it and what the ethics and the laws are regarding it and the limitations. And I'm glad to see that, you know, the governor's encouraging it."

> Authenticity is a leadership characteristic that is implied by Participant 1, but actually called out by a different participant. Participant 6 shared,
> Authenticity and a kind of forethought, like the value added to collective understanding is important and as leadership that seems to, it could be a principle that we use that authenticity is important.... respect and trust and ongoing innovation. If those things are not done, then of course the opposite could be true. The broken trust, there's frustration, the lack of adoption, all the negative outcomes. So, authenticity comes to mind when leadership skills.

Being present, leading by example, encouraging learning, and being responsive are examples of what authentic leadership may look like within the context of Participant 1. Participant 6 lays out the benefits and consequences of having technological leadership that is authentic, especially in the context of AI. They suggest that authenticity is necessary for leadership to build respect and trust, particularly for innovation, adoption, and change management. In the AI context, it is easy to identify in-authenticity if one is speaking about AI, but it is clear from examples and language

that they have never actually used any AI tool. This kind of leadership may actually hurt trust and slow or even reverse adoption and integration of AI.

Patience is an essential aspect of supportive and encouraging leadership within the AI and technology landscape. While understanding that change and adoption is a long term process is important in all leadership, this is especially true within the context of uncertainty in terms of time, technological implications, and potential threats to one's security and identity. For example, Participant 1 shared about the patience necessary within the context of floppy disks and the first computers,

> To sit down and really talk with them one-on-one to let them know what it's like, let them know what the benefits are, show it to them. A lot of people haven't seen it yet. It was like when the first computer came out and had the floppy, a lady that worked in my office never touched a computer, she was 20 years older, she would not touch it. She just was terrified of it. There was no way around it. Well, about a year later I finally convinced her into getting on the thing because there's no way she could break it. But it took me that long to kind of coax her into it, but it's gonna take somebody knowledgeable that can sit there and say, well I understand that concern, while over here is an option.

Leadership here was slow and no doubt trying, but this patience was a prerequisite for being able to encourage, gain the trust, and eventually support the resistant person in technology adoption.

Openness to reflection is another element to patience. Any attempt to slow down and ask questions during change management or technology adoption connects leadership to those that are likely most impacted by change. And those employees more often than not are thinking and talking about those questions amongst themselves. Participant 2 highlights this through its absence in the discussion of AI leadership on a college campus,

> I think that we need to rethink ownership. What does ownership look like? What does even honesty look like? What does collaboration look like? Even asking these questions and coming up with an answer that isn't, it looks like what we've always done is just clothed in fancy dress, is that's what leadership looks like and I don't feel like we're doing it.

A leader's disposition to appropriately slow change down will be perceived as supportive against a backdrop of acceleration where AI or other technological advances seem overwhelming and impossible to keep up with. That a leader is asking questions, reflecting, or merely creating space for others to reflect is evidence of patience, support, and can even come across as empowering.

Empowering people and processes. Technological leadership in the contemporary AI moment must prioritize empowerment, empowering people and developing processes for change and integration that themselves are empowering. Of course, many theories of leadership and leadership development have included empowerment. Transformational leadership, for instance, addresses empowerment through all four of its key principles; idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation. At its core, this approach to leadership is about helping people to understand purpose beyond themselves and challenge them to take ownership of their work or journey toward accomplishing their goals.

At a university, empowering people includes not just the employees, but also the students because the institution is first and foremost, an institution of higher learning. But for faculty and other employees working with students on learning, they themselves have to also feel empowered and supported in their own experimentation and adoption of AI. Participant 2 shared, “Leadership looks like teaching people, both faculty, students, and staff, not to be terrified of it. Like you said, it's everywhere. It's sculpting a lot of our decisions, and we can be much more symbiotic about it. We can be much more clever about it if we're just not afraid.” Technological leadership is guiding staff and faculty to not be afraid and even to possibly embrace the use of AI in their work, including teaching.

Even if staff and faculty don’t like using AI in their work and lives, empowerment can also come from understanding a larger purpose or motivation in navigating AI and other technologies. Participant 4 captures this well,

> I feel like we'll have to embrace it. I don't say that lightly, and I'm not saying that we have to like it, but we'll have to at some point have it in our lives, part of our lives. And I think we are really the responsible ones to teach our students, listen, there's lots of tools out there that we can use AI, but let's make sure we're all using them responsibly and ethically.

Within the context of higher education, technology leadership may look like reminding or prompting faculty, instructors, and staff that teaching can be a higher purpose. Helping students learn responsible and ethical AI use can be empowering to individuals within an organization and that may be sufficient to help motivate AI adoption, or at least familiarity. Or as Participant 4 put it, “we are really the responsible ones.”

Empowerment can also happen through open processes in addition to more direct leadership with individuals. Put differently, leadership can cultivate an environment through intentional process design that enables individuals within an organization to feel and be empowered. For example, Participant 5 offered transparency as one way for processes to include and value individuals. They said that “All these voices kind of be part of this process in terms of transparency ideally leads to that trust piece.” What they are suggesting is that including many or all of the perspectives impacted by AI in the process for creating AI policy, governance, and norms may yield a more transparent process and ultimately an end result that is more trusted. This is start contrast to the top-down approach shared by Participant 4,

> In terms of leadership though in my area with implementing it, it's basically from the top down like we need to use X system and that's the way it is. There's really no or seemingly there's no flexibility in terms of the systems that are used. But I mean in terms of maybe training is part of that but even then.

People feel more empowered as a result of a process where they can participate, having felt included, validated, and maybe even motivated by something larger than just themselves and their own individual work.

Leading with clarity. The saying goes that culture eats strategy for lunch. In the context of technology leadership and AI adoption, ambiguity feasts at the change management buffet. Effective leadership in the AI and technology space, particularly in the context of institutions of higher education, requires providing direct and clear guidance and policy. This is especially true in an uncertain terrain and among decentralized and sometimes non-hierarchical spaces, e.g., academic classrooms. If faculty and instructors are taking up the responsibility of leading students in AI usage through their teaching, they too need to provide clear instructions and guidance. For instance, Participant 3 highlights how they could lead with clarity by providing justification, "If you teach your students that this is a tool to be used within parameters or that by using this as a cheating tool, you're only cheating yourself." But it is not just enough to have clarity at the classroom level. Participant 4 shares how this kind of clear leadership is necessary at the institutional scale as well,

> How do we address these concerns, well, it's through transparency but through clear policies. And I keep hearing that over and over again from colleagues who are teaching at the faculty level. And they're saying, we need to have clear, established policies coming from, or even recommendations coming top down in terms of how do we deal with these AI issues in the classroom? Are they part of the honor council policies and procedures?

The lack of clarity at the organizational level may result in multiple or even dozens of approaches to AI usage and adoption at the micro-level. These participants are sharing from the context of teaching and classrooms in higher education. One can imagine how confusing or overwhelming this may be for students trying to navigate multiple different classroom expectations on top of other external commitments and pressures.

Theme 2. Perceptions about the current AI tools, including Early Alerts Systems (EAS) in HE

A second major theme emerging from the focus groups was how employees perceived the potential benefits of integrating AI tools into their work, department, and the institution. Focus group participants identified two main potential benefits of AI tools in HEIs: *1) assistance in administrative work; and 2) assistance with student success.*

Improving administrative processes is one clear potential benefit identified by employees of this higher education institution. They thought that AI tools could be used generally to augment or assist in the administrative work required to maintain colleges. For example, Participant 2 said "I feel like there has to be a way to use AI to automate some of the processes." Automation was a constant theme in the examples shared by participants across use cases. Participant 1 shared that they believed AI tools could impact and improve strategic planning,

> I know this year we had like several students that were in like three in a room. So maybe there's something that can be done with the AI as we're looking at that, that we say, okay, we never want to grow to 30,000. What do we need to do housing wise? And how can we use AI to go ahead and solve some of these other major issues that.. it can give us predictions of, okay, this is what it's gonna look like with 25,000 students. This is not just the classrooms, but the dining. It's everything, the dining, the classrooms.

AI tools may not only help with automation. Pulling and summarizing available information from different departments, and coming up with new marketing and administrative reporting products, would be more difficult to do for a single human administrator. At the same time, input of AI tools is the first step to speed up the administrative processes and analyze more data than a human could do in a given period of time. Another example provided by Participant 1 highlights the already realized advantages of integrating AI tools, they shared that

> [For flyers] I had no idea what to write. Searched and googled everything online, and there was nothing. So, then I went and used AI, and it was amazing what it was able to pull up, and all this information and history of things that we had no idea. So, then we could take that and actually adapt it to what we needed for our invitations that were going out.

Using AI tools can help users get started when they have little to no already established work to build off. But importantly, and as Participant 1 exemplifies, after the first AI tools' input, it is vital that humans fact-check the outputs.

Enhancing efforts at improving student success and retention is another major benefit anticipated from using AI tools across postsecondary education. Of course, what enhancing student success means varies across employee position and context. Even with that being said, there is great hope that adopting AI tools will yield such benefits. Within the context of advising, something like an AI-informed Early Alert System (EAS) can provide support with planning academic paths, serving as a supporting tool for advisors, who might potentially miss out on something while serving hundreds of students. For instance, Participant 3 provided the following example of her daughter's mishap when a human advisor missed on providing her with information that would help to declare a minor in classes she was taking,

> With advising, like it would catch that this advisor is making a mistake or maybe, yeah, not providing answers that could assist a student, that they may, you know, they may miss graduation because they didn't get these classes in and nobody caught it. My daughter was a student here. She didn't know that because she wasn't accepted into her major, she could still declare it as a minor and take the classes that she wanted to while she was waiting to be accepted.

Rather than providing AI-based support at the beginning of a task or project, this example showcases how AI tools could help employees toward the end of a process, ensuring that mistakes are prevented.

Another example shared within the student success context demonstrates how AI-based tools can leverage both system and individual level insights. For instance, AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) can help in student retention by categorizing a student's progress in three categories, e.g., green - on track, yellow - pay attention, red - a student is at risk of dropout. Participant's 1 statement on grouping students into different groups of progress demonstrates this,

> When we have the students and they're, let's say in the red, and you know that, that they're really struggling and, or they're in the yellow, that they're having some trouble. I

> think that it's excellent [in some way]... I think it's a godsend because the school can use this information to directly work with these students one-on-one. And I think you're going to see more students graduating. You're going to see less students dropping out.

Participant 1's EAS example shows how AI tools may be used along a wide spectrum of skills from data analysis and categorization to generating and actually sending messages.
Focus group particip
ants also referred to the example of classroom learning for how AI tool adoption may provide advantages within the context of student success. Participants talked about how AI tools can be used as artifacts or objects for reflection within the classroom learning environment. Faculty could ask students to explore AI tools within the disciplinary context and then critique or otherwise question the AI outputs, their value, or even the processes by which they were generated. Furthermore, Participant 5 suggested using AI tools from the faculty perspective to customize the study materials based on the progress of each individual student:

> I could see AI creating great opportunities in differentiation and asynchronous learning and teaching the students from where they are. I mean we've all had students sitting in class that are top of the class and really should be in a more advanced their knowledge level or their experience level could take them farther but they're limited within the scope of the curriculum that we can offer you know ... and then there are students that perhaps need not necessarily remedial but just a different mode of teaching... you know, accommodating a different learning style.

The use of AI-based tools here is another instance where individual faculty may benefit from the automation and ability of AI to generate lesson plans quickly across student contexts to empower faculty to spend more time on later order tasks and student support.

Theme 3. Critical discussions about AI tools in HEIs

The focus group participants mentioned concerns and risks stemming from diverse AI tools' adoption in HEIs in addition to their potential benefits. Ethical concerns and safety and control related concerns were the two major critical themes that emerged from the focus groups.

Defining and even understanding what the ethical use of AI tools means was one of the major critical concerns expressed from participants. For example, Participant 1 shared that "My biggest concern, I think it's about the ethics of it. It's about truly their understanding of what it is and how it can be used and understanding the benefits in all the different areas." This participants' insights reflect much of what has been shared within the AI literature about the role that definitions and AI literacy play in AI tool comfort level, adoption, skepticism, and policy. Even more basic than how we should ethically leverage the most advanced AI tools are the everyday individual decisions we will have to make as consumers and users of AI-enabled tools. Participant 5 frames it around comfort-level,

> I also have privacy concerns.... There are things that I openly embrace, and there are things that I am more reluctant to participate in. I am uncomfortable creating apps or using apps and creating accounts to access everything in my life. That still makes me uncomfortable. I'm not going to have a choice very much longer.

Basic understandings of AI-tools and how they work are a foundational and a-priori access point to begin considering some of the other questions and concerns around ethics and privacy.

Improved understanding and knowledge doesn't necessarily translate to ethical use of AI tools. While having more familiarity or comfort level might make one more likely or inclined to use AI-based tools, this disposition can also yield even more critical approaches to AI. Participant 2 captures this in their own life experiences and reflections,

> Black men with the same numbers as white men were deemed to be healthier than their white counterparts. And so they end up waiting on the transplant list at least twice as long, at least twice as long. So, there's lots of black men who've died on transplant lists. My father was one of them. He died on the transplant list … and he got bumped. But then he died not long after that had happened. So, we're seeing, I mean, this is a well-known, well-established fact for African-Americans that there is a disparate treatment and service gap for us in healthcare, and AI has been tweaked to perpetuate that. This is why I'm saying the human systems and the question of bias are so important for us to untangle because definitions of health are reinforcing the disparities that we really want AI to be able to close.

Even with the understanding of and a desire for how AI tools can be used to help close disparities, this participant shares how important it is to remain critical of how AI may be used. AI is not a neutral instrument, but can reflect biases from society or of the time. This same participant names this in the discussion as the "algorithms of oppression."

Given the ethical concerns of how AI tools may be used to knowingly or unknowingly exacerbate problems within a one's life, family, or community; questions of safety and control were a natural second theme from the focus groups. One participant framed the issue of control around plagiarism and ethics, Participant 1 shared that, "When I think of ethics, I'm thinking of plagiarism. I'm thinking of just in general when it comes to, OK, like I think there's certain things that they should not be in AI if you're using it. I think there's certain areas that people should not be allowed to go into." Within the education context, we typically think of plagiarism as a student copying or stealing for assignments without proper citation or giving credit to the original author(s). Here, the participant is referencing how AI tools are being developed without thought or concern to what they are being trained on, data integrated into them, or even shared from a user standpoint.

The increasing ubiquity of AI tools through its integration into all aspects of our lives only magnifies these concerns about control and safety. For example, Participant 6 said that AI is "In our clothes, in our bio makeup. To me, it's just a matter of time before we get there. It's not if, it's when. So, if that's the case, what are we doing to understand? It's not only benefits, but it's like a reliance on it." Furthermore, Participant 4 shared that "What I'm worried about is how dependent we've become, you know, the younger generations, we've become dependent on these tools." That AI and AI-based tools are everywhere is both a concern in and of itself and strengthens the other concerns shared about ethics, privacy, safety, and controlling how AI works or who has

access to it. Participant 1 captures all of these sentiments, including potential benefits, in this shared anecdote,

> I keep talking about the robot but okay, so my dad was at the hospital recently and he had this really tall robot that was sitting in the corner and every time my dad got out of bed, it told him to get in bed and it was great. It was like he was at his own babysitter right there because he was a follow hazard but you know, you don't want them to be able to take this and then have something that acts like it's a living person, you know, and start going into the other side of the bad side, which I see is, you know, rebalance control in the world and, you know, setting off the bombs and, you know, it's just in staying, staying safe and still keeping us the humans in control when it comes, and I'm ex-army, ex-military, so I'm thinking of nuclear bombs and stuff like that. I don't want that to be in a machine's hands. I want it to be in person.

Discussion

This paper argues that higher education institutions (HEIs) should look into the adoption of AI tools like EAS, focusing on solving student retention and accountability issues in HEIs (Alexander, 2020) in a *holistic, ethical and responsible way*. We call for effective technology leadership in setting a vision, strategic goals, and ethically engaging stakeholders. By technology leadership the authors understand not only university and department leaders with an IT background, but also university leaders who are part of the strategic planning and adoption of AI tools throughout university departments and functions. Also, this paper stimulates a new stream of thinking, where educational stakeholders (leadership and administrators, faculty, accrediting bodies, alumni, industry partners, and others) are encouraged to rethink current approaches to technology leadership, particularly in the age of accelerated AI-based changes. As is apparent across all three major themes, the situation requires not just a great leader with technological vision, but an entire approach to leadership, with everyday leaders across an organization, capable of ushering us through a technological age ripe with uncertainty and existential questions.

This study builds on the previous research in higher education that identified the necessary skills, qualities and responsibilities for leaders in higher education context during the adoption of AI tools, particularly AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) (Titareva, 2025). The purpose of this study was to build upon a previous quantitative study by employing qualitative research methods. A solely quantitative analysis of technology leadership, especially in the context of AI and EAS within higher education, might not have been sufficiently comprehensive at the stage when EAS technology is not yet commonplace in HEIs. Additionally, examining the presence/absence of technology leadership did not provide prescriptive recommendations for constituting it in the new context. Therefore, this study aimed to provide a deeper, more contextual understanding of the leadership competencies expected by followers for effectively integrating AI technologies in HEIs. The study addresses the main research question: "What are essential leadership skills, qualities, and responsibilities for implementing AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) in higher education?" Simultaneously, this discussion can be extended to other prevalent AI-based tools relevant for academia.

Prior research indicated that educational leaders with skills in empowerment and team motivation could positively influence the intention to adopt, and possibly the actual adoption of AI-based EAS tools in HEIs (Titareva, forthcoming in 2025). While the quantitative study was able to demonstrate the presence and statistical significance of empowerment and motivation for positive technological leadership, the study was not able to speak to what that actually looked and felt like from the perspective of members of the institution. The current study identified additional technology leadership skills, qualities and responsibilities expected by the followers. That empowerment and motivation came up organically in the interviews reinforces the findings of the quantitative research on technological leadership in the higher education AI landscape and further validates the qualitative insights shared here.

A few important recommendations for emerging technological leaders in the postsecondary AI landscape. First, educational stakeholders are encouraged to learn the basics of AIEd technologies, their pros and cons, and think how these technologies can be handled in an ethical and responsible way. Exploring, experimenting, and better understanding new technologies is essential to contemporary leadership in these uncertain, changing industries. This will go a long way to providing the kind of encouraging and supportive technological leadership that participants shared in the first theme.
Second, for many of us, AI-based technological breakthroughs revolutionize education without our notion and ability to influence it. At the same time, educational stakeholders will eventually have to accept that the technology has arrived, we have to react, and find a balanced approach to enhancing the benefits and mitigating the risks. Thus, number of several potential tactical steps for universities that wish to smoothly navigate Industry 4.0 and create University 4.0 is to open their AI Literacy & Ethics centers, where faculty is offered regular workshops on the latest AI tools development applicable to HE context, dedicated professionals provide class visits and workshops on ethical and responsible use of AI tools for students, university stakeholders can convene and share their best practices, questions and concerns, as well as where guidelines are coming from in terms of AI recommendations for the campus.

Third, it is important for technology leaders and staff on the university campuses to recognize the roots of the emotional fear among the faculty and staff. Recognizing that adopting or integrating AI-based tools is more about people and affective responses than technical proficiencies is critical to the ethical use of AI in education. Focus group participants shared their concerns and potential benefits and noted that many were tied to personal, and sometimes emotional, experiences that substantially framed their perceptions of AI and openness to technological leadership. Leading with empathy and support will go a long way to helping students, staff, and faculty critically and genuinely explore the use of AI-based tools and systems. Furthermore, a decent amount of fear or trepidation regarding the use of AI in education relates back to one's own job satisfaction or even security. For example, Participant 6 shared that,

> People are afraid to use the technology, not because they aren't familiar with it and they don't want to use it, it's because they don't want to be caught between a lock and a hard place and get in trouble and sanctions be put on them or their own unit.

An employee's fear may be based on the perception that their job will partially or completely be replaced with AI. Or an employee may understand AI as a threat to their skill level, confidence, or own ability to perform. Or as shared here by one of the focus group participants, it might be

that employees fear their job security could be jeopardized by the unintended misuse of AI. No matter the reason, employers, leaders and supervisors must do more to understand what is motivating skepticism, concern, or avoidance of integrating AI-based tools.

Fourth, AI Literacy among educational stakeholders is a crucial next step in bringing awareness and starting to handle the so-called AI in Education crisis across campuses globally. Improving awareness about and ability to interact with AI on a everyday user basis would also address prior concerns about ethics, privacy, inappropriate uses, and so much more. As Participant 5 shared, "So, technology is really the basis of what we're doing. And technology literacy is really important…We don't have any structured leadership." Technological leadership here means providing clarity around what AI is, how to properly use it, understand it, and work ethically with it.

Lastly, we want to highlight important implications for leadership, campuses' transitions and new technology implementation in the HE context. Educational institutions need to set guardrails and recommendations to minimize the potential harm from unethical or unregulated use of the AI tools on their campuses. Also, leaders should consider potential implications for equity and access. As Participant 6 has mentioned,

> Maybe there is a future that these traditional institutions exist in fewer numbers and only maybe the most elite school systems are available to people. Or maybe the flip. You know, only the very, I guess it would be those who can pay for it, to pay for the very traditional thing, would get that thing. Like the [Name of the Ivey League school in the US] would probably not go away anytime soon…

Thus, as one of the futuristic scenarios predict (when technologies could be embedded in our bodies and help us navigate our lives), this could lead to the university systems going back to the 16th-17th century, when higher education was available only to the families and students who could pay for it.

Implications

Technology leadership in higher education should be holistic, encompassing various skills and qualities beyond technical expertise. It should focus on ethical and responsible AI tools adoption, emphasizing stakeholder engagement, awareness training, and the cultivation of an open and supportive technological environment. The future of technology leadership in higher education, particularly regarding the adoption of AI tools like Early Alert Systems (EAS) (but not limited only to them), is influenced by several key findings of this study.

Essential Leadership Skills and Qualities. The study highlights the need for technology leaders to be encouraging, supportive, authentic, and skilled in stimulating AI awareness activities and training. Leaders should also focus on minimizing fears associated with AI tools, setting ethical boundaries for their use, ensuring transparency, and building trust. At the same time, leaders should foster an environment that encourages administrative staff and faculty in HEIs to be open to new technologies. This includes facilitating the automation of slow

administrative processes and enhancing mentoring, advising and providing support during technology adoption.

Technology Leadership Beyond IT Backgrounds. Effective technology leadership in higher education requires more than IT expertise. It includes university and department leaders involved in strategic planning and across various university departments and functions. Technology cannot be a stand-alone solution, it needs humans, leadership and change of culture for it successfully to be implemented and used in organizations in the long-term. Effective leadership is essential for setting a shared technological vision, strategic goals, and securing stakeholder support, doing so ethically and responsibly. During new technology adoption, leaders in this emerging AI Age are expected to combine technological knowledge with leadership skills by looking not only on the technical aspects of tools' adoption but also on aligning with the institutions' vision, mission, and goals. Engaging in conversations between AI experts and higher education staff and faculty is crucial. This could be helpful in rethinking the definitions of ownership, honesty, and collaboration in the context of AI technology.

Equity & Ethics in Technology Leadership. Discussions about AI and leadership in HE should consider broader issues like equity, inclusion, data privacy, and ethics, going beyond technological aspects. When using AI tools like Early Alert Systems (though, not limited only to them), it is vital to address fairness and the psychological impact on diverse educational stakeholders, acknowledging that human biases can influence these systems. The evolving nature of AI discipline and technology requires human decision-makers in higher education to retain authority and have comprehensive technology leadership training. Delay in addressing these concerns could lead to negative outcomes like job losses, lagging in innovation, and risks to educational equity and data privacy. Thus, proactive leadership emphasizing ethical considerations and AI literacy within the HE context is vital. It is also important for university top and middle management leaders (both with IT and non-IT backgrounds) to actively engage in emerging technology strategies development that prioritize ethical considerations, continuing development in technology leadership, and education in AI discipline and tools' use.

Limitations

This study's main limitation is its qualitative approach and data collection from only one university in the southeast of the United States, which minimizes broad generalizations to other higher education institutions both in the US and globally. For a more robust validation of these findings, further empirical research across diverse institutions and geographies is required.

Further, the study's participant pool might not represent the diversity found in the broader higher education landscape. This includes variations in ethical, racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and academic backgrounds, which could influence perceptions and experiences with AI tools' adoption in higher education. By including the diverse respondents provides several advantages: it improves fairness and equity aspects of the research by including diverse voices and lens on the research question(s), diverse sample might influence the view on the required leadership skills during the AI age, researching heterogeneous groups can lead to unexpected insights, and results across diverse samples can be more relevant across different contexts and populations.

It is also important to note that the interpretive nature of qualitative research can introduce researcher bias in data analysis and interpretation. This could affect the objectivity and reliability

of the findings. Also, looking at additional, more prevalent AI-based tools in HEIs, for example, large language models like OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Gemini, Microsoft's Co-pilot, Anthropic's Claude, Meta's AI could provide additional insights guiding the academic institutions what skills their leaders should train and develop in order to be ready for AI Revolution in the field. Addressing these limitations in future research would involve expanding the geographic and institutional scope, diversifying participant demographics, incorporating a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, and regularly updating the research to keep pace with technological advancements.

Future Research

The current study's focus on AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) in a single higher education institution provides a foundation for future research in several key areas.

Future research should aim to include a more diverse range of higher education institutions across different geographic regions. This potentially could enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide insights into how various educational contexts influence the adoption and impact of AI technologies and tools in HEIs.

Incorporating a mix of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research designs can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in AI tools adoption in higher education. This multifaceted approach would allow for the validation and extension of the current study's findings.

Further, future research should pay special attention to how AI tools' adoption impacts different educational stakeholders demographics, particularly marginalized and underrepresented groups. This would ensure that AI tools' adoption in HE considers inclusivity and equity.

Also, more research is needed on the ethical implications and privacy concerns surrounding AI tool's adoption in higher education. This includes studying the implications of data handling, consent, and transparency in decision making and suggestions by AI-based predictive analytics tools.

The field of AI in Education (AIEd) is 30+ years old (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). However, for all these years it has been mainly conceptual and is underdeveloped in terms of robust theoretical and empirical base. Additionally, after the public release of ChatGPT 3.5 in November 2022 (OpenAI, 2022), and the next versions of ChatGPT 4.0 in March 2023 (Weitzman, 2023) and ChatGPT 4o in May 2024 (OpenAI, 2024), HE leadership, faculty and staff started exploring how to leverage available AI tools to guarantee the ethical and responsible approach to the tools' adoption and use by diverse HE stakeholders, including HE management, staff, faculty and students. Empirical academic research in the AIEd field has become critically important.

The research in terms of future leaders in HE and the required and expected characteristics, skills, attitudes that effective leaders have in the context of AI, is crucial. This might be the time when humanity's epistemological approach to education (addressing the question "how we know what we know?" and "how we build knowledge") might shift to ontological stance ("what is the

nature of being and what is reality in the AI Era?"), is an intriguing avenue for future academic research (Office Hours with EAB, 2024).

Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of technology leadership in the ethical and responsible adoption of AI tools in higher education, particularly in the context of AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS). The findings show that effective technology leadership extends beyond technical skills, requiring skills in fostering openness to technology, providing continuous AI awareness training, and ensuring ethical and responsible use of AI tools.

This study is a call to action for higher education institutions and leaders of different levels to embrace AI technologies sensitively and responsibly, ensuring that their adoption helps to improve educational outcomes without compromising ethical standards and equity.

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Competing Interests

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Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to the study conception, design, IRB application preparation, and data collection and analysis. The initial draft of the manuscript was prepared by Dr. Tatjana Titareva.

Both authors worked equally during the review and editing stage of the first version of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

Data is provided within the manuscript. IRB protocol . The authors have obtained the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study within James Madison University (JMU) where the data has been collected. IRB approval nr. 23-4186.

APPENDIX A

Table 1

Identified themes and codes in terms of skills, qualities and responsibilities relevant to educational leaders during the adoption of AI-based Early Alert Systems (EAS) in the HE settings

Theme (T)	Code (C)
T1. Technology Leadership skills, qualities and responsibilities useful during the adoption of new technologies, including AI-based EAS in HEIs	*C1.1: Encouraging and supportive leadership*
	C1.2: Empowering people and processes
	C1.3: Leading with clarity
T2. Perceptions about the current AI tools, including Early Alerts Systems (EAS) in HE	*C2.1:* A*ssistance in administrative work*
	C2.2: Assistance with student success
T3. Critical discussions about AI tools in HEIs	*C3.1: Ethical concerns*
	C3.2: Safety and control related concerns

Equity in Action: Transformative Leadership and Anti-Racist Praxis in Canadian K-12 Schools

Ayodeji Osiname
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon Canada

Abstract

This paper examines how Canadian K-12 schools, amidst growing diversity, have historically marginalized certain student groups, perpetuating inequities. It explores the roles of school principals in reversing these trends and creating inclusive, equitable, and safe environments for all. The paper uses two theoretical frameworks—Transformative Leadership theory and Anti-Racist theory—to guide principals in fostering inclusive school cultures. The synergies and distinctions between these frameworks are analyzed to advocate for an integrated approach. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for school leadership. School leaders must engage in self-reflection, collaboration, and resilience to cultivate social justice-oriented school cultures. The integration of Transformative Leadership and Anti-Racist theory equips principals with the strategies needed to challenge inequities and foster inclusive environments. The paper contributes to the discourse on educational leadership by offering a dual-theoretical perspective demonstrating how these frameworks can complement each other to advance equity and inclusion in diverse school settings.

As school communities across Canada continue to grow in diversity, they are increasingly shaped by differences in race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and socioeconomic status. While this diversity enriches the educational experience, it has also led to persistent educational inequalities, exclusion, and disparities in academic outcomes, particularly for marginalized groups. For example, Indigenous students, Black students, and those from low-income backgrounds often face lower graduation rates and higher dropout rates compared to their peers (Fleras, 2017; Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017; Shankar et al., 2020). In addition, LGBTQ+ students frequently report experiences of discrimination, bullying, and a lack of inclusivity in school environments (Kosciw et al., 2022). Similarly, students with disabilities often face barriers to inclusion, as well as instances of marginalization and exclusion within educational settings (Taylor et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2016). These inequities are reflected in both academic performance and in students' sense of belonging, safety, and overall well-being within the school system.

Historically, Canadian schools have responded to diversity in ways that have often privileged certain groups while marginalizing others. For example, the educational system has struggled to meaningfully integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and teaching, contributing to lower educational outcomes for Indigenous youth (Battiste, 2008; Battiste, 2013). Similarly, students from racialized communities may encounter systemic barriers that impede their educational success, from biased curriculum content to discriminatory practices by educators (Dei, 2000,

2001; Dei et al., 200). These disparities in educational opportunities are compounded by the intersectionality of multiple forms of marginalization, making it crucial for school leadership to actively address and dismantle these barriers.

In this context, school leadership that actively involves teachers and staff plays a critical role in addressing the long-standing trends of educational inequalities and fostering inclusive, equitable learning environments for all students. School principals are charged with creating safe and supportive environments where every student, regardless of their background, feels valued, included, and respected. This requires not only knowledge and skills but also the commitment to lead with a focus on social justice and equity. If Canadian schools are to genuinely serve the common good, school leaders must be equipped to challenge practices that perpetuate marginalization and exclusion (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015).

This paper identifies two theoretical frameworks that can guide school principals in building inclusive school cultures: *Transformative Leadership Theory* and *Anti-Racist Theory*. These two perspectives are compared to demonstrate how they can inform Canadian school leaders. *Transformative Leadership theory* begins with a commitment to justice and equality, challenging inequitable practices and promoting not only individual achievement but also the collective good (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). This theory emphasizes empowerment, hope, and activism—principles that can inspire school leaders to take bold actions in support of marginalized students. *Anti-Racist theory*, on the other hand, focuses on addressing issues of race, power, and privilege, critically examining how racial hierarchies shape the experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Dei, 2000; Kendi, 2023). By integrating these frameworks, Canadian school leaders can better understand and address the specific needs of marginalized student populations, promoting educational environments where diversity is celebrated, and all students are given the opportunity to succeed.

Research has shown that creating and sustaining an inclusive culture is a complex and ongoing process that requires continuous self-examination and thoughtful reflection by school leaders and all members of the organization (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015; Wasserman, et al., 2006). Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) explain that building and fostering inclusive schools that meet the diverse needs of students is a complex and difficult task. School leaders face enormous challenges in building a culture where every student, along with everyone else, feels valued, safe, respected, and included (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). However, Wasserman et al. (2006) found that effective school principals met numerous challenges from within the school, the community, and beyond. School leaders who are committed to social justice attend not only to the dimensions of diversity, but also to multiple aspects of leadership—from student achievement to school structures, curricula, instruction, safety, behavior, culture, and community (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015).

Furthermore, the growing demographic shift in Canada necessitates school leaders who can advocate for and act as agents of cultural change, equipped with the knowledge, strategies, support, and courage to make curricula, instruction, student engagement, and family partnerships culturally responsive (Cooper, 2009; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). As such, school principals must approach leadership as a collective process, where collaboration is key to creating inclusive schools and communities (Ryan, 2006). Transformative leadership and anti-racist theories offer

appropriate frameworks to guide school principals in building and sustaining inclusive school cultures.

Transformative Leadership Theory

Transformative leadership is committed to concepts such as promise, liberation, hope, empowerment, activism, risk, social justice, courage, and revolution to bring about social transformation (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). It starts by challenging inappropriate uses of power and privilege that create inequity and injustice (Cooper, 2009; Dantley, 2003; Shields, 2022; Quantz, et al., 1991). Caldwell et al. (2012) describe transformative leadership as an ethics-based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term interests of stakeholders and society and honoring the moral duties that organizations owe to their stakeholders. The authors state that transformative leadership integrates ethical mandates, behavioral assumptions, and standards of excellence that are important in leading successfully. Shields (2022) defines transformative leadership as a reciprocal process whereby one or more individuals engage with others in a way that leaders and followers raise one another to a higher level of motivation and morality. Shields (2022) explains that transformative leadership is a value-based endeavor and can encourage change in any social relationship. Transformative leaders afford all students in the school the opportunity to contribute and participate in a democratic learning environment. Thus, transformative leadership creates a personal connection and displays moral principles that help followers to examine their lives, fulfill their potentials, and create a better world (Caldwell et al., 2012; Cooper, 2009; Dantley, 2003; Shields, 2022).

Leadership does not reside in an individual but in the relationship between individuals (Cooper, 2009; Ryan, 2006). Transformative leadership theory is characterized by a shared vision in pursuit of a grand ideal to create personal relationships that bring about the best in others and ultimately to change the world (Shields, 2022; Quantz et al., 1991). Shields (2022) explains that leadership becomes meaningful when leaders demonstrate a genuine commitment to the welfare and growth of individuals. Transformative leadership demonstrates a commitment to the well-being of followers which makes leaders credible and trustworthy (Quantz et al., 1991). Caldwell et al. (2012) affirm this notion that transformative leaders share an authentic concern for the welfare of others and encourage their growth to create a better world. Transformative leadership is perceived as authentic and genuine because it possesses the ability to touch hearts, inspire great sacrifices, and demonstrate courage to change the world.

Transformative leadership theory places the ethical responsibility of working for the greater good within the role of the leader (Cooper, 2009; Dantley, 2003; Quantz et al.,1991). Dantley (2003) describes how transformative school leaders are moral agents with responsibilities to ground their decisions and professional behavior in deliberate reflection of their moral values. The author explains four reasons that the conduct of these leaders should be intentionally moral:

1. Schools serve as a moral socialization function in society.
2. The status of children as minors means that they have little voice in determining the quality, quantity, and content of their school experiences.
3. School leaders themselves are moral agents; their actions and decisions are grounded in deliberate reflection and actions.

4. School leaders focus on the well-being of those in the learning community; their moral behavior is evidenced in their sensitivity to those who are marginalized.

As such, the moral duties of transformative school leaders allow them to reject ideologies and practices steeped in blatantly biased and color-blind practice to transform the school (Cooper, 2009; Dantley, 2003).

Transformative leadership theory recognizes the need for a school leader to begin with critical reflection and analysis and to work through responsibilities with enlightened understanding and actions that ensure that every member of the school is provided, as much as possible, with a level playing field (Shields, 2022). Transformative leadership empowers the school leader to engage in self-reflection, systematically analyze the school, and confront inequities regarding race, gender, class, language, and sexual orientation (Cooper, 2009). Transformative leaders are leaders who encourage commitment to action, convert followers to leaders, and become influential agents of change (Cooper, 2009). Ncube (2010) affirms that transformative leaders connect with followers and earn their support, trust, and commitment, bringing out the best in them. Thus, transformative leadership theory would enable school leaders to negotiate and work to effect both educational and broader social change and to create a more inclusive, equitable and deeply democratic notion of education (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

Exemplary leadership that can identify inequities and help to make the realities of change happen is an example of transformative leadership. Brown (2006) states that to attain excellence and to create and sustain inclusion, there must be effective school leadership present. A transformative leader is one who provides guidance, direction, and influence for others to bring about fundamental change (Brown, 2006). Shields (2022) outlines the responsibilities of transformative leaders as initiating structural transformations, organizing political spaces, and fostering dialectical rather than hierarchical relationships between leaders and those they lead. Shields (2022) explains that transformative leaders must be prepared to work from within dominant social formations to exercise effective oppositional power, and to be activist voices for change and transformation. Shields (2022) clarifies eight elements of transformative leadership. To accomplish their tasks, transformative leaders need to balance both critique and promise; to effect deep and equitable changes; to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks that generate inequity; to challenge inappropriate use of power and privilege; to emphasize both individual achievement and public good; to focus on liberation, democracy, equity, and social justice; and finally, to focus on interdependence, interconnectedness, and global issues. Adopting transformative leadership requires understanding how it would impact the historically bureaucratic structure of schools, and the traditionalist discourse used to describe them (Quantz et al.,1991). Using these tenets, the following section provides a summary of transformative leadership in action.

Transformative Leadership in Action at Maple Valley Secondary School (MVSS)

In Manitoba, Canada, Maple Valley Secondary School (MVSS) (pseudonym) faced longstanding challenges, including a significant achievement gap among students from marginalized communities, particularly Indigenous and immigrant populations. Under the leadership of Principal Kalid Kaur (pseudonym), the school adopted a transformative leadership framework to address systemic inequities and foster an inclusive educational environment. The author engaged

in an extended conversation with Principal Kaur to understand how she worked to build equitable, socially just, and inclusive learning environments and experiences for all students. This engagement emerged from the author's previous study, published in the *Journal of Improving Schools* (author's name withheld for blind review), which was conducted with school administrators in Manitoba, Canada.

This case study drew insights from a selected group of school administrators focusing on their lived experiences and patterns of behavior in relation to their leadership approaches. The study employed semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions designed to explore complex issues related to building inclusive schools. The author designed an interview protocol to elicit reflective narratives around leadership practices, equity initiatives, and challenges related to students' inclusion and integration. These interviews provided a rich, detailed account of how principals interpreted and enacted different leadership approaches within their unique school contexts. This process allowed the author to critically examine how the principals' leadership practices aligned with goals of equity, inclusion, and social justice. To enhance the credibility and accuracy of the findings, follow-up interviews were conducted with each principal. These sessions served to clarify initial responses and allowed participants to reflect and comment on the researcher's interpretations and emerging themes. This process of member checking ensured that the findings authentically represented participants' perspectives.

The data were analyzed using both open coding and NVivo software, although the open coding process was the primary analytic tool. Open coding was used to segment and label data based on recurring phrases, actions, and concepts emerging from the principals' language. Interview transcripts were compiled and responses to each interview question were organized into separate documents to facilitate thematic comparison. During the coding process, the researcher used the participants' own words to preserve authenticity and ensure that meaning was grounded in their lived experience. This approach allowed for the development of key themes that reflected how the participants conceptualized and enacted their leadership styles.

Each participant's narrative was preceded by descriptive contextual information, which provided insight into their school settings and professional backgrounds. This contextualization enriched the analysis and enabled a more nuanced understanding of how leadership practices were shaped by specific institutional and community dynamics. The findings were synthesized into a narrative discussion, organized thematically, and interwoven with relevant literature on leadership. This format allowed for a critical presentation of the principals' leadership journeys, demonstrating both challenges and promising practices in their efforts to build inclusive schools.

The following brief example of Principal Kaur's leadership illustrates transformative leadership in action and demonstrates how it can provide practical guidance for school leaders committed to fostering equitable, socially just, and inclusive learning environments in Canada and beyond. In the following vignette, the practical application and core principles of transformative leadership are evident. Although this is merely a cursory overview of the discussions that led to the school's transformation, it clearly demonstrates the power of adopting an approach guided by transformative leadership theory.

1. **Balancing Critique and Promise**

Principal Kaur critiqued systemic inequities without assigning blame to individual students, families, or teachers, thereby overcoming the common tendency to place responsibility for lack of success on students' circumstances rather than the school's approach. She began with a listening campaign, holding open forums with students, parents, and teachers to understand their experiences with systemic inequities. She acknowledged the historical neglect of marginalized groups in the school system while promising tangible changes rooted in collaboration and equity. Transformative leaders engage in dialogue and discussion to clarify roles and responsibilities for student success. The transformative school leader will not only critique unfairness but make changes that would bring the promise of equity and inclusion to those outside of the mainstream (Dantley, 2003; Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

2. **Effecting Deep and Equitable Changes**
   Transformative school leaders need to support teachers to develop strategies that would help all students attain high academic standards. They can provide professional development and training for teachers on how to support students who are disadvantaged to meet their pressing needs (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). MVSS conducted an equity assessment to identify disparities in resource allocation, extracurricular access, and academic performance. The school prioritized funding for support programs, including free tutoring and mental health resources for underserved students. Implementing this mandate requires understanding yourself and your non-negotiables, as well as your community and school (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

3. **Deconstructing and Reconstructing Knowledge Frameworks**
   Transformative school leaders must carefully and consistently engage in the deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge frameworks (i.e., social or cultural knowledge) (Shields, 2022). They disrupt old knowledge that perpetuate deficit thinking and inequity and replace it with new frameworks of inclusion and equity (Brown, 2006; Shields, 2022). Principal Kaur led efforts to decolonize the curriculum, collaborating with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and local cultural organizations. She worked with teachers to provide new teaching materials integrated Indigenous histories, immigrant narratives, and global perspectives, creating a curriculum that reflected the diversity of the student body. Confronting inequity wherever it exists and striving to ensure the success of traditionally marginalized students are central to transformative leadership theory (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

4. **Challenging the Inappropriate Use of Power and Privilege**
   Transformative leaders ensure that all voices are heard, dissenting perspectives are expressed safely, and all ideas are carefully considered (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). Principal Kaur advocated for equity in student leadership roles. She restructured the selection process for the student council to include proportional representation from marginalized groups, ensuring diverse voices in school decision-making. The advocacy changed the culture, the tone, and the morale of the school. Transformative leaders strive to redistribute power from a top-down leadership approach to a more collaborative model, ensuring that all stakeholders actively participate in

decision-making (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

5. **Emphasizing Individual Achievement and Public Good**
   Transformative school leaders work to establish equitable, school-wide practices that promote unity rather than division among groups (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). These leaders employ strategies such as regular school-community meetings, mentoring programs, and similar initiatives to drive school improvement and reform. They actively cultivate strong community relationships and take responsibility for involving families and the broader school community in fostering an inclusive school culture (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). MVSS launched the Maple Mentors program, connecting students with professionals in various fields to inspire individual achievement. In addition, the school initiated a community garden project, teaching students' sustainable practices while providing fresh produce to local food banks. This program enabled students to develop a sense of belonging within the school community and to appreciate their connections to one another and the school. This tenet recognizes the importance of individual achievement and the development of competency and self-confidence, while also emphasizing the value of activities that foster collective efficacy and a sense of community (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

6. **Focusing on Liberation, Democracy, Equity, and Social Justice**
   Transformative school leaders must prioritize liberation, democracy, equity, and justice (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022) by fostering an environment that welcomes and respects everyone's full participation in the school. Transformative school leaders work toward comprehensive philosophical school reforms that are focused on the principles of equity, success, and social justice (Cooper, 2009; Shields, 2022). School success is demonstrated through the parity of achievement of students across racial, ethnic, cultural, and social classes (Riehl, 2000). At MVSS, principal Kaur encouraged students to establish equity and justice committees, including an Indigenous Student Council and a Multicultural Club. These groups worked with staff to design initiatives promoting anti-racism, reconciliation, and social justice education within the school. This tenet also involves shifting from general principles related to transforming underlying structures and school-wide policies to a focus on curriculum and pedagogy (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

7. **Focusing on Moral Courage and Activism**
   Transformative school leaders need to acknowledge the patterns of power as they affect marginalized groups (Brown, 2006; Shields, 2022). When incidents of racial discrimination surfaced, Principal Kaur did not shy away from addressing them head-on. She implemented mandatory anti-racism training for staff and students, even in the face of resistance from individuals who questioned its necessity. She also took the risk of apologizing to parents and the community for a situation for which she was not responsible. Although transforming the school is difficult and risky (Brown, 2006), the transformative school leaders must demonstrate moral courage and a willingness to take risks and become actively engaged in the struggle of creating schools that are more

equitable, inclusive, and socially just (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

8. **Focusing on Interdependence, Interconnectedness, and Global Issues**
   Transformative school leaders must encourage teachers and students to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for world citizenship (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). Through a partnership with the Manitoba Global Education Network, MVSS introduced global citizenship workshops. Students participated in projects addressing climate change and poverty, connecting their local community efforts to broader global challenges. Teachers ensure that students understand the importance of taking responsibility for the welfare of others, recognizing how events in one part of the world can impact those in other areas. Transformative school leaders assist teachers to develop pedagogical approaches that would create global understanding for all students (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

Results and Impact

Within three years, MVSS saw remarkable improvements. Graduation rates among Indigenous and immigrant students increased by 25%, and participation in extracurricular activities doubled. The school became a hub for equity-driven education, with Principal Kaur receiving recognition for her leadership in advancing reconciliation and inclusion among her peers and in the province. This case highlights how transformative leadership principles when applied thoughtfully and collaboratively can drive systemic change and create an equitable, inclusive learning environment in schools. Although the success at MVSS demonstrates the power of transformative leadership in addressing systemic inequities, a deeper and complementary theoretical lens such as anti-racist education provides additional insights into the structures and ideologies that must be challenged to sustain equity and inclusion in schools.

Anti-Racist Education Theory

Anti-racist education refers to an active resistance to the way in which knowledge, status, value, and competence have been framed to give preference to the dominant groups' interests (Dei, 2000, 2001; Kendi, 2023; Thompson, 1997; St. Denis, 2007). The anti-racist education model challenges the denial of the significance of race in teaching and learning and contests the rejection of racial differences in social practices and actions (Dei, 2001; Kendi, 2023; St. Denis, 2007). The model views schools as contested public spheres and as political sites for the reproduction of power and social inequity (St. Denis, 2007; Kendi, 2023). Questions of power and equity are at the forefront of anti-racist education (Dei, 2000). Anti-racist education poses crucial questions for educators: How can they alter the dominant structures through which knowledge is produced? How will school leaders create space for divergent and oppositional voices to exist? (Dei, 2000; St. Denis, 2007). These questions mean that effective teaching and learning demands a clear positioning of one's politics, because knowledge is never neutral—it is always contested and political (Dei, 2000; Kendi, 2023; St. Denis, 2007). Anti-racist education involves educational advocacy for social change through questioning and analyzing the structures that produce or reproduce inequity (Dei, 2000, 2001; St. Denis, 2007).

The saliency of race in anti-racist theory cannot be overemphasized. Anti-racist theory uses

racial identity as a starting point in pursuit of a politics of change that subverts the hegemonic practices of the dominant group (Dei et al., 2000; Kendi, 2023). Dei et al. (2000) explain that anti-racist theory operates from a philosophical standpoint that the identities of individuals have both spiritual and material bases and that the distinction between personal and social identity is useful as an entry point for a transformative change. Dei (2000) further explains that anti-racist theory holds certain assumptions about the nature of human existence and the complexities of the social realities that undergird the critical understanding of identities. Anti-racist theory uses a discourse of identity that fulfils individuals' politics, desires and interests in calling for social transformation (Dei, 2000; Kendi, 2023). Dei (2000), Dei et al. (2000) and Kendi (2023) call on educators to understand racial hierarchies that shape our schools, workplaces, and other institutional settings, recognize the pervasiveness of racism in the society, and face these challenges for social change. Anti-racist education rejects oppressive political practices and discourses that seek to displace race in the school and society (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000; Kendi, 2023; St. Denis, 2007).

Anti-racist pedagogies utilize the experiences and cultural knowledges of diverse students as effective resources and tools for educational change (Dei, 2000). Dei (2000) and Dei et al. (2000) affirm that anti-racist pedagogical practices reflect the diverse bodies, histories, and experiences of students in today's classrooms. Such knowledge would provide interpretations of difference and guide how curricula should reflect diverse cultures (Kendi, 2023; St. Denis, 2007). Anti-racist education sees educators as dealing with marginalization and exclusion in school contexts by, instead, centering all human experiences in the learning process (Dei, 2000, 2001; St. Denis, 2007). Dei et al. (2000) offer a framework that forms the basis of curricular, instructional, and pedagogical development for teachers and educators towards anti-racist praxis. The framework forms a critical integrative approach to inclusive education based on an anti-racist approach and includes the following:

- integration of diverse knowledges (e.g., indigenous, spiritual, cultural and/or community knowledge)
- recognition and respect for differences in backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives
- identification and action for social and educational change: equity, access and social justice
- facilitation of the important roles of parents and community

Integration of Diverse Knowledges

The integration of diverse knowledge works towards the agency and empowerment of oppressed groups (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000). This approach calls educators to recognize the linkage between identity, schooling, and knowledge production. The framework highlights three sources of knowledge that have been marginalized—indigenous, spiritual, and community knowledge—and calls for the integration of such knowledges into curricula (Dei et al., 2000). For example, Indigenous knowledges can be used to decolonize and reform conventional practices because they are rooted in and articulated through the language and cognitive abilities of minority students (Aikenhead, 2001; Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 1994; Dei, 2000; St. Denis, 2007). Indigenous knowledges enable minority groups to articulate immediate and practical concerns that arise from their experiences in the social world. They also offer a more holistic and relational understanding of how individuals and groups come to perceive and engage with the world—

highlighting the interconnectedness between people and the world around them (Aikenhead, 2001; Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 1994; Dei, 2000). Educators can integrate these various ways of knowing to assist students to engage in social action that is both emancipatory and revolutionary (Battiste, 2013; Dei et al., 2000; St. Denis, 2007).

Recognition and Respect for Differences in Backgrounds, Experiences, and Perspectives

This approach of recognition and respect for differences describes curricula as a medium to know oneself and others, as well as to respect one another (Dei et al., 2000). Curricula serve as both "windows" and "mirrors": Curricula as a window allows students to see the realities of others, whereas curricula as a mirror allows for the representation of their own realities (Dei et al., 2000). Dei et al. (2000) and St. Denis (2007) explain that recognizing curricula as incorporating diverse cultural knowledges also involves understanding ourselves as racial texts—acknowledging how individuals' identities, particularly with regard to race, are constructed, interpreted, and represented in society. In this case, teaching practices will acknowledge and validate diverse identities (Dei, 2000; St. Denis, 2007). Educators will be able to recognize and understand their own positions in relation to their students, as well as uncover the beliefs, values, and assumptions they use to respond to the dimensions of diversity in the school (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000, St. Denis, 2007).

Identification and Action for Social and Educational Change

This approach of effecting social and educational changes—equity, access, and social justice—recognizes that all systems of oppression are connected and interlocking and that addressing one type of oppression ignores the interrelationships with other oppressions (e.g., race, gender, language, class, sexual orientation) (Dei et al., 2000; St. Denis, 2007). Dei et al. (2000) and St. Denis (2007) explain that schools must become primary arenas for anti-discrimination and human rights education that confronts issues of access and equity in society. Policies that target various forms of discrimination and unravel the relationships of power will contribute to the goal of a safe school (Dei et al., 2000; Kendi, 2023). Educators need to acknowledge existing inequities in the educational structures and environment, understand their roles in these structures, and actively advocate for change (Dei et al., 2000; St. Denis, 2007). Educators need to challenge the existing institutional structures that ignore the needs of minority groups by working for a more inclusive institutional climate (Dei et al., 2000; St. Denis, 2007). Educators' roles extend from the sphere of the classroom into the community and require engaging with social and political issues (Battiste, 2013; Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000).

Facilitation of the Important Roles of Parents and Community

The local community within which schools are constituted is represented by parents, caregivers, and extended families; the neighborhood; and racial, ethnic, and/or cultural religious groups. Teaching for community empowerment stresses that school policies, practices, and curricula should be integrated to reflect the knowledge, experiences, and histories of the local community (Dei et al., 2000). Battiste (2013) and St. Denis (2007) explain that local community-based knowledge is an alternative educational program and that strategies that are based in cultural or linguistic communities can supplement education in the school system. The role of educators is

to make solid linkages between local communities and the school (Dei et al., 2000; St. Denis, 2007) and thus, work towards meaningful change at a broader level.

Anti-racist education contests the renunciation of the significance of race in the process of schooling and stresses the consideration and inclusion of minority students' experiences, histories, cultures, and identities at all levels of educational practice (e.g., teaching, instruction, and curricula) (Dei et al., 2000; St. Denis, 2007). However, centering the lived experiences and personal accounts of minority students within the curricula and pedagogical practices cannot be effective without addressing notions of power, privilege, and domination (Dei, 2001; Kendi, 2023; St. Denis, 2007). The integrative anti-racist discursive practice articulates the understanding of the interlocking nature of oppression and maintains that educators must be aware of the historical contexts and institutional structures that sustain educational inequities (Dei et al., 2000). Such practices will encourage parents and community members from diverse racial, ethno-cultural, and class backgrounds to be jointly involved in both the decision-making and the delivery of education (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000). The rich knowledge from the community can help in empowering minority students to achieve both academically and socially (Aikenhead, 2001; Dei et al., 2000; St. Denis, 2007). Such an approach can also act as advocacy for collective political action for the delivery of equal educational opportunities for minority students (Dei, 2000; St. Denis, 2007).

Anti-racist education challenges the power imbalances that exist among sociocultural groups in society (Dei, 2000; St. Denis, 2007). It recognizes race and other sociocultural differences as central to understanding issues of power and equity both within schools and the broader society. At its core, an anti-racist education interrogates how these differences are constructed and maintained to uphold systemic inequities (Dei, 2000; Dei, et al., 2000; St. Denis, 2007). Dei et al. (2000) and Horsford and Clark (2015) emphasize that school leaders have a critical role in advancing inclusive practices that directly address race at personal, school, and community levels. They outline a four-stage process of developing race consciousness in leadership:

1. *Racial literacy*: the leader's ability to comprehend what race is and how it functions to sustain inequities and oppression in society.
2. *Racial realism*: the acknowledgement of the historical and ongoing significance of race and racism in shaping lived experiences and institutional structures.
3. *Racial reconstruction*: a transformative process where leaders critically reframe the meaning and implications of race to disrupt inherited assumptions, beliefs, and biases.
4. *Racial reconciliation*: an intentional effort to address and heal the deep psychological and social harm caused by racism.

Such an evolution of race consciousness manifests as awareness, disposition, skills or abilities, knowledge and understanding of the school leader empowering them to navigate and address racial dynamics within educational settings (Horsford & Clark, 2015). Many authors (i.e., Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009) have suggested tools or strategies to help leaders foster this race consciousness and cultivate anti-racist school cultures. The next section offers an example of how such strategies can be applied in practice through an anti-racist model.

Implementing Anti-Racist Education: Strategies for Cultivating Racial Awareness in School Community

Creating equitable and inclusive learning environments requires more than acknowledging the existence of racism. As such, it demands intentional action from educational leaders. Implementing anti-racist education involves equipping school leaders with the tools and strategies needed to confront and disrupt systemic inequities. This section outlines practical approaches that school leaders can use to cultivate racial awareness, foster inclusive practices, and engage educators, students, and families in the ongoing work of building just and equitable schools. These approaches include (1) dialogue, (2) film/video screenings, (3) book circles, (4) multicultural curriculum transformation seminars, and (5) parental involvement outreach and programming (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). These strategies are grounded in the principles of anti-racist education and aim to support transformative leadership across all levels of the school community.

Dialogue

A school leader can use *dialogue* as a strategy or tool to build race awareness in the school and the school community (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). Horsford and Clark (2015) explain that dialogue is about "learning to walk the talk of democracy" (p. 69)—that is, living, learning, and working productively with others, even in the presence of differences. Dialogue offers opportunities for inclusive leaders to learn how to engage in dialogue themselves (personal level), and to facilitate others in dialogic interaction (school and community level) and fosters the creation of classroom-school-communities in which people of different races can come together to combat systemic racism in education (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009).

Film/Video Screenings

Another tool the school leaders can use to build racially inclusive schools is *film/video screenings* (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). The school leader can use powerful videos and films on race that focus on dispelling the myths associated with race, such as videos/films on the biological construct of race or the use of race as a social construct, to justify social inequalities as the natural order of things (Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). Examples of such resources included *Race: The Power of an Illusion, 13th (directed by Ava DuVernay), and Coded Bias.* Powerful videos and films such as these would provide a great way for school leaders to foster their own racial literacy and that of others (Sautner, 2009). As such, when this pedagogical approach is accompanied by skillful co-facilitated dialogue, it makes it most effective. Using this unique challenging pedagogical process of race-based dialogue and the willingness to provide direct education on race invites the emergence of a new understanding of race (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). The new understanding creates the possibility for meaningful movement toward the construction of inclusive school communities in which racial equity and justice can develop and thrive.

Book Circles

Book circles can also be used by school leaders to build race awareness (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). Inclusive school leaders can use a plethora of exceptional, hard-hitting books to provide the historical knowledge of racism (Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). Examples of such books included *The Science of Racism by Keon West, White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism by Robin DiAngelo, Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America by Ibram X Kendi.* This approach will offer the school leader substantive opportunities to unpack the racism of the past in relation to its ongoing influence on the present (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). For example, book circles can be a vehicle for engaging in racialized discourses concerning intellectual ability and educational achievement, and the importance of these discourses on curricular and educational policies (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). The school principal can use this approach to lay the foundation for a sense of agency that is necessary to push back against negative discourse and push toward positive change.

Multicultural Curriculum Transformation Seminars

Multicultural curriculum transformation seminars are a process for ascribing new meaning to race in ways that transform existing assumptions, beliefs, and biases (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015). This approach can engage both teachers and educational leaders in revising curricula across grade levels and subject areas (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). By so doing, inclusive school leaders create opportunities to integrate content that reflects students' histories, lives, cultures, countries of origins, contributions and works of people of color (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). The curriculum revision processes are primarily focused in three areas: content (what is taught), pedagogy (how it is taught), and assessment (whether teaching and learning are effective) (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). The approach starts with a critical review of existing curricula to reveal errors, inaccuracies, unacknowledged biases, and omissions of what has been organized as knowledge in every subject area, as well as structures and relations of power, privilege, and oppression in society (Horsford & Clark, 2015; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). Inclusive school leaders must dedicate ample time to engage teachers in professional development seminars on the importance of curricular transformation, encourage them to participate in discussions, and provide them with opportunities for collaborative learning (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015).

Parental Involvement Outreach and Programming

Parental involvement outreach and programming is an initiative that focuses on parental development and thus has direct impact on students' educational performance (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). Moreover, improved student performance may become more predictable when the individual development of parents' knowledge of racism is central to the work of the school (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Sautner, 2009). Although schools were historically an unwelcome place for parents of minority students due to racism, parental outreach initiatives have the potential to heal the wounds and damage resulting from racism in schools and society (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Morris & Taylor, 1998; Sautner, 2009; Scanlan & Johnson, 2015). The inclusive school leader needs to work to engage

parents in their children's education and encourage participation in the democratic life of the school community (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Scanlan & Johnson, 2015). Such practices hold the promise of bringing about racial reconciliation and open the possibility for educational equity for all students (Horsford & Clark, 2015; Scanlan & Johnson, 2015). While parental involvement initiatives are critical in fostering equity and healing within school communities, it is equally important to examine the broader theoretical foundations that guide inclusive leadership practices. The following section explores the intersections and distinctions between transformative leadership and anti-racist theories providing insights into how these frameworks can inform and strengthen educational leadership for equity.

Comparing and Contrasting Transformative Leadership and Anti-Racist Theories

This section explores the commonalities and differences between transformative leadership and anti-racist theories to provide a deeper understanding of how both frameworks contribute to building and sustaining inclusive school cultures. To ensure clarity, the discussion is organized into two sub-sections: similarities and differences.

Similarities

Transformative leadership and anti-racist theories can inform the work of school leaders in diverse contexts. They have common goals of providing inclusive and equitable education for all students. These theories equip school leader to identify and interrogate issues of power and privilege, advocate for social justice and social change, and enhance educational outcomes, particularly for marginalized students (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022).

Inclusive and Equitable Education for All

These theories are both committed to practices that create socially just schooling by providing inclusive school environments across multiple dimensions of diversity (Dei, 2000; Shields, 2022). They advocate equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic status, and/or varied ability (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022). They are dedicated to creating school environments that eliminate marginalization across these dimensions. The theories encourage the development of inclusive spaces based on collaboration, dialogic relationships, and respect for the contributions of all members of the school community (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022). They acknowledge all children as full members of society and commit to the removal of barriers that prevent children's full participation in democratic schooling (Shields, 2022; Dei, 2000). Through the considerations of all aspects of children's experiences, these theories ensure equal educational opportunities for every student (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022).

Issues of Power and Privilege

The theories both deliberate on issues of power and privilege that create inequities and injustices for marginalized groups in the school and society (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields, 2022). They work to challenge the status quo and disrupt outdated knowledge that perpetuates deficit views, thinking, and assumptions about diversity in both the school and

society (Dei, 2000; Shields, 2022). This approach enables schools to become inclusive spaces where students can engage with content that reflects rigorous academic expectations and meaningful learning outcomes (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields, 2022). The theories challenge the structures of schooling that have traditionally disadvantaged minority groups and stress that educators must alter the very structures that reinforce educational disparities (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields, 2022). They call on educators to understand and recognize the power they hold and to use it carefully in the interest of all students, particularly in the interest of disadvantaged students (Dei, 2000; Shields, 2022). The theories ask educators to be courageous, critically reflective, risk-taking, innovative, and political to interrogate the dominant power dynamics that construct and maintain social inequality in the school and community (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields, 2022). Both theories encourage educators to be prepared to work from within dominant social formations, exercise effective oppositional power to courageously resist, and become activist voices for change and transformation (Dei, 2000; Kendi, 2023; Shields, 2022).

Advocacy for Social Justice and Social Change

The theories understand the inequities in school and society, point to the necessity for change, and provide a guide for leaders to initiate change (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022). They provide frameworks for changing the institutional arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, advancing, and sustaining inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions (Dei, 2000; Kendi, 2023; Shields, 2022). The theories share the principles of respect, caring, and recognition, and they share genuine concern for the welfare, growth, and unity of every individual in the school and the community, especially for marginalized populations (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022). Both theories make issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions central to their advocacy, practice, and vision (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022). Anti-racist and transformative leadership theories work to disrupt and subvert deep rooted structures that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes in the school and society (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022). Thus, both theories work to strengthen school cultures and communities and foster equal educational opportunities for all students (Dei, 2000; Shields, 2022).

Enhancing Student Educational Outcomes

The main objective of both theories is raising student educational outcomes across the dimensions of diversity (Dei, 2000; Shields, 2022). The theories encourage the development of a learning environment that integrates the delivery of support services for struggling students in the classroom and prioritizes access and educational opportunities for all students over separation and exclusion (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022). The theories both embrace responsibility shared by the school leader, teachers, support staff, and the community for the education of all students (Dei, 2000; Shields, 2022). They encourage capacity building to collectively and collaboratively meet each student's needs (Dei, 2000; Shields). Both theories engage families and community members in authentic partnerships for student success (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields 2022). The theories encourage the school leader to make an ethical commitment that emphasizes the elimination of structural impediments and

educational inequalities for the success of marginalized students Dei et al., 2000; Shields 2022).

Both theories complement one another by offering school leaders a unified and robust framework for addressing educational inequities and fostering inclusive school environments. In situations where students from historically marginalized backgrounds experience systemic barriers, both frameworks urge leaders to disrupt status quo practices and challenge dominant power structures (Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015; Shields, 2022). While transformative leadership emphasizes moral courage, social justice, and redistributive equity (Shields, 2022), anti-racist theory directly interrogates racism, race consciousness, and intersectionality as core to educational reform (Dei et al., 2000). The two theories will empower leaders to center the experiences of marginalized students while simultaneously transforming school cultures to reflect democratic values, inclusion, and shared responsibility (Dei, 2000; Kendi, 2023; Shields, 2022).

In addition, in practice, these theories intersect in powerful ways. For example, when addressing racial disparities in academic achievement or school discipline, school leaders can draw from anti-racist theory to identify how racial bias operates structurally, while applying transformative leadership to mobilize resources, build coalitions, and implement equitable policies. The shared commitment to social justice, critical reflection, and inclusive collaboration enables leaders to foster dialogic relationships, engage communities, and drive systemic change (Dei, 2000; Shields, 2022). This combined approach promotes equitable educational outcomes and nurtures school communities where all students, regardless of their identity, can thrive.

Differences

While both theories share similar objectives, they employ distinct strategies and tools to achieve their goals. These differences provide valuable insights for school leaders dedicated to creating and maintaining inclusive school cultures, helping them navigate the practical application of each framework.

Anti-Racist Theory

There are two unique aspects of the anti-racist model that makes it different from the transformative leadership theory. The race consciousness of the model shows the significance of validating and affirming marginalized groups (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000; Kendi, 2023). The anti-racist model of education utilizes race in all its discursive practices and challenges the denial of the importance of race in teaching and learning (Dei, 2000, Dei et al., 2000; St. Denis, 2007). The model fosters race consciousness, understanding, and knowledge through strategies such as dialogue, film/video screenings, book cycles, multicultural seminars, and parental outreach programs (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015). Anti-racist theory interrogates and analyzes how race is used to justify inequity in the school and society (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015).

The second aspect is the acknowledgement of intersectionality that the anti-racist model recognizes in examining oppression (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015). Anti-racist education recognizes all systems of oppression as connected and interlocking. For

example, how the intersections of race with class, gender, religion, (dis)ability, and other dimensions of identity further marginalize individuals in school and society (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015). Anti-racist education acknowledges that addressing one type of oppression ignores the interrelationships with other oppressions (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015). Moreover, anti-racist education utilizes the intersectional approach to reveal the complex issues experienced by those who are affected by the intersectionality of oppressions and thus are rendered invisible within institutions (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015).

To that end, school leaders can apply an anti-racist framework when addressing racial and systemic inequities within their schools and communities. This approach is essential where students and families face marginalization rooted in race and its intersections with class, gender, (dis)ability, and religion. Anti-racist framework empowers leaders to affirm the lived experiences of racialized students, challenge deficit narratives, and confront structures that sustain inequity Dei et al., 2000; Kendi, 2023). It supports critical, reflective, and community-based strategies such as inclusive dialogue, culturally responsive curricula, and race-conscious professional learning to disrupt exclusionary practices (Dei, 2000; Dei et al., 2000; Horsford & Clark, 2015). Through centering race and examining the intersectional identities of individuals and groups, the framework equips leaders to recognize inequities and foster inclusive, equitable school environments.

Transformative Leadership Theory

Two key aspects of transformative leadership theory distinguish it from the anti-racist model of education. The first aspect is its emphasis on moral courage and value-based endeavors, which provide flexibility in implementing the mission of offering equitable opportunities for all students (Dantley, 2003; Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). Transformative leadership theory empowers school leaders to confront issues of diversity, encouraging them to address these challenges rather than avoid or remain silent about them (Caldwell et al., 2012; Cooper 2009; Shields, 2022). It urges school leaders to use their position ethically in service of all students and school community members, with particular focus on advocating for those who are most marginalized (Ncube, 2010, Ryan, 2006; Shields,2022). Through this framework, transformative school leaders can align their actions with core values, working toward closing the academic achievement gap and ensuring equal educational opportunities for marginalized students (Dantley, 2003; Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

The second aspect centers on the deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge frameworks, with a focus on the redistribution of resources and fostering authentic school and societal change (Caldwell et al., 2012; Cooper 2009; Shields, 2022). While recognizing inequities is the starting point, transformative leadership also stresses the importance of redistributing both fiscal and human resources to effect real change (Dantley, 2003; Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). Transformative school leaders guide educators to develop instructional practices that respond to the challenge of diversity (Ncube, 2010, Ryan, 2006; Shields,2022). This process involves critical awareness, reflection, and a direct response to structures of domination such as those based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and ability—both within the school system and society at large (Ncube, 2010, Ryan, 2006; Shields,2022). These efforts are crucial for

achieving high academic success for all students and dismantling the inequitable structures within the educational system that perpetuate racial and class disparities (Dantley, 2003; Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022).

To this end, school leaders can use the transformative leadership framework when addressing systemic inequities that demand moral courage, ethical decision-making, and structural change (Shields, 2022). This approach is ideal in contexts requiring the redistribution of resources, the revision of exclusionary practices, and the alignment of leadership with core values such as equity and justice (Dantley, 2003; Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). Transformative leadership empowers leaders to confront power and privilege, engage in critical reflection, and foster inclusive, responsive pedagogy (Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2022). By challenging dominant structures and rebuilding equitable practices, the framework enables leaders to close achievement gaps and drive meaningful changes across schools and communities (Shields, 2022).

Table 1 summarizes the similarities and differences between transformative leadership and anti-racist theories, and Figure 1 further illustrates how school leaders can apply both frameworks to build inclusive school cultures.

Table 1

Comparing and Contrasting Transformative and Anti-Racist Theories

Unique Features of Transformative Leadership Theory	Similarities Between the Two Theories	Unique Features of Anti-Racist Theory
Moral courage and value-based endeavors	Inclusive and equitable education for all	Race and race consciousness
Re-distribution of resources	Issues of power and privilege	Race and Intersectionality
	Advocacy for social justice and social change	
	Enhancing student educational outcomes	

A Case for Combining the Two Theories

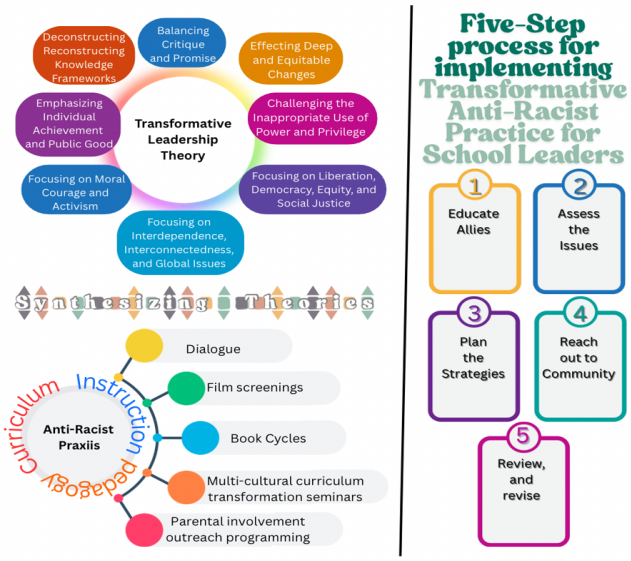
Combining these theories provides a solid foundation for school leaders to engage in practices of equity, inclusivity, and social justice. The integration of the theories strengthens them, creating an effective framework to guide school leaders in driving both school and societal change. Figure 1 illustrates the vision for merging the two theories.

The integrated framework enables school leaders to identify and understand the factors that

contribute to marginalization within the community context and propose ways to move toward reparative action. In implementing this framework, it is essential for leaders to connect with staff and the community, gaining their support, trust, and commitment. Once this foundation is established, leaders can educate stakeholders about the framework and how it can guide their work with the school community. The first step involves identifying key issues and then planning strategies to address these challenges. Together with staff (allies), the school leader will leverage the unique aspects of both theories to develop an action plan, using tools and strategies such as dialogue, film screenings, book cycles, and seminars to engage the community. The leader will also ensure continuous assessment of the action plan's effectiveness while striving to build a collaborative community grounded in diversity and inclusion.

Figure 1

Combining Transformative Leadership and Anti-Racist Theories



Contextual Considerations

The frameworks of Transformative Leadership and Anti-Racist theory offer invaluable tools for fostering equity in schools, but their implementation may be influenced by the realities of specific contexts. While these approaches provide a robust foundation for addressing systemic inequities, they often contend with external factors such as underfunded school boards and resource-strapped communities. In marginalized communities, financial and structural constraints can limit the scope of equity-focused initiatives. As such, school principals may face resistance from their communities when advocating for transformative changes. Hostile social climates or deeply ingrained biases against equitable practices can create professional risks, potentially discouraging bold leadership efforts.

Equity-focused initiatives require sustained professional development, critical reflection, and long-term commitment, which can be difficult to prioritize in already overburdened educational settings. Many Canadian educators face high workloads, competing demands, and burnout, which can limit their capacity to fully engage with equity-centered efforts (Kirk et al., 2022).

Moreover, the intersectionality of marginalization demands multifaceted and collaborative solutions that extend beyond individual schools, requiring substantial time, resources, and systemic coordination. These realities emphasize the importance of situating Transformative Leadership and Anti-Racist practices within a nuanced, context-sensitive framework. Addressing the diverse and intersecting needs of students from marginalized backgrounds cannot fall solely on school leaders; it requires coordinated support among schools, families, community organizations, and policymakers.

Despite these challenges, school leaders are not without agency. By adopting practical, adaptive, and contextually grounded strategies, they can initiate and sustain meaningful change. The following approaches offer guidance for school leaders seeking to overcome these barriers in ways that are both courageous and sustainable:

1. Start small and build incrementally. Introduce manageable equity initiatives aligned with school priorities to build momentum and secure stakeholder buy-in.
2. Leverage existing structures. Embed equity conversations into established processes such as school improvement planning, staff meetings, and professional learning communities.
3. Foster collective ownership. Engage staff, students, and families in shaping inclusive practices through participatory and collaborative decision-making, rather than top-down mandates.
4. Advocate strategically. Use disaggregated school-level data to identify disparities and make evidence-based appeals for additional support or policy changes.
5. Form community partnerships. Collaborate with local organizations that serve racialized, Indigenous, and newcomer communities for example, to extend resources and foster trust.
6. Practice resilience and reflective leadership. Model openness, persistence, and self-awareness, especially when facing resistance or fatigue, to create a culture of continuous growth and learning.

Recognizing and navigating these challenges does not diminish the transformative potential of anti-racist and equity-focused leadership. Rather, it affirms the need for intentional, adaptive strategies that empower school leaders to address systemic barriers while advocating for sustainable, inclusive, and justice-oriented change.

Future Research

Future empirical research needs to explore the effectiveness of this integrated framework that combines transformative leadership and anti-racist theories in advancing equity and inclusion in schools. Researchers should investigate how school leaders apply these frameworks in practice and assess their impact on school climate, student outcomes, and community engagement. Particular attention should be given to how leaders use the frameworks to uncover and address systemic inequities, build trust with stakeholders, and implement reparative strategies. Studies could evaluate tools such as dialogue, film screenings, and equity seminars in fostering inclusive cultures across varied educational contexts. Longitudinal and comparative research would also offer insight into the adaptability and sustainability of the frameworks when navigating practical challenges like limited resources, resistance, or competing institutional priorities. This line of inquiry would help determine how well the integrated approach supports school leaders in

driving sustained equity-focused change.

Conclusion

The transformative leadership and anti-racist education concepts examined in this paper are closely connected through the shared goal of identifying and restructuring structures that generate inequity and marginalization, and work towards inclusive and equitable education for all. The integration of these theories would (a) empower school leaders to understand and challenge various forms of social oppression and structural inequities along the lines of their race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic status, and/or varied ability, as well as their intersections; (b) enable school leaders to be responsive and advocate for social justice and social change both within the school and society; and (c) promote collaboration among stakeholders to ensure equal educational opportunities and high-quality education for all students, regardless of their background. Confronting marginalization head-on is crucial if educators want to provide inclusive educational environments. Transformative leadership and anti-racist frameworks have the potential to challenge the power imbalances and ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students in K-12 Canadian schools and implementing both theories simultaneously provides a more comprehensive approach for the work of school leaders.

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Voices Unheard: The Paradox of Teacher Leaders in Educational Decision-Making

Diane E Johnson
Lamar University
Kelly Brown
Texas A & M University
Corpus Christi

Abstract

Across decades of education reform, the absence of teacher leaders' (TLs) voices has been a persistent concern, particularly during major initiatives like the development of the Common Core State Standards (Mathis, 2010). Despite being at the heart of the classroom and responsible for daily instructional decisions, teachers have often been excluded from key policy conversations that shape their professional landscape (Sebastian et al., 2016; Gozali et al., 2017). This disconnect is striking; while TLs are expected to nurture, guide, and assess students, their expertise is frequently overlooked in the creation of standards, curricula, and assessment policies that govern their work (Greinke, 2017; Miller & Pinkerton, 2017). Teachers require leadership qualities to continually maintain best practices, yet policy makers and administrators from outside the classroom environment often drown out their leadership voices (Warren, 2016).

The consequences of sidelining teacher leader perspectives are significant. When TLs are not involved in decision-making, reforms risk lacking relevance and buy-in, which can undermine both their effectiveness and teacher morale (Khan, 2019). TLs possess invaluable insights into student needs and classroom realities, making their participation essential for crafting policies that are both practical and impactful (Law, 2015). Elevating TL voices not only leads to more responsive and equitable education systems but also enhances the attractiveness of the teaching profession itself, an urgent need as schools worldwide face increasing teacher shortages (Rose, 2017).

Recent movements and research highlight the benefits of incorporating teacher input: schools and systems that prioritize teacher voice see improved student outcomes, greater teacher satisfaction, and more sustainable reforms. As education continues to evolve, the call to amplify TL voices grows louder, emphasizing that meaningful progress depends on listening to those who know the classroom best.

The Vital Role of Teacher Leaders: Why Their Voices Matter More Than Ever

Teacher leaders (TLs) have a significant positive influence on schools. They engage as leaders regardless of their formal title, share expertise in content and educational practices, and often exceed traditional job expectations both inside and outside the classroom (Angelle, 2017). TLs are recognized for being student-centered, understanding school operations and curriculum, and shaping the working environment and change initiatives (Lovelace, 2019). Mowdy (2015) uncovered that their efforts drive student achievement by advocating for improvement, even when their roles are not strictly defined. Additionally, TLs contribute to the emotional well-being

of colleagues and are especially effective as adaptable problem solvers during school crises (Cherkowski, 2018; Sawyer, et al., 2022). While administrators often must focus on state assessments and district-wide curricula, TLs prioritize changes that directly benefit students and colleagues, which positively affect student achievement and teacher retention (Mount, 2018).

Professional Capital Framework: A Shift in Understanding

While school leaders inherently understand the vital role teachers play in the school ecosystem, it helps to frame the role of teacher effectiveness. The professional capital framework developed by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) grounds this study and represents a shift in how leaders can understand teacher effectiveness and school improvement. The framework proposes that professional capital consists of three interconnected components: individual human capital, social capital, and decisional capital. Teachers develop a set of knowledge, skills, and experiences while in the role, which supports their understanding of the reality of educating students (McAuliffe, 2020). Human capital refers to the development of teachers' knowledge, skills, and experiences to support the practical understanding and teaching of students. Social capital leverages collaborative relationships among teachers and other members of the school community to share knowledge and information, thereby enhancing educational outcomes. Decisional capital refers to the experience and reflection that teachers gain to make informed judgments about learning and instruction for their students. This holistic approach recognizes that sustainable change requires teachers and other school stakeholders to work collaboratively for the betterment of students.

The human capital component encompasses the traditional qualifications, skills, and knowledge that individual teachers bring to their practice. Social capital builds on this foundation by emphasizing collaborative learning, peer mentorship, and the collective wisdom that emerges when educators work together purposefully. While decisions in complex situations are made on numerous occasions with various problems, decisional capital represents the capacity to make increasingly informed and effective choices over time, guided by professional judgment backed by evidence (Grover, 2019). Together, these three forms of capital create a powerful synergy that transforms not just individual classrooms but entire educational systems, moving beyond quick fixes toward sustainable, long-term improvement grounded in professional expertise and collaborative practice.

Activism

Educational policy is typically determined by government authorities and enforced by administrators, but teachers, who are most familiar with classroom realities, possess valuable insights into student growth (Huong, 2020). When curriculum becomes politicized instead of being based on content knowledge and teacher input, teacher voice diminishes, and the curriculum becomes vitiated (Kim, 2024). However, initiatives like Teach to Lead (2021) aim to empower TLs by providing resources and encouraging collaboration to amplify their impact. For effective policy implementation, TLs must be involved in identifying potential challenges and proposing solutions (Haas, 2017). Advocacy by TLs is most effective when they receive adequate preparation and professional development; otherwise, their contributions may be overlooked (Allen, 2016). Legislative efforts, such as the Teachers Are Leaders Act, support the integration of TLs into school leadership while allowing them to remain classroom-based

(Congressional Research Act, 2019). TLs' perspectives are more effective advocates when their perspectives are included in policy discussions, and they gain trust from peers when championing school-wide initiatives (Wawro, 2015; Thomason, et al., 2023). Involving TLs in policy design bridges the gap between policymakers' intentions and teachers' interpretations (Gunnulfsen, 2017). However, their voices often gain recognition only when heard beyond the classroom setting (Cemaloglu & Duran, 2018). Sustainable and effective change requires empowering TLs to implement their own strategies rather than simply following directives from higher authorities (Miller & Pinkerton, 2017; Vrhovnik et al., 2018).

Collaborative Cultures

TLs play a crucial role in balancing risk-taking and support, both in their own classrooms and for their colleagues (Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2017). When school leaders empower teacher leader voices, campuses embody equitable practices and enhance cross-curricular practices (Buchanan, et al., 2023). Rather than replacing administrators, collective leadership allows administrators to focus on administrative duties while capacitated TL voices address educational needs (Goksoy, 2015). Their vocal influence extends to digital transformation, as they introduce and expand the use of digital tools campus-wide (Ab, 2024). Schools centering on empowering TL voices tend to center around the improvement of teachers; however, schools moved beyond the early stages of collaborative leadership to collegial voices including TLs found TLs developed sounder solutions for student success bringing the focus back to students (Figueroa Moya, 2024).

Effective school cultures support TLs in modeling collaboration and developing future leaders, particularly when administrators provide opportunities for skill development and leadership training (Yuet et al., 2016). TLs often self-reflect before offering guidance, and this leads to peer observations promoting mutual growth (Sox, 2016; Tennett, 2019). TLs' self-reflections lead to further advocacy because their empowered voice leads to improved solutions assisting leadership and establishing improved cultures (Ordynans et al., 2023). TLs act as bridges between teachers and administrators, utilizing their voice to establish this collaborative culture (Hunzicker, 2017; Baker-Doyle, 2017; Bradley-Levine, 2022). Open dialogue about school culture and policy solutions can help bridge communication gaps between teachers and administrators (Ali, 2019). Even as far back as the early 2000s, Evans (2001) ascertained improved morale, culture, retention, and initiative when campuses had leadership willing to embolden TL voices.

Student Achievement

Research links student success to schools that foster collaborative cultures and support teacher growth (Ozgenel, 2020). With emboldened voices on campus, TLs create collaborative classrooms, reduce workplace stress, and increase job satisfaction, all of which contribute to higher student success (Allen, 2018; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018; Parlar & Cansoy, 2017). TLs' voices influence student achievement by strengthening student voice and self-esteem, leading to improved student outcomes (Prabahar et al., 2024). Student achievement directly correlates with TLs finding their voices and various forms of leadership styles, which models critical thinking, academic achievement, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, self-management, and study habits for students, enhancing student achievement (Shen & Abdullah, 2024). TLS with decision-making empowerment and voice proved to have a positive impact on

overall student achievement (Woo, 2022). Furthermore, TLs vocally promote social justice and foster connections with students, which positively impacts learning outcomes (Allen, 2016; Saunders, 2018). Utilizing voice, TLs' content expertise, and classroom management skills leads to greater student engagement and fewer disciplinary issues (Calderone et al., 2018; Uredi & Gul, 2018).

Teacher Retention

Schools that utilize TLs' voices generally experience higher teacher retention rates (Cosenza, 2015). Where TLs feel valued and engaged, TLs' voices significantly enhance teacher well-being, commitment, and retention (Nguyen et al., 2024). Conversely, TLs may leave if they feel their contributions are not valued (Watson, 2018). Teacher attrition is often linked to a lack of autonomy and stressful work environments, but TLs whose voices are empowered to innovate and support peers help mitigate these issues (Adusei et al., 2016; Ponnock et al., 2018; Bagley & Margolis, 2018; Alsbury et al., 2018). TLs' voices inspire colleagues through their passion and commitment (Lovelace, 2019). TLs' provide practical, content-driven feedback and foster a culture of self-reflection and growth among teachers on campuses where their voices hold weight and delegation (Bradley-Levine, 2017; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018; Thomas, 2017). Positivity in TL voice addressing campus leadership predicts higher levels of retention (Perrone, 2022).

Methodology

This phenomenological study intended to establish a better understanding of TL perceptions of their voice in a suburban high school by asking the following research questions:

1. How do teacher leaders perceive their voices to be heard by administrators?
2. How do teacher leaders perceive the impact of their voices on campus?

In this study, the concept of "voice" is regarded not merely as data but as active participation in conversations that recognize the value of diverse perspectives in driving change (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2024). This approach aligns with recent scholarship that emphasizes the importance of honoring participants' voices as the source of meaning and knowledge, rather than reducing them to disembodied textual data. By foregrounding participant voice, the research aims to foster authentic engagement and ensure that the findings accurately reflect the lived realities and insights of the TLs involved. A hermeneutical phenomenological study was conducted to ensure a TL's personal experience was captured, leading to uncovered thematic connections (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The responses were analyzed to gain insight into the identified TLs from various grade levels and in varying leadership positions to understand the level of empowerment each felt their voice had (Creswell, 2013).

To establish the credibility and validity of the research, several strategies were employed. Creswell (2013) notes that validation in qualitative research encompasses the researcher's efforts to obtain the most accurate accounts and preserve the validity of responses. In this study, trustworthiness was ensured by member checking, a process recognized as a key technique for enhancing accuracy, credibility, and transferability in qualitative research.

Member checking was implemented at multiple stages:

- After initial analysis, participants were invited to review the researcher's interpretations and suppositions for accuracy.
- Participants were shown the emergent themes from their data, providing an opportunity to confirm that important points were neither missing nor misrepresented.
- This iterative process allowed participants to affirm or clarify the findings, thereby reducing the risk of misinterpretation and enhancing the authenticity of the results.

To further ensure rigor and minimize researcher bias, the study employed the phenomenological method of epoché, specifically through the practice of bracketing. Bracketing, or epoché, involves the researcher consciously setting aside personal preconceptions, assumptions, and prior experiences to approach the phenomenon as described by participants. This method, rooted in the work of Moustakas and Husserl, is essential for achieving objectivity and confirmability in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher, who had prior experience as a teacher leader (TL), deliberately "bracketed" her own experiences throughout data collection and analysis. By focusing on the voices of the interviewed TLs, the researcher sought to understand the phenomenon from their perspectives, rather than imposing her own assumptions or interpretations (Englander, 2016).
This process allowed for a more authentic and nuanced representation of participant realities, enhancing both the rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

Participants

This phenomenological study employed purposeful sampling to choose participants with direct experience related to the phenomenon being investigated. Purposeful sampling, as described by Creswell and Guetterman (2015), entails selecting individuals based on their relevance and connection to the research topic. In this research, teacher leaders (TLs) were identified through concept sampling, a method that focuses on selecting participants who represent key characteristics or roles critical to the research aim. The TL selection process utilized a two-tiered method involving both formal and informal TLs. Formal TLs consisted of recognized department heads on campus, chosen as primary participants. Informal TLs were selected based on recommendations from administrators, targeting teachers who displayed leadership qualities or engaged in leadership roles without having an official title (Creswell & Guetterman, 2015). To ensure a broad representation, TLs were chosen from various academic disciplines, including the four core subjects (mathematics, science, English, and history), arts and humanities, career and technology education, and foreign languages. Administrators were crucial in nominating teachers who demonstrated leadership abilities even without formal TL designations.

A minimum of ten participants is recommended for phenomenological studies to provide sufficient depth and breadth of data (Creswell, 2013). The study included 10 TLs who met the established criteria. The participants in this study represented a range of backgrounds and experiences, with participants' teaching experience ranging from 6 to 44 years. Nine out of ten

participants were female. Nine participants identified as Caucasian, and one identified as Hispanic. Half of the participants were graduates of the same high school where they now teach. All participants were invited to share their perceptions regarding the utilization of teacher leader (TL) voices on their campus in semi-structured, web-based, one-to-one interview protocol with open-ended questions developed by the researcher. Due to the flexibility of time and location, online interviews were employed (Creswell, 2013). All responses were recorded and transcribed. Identifying information, such as names and content-specific details, was removed to protect participant privacy. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity in the reporting of findings (see Table 1).

Table 1

Teacher Leader Pseudonyms

Teacher Leader Identifier	Teacher Pseudonym
Teacher 1	Karen
Teacher 2	Suzanne
Teacher 3	Lauren
Teacher 4	Saige
Teacher 5	Chad
Teacher 6	Leann
Teacher 7	Priscilla
Teacher 8	Brittany
Teacher 9	Donna
Teacher 10	Rose

This approach ensured both the protection of participant identities and the integrity of the data collected. The research was conducted at a high school located in a suburban town in Southeast Texas. Key characteristics of the setting included grades 9th through 12th. Approximately 1,520 students attended the high school that received an "A" rating for state exemplary performance. The student population consisted of 55% white, 27% Hispanic, 10% African American, and 45% were economically disadvantaged. The campus held 113 teachers and eight administrators (including assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, and others). 22% of faculty held master's degrees and 1% held a doctorate at the time of the study.

The study examined perceptions of the teacher leader (TL) role and its potential for intentional growth (Davidson & Cosgrove, 2003). Interview responses were categorized and coded to identify recurring themes related to the perceived impact

and future role of TLs. This process employed Creswell's (2013) "lean coding" approach, which facilitates theme identification while minimizing researcher bias. Findings inform administrators in two key areas: (1) TLs' self-perceived influence on campus, and (2) opportunities to enhance the TL role based on reported needs. To ensure validity, multiple administrators selected TL interviewees from each department based on performance and alignment with the defined TL role.

Findings

Echoes in the hallways: Are TLs truly heard?

The first research question explored how teacher leaders (TLs) perceive the extent to which their voices are heard by administrators. This inquiry specifically sought to understand TLs' experiences with different administrative levels, including on-campus principals, curriculum coordinators, and district-level administrators. The distinction between on-campus and district-level administrators was a central theme, as was the impact of this distinction on the perceived effectiveness and influence of teacher voice. On-campus administration consisted of a head principal, three assistant principals, and a curriculum coordinator, whose office was located within the high school. During the study, a transition occurred: the head principal was promoted, and the middle school principal became the high school principal. This change influenced participant responses, with many reflecting on experiences with both the outgoing and incoming principals.

The power of proximity. Most participants felt their voices were acknowledged by on-campus administrators, but often sensed their input was not acted upon. Suzanne observed that the administration "want to give the teachers a feeling that they have a voice, but it doesn't mean they're going to use it and take it." Lauren echoed this, describing "the principal would ask input on things," but "he was asking for verification on what his plan already was" as a formality to validate pre-existing plans rather than to influence decisions. Saige metaphorically likened the experience to "somebody is asking your opinions to buy a TV, and you give them your opinion on the best. And then, they go 'oh, okay' and go buy their own TV."

Leann highlighted the slow pace of change, noting that meaningful adjustments required navigating lengthy committee processes. She also felt administrators "are out of touch with the classroom, so it's a struggle to get them to understand." Brittany remarked that administrators listened selectively, while Karen attributed this to administrators' being "too afraid to change" due to fear of district-level leaders and parents, which she believed limited innovation and student opportunities.

The curriculum coordinator was consistently cited as more responsive and supportive. Karen appreciated "the curriculum instructor at least tries and researches our requests," even if not all were approved. Suzanne valued the coordinator, "gave time to play around and make sure [initiatives were] worth implementing." Leann noted that the coordinator actively "asks for feedback and how an initiative is working," though she felt this openness was not mirrored by other administrators.

Some participants, such as Chad and Priscilla, observed that on-campus administration had "evolved and allow[ed] us to do more on campus," allowing greater teacher involvement in decisions, including allowing "us to sit on the new AP (assistant principal) interviews." However, Priscilla also noted reluctance among administrators to "rock the boat by bringing it to the admin building 9upper administration." Donna shared that her technology leadership was recognized and encouraged by an assistant principal, while Brittany felt comfortable discussing issues with on-campus administrators, attributing problems to external factors "because too much other activity is going on behind closed doors." Rose believed that when committees were formed, teacher leaders' input was genuinely considered due to "taking what the TLs have to say and maybe it's just because they don't have to stand on their own." TLs with strong voices aid in empowering leadership and adding credence to administrative decisions. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of open communication and ethical leadership in fostering teacher voice (Sagnak, 2017).

Hierarchy dilutes urgency and impact. Upper-level administrators were located in a separate building and had limited interaction with the secondary campus. This physical separation contributed to a sense of disconnect and lack of influence. Participants widely perceived district-level input mechanisms, such as surveys, as perfunctory. Karen described these as formalities with little real impact since "They do whatever they want, and they are not even the ones in the classroom." Leann and Brittany similarly felt that decisions were "already made, and it was a formality of input," and made them feel "a part of the conversation, even though they had no intention of using my opinion," with surveys serving only to create an illusion of participation.

Lauren noted that concerns were not "heard with the same emphasis as it goes from principal to the superintendent. And if it's not…then the concern can be taken more lightly than it is [by upper administration]." Suzanne felt "you want to be heard, and even though you might say it out loud, no one's listening." She also observed that long-tenured staff who "knew how to play the game" were more likely to be consulted.

Karen believed district administrators avoided seeking teacher input out of fear of parent reactions and a preference for maintaining long-standing practices

describing upper administration's attitude as "if it has worked for 50 years, why do we have to change it?" Lauren agreed that administrators often had predetermined plans and, while not intentionally dismissive, "They just don't see beyond themselves." Saige described the process of voicing concerns as "running into walls and chasing our cannels from the top to the bottom," highlighting the lack of open channels from campus to district leadership. Rose, while not feeling intentionally ignored, recognized that administrators ultimately had the discretion to use or disregard teacher input.

Input to Impact

Research question two aimed to determine the extent to which TLs felt their input influenced campus changes. Two clear themes emerged from the data: instances where TL voices were heard and accepted, resulting in tangible impact, and instances where TL voices were unheard or dismissed, leading to frustration and limited influence**.**

Where teacher voices thrive. Participants also described situations where their voices were welcomed and led to meaningful change, particularly through committee participation and the presence of responsive administrators. Lauren and Priscilla praised the district and campus for establishing "committees for new policies and initiatives," especially to ensure TL voices were heard during the commencement of newly required state mandates. Rose noted that these committees often welcomed any interested teacher, not just TLs, broadening the spectrum of voices considered. Leann observed, "I've been seeing a little bit more of holding off on the decision-making process until everyone has given feedback, then a decision has been made," reflecting a more participatory approach.

TLs highlighted specific assistant principals (APs) and the curriculum coordinator as particularly responsive to departmental needs. Suzanne shared that the curriculum coordinator regularly sought teacher input on new initiatives. Lauren recounted, "When major conflicts occurred regarding schedule conflicts, the AP listened and stepped in to correct the problem." Saige felt "my voice is always heard with in the classroom" and even was once specifically asked for insight on a new initiative. Leann described a post-hurricane scenario where principals actively requested teacher feedback, noting, "I feel like there's genuine asking to get feedback from us." Brittany simply stated, "I've never felt dismissed." Rose explained that APs consistently asked for departmental needs and honored requests, taking "into consideration TL voices that will make a positive impact on campus."

The frustration of the unheard. A recurring theme among participants was the perception that their voices were often disregarded, especially regarding major decisions like the implementation of new procedures, policies, or

initiatives. Suzanne described seeing colleagues “exhausted and screaming ‘We need help,’ and I don’t think anyone’s throwing out a life preserver for us.” Lauren added that despite voicing concerns about managing both virtual and face-to-face instruction, administration required both, leading to overwhelming workloads, and she “checked into TRS [Teacher Retirement System] and retiring.” Saige observed that teacher voices were often lost in efforts to appease parents rather than address staff or student needs, a problem exacerbated during the pandemic. As Kidson et al. (2020) noted, meaningful policy change requires the inclusion of TLs’ voices.

Many TLs felt that input on new policies or initiatives was solicited only after decisions had been made. Karen stated, “I don’t think our voice matters at all…we are just ignored.” Suzanne agreed, saying, “they already have an idea what they want to do, and it kinda doesn’t matter what any of us say.” Karen cited “Flex Time” as an example of a policy implemented without meaningful teacher input, calling it a waste of valuable time. Lauren mentioned not being heard regarding initiatives like Lead4ward and project-based learning (PBLs), noting administration “ask for opinions on policies, but policy is typically already written and a sonde deal.” Lauren pointed out “the school board hears only the superintendent’s side of the story and not ours” which is problematic since they do not hear from those directly involved with students in the classroom. Saige added that decisions were made by the school board and upper administration “for what’s going to make the least amount of people angry, and by people, I mean parents, and it seems that it’s at the expense of the teachers.” Brittany expressed concern that professional development was too generic and “needs to be more content and level specific,” yet her feedback went unheeded. Donna was frustrated by repeated, mandatory training sessions without prior input from TLs. Rose reflected on the persistent lack of TL voice in policy discussions and wondered, “if they even listen to what we are saying concerning policies.” Leann, though sometimes heard as a department head, still felt her voice was diluted in the chain of command. As Sagnak (2017) emphasized, ethical and effective schools require that TL voices are genuinely promoted and heard by leadership.

Discussion

The present study investigated teacher leaders' perceptions of administrative recognition of their voices and the extent to which their input influences school initiatives and policies. As educational expectations and demands continue to escalate, the teacher leader role evolves while many teacher leaders perceive their contributions as undervalued or overlooked. Participants provided suggestions for strengthening the teacher leader role and overcoming barriers to effectiveness.

Teacher leaders increasingly leave the profession due to heightened demands, insufficient compensation, lack of respect, heavy workloads, and limited campus support (Hilton, 2017). The documented need for more teacher leaders (Palmer,

2018) faces obstacles from inadequate support by current leadership and frequent misidentification or underutilization of teacher leaders (Gozali et al., 2017; Hunzicker, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the necessity of including teacher leader voices in school decision-making processes (Kidson et al., 2020).

Administrative Recognition of Teacher Leader Voices

Findings for the first research question revealed that teacher leaders generally felt their voices were acknowledged by on-campus administrators, particularly curriculum coordinators and assistant principals. Most participants, however, expressed uncertainty about whether their input led to meaningful change. District-level administrators infrequently heard teacher leaders' voices, with input often solicited only as a formality through surveys and similar mechanisms.

A significant disconnect exists between teacher leaders and those with power to enact change, resulting in limited influence over school-wide decisions. When teacher leaders lack input in initiatives impacting their classrooms, there is reduced fidelity and trust in the initiative, with more problems than solutions presented (Williams-Britton, 2021). Administrators with whom teacher leaders had regular, personal contact were more likely to listen and act on their input. District-level administrators, in contrast, remained distant and unresponsive.

Campus Impact of Teacher Leader Voices

The second research question addressed teacher leaders' perceptions of their voices' impact on campus operations. Participants felt particularly unheard regarding protocols and major policy or initiative changes. Decisions were often made without meaningful teacher input, creating frustration and powerlessness. Teacher leaders reported that their voices made a difference through participation in committees or collaborative groups, especially those led by on-campus administrators.

Such collaborative settings fostered trust, allowed for genuine feedback, and sometimes resulted in policy or procedural adjustments. Teacher leaders often felt their input was not utilized to improve policies or practices despite being heard. On-campus administrators' lack of hierarchical power limited the implementation of teacher leader suggestions, while upper-level administrators remained largely inaccessible.

Innovation and Technology Leadership

Increasing curriculum and technological demands position teacher leaders as innovative pioneers in incorporating best practices and technology trends.

Collaborative ownership of school curriculum by teacher leaders creates increased program longevity and teacher retention (Ainin, et al., 2025). Leadership must establish environments of low stress and high experimentation to provide teacher leaders forums for implementing and increasing curriculum and digital resource use for success (Olaniyan & Uzorka, 2024).
Teacher leaders empowering students to utilize advanced digital resources have observed increased student productivity, warranting further study (Macdonald, 2015). Teacher leaders actively choose to see the benefits of using artificial intelligence as a digital tool to enhance administrative tasks and student learning, modeling its academic usage for others on campus (Ghamrawi et al., 2023). This modeling of proper, innovative AI use leads to new teachers growing as leaders and potential teacher leaders in the future (Li & Shan, 2025). Teacher leaders' enhancement of curriculum and digital applications creates cyclical growth of teacher leaders, further impacting student achievement and teacher growth.

From Hierarchy to Partnership: Building Collaborative Leadership Structures

TLs expressed a strong desire not only to be heard but to see their classroom-based insights drive meaningful change. Participants advocated for a shift from hierarchical to collaborative leadership structures, emphasizing the need for shared decision-making and distributed leadership. Many TLs noted that effective leadership often comes from teachers without formal titles, highlighting the importance of recognizing and supporting informal leaders. TLs acknowledged the need for ongoing training and mentorship to prepare future leaders, suggesting that leadership development should be an intentional, district-wide effort.

This study concentrates on a high-performing suburban high school, yet its findings align with national teacher leadership trends. For example, urban schools with limited resources may face more pronounced disparities in teacher leadership influence stemming from top-down accountability systems (Rodriguez et al., 2023). In contrast, rural districts that foster close-knit staff relationships could utilize informal teacher leadership roles more successfully (Follette & Washburn, 2022). Future research needs to examine these dynamics across different settings to uncover context-specific obstacles to teacher leadership empowerment.

Conclusion

In this study, TLs felt that although their input was often recognized, it did not significantly affect the development of school policies and practices. On-campus leaders were more willing to listen and work together, but they lacked the power to make substantial changes. Conversely, district-level administrators were viewed as removed and unresponsive, further limiting the influence of TLs. The results indicate that cultivating a more collaborative and inclusive leadership

culture, along with granting TLs genuine opportunities to impact decision-making, could improve school initiatives and benefit the professional development of teacher leaders. Gillett-Swan and Baroutsis (2024) suggest extending TL involvement beyond advisory roles towards more participatory engagement.

Schools and districts should create more structured opportunities for TL input, particularly in policy development and implementation. Empowering both formal and informal TLs through shared leadership models can improve school culture and student outcomes. Further studies should explore effective models for integrating TL voices at all administrative levels, examine the long-term impact of collaborative leadership, and investigate strategies for supporting informal teacher leaders.

This study highlights the critical, yet often underutilized, role of teacher leaders in shaping educational practice. Addressing the barriers to TL influence and fostering a culture of genuine collaboration are essential steps toward building more responsive and effective schools.

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The Emotional Labor of Care: Sustainability and Strain in Leading with Unconditional Positive Regard

Emily Mulvihill, Ed.D.

Abstract

Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) is the capacity to honor the inherent worth of all persons, a practice increasingly applied to school leadership. While UPR fosters trust and dignity-based relationships, its sustained use within chronically under-resourced schools exacts a significant emotional toll. This study builds on prior research with Colorado school leaders who framed UPR as a "compass for relationships." Using narrative inquiry with five leaders from the original cohort, this follow-up examined the emotional and psychological costs of leading with UPR. Findings revealed four themes: the weight of holding space, tensions between values and mandates, resilience through reflection, and boundary-setting as care. Leaders described compassion fatigue, moral dissonance, and burnout, but also identified reflective practices and boundary work as sustaining strategies. Implications highlight the need for leadership preparation, district supports, and policy frameworks that explicitly recognize and protect the emotional labor of humanizing leadership.

Introduction

Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) is the capacity to value others without judgment and hold space for the inherent worth of all persons (Rogers, 1957). In a school leadership context, UPR has been described as a way of being that centers authentic relationships, dignity-based practices, and a consistent honoring of the humanity of students, staff, and community members. In a prior study (Mulvihill, 2025), school leaders in Colorado defined UPR as a "compass for relationships" that guides them through difficult circumstances, especially within high-stress and under-resourced educational environments. In practice, however, sustained use of UPR is not free. As leaders seek to put empathy and presence at the center of their work, many also described fatigue, frustration, and heartbreak. This follow-up study interrogates the pushback that results when leaders choose to "lead with heart" in the face of system pressures. The research question for this article was: What are the emotional and psychological tolls of sustaining Unconditional Positive Regard as a leadership practice within schools facing chronic adversity?

Literature Review

Unconditional Positive Regard in Leadership

Carl Rogers (1961) first described Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) as a psychological orientation in which one person is accepted for who they are,

without reservation. People in this mode of being are seen as valuable despite their behaviors, feelings, or situations. Rogers (1961) believed that UPR leads to psychological safety and allows for the potential for authentic growth when empathy, congruence, and acceptance are offered. UPR was originally rooted in counseling and humanistic psychology, but more recently has been conceptualized by some as a mode of being for educational leaders (Noddings, 2012; Brown, 2018). UPR in schools is operationalized as leaders routinely practicing dignity, empathy, and a nonjudgmental presence with their students and staff to cultivate trust and depth in relationships. Noddings (2012) also aligns UPR with an ethic of care and argues that successful teachers and school leaders must form relationships with students, parents, and community members based on the three pillars of attentiveness, responsiveness, and authenticity. Similarly, Brené Brown (2018) posits that leaders who are vulnerable and compassionate (two features of UPR) create more inclusive, resilient cultures. UPR is sometimes placed under broader conceptual umbrellas of care ethics (Gilligan, 1982), relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), and culturally responsive leadership, and is therefore considered a humanizing and equity-oriented model of school leadership. Theoharis (2009) writes that "equity-driven educators must work against system-level injustices AND must simultaneously work in relationships with people in a way that is relentlessly, ruthlessly, responsive to individuals" (p. 57). Equity-driven leaders are often described as "warm demanders" (Theoharis, 2009) who have high expectations for students and staff while also providing high levels of support. Leaders who take on an UPR orientation model this by upholding the dignity and humanity of students and staff in the face of institutional barriers.

Emotional Labor in Educational Leadership

Emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) is defined as the regulation of one's feelings to display a certain acceptable emotion to others, and is typically required of those who work in service-based professions. Emotional labor can be thought of as two discrete practices: surface acting, which refers to a person performing an emotion that they do not actually feel; and deep acting, which can be conceptualized as a person's process of bringing their true inner emotions in line with the emotional requirements of a role. In school contexts, emotional labor can include masking frustration, remaining calm during crises, navigating interpersonal tensions, and internalizing the emotional pain of students, families, and colleagues (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). School leaders are often held responsible for not just their own emotions, but for those of the organization as a whole, and are required to be optimistic, emotionally balanced, and caring, even when they are feeling overburdened, disrespected, or morally compromised (Beatty, 2000). This expectation for emotional regulation and performance falls more heavily on leaders who engage in UPR, as they are more likely to view their work through a strong relational lens, and approach it from a place of emotional presence and availability. Scholars have begun to make important connections between

emotional labor and experiences of burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral injury among educational workers (Kelchtermans, 2005; Santoro, 2018). Compassion fatigue and moral injury are two distinct phenomena that often result from emotional labor. Compassion fatigue is characterized by emotional exhaustion that is brought on by a prolonged state of empathetic engagement (Kelchtermans, 2005). Moral injury results when individuals feel that they have been pushed to act in ways that are counter to their personal values by a given institution (Litz et al., 2009). School leaders who engage in UPR may experience both compassion fatigue and moral injury, and are often expected to emotionally support staff while also enforcing school policies and practices that may go against their own sense of care and inclusion.

Burnout and Moral Dissonance

Maslach and Leiter (2016) have defined burnout as a psychological syndrome in response to chronic, unmanaged workplace stress, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. In schools, leadership is uniquely affected by burnout due to emotional isolation, high-stakes accountability pressures, and the constant, often unrelenting, demands of care work (Leithwood et al., 2020). Burnout among equity-centered leaders is further fueled by the experience of moral dissonance: a felt disconnection between one's moral purpose and institutional demands (Santoro, 2011). Leaders who are deeply committed to principles of relational trust and care, when pushed to enact punitive discipline policies, deny student supports due to funding constraints, or defend inequitable evaluation systems can feel a rupture between their values and their actions. This form of moral dissonance can become a chronic source of stress that weakens purpose and invites emotional withdrawal. Leaders who practice UPR are especially at risk of burnout as they often become the emotional centers of their schools. Leaders' identities are tied to this relational/affective labor: they are the person staff turn to in moments of personal crises, the person who can stay composed when a student is in a mental health crisis, and the person who is consistently and consciously advocating for marginalized voices. The affective intensity required of leaders can, over time, become emotionally exhausting and sap their efficacy if it is unsupported by system resources or personal boundaries (Donker et al., 2020). We must therefore seek to center emotional labor awareness and practices in leadership preparation and ongoing professional development, including creating space for reflective practice, peer support structures, and emotionally intelligent models of supervision

Methodology

This article builds upon data from a phenomenological study of 14 K–12 school leaders in Colorado (Mulvihill, 2025), all of whom identified UPR as central to their leadership identity. For this follow-up, five leaders from the original cohort

were re-interviewed using a narrative inquiry lens (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to explore how their emotional experiences had evolved since the initial study.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their depth of reflection in the original interviews. Each participated in a semi-structured, 60-minute interview focused on emotional sustainability, burnout, and reflective practices. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to code and synthesize findings across cases.

Findings

Theme 1: The Weight of Holding Space

Leaders described a persistent sense of emotional vigilance. One principal noted, "It's like I'm always scanning for who's hurting, who's fading, who needs me to show up." While they saw this sensitivity as a strength, it also led to compassion fatigue. The emotional weight of holding space for others, without reciprocity, contributed to exhaustion.

Theme 2: Regard vs. Regulation

Participants frequently experienced tension between their UPR values and external mandates. One assistant principal shared, "When I have to suspend a student I know is struggling with homelessness, it feels like a betrayal of everything I believe." This dissonance resulted in internal conflict and, at times, professional disillusionment.

Theme 3: Resilience through Reflection

Despite emotional strain, leaders identified reflective practices, journaling, coaching, mindfulness, as essential for sustaining UPR. One leader stated, "My journal is the only place I can be completely honest. It helps me reset and return to who I want to be."

Theme 4: Boundary-Setting as Care

Several leaders emphasized the need to set boundaries without abandoning regard. "UPR doesn't mean being a martyr," one leader clarified. "I've learned to say 'not today' without losing my compassion."

Discussion

These findings reinforce the notion that relational leadership, while transformative, requires immense emotional labor. Leading with UPR asks school

leaders to be emotionally available, empathically attuned, and consistently humanizing in contexts that often lack structural alignment with these values. This labor is both courageous and costly. It demands a level of emotional intelligence, moral commitment, and interpersonal sensitivity that is often unsupported in traditional leadership development or institutional design. The findings echo the growing body of scholarship calling for greater recognition of the emotional dimensions of educational leadership (Beatty, 2000; Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Importantly, UPR should not be romanticized as effortless or purely intuitive. It requires stamina, intentional recovery practices, and professional structures that honor and protect relational labor. Without these supports, leaders risk emotional depletion, disengagement, or resentment, conditions that directly undermine the trust, connection, and dignity that UPR aims to foster. In advancing UPR as a sustainable leadership model, school systems must move beyond expecting individual leaders to "absorb" all emotional burdens. Instead, institutions must develop ecosystems of care that include peer networks, reflective spaces, emotionally literate supervision, and policy flexibility. Only then can the transformative potential of UPR be fully realized without sacrificing the well-being of those who lead with it.

Implications for Leadership Preparation

Leadership preparation should explicitly cover how to recognize, prepare for, and manage the emotional labor required to embody UPR. Programs can offer specific skill-building and experiences related to knowing and setting boundaries, noticing and resisting moral dissonance, noticing the signs of compassion fatigue, and building personal and communal practices to stay emotionally sustainable (Santoro, 2011; Beatty, 2000). Coursework in trauma-informed leadership, care ethics, and emotionally intelligent supervision models can support future leaders for the affective aspects of their work. Leadership preparation must also counter the ways the hidden curriculum in higher education often rewards stoicism or martyrdom. Modeling of, and practice in, vulnerability, emotional literacy, and practices of care that include the leader are central. Simulations, case studies, and mentoring must acknowledge and embed the ethical complexity, as well as the affective tensions, of leadership.

School Districts and Policy Implications

Leadership through the lens of UPR will not work in silos. School districts must provide supports that acknowledge and honor the emotional labor of leadership. Regular reflective supervision, coaching, and structures to ensure time for self-care should be part of the system. If we value social-emotional learning for kids, then we must make the emotional sustainability of adult leaders a priority. Policy should not only provide room to practice care but offer metrics to evaluate care as

a component of effective practice. Evaluations and public ratings that only reward high test scores and fidelity to mandates can cause dissonance and frustration for leaders committed to UPR (Theoharis, 2009).Discipline policy and practice should offer alternative, restorative approaches and relief for school leaders, who are put in the position of enacting harsh and disproportionate punishments that are at odds with their values and beliefs. Districts can also create collective care infrastructure to support the relational labor of UPR (see below).

Leadership Practice Implications

Embodying UPR is important work that also requires us to be clear with our own boundaries, engage in regular reflection, and build community accountability. Leaders need to make space to think about how they will define UPR, which, should not be an invitation for leaders to "give and give and give until we die." This would both be unsustainable and also in tension with much of what equity work should be in schools. UPR has the potential to help us challenge many of the ways that traditional leadership narratives ask us to be effective at the expense of our humanity. Being present, humble, and ethically consistent, even when blocked by bureaucratic systems, is part of UPR. It should also challenge dominant notions of a "strong leader" that are typically rooted in colonial white supremacist masculinities. Communities of practice and peer reflection groups are critical for building individual and communal resilience. In these spaces, school leaders can share dilemmas, practice noticing and processing emotional tensions, and co-create strategies to remain present to their own and others' humanity. These groups are also important for building UPR as they allow us to challenge individualizing frames of care, reflect on shared meaning, and lean on each other to help maintain our own values and boundaries. Ultimately, we must recognize that UPR is not an individual disposition, but a collective practice. It is not sustainable or possible without being part of networks and systems of care, being in a reflective culture, and having policies that support the emotional and ethical work of leadership.

Conclusion

Leading with Unconditional Positive Regard is a radical and necessary act of being in a time of educational fragmentation. Yet without tending to the emotional toll it takes on us, we risk burning out the very leaders who light the way and make schools humane places of hope. Recognizing, supporting, and sustaining the emotional labor of care is not a nice-to-have add-on to leadership development, it is central.

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Curriculum Beyond Constraint: Stakeholder Perspectives on Innovation and Autonomy in a Free School

Dr Lucy Barker[a], Dr David Littlefair [b], Christopher Million[c]
[a, b, c] *Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK;*
[a] *Correspondence: l.a.barker@northumbria.ac.uk*

Abstract

Free schools in the UK, like international ones, were established to promote autonomy, innovation, and diversity in education. This case study explores how one such school in the South of England, leveraged these freedoms to co-construct a distinctive and socially just curriculum. Data collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with school leaders, teachers, trustees, and parents was analysed thematically and revealed how leadership, curriculum design, and the hidden curriculum intersect to support holistic development, equity, and community cohesion. Particular attention is paid to how extended opportunities in the arts, sport, and enrichment activities contribute to cultural capital and wellbeing. The findings reveal that shared leadership and inclusive governance structures have enabled sustained innovation, rooted in a clear values framework and strong parental engagement. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Dewey, Freire, and Bourdieu, the study illustrates how autonomy, when combined with reflective, community-based practice, can produce meaningful and contextually relevant educational outcomes. The school exemplifies an approach to innovation that balances academic rigour with care, creativity, and stakeholder voices. The paper concludes by discussing implications for policy and practice, offering a conceptual model for inclusive curriculum leadership in the context of school reform.

Keywords:

Free schools; curriculum innovation; autonomy; stakeholder engagement; holistic education

Introduction

Free schools in England and Wales are state-funded but independently run, enjoying autonomy over curriculum, staffing, and finances (DfE, 2014a; Higham, 2014a). Having autonomy positions them uniquely to deviate from traditional educational norms and experiment with innovative educational practices (Greany 2016; Wiborg, 2018). This case study explores how one free school in England has leveraged curricular freedom to foster creativity and innovation, focusing on

the role of stakeholder voices; leaders, teachers, and parents, in shaping these changes (Ball, 2012; Fullan, 2016). It responds to Greany's (2016) call to reframe educational innovation by addressing three key tensions: the importance of balancing both *professional* and *structural* autonomy; the influence of vertical accountability mechanisms on how parents perceive and value innovation; and the challenge of securing legitimacy for innovative practices among key stakeholders. Quasi-market models, premised on school autonomy, parental choice, and vertical accountability, have often been promoted as the best means to drive innovation; however, evidence of their success remains limited. Focusing on adult stakeholders; leaders, teachers, trustees, and parents—this paper explores how their perspectives and agency shape curriculum innovation. The school at the heart of the study, opened in 2012 and fully established as an all-through institution by 2020, maintains a strong focus on academic excellence and holds high aspirations for all students, irrespective of background. Through its inclusive ethos and commitment to holistic development, the school offers an insightful case of how autonomy can be leveraged to pursue both excellence and equity. The core question asked is: *How has this free school exercised its curricular freedom to drive innovation, as seen through the perspectives of key stakeholders?*

Curriculum Innovation

Unlike traditional schools, free schools are not required to follow the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014b), enabling them to tailor learning to students' needs. This freedom aims to encourage innovation, diversity, and parental choice (Gunter, 2011). However, research suggests many free schools underuse this liberty, especially in curriculum development (Finch et al., 2014). Curriculum innovation involves introducing new content and pedagogies into teaching (Fullan, 2016; Kelly, 2009) and benefits from stakeholder involvement throughout planning and implementation (Fullan, 2016; Littlefair et al., 2023). The original Free School policy emphasized "innovation, diversity, and flexibility" (House of Commons Hansard, 2010), intending curricular freedom to rethink education for 21st-century learners. If this autonomy is underused, it raises questions about the policy's impact and the role of stakeholder agency. The curriculum places equal emphasis on music, sport, and a wide range of extracurricular activities alongside core subjects such as English, mathematics, and science. These activities are not treated as add-ons but as integral extensions of the formal curriculum, reflecting evidence that participation in extracurricular programmes can enhance academic achievement (Broh, 2002). Through an extended school day, the use of specialist teachers, and strong community partnerships, the school embodies a holistic educational approach, one that fosters wellbeing, identity, and social participation. This aligns with John Dewey's vision of education as extending beyond academic attainment to support the full development of the child (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Priestley & Biesta, 2013). It views education as cultivating the whole child beyond standardized tests (Bates & Lewis, 2012; Bialik et al., 2015). While this

paper focuses on the influence of adult stakeholders in curriculum innovation, a complementary paper (in press) will explore how *pupil voice* contributes to shaping curriculum and learning experiences within the same free school context. Examined through the method of photo-voice and a mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011), the extent to which students' perspectives are heard, valued, and acted upon, offers a more complete picture of participatory curriculum development in autonomous school settings.

Empirical research on the pedagogical practices within free schools remains limited, particularly in assessing whether their claimed innovations meaningfully enhance parental choice or lead to improved academic and social outcomes for pupils (Wiborg et al., 2018). Against this backdrop, this article examines how and why stakeholders at a free school in the South East of England have used their curricular autonomy to design an innovative programme that foregrounds foundation subjects such as music and sport, areas frequently marginalised in accountability-driven systems (Baer & Garrett, 2010; Hargreaves et al., 2023). Research is increasingly recognising the value of a broad and balanced curriculum, not only for academic development but for fostering creativity, engagement, and holistic growth (Alexander & Flutter, 2009; Hallam, 2010; Robinson and Aronica, 2015). By foregrounding voices of parents, teachers, and leaders, this study offers insights into how curricular autonomy can create inclusive, responsive, and innovative education. It adds to research examining how policy freedoms translate, or fail to translate, into meaningful change (DfE, 2014a; Greany, 2018; Littlefair et al., 2023). We adopted a qualitative case study approach, using document analysis, interviews with staff, and observational data to examine how curriculum decisions reflect principles of innovation and social justice. The case study method was selected for its strength in generating rich, contextually grounded insights and for its capacity to explore complex social phenomena as they unfold in real-life educational settings (Creswell, 2014; Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). Freire's (1970/1996) concept of conscientisation, emphasising critical reflection, dialogue, and learner agency, served as an analytical lens to evaluate the extent to which the school transcends passive models of instruction in favour of a democratic, student-centred ethos.

The school's emphasis on the 'hidden curriculum' (the implicit transmission of values, norms, and social behaviours) reflects Jackson's (1968) foundational work and aligning with contemporary priorities around the 21st-century '4Cs': critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Bialik et al., 2015). These elements were explored through stakeholder perspectives on culture, relationships, and broader educational aims. By applying these theoretical lenses, the study critically evaluates how the school's curriculum fosters not only academic growth but also the holistic, equitable development of socially conscious learners.

Free Schools

Free schools are state-funded but independently run institutions operating outside local authority control. Drawing inspiration from Sweden's *friskolor* and North American charter schools, they were introduced under the UK Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government in 2010 with aims to enhance diversity, innovation, and parental choice within state education (Higham; Wiborg et al., 2018, 2014a). By 2023, over 650 free schools in England educate more than 350,000 pupils, evidencing the programme's expanding role in the educational landscape (Gov.UK, 2023). In the UK, the Coalition's *Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010) positioned free schools as mechanisms to raise standards and foster innovation, especially in disadvantaged areas. These schools, established by parents, teachers, and community groups, were distinctly defined as new entities rather than conversions, differentiating them from academies, and thereby granted curricular and pedagogical autonomy, including freedom from the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a; Higham, 2014b). Cirin (DfE, 2014a) highlights that this autonomy, paired with accountability, holds promise for improved performance, particularly when innovation in teaching and learning is prioritised; an approach aligned with global discourses on market-driven education reform and school choice (Greany, 2018; Wiborg et al., 2018).

The free school model has however attracted critical scrutiny concerning its impact on equity, educational outcomes, and systemic coherence. The evidence for sustained improvements in academic achievement and social inclusion remains inconclusive (Morris & Perry, 2019; Wiborg et al., 2018). Critics warn that opening new schools can lead to duplicated provision and unnecessary surplus places, especially in areas where student demand is stable or declining (Finch et al., 2014; Higham, 2014a). Concerns also focus on social equity, with research suggesting that middle-class families disproportionately benefit from free schools due to their greater capacity to navigate complex admissions and choice processes, potentially reinforcing segregation along socio-economic and ethnic lines (Bunar, 2008; Morris & Perry, 2019).

Moreover, some free schools replicate traditional pedagogies, challenging claims of curriculum and pedagogical innovation (Greany, 2018; Wiborg et al., 2018). In contrast to academies that usually involve the conversion of existing schools, free schools are established entirely from the ground up. This offers potential for distinct curricular visions and novel pedagogical approaches but entails greater uncertainty and challenges in establishing effective practices without established community ties or reputations (DfEa, 2014; Higham, 2014b; Littlefair, et al., 2023). The free school programme exemplifies a neoliberal shift towards decentralised, market-based governance in education (Ball, 2012; Hodgson, 2012). Yet, this model raises important questions about democratic accountability and the implications of removing schools from local authority oversight (Gunter, 2011; Higham, 2014b). Additionally, the focus on innovation is often

insufficiently supported by rigorous, systematic evaluation, limiting opportunities to identify and scale effective practices (Greany, 2018). In response, there are calls for strengthened transparency, clearer definitions and measures of curriculum innovation, and safeguards to ensure equity within the free school sector. Without such frameworks, the risk remains that the programme prioritises institutional autonomy and parental preference over educational coherence and social justice (Priestley & Biesta, 2013; Wiborg et al., 2018).

Innovative Practice

Innovation in education can be universally understood as the introduction and implementation of new ideas or methods that transform established practices, enhancing learning experiences and improving outcomes for all learners (Fullan, 2016; Robinson and Aronica, 2015;). It involves doing things differently in ways that challenge traditional norms and lead to meaningful improvements (Peck, n.d.). An early Department for Education (DfE, 2014a) evaluation of free schools found that 57% of free schools reported running an extended school day, while 81% of respondents believed they offered something innovative in their curriculum delivery. Specific examples of innovation identified in the study included adopting alternative curricula distinct from the National Curriculum, developing unique school ethos or pedagogical styles, creating opportunities for pupils' personal development, employing specialist teachers for certain subjects, introducing additional subjects beyond the statutory framework, and lengthening the school day to provide more learning time (DfE, 2014a, p.17). Such innovations align with broader conceptualisations of school autonomy enabling tailored pedagogical approaches responsive to local contexts and learner needs (Greany, 2018; Higham, 2014b). However, scholars caution that claims of innovation must be critically examined, as some practices labelled 'innovative' may reflect incremental rather than transformative changes (Biesta, 2010; Graffino, 2015).

Moreover, the relationship between innovation and improved outcomes is complex and contingent on factors such as implementation fidelity, staff capacity, and wider system support (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2014). In the context of free schools, innovation is often positioned as a core justification for their autonomy and distinctiveness (DfE, 2014a; Wiborg et al., 2018). Yet the transformative potential of such innovation depends on whether it fosters democratic participation, social justice, and holistic development rather than simply offering market-driven parental choice or superficial pedagogical change (Apple, 2004; Biesta, 2010).The case study described here highlights the importance of critically examining if and how free schools' innovative practices empower marginalized learners and contribute to more equitable education systems that transform curricular for 21st century learners (Greany, 2018; Morris & Perry, 2019).

An Innovative Curriculum

The UK education system has evolved from a divided structure to a formally integrated, yet still fragmented, comprehensive model (Bunar, 2008). Within this context, national policy increasingly positions innovation as essential to educational reform and economic growth. Greany (2018) argues that schools must adopt innovative curriculum and pedagogical practices to prepare learners for the complexities of a diverse, technologically advanced world—a view echoed in international discourse (OECD, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2020). Innovation in education spans three levels: curriculum design by leaders, classroom practice by teachers, and mindset development in students (Williamson & Payton, 2009). Developing 21st-century competencies—Creativity, Critical Thinking, Communication, and Collaboration—is essential for meaningful learning and societal participation (Bialik et al., 2015; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Embedding these "4Cs" into curricula ensures relevance and equips learners for real-world challenges (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). These imperatives are particularly salient as the UK undertook a Curriculum and Assessment Review to modernise learning for students aged 5–19 (Gov.UK, 2024), reflecting a global shift toward learner-centred, flexible education. However, despite their intended purpose, many free schools have struggled to realise meaningful innovation. Wiborg et al. (2018) report that inspection pressures and institutional isolation often stifle experimentation. Greany (2018) identifies the core challenge as balancing autonomy, accountability, and professional capacity. Without strong leadership, teacher development, and supportive evaluation, innovation risks becoming fragmented or unsustainable (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2014).

Policy Implications

The drive for innovation in free schools and the wider education system brings critical policy challenges. While the free school programme promotes autonomy and decentralisation, reflecting neoliberal priorities of choice and competition (Ball, 2012; Gunter, 2011), this shift complicates efforts to ensure equitable access, quality, and coherence across schools. A central tension lies between autonomy and accountability. Although free schools are designed to innovate, inspection frameworks like OFSTED can inadvertently limit creativity (Greany, 2018; Wiborg et al., 2018). To support meaningful innovation, accountability must evolve beyond narrow metrics to include qualitative indicators of student engagement, curriculum relevance, and holistic development (Biesta, 2010; Priestley & Biesta, 2013). Importantly, innovative curricula foster not just academic achievement but also the "hidden curriculum", the implicit teaching of values, social norms, and life skills (Jackson, 1968). These "softer skills" such as resilience, collaboration, and ethical reasoning are increasingly seen as essential for lifelong learning (Johnson-Mardones, 2015). Equity remains a pressing concern. Research shows that school choice can reinforce social segregation, as advantaged families are better positioned to navigate the system (Bunar, 2008;

Morris & Perry, 2019). Safeguards such as fair admissions, targeted support, and community outreach are essential to prevent innovation from deepening inequality (Gorard & See, 2013; Reay, 2017). Innovation also depends on teacher capacity and leadership. Professional development and collaborative school cultures are key to sustaining change (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2014). Policies should invest in continuous learning and support structures that empower educators to experiment and share best practices (Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). System coherence is equally vital. Without coordination, the growth of autonomous schools risks duplication, inefficiency, and misalignment with national priorities (Higham, 2014a). Building networks across schools can help share innovation, ensure consistency, and uphold shared goals (Greany & Higham, 2018; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). The current Curriculum and Assessment Review (Gov.UK, 2024) offers a timely chance to embed innovation more systematically. Policymakers should support greater curricular flexibility that responds to local contexts, while also establishing clear, evidence-based frameworks for evaluating impact, striking a balance between local autonomy and system-wide accountability (Schleicher, 2018). Transparent evaluations can guide the scaling of effective practices and avoid repeating ineffective ones (Fullan, 2016). In sum, policy must strike a careful balance, between innovation and equity, autonomy and accountability, local flexibility and system-wide coherence. Evidence-informed, inclusive policymaking is key to ensuring that innovation benefits all learners. To explore what this balance might look like in practice, the following section builds on the work of educational theorists John Dewey (1916, 1938) and Paulo Freire (1970, 1996), examining how innovative curriculum frameworks can support the holistic development of learners.

Theoretical Framework

Exploring whether conditions within one free school support an innovative and socially just curriculum and guided by Lattuca and Stark's (2009) broad definition of curriculum as an "academic plan" encompassing purpose, content, pedagogy, and evaluation, we drew on Dewey's (1916, 1938) view of education as experiential and socially grounded, Freire's (1970/1996) emphasis on participatory, transformative learning, and Bourdieu's (1986) theories of cultural capital and social reproduction. John Dewey (1916) famously called for education to "get out of its isolation and secure the organic connection with social life" (p. 29). This idea remains highly relevant to contemporary curriculum re-thinking, especially in the 21st century where the future is uncertain and rapidly changing. Dewey emphasized that education should prepare students not only by transmitting knowledge but by cultivating effective habits, adaptability, and the capacity to "learn how to learn" (Dewey, 1938). Central to Dewey's philosophy is the concept that learners become collaborators with peers and teachers, actively constructing knowledge through inquiry and problem-solving across diverse contexts (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p.13). However, this approach to pedagogy is

often seen as risky or challenging within today's results-driven, high-stakes assessment environment, and tends to be more established in early years education than in upper primary or secondary settings (Biesta, 2010; Klenowski, 2017). Despite the dominance of market-oriented education policies emphasizing standardization and accountability (Ball, 2012; Gunter, 2011), models of progressive pedagogy inspired by Dewey's ideas continue to thrive in some schools (Bates & Lewis, 2012). The free school in this study explicitly rejects what Paulo Freire (1970/1996) termed the 'banking concept of education', where "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those they consider to know nothing" (p. 65). Instead, this school embraces active learner participation, fostering dialogue and critical engagement, aligning with Freire's concept of *conscientisation*—a process of developing critical awareness that situates education within the social, cultural, and political realities of learners and educators alike (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p.131; Freire, 1970/1996). For school leaders, *conscientisation* acts as a catalyst in decision-making about pedagogy, encouraging democratic and reflective educational practices (Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2003). The focus on the holistic development and well-being of children further resonates with international rights-based frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Article 29 asserts that education should aim to "develop your personality and talents to the full" (UNCRC, 1989, Article 29). A socially just and inclusive curriculum, therefore, is one that nurtures every child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential, promoting participation, equity, and respect for diversity (Biesta, 2007; Hargreaves, Quick, & Buchanan, 2023, p. 546). This vision challenges narrow conceptions of schooling focused solely on academic achievement and aligns closely with Dewey's and Freire's emphasis on education as a means of personal and social transformation, and with Bourdieu's call to interrogate which forms of knowledge are valued, and for whom.

Case Study and Methodology

A qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2017) yields rich, context-specific insights suited to complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2014; Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). The single case was purposefully selected as an example of an innovative curriculum and holistic, inclusive ethos. Data included interviews with leaders, teachers, and parents; document analysis; and field observations. Triangulating these sources enhances trustworthiness and validity (Flick, 2004; Quintão, Andrade and Almeida, 2020). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019) identified patterns in stakeholder narratives, with attention to reflexivity and positionality for transparency (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The study focuses on curriculum innovation in practice, including foundation subjects, specialist teaching, extended hours, and community partnerships, emphasizing how collaboration shaped these developments. While findings from

this in-depth study are not generalizable to all free schools, they provide analytical generalizations (Yin, 2017) that offer a conceptual lens for similar contexts.

Main Research Questions and Sub-Questions

1. To what extent has the school successfully developed an innovative curriculum and implemented pedagogical practices that align with the government's Free School policy as well as the school leadership's vision?

    What specific elements of the curriculum are considered innovative by the school leadership and teaching staff?

    How is autonomy exercised in curriculum design and delivery within the school?

2. How do key stakeholders perceive the benefits and challenges of establishing a free school characterized by an innovative curriculum and a distinctive pedagogical approach?

    What are parents', teachers', and pupils' perceptions of the curriculum and teaching methods?

    How do stakeholders view the impact of the extended school day and extracurricular activities on pupil development and wellbeing?

    What are stakeholders' perspectives on the school's ethos and its contribution to social justice and inclusion?

This study used a descriptive case study approach to examine the free school within its real-life context, ideal for exploring complex educational practices like curriculum design (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2017). To ensure trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), data were triangulated across multiple stakeholder groups. Over two site visits (four days), qualitative data were gathered through interviews with the headteacher, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), and music director; focus groups with parents, teachers (including the business manager), and trustees; and observations supplemented by informal staff conversations. This multi-method strategy captured rich, nuanced perspectives, supported by Geertz's (1973) concept of *thick description*, which interprets both behaviours and their underlying meanings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the university's Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including parents (focus

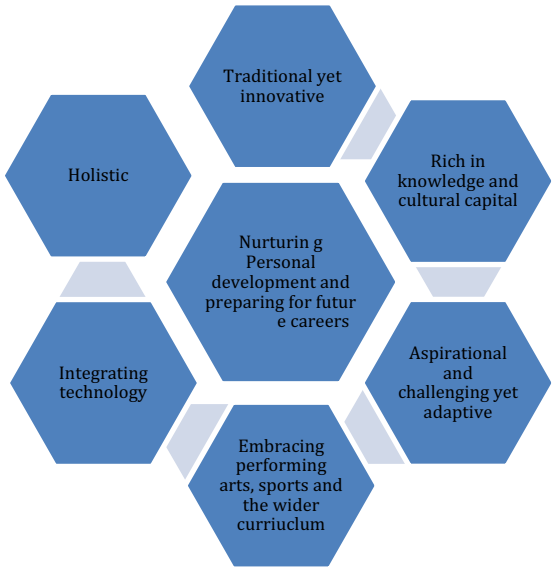
group), teachers (interviews, observations, focus group), and trustees (focus group). Participants received detailed information sheets outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through secure data storage and pseudonymisation in all reporting.

Data Analysis Process

We used Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013, 2019, 2023) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to code and interpret data from interviews and focus groups. RTA allows for the identification of meaningful patterns or themes related to the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Following familiarisation with the data through repeated listening and reading, all authors independently noted potential themes. The team then collaboratively coded transcripts and refined these codes into broader themes through iterative discussions. The lead researcher synthesised the final thematic framework to ensure coherence and alignment with the study's aims. This reflexive, collaborative approach supported a rich, nuanced understanding of the school's innovative curriculum practices.

Findings

Figure 1: The Free School's Framework for Curriculum Innovation



Case study school: The ‘all-through’ curriculum vision for this school

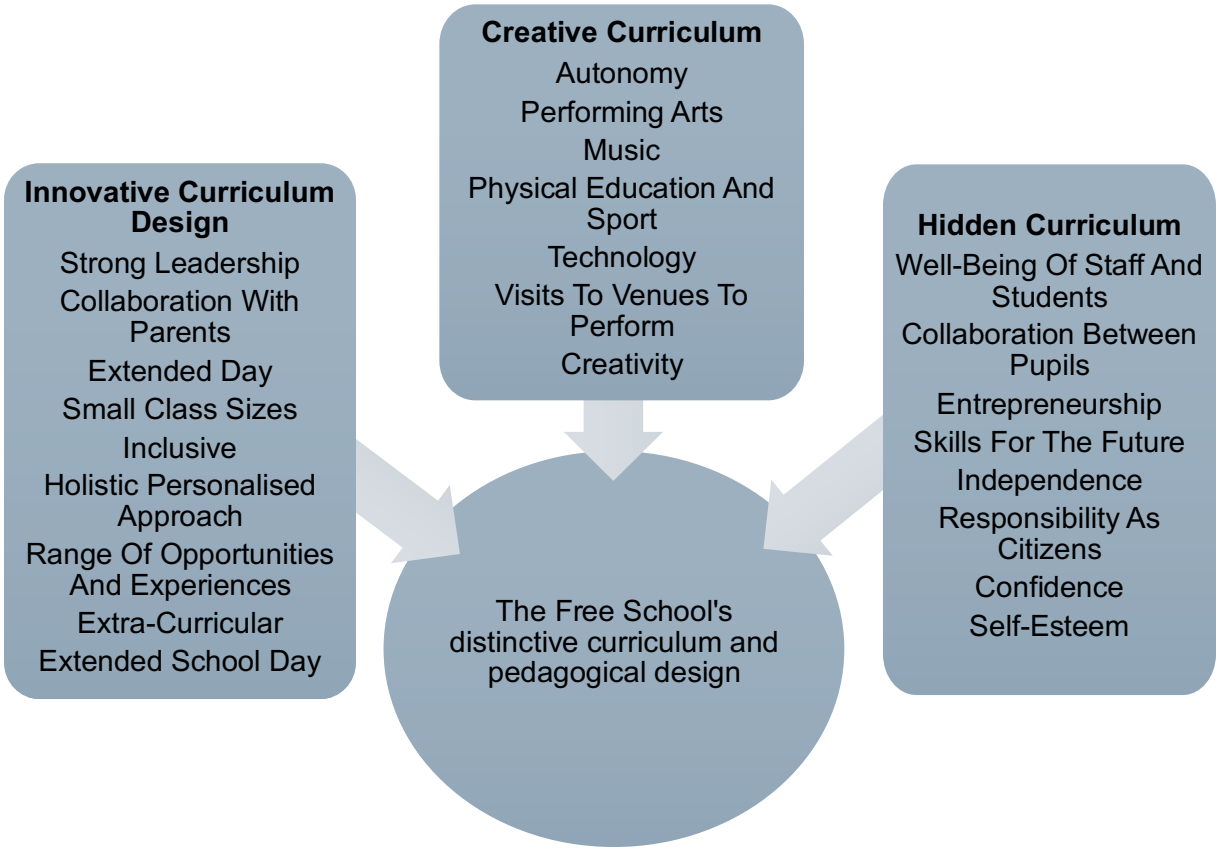
Figure 1 presents the framework for curriculum innovation that underpins this free school’s all-through model, which supports students from ages 4 to 18. The structure offers a continuous and integrated educational journey, uniting primary and secondary phases. At this school, the core values and ethos are consistently embedded across all year groups, from Reception to Sixth Form, fostering coherence and continuity throughout students' learning experiences.

The school’s curriculum vision is distinctly learner-centred, integrating performing arts, sports, and the wider curriculum closely alongside a strong academic foundation in core subjects such as English, mathematics, and science.

This holistic approach reflects Baer and Garrett’s (2010) assertion that “teaching for creativity and teaching specific content knowledge need not be in opposition” (p. 6). Lattuca and Stark (2009) describe a curriculum plan as “a total blueprint for action, including purposes, activities, and ways of measuring success” (p. 4).

In line with this, the school’s mission is to provide a unique education that is freely accessible to all students, combining academic excellence with best practices drawn from both state and private sectors. Importantly, despite the school’s growth, its leaders have maintained fidelity to the original ethos, developed collaboratively with parents and the wider community.

Figure 2. Themes and Sub-themes from the Thematic Analysis.



Theme 1: The School's Innovative Curriculum Design

Theme 2: The Creative Curriculum

Theme 3: The Hidden Curriculum

The empirical findings of this study, summarised in Table 2, are organised into three broad themes derived through reflexive thematic analysis. In the following section we examine the perceptions of stakeholders of the school through the themes of Innovative Curriculum Design, Creative Curriculum and Hidden Curriculum.

Theme 1: An Innovative Curriculum Design

Music as a Core Driver of Innovation

Music is not positioned as an extracurricular enhancement but as a central pillar of the school's curriculum and ethos. The school's *Chance to Play* programme provides all Year 3 pupils with free, specialist-led instrumental tuition—an approach underpinned by an inclusive, equity-driven philosophy.

As the headteacher asserts:

"We have excellent music provision and the opportunities for children from all backgrounds to learn an instrument... and to have a culture-rich environment."

This quote emphasises music as a vehicle for cultural access and levelling opportunity, particularly for pupils who might not otherwise engage with instrumental learning. It suggests that music functions not simply as artistic expression, but as an entitlement contributing to social mobility that aligns with arguments about expanding access to elite cultural forms through schooling. Empirical and theoretical work rooted in Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital shows that music training, particularly in genres associated with elite taste, provides students with embodied habits, tastes, and competencies that signal social status and privilege. The school rebalances the power relations that are mediated with music (Bates, 2021). Pupils from diverse backgrounds accumulate cultural capital typically reserved for higher socio-economic groups (Archer et al., 2015; Bourdieu, 1986).

Parents reinforce this inclusive framing. One comments:

"They may not like violin... but at least they've tried it." (Parent)

Here, value is placed on exposure and experience, rather than proficiency. This reflects a commitment to broad educational entitlement and challenges the instrumentalist view of education as achievement-centric. The emphasis on trying, rather than excelling, aligns with Dewey's (1916) experiential pedagogy, where learning is about exploration and growth.

The music director reinforces this vision:

"We're not trying to create people that are going to go into music as a career... but to give every child the opportunity to develop their musicianship."

This perspective places emphasis on process rather than product, developing musicianship as a form of identity, confidence, and self-expression (Lamont,

2011; Welch et al., 2014). It reflects progressive, human-centred aims and reframes music education as a universal developmental right (Hallam, 2010; Wright, 2010).

The structured curriculum includes composition, listening, and performance, ensuring breadth and depth. The headteacher links this to holistic development:

"Music increases pupils' ability to work collaboratively, improving their focus, self-confidence and self-esteem... contributing to academic successes."

Stakeholders reframe music as an enabler of wider outcomes, both social and academic (Fitzpatrick, 2006) rather than as a 'soft' or peripheral subject. It supports claims by Hallam (2010) and Winner et al. (2013) that music enhances cognitive and emotional capacities, and reflects a holistic view of education.

A trustee adds a cross-disciplinary perspective:

"Studies have shown that music really helps with academic success. Similarly, sport... the team aspect, working with people... It's obvious to us."

By embedding music and sport into the core educational experience, the school fosters essential personal and social skills that extend beyond academic achievement. These subjects provide rich opportunities for experiential learning, helping pupils to develop emotional intelligence, teamwork, resilience, and self-regulation. Such competencies closely reflect the "4Cs" of 21st-century learning, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (Bialik et al., 2015).

Beyond their intrinsic value, these skills also translate into workplace readiness. For example, students learn to work productively with others toward shared outcomes, to set and pursue meaningful goals, and to sustain motivation and focus over time, hallmarks of employability and lifelong learning (Bates, 2021).

The school offers a range of pathways, from orchestras and choirs to backstage roles, broadening definitions of participation and creativity. This pluralistic model, rooted in Burnard's (2012) work on inclusive creativity, ensures that students engage with music in diverse and meaningful ways, regardless of skill or interest. The school follows Burnard's challenge of traditional, individualistic notions of creativity, advocating for a pluralistic approach that acknowledges diverse musical practices and cultural contexts.

Sport and Physical Education

Physical Education also plays a central role in the school's identity, with primary pupils receiving four sessions per week, an unusual commitment in a system where foundation subjects are often deprioritised. One parent highlights the school's sporting success: *"They won a Netball Cup... tri-counties in hockey... The girls won a Football Cup."* While this quote reflects traditional markers of achievement, it also demonstrates that sport is taken seriously as a curricular domain, on par with academic subjects. Recognition of girls' achievements also suggests a commitment to gender equity in physical education. A more developmental framing is offered by a teacher: *"We look at success globally... Nine Year 6 girls, including one registered blind, reached the South of England finals in three sports."*

This reframes success not only as competition, but inclusion. The mention of a visually impaired pupil participating at a regional level highlights the school's adaptive and inclusive practices. It supports Bailey's (2006) assertion that sport can be a tool for inclusion, resilience, and wellbeing—especially when delivered intentionally. Mental health benefits are also foregrounded: *"It really helps their mental health... just to get out and work as a team."* (Teacher). Underscoring the school's holistic philosophy and the recognition that PE contributes to emotional regulation, teamwork, and self-concept is especially valuable in a post-pandemic educational landscape. The school's physical education strategy aligns with Dewey's (1938) emphasis on experiential learning and Freire's (1970) vision of education as humanising and empowering.

Innovative Technology as a Catalyst for Modern Learning

The school's early integration of cloud-based platforms, 1:1 Chromebook provision, and Google Apps has transformed teaching and learning into a highly collaborative, digital-first environment. A parent remarks: *"They're on the Chromebooks from such a young age. That is the future... the other schools didn't have anything like that."* Parental recognition of the school's forward-thinking digital strategy is seen as both future-oriented and distinctive. The phrase "that is the future" suggests a sense of preparedness that other schools lack. Another parent adds: *"My seven-year-old is typing up her homework and sharing it with her teacher."* which points to real-time communication and feedback, illustrating how digital tools can increase learner autonomy and engagement. These practices reflect pedagogical models that support agency, choice, and personalisation (Voogt & Roblin, 2012; Bialik et al., 2015). Rather than viewing technology as a supplement, the school embeds it as an essential medium for expression, collaboration, and independent inquiry, key features of student-centred learning and progressive pedagogy (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970).

Teacher Autonomy as a Foundation for Innovation

Central to the school's innovation is the professional agency afforded to teachers. Staff are empowered to design creative flexible learning tailored to their pupils. One teacher explains: *"You can be as creative as you want to... The teachers who find it most difficult here are the people who don't have flexibility."* A culture of professional trust, where innovation is expected and supported aligns with Hargreaves & Shirley's (2012) notion of "professional capital," where teacher autonomy is key to school improvement. The quote also signals that innovation requires a mindset shift, not all educators may be comfortable in such an open environment. Another teacher contrasts the school with more rigid systems: *"Most schools... are very set in stone. Whereas here, we are open, 'Yes, that sounds great, let's do that.'"* suggesting a rejection of prescriptive curricula in favour of co-construction and responsiveness that is core to Freire's (1970) idea of dialogical education. It also resonates with Fullan's (2016) advocacy for innovation through shared vision and distributed leadership. Across interviews, teacher autonomy is not depicted as laissez-faire, but as structured freedom, within a mission-driven culture that values experimentation and creativity. This contributes directly to the school's innovative practices, allowing the curriculum to evolve responsively rather than reactively.

Theme 2: Innovative Curriculum Design – Leadership

Leadership plays a central role in shaping the school's innovative curriculum. As a single academy trust, strategic oversight lies with the Board of Trustees, while day-to-day operations are led by the Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team (SLT). This distributed leadership structure supports shared ownership and long-term innovation (Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2006), and reflects an intentional departure from top-down governance. The founding stakeholder team capitalised on the autonomy afforded by Free School status to design a curriculum free from legacy systems or imposed structures (Littlefair et al., 2023). One trustee reflected: *"You must really believe in the concept of a free school"* , signalling the ideological commitment required to embrace the Free School model.

The emphasis on belief highlights that curriculum innovation here is not only technical but value-driven, involving risk, imagination, and disruption of the status quo. It reflects a deeper alignment with entrepreneurial forms of educational leadership that thrive on autonomy and vision-setting (Higham, 2014a). That vision was central to staff recruitment and culture-building, as one teacher recalled: *"I was sold by the headteacher's vision"* which reveals the magnetic role of leadership in securing staff buy-in. It echoes Fullan's (2016) argument that deep change is propelled by leaders who inspire moral purpose. The term "sold" suggests that the headteacher effectively communicated a compelling narrative of what education could be, persuading staff to join a

venture characterised by uncertainty but driven by conviction. Leadership here is not managerial, but transformative and purpose-led (Littlefair, et al., 2023).

Navigating Parent-School Partnerships

A defining feature of the school's leadership style is its partnership with parents. From inception, families were treated as co-creators of the educational vision, reflecting Epstein's (2001) model of family-school partnership. However, this inclusive approach introduces **tensions** around boundaries and authority. As one teacher observed:

"Parents… still feel that they have the right, which they do, to comment. It's a fine balance between who is leading it, the parents or not." (Teacher).

This highlights the delicate negotiation between parental agency and professional autonomy. While valuing family voice aligns with democratic educational ideals, it also raises questions about leadership legitimacy and decision-making authority.

The teacher's tone reflects both respect and concern, a recognition that co-production must be balanced with pedagogical leadership, which is particularly relevant in Free School contexts, where founding parents may maintain strong ownership expectations. Leadership, therefore, must operate with both openness and clarity, ensuring that participation does not undermine professional judgement and value the importance of role clarity in sustaining effective collaboration (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Flattened Structures and Collaborative Culture

Teachers describe a non-hierarchical organisational culture that empowers staff agency. One staff member commented that the headteacher: *"Doesn't lord it over everyone else."* illustrating the ethos of horizontal leadership; a relational approach where status is downplayed in favour of collaboration. The use of informal language ("lord it over") suggests a rejection of authoritarian models in favour of collegiality and mutual respect. Such environments are more conducive to innovation, as they reduce fear of failure and encourage risk-taking (Gronn, 2002; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). The culture is one of distributed responsibility, where innovation is seen as everyone's work, not the sole domain of senior leaders, reflecting a broader shift from compliance-driven leadership to capacity-building leadership, rooted in trust and teacher professionalism (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

Parental Perspectives on Curriculum Leadership

Parental responses reveal alignment between the school's values and family aspirations. Beyond logistical factors like location, parents emphasised the school's holistic curriculum, particularly its commitment to enrichment through music, sport, and small class sizes. One parent shared: *"Small class sizes, small nurturing environments… swimming and music… aren't offered in some of the bigger state schools, which conveys* appreciation for the personalised and enriched learning environment. The parent's comparative framing ("aren't offered…") positions the school as distinct from mainstream provision, suggesting that leadership has succeeded in articulating and delivering an alternative educational offer. It also reflects a growing demand among families for whole-child development, as theorised by Noddings (2005) and supported by research on enrichment's role in cognitive and emotional growth (OECD, 2018). Importantly, these shared values foster social trust and cohesion. The alignment between what the school provides and what families value supports a relational climate where collaboration is more likely to be constructive than conflictual (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This atmosphere is not accidental, but the result of intentional leadership practices grounded in inclusion and transparency. In sum, **Theme 2** illustrates how visionary and distributed leadership has enabled innovative curriculum design, built strong community relationships, and maintained a values-led approach.

Quotes from trustees, teachers, and parents show that leadership here is relational, strategic, and grounded in moral purpose, creating the structural and cultural conditions for sustained innovation. Table 1 exemplifies the viewpoints of stakeholders at the school for each theme.

Table 1.

Curriculum Perspectives Across Stakeholders

Theme	Parents	Teachers	Leadership
Curriculum Priorities	Value music, sport, and enrichment	Embrace wide-ranging opportunities	Designed a balanced, integrated curriculum
Innovative Features	Praise early Chromebook use	Appreciate creative freedom	Implemented tech and arts from inception

Theme	Parents	Teachers	Leadership
Holistic Development	Emphasise mental health, personal growth	See success as social, emotional, academic	Promote whole-child ethos
Voice & Agency	Feel heard in school design	Value professional autonomy	View parents as "critical partners"
Tensions	Occasionally challenge decisions	Note challenges of high parental involvement	Work to balance input with professional leadership

Theme 3: Personalised Inclusion and the Hidden Curriculum

Support and Class Size: Personalised Inclusion

Small class sizes are central to the school's commitment to equity, inclusion, and individualised learning. These are not incidental, but a deliberate structural feature embedded in the school's design to support visibility, care, and tailored pedagogy (Blatchford et al., 2011).

A parent explains: *"In a bigger school, you get lost more easily… slip through the cracks."*

This statement reveals a concern with institutional anonymity and reflects a broader desire for settings that prioritise the individual child. The phrase "slip through the cracks" underscores how easily pupils can become invisible in larger systems, especially those with additional needs.

The parent's language highlights the protective function of a small-school environment in safeguarding belonging and attention. The SENCo echoes this point: *"What's been the real key draw [is] the curriculum and the size."*

Here, curriculum and size are linked not only as practical advantages but as inclusive mechanisms. The SENCo emphasizes that structural elements are fundamental to the school's identity, indicating that inclusion is deeply embedded in the institution's core rather than being an add-on or afterthought. Staffing ratios also reflect a quasi-independent model:

"We have 23 or 24 pupils with two adults always in the room… more like the ratios you'd find in a private school."

This comparison is significant. By referencing the independent sector, the speaker suggests that the state-funded provision here equals or even surpasses fee-paying

schools in delivering personalized attention. This challenges the traditional equity gap and redefines what can be achieved in state education, demonstrating how expanded opportunities can promote greater inclusion and educational justice.

Wellbeing and Belonging

Wellbeing is portrayed as a core element of the school's ethos—deeply embedded and proactively addressed, rather than treated as a reactive or marginal concern. The staffing of pastoral support with an Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA), a counsellor, and pastoral leads reflects a whole-school commitment to emotional development.

"It's an incredibly happy place to work." – Teacher

"My son knows every kid in the school… it's very much a home from home." – Parent

"It's always felt like a family, hasn't it?" – Teacher

These comments collectively construct the school as a relational space—a "family" where individuals are known, valued, and supported. The repetition of familial metaphors suggests that the school has successfully cultivated a climate of trust and emotional safety, foundational to motivation and academic engagement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The parent's observation that her child "knows every kid" underscores the school's strong sense of community and social cohesion, qualities that are increasingly undermined by neoliberal education policies emphasizing competition, standardization, and efficiency at the expense of relational and communal values. Remarkably, this close-knit environment is maintained even as the school grows to accommodate 948 pupils, demonstrating that scale need not come at the cost of connection.

"The kids are well cared for on an individual basis." – Teacher
This quote reinforces the school's ethic of care (Noddings, 2005). "Well cared for" suggests that wellbeing is not abstract policy but experienced in tangible, everyday interactions, furthering a model of education that values each learner as a whole person, not just a performer of outcomes.

Equity Through Enrichment

The school's extended day and integrated enrichment programme reflects a reimagined curriculum that addresses both opportunity gaps and real-world learning. Crucially, enrichment is non-optional and cost-free, signalling a commitment to removing barriers to access. Fraser's model of social justice, spanning redistribution, recognition, and representation, provides a powerful

analytical framework for understanding how curriculum and enrichment practices can challenge both material and symbolic forms of educational inequality (Power, 2012).

"Learn further by having exposure to different kinds of activities beyond the classroom."–Trustee

"All the extracurricular things… don't always happen in other state schools." – Parent

"The extended day and extended holidays was one of the reasons I chose to work here."-Teacher

"They mirror the private holidays… a big advantage for some families." – Parent

These quotes together show how the school has blurred the lines between formal and informal education, giving all students access to experiences that are often the preserve of more advantaged families (Bourdieu, 1986). The trustee's focus on "different kinds of activities" implies a broader definition of learning, one aligned with the cultivation of 21st-century competencies (Greany, 2018; Morris & Perry, 2019).
The comparison to the independent sector re-emerges, not as aspiration to exclusivity but as a strategy to democratise access to high-quality provision. Gardening clubs feeding into the school kitchen further exemplify sustainability education and practical citizenship, reinforcing learning through lived experience.

Theme 4: Hidden Curriculum – Character, Confidence, and Cultural Capital

The school's ethos goes beyond academic outcomes to focus on developing the whole child, aligning with social justice principles and a vision of education as a route to empowerment (Freire, 1970; Nussbaum, 2010).

The Headteacher states:

"We prepare each child for their future, giving them a strong foundation in numeracy, literacy and a full range of other traditional subject areas, as well as the skills to succeed in life."

This quote encapsulates the school's mission to integrate academic rigour with personal development. The reference to "skills to succeed in life" reflects Dewey's (1938) and Jackson's (1968) ideas that the most meaningful lessons are not always explicit. This "hidden curriculum" encompasses confidence, agency, and resilience—traits that scaffold both academic and societal success.

Teachers articulate how these skills are cultivated:
"They can really present themselves in any forum... we're giving them the skills in the class, how can you translate that, use them and show them off."
"We are producing a generation of children who are so confident and so eloquent."

These reflections position oracy, self-expression, and presentation as deliberate outcomes. By emphasising real-world application ("any forum"), staff demonstrate how classroom learning translates into cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).
The term "so eloquent" suggests high expectations for communication, irrespective of background, reinforcing equity by offering all children tools traditionally associated with privilege. A trustee reinforces this vision:
"If you stand on stage in front of parents and play an instrument and perform, you take that with you through your life."

Here, performance becomes a metaphor for confidence, competence, and embodied learning. This echoes Reay's (2017) critique of stratified education systems and reflects a model in which symbolic and cultural capital are made universally accessible, not inherited. The school's ethos also promotes civic engagement and values education:
"They are encouraged to be courageous, innovative, caring citizens, making the local community a better place to live." – Teacher

This aligns with Nussbaum's (2010) concept of global citizenship and reflects Freire's (1970) belief in education as a tool for social transformation.
It suggests that children are not simply absorbing knowledge but are being equipped to act ethically and compassionately in the world.
Through stakeholder narratives, the school emerges as a values-driven, community-oriented, and equity-focused institution. The quotes demonstrate how inclusive structures (class size, staffing, enrichment) combine with a hidden curriculum of confidence, care, and cultural capital to produce a transformative educational experience. This model challenges conventional hierarchies, blurs sector boundaries, and repositions public education as a site of opportunity, dignity, and social mobility.

Discussion

This case study reveals a powerful story of curriculum transformation driven by intentional design, stakeholder engagement, and visionary leadership. Through interviews and observations, three key themes emerged: curriculum design, innovation, and the hidden curriculum, showing how this free school has reimagined education within the freedoms of the Free School policy in England. Central to its distinctiveness is intentionality from the start: a clear, coherent, yet flexible curriculum shaped collaboratively by leaders, teachers, parents, and

community partners (Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Littlefair et al., 2023). This democratic process embeds ownership, responsiveness, and relevance at the core of the school's offer.

Creating Innovation Within Constraints

Despite pressures from market competition and accountability (Wiborg et al., 2018), the school fosters teacher autonomy and pedagogical innovation. Moving beyond scripted teaching, it embraces adaptive, inquiry-based learning that blends formal knowledge with enriching experiences. This flexible, inclusive curriculum supports differentiated and emotionally responsive education, embodying Dewey's (1938) experiential learning and advancing transformative education.

Stakeholder Benefits and Collaborative Power

The school's culture of co-construction shares power and values all voices. Distributed leadership engages children, parents, teachers, and community partners in shaping practice, echoing Ken Robinson's (Graffino, 2017) view that innovation springs from interaction. Though tensions around parental roles exist, stakeholders overwhelmingly see collaboration as a strength (Littlefair et al., 2023). Teachers gain agency and shared purpose; parents feel invested. Strategic partnerships with sports and arts institutions extend learning and deepen community ties, enhancing authenticity and engagement.

The Hidden Curriculum as Equity Driver

Most profoundly, the school's hidden curriculum redefines success by centring confidence, communication, and care. Activities like music, sports, and public speaking build resilience, character, and self-efficacy; essential human skills for today's world. This focus on creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking aligns with OECD (2018) and thinkers like Nussbaum (2010) and Freire (1970), preparing students not just for work but for meaningful life. Music education supports socio-emotional growth and democratizes access to cultural capital often reserved for elites (Archer et al., 2010; Bourdieu, 1986), reinforcing the school's commitment to equity and inclusion (Trevarthen & Malloch, 2002). Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital offers a vital lens through which to understand the school's commitment to arts education, enrichment, and inclusive pedagogy. By embedding music, sport, and public performance into the core curriculum, the school works to democratise access to forms of knowledge, skill, and expression often reserved for the socio-economic elite (Archer et al., 2010; Reay, 2017). This deliberate distribution of cultural capital challenges traditional patterns of social reproduction, positioning education as a means of social mobility rather than a mechanism of inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In

this context, curriculum design is not just a pedagogical choice, but a political one, aimed at widening opportunity and disrupting entrenched hierarchies. For Goldthorpe (2007), for instance, in reducing education to an engine of class inequality, Bourdieu neglects the ways that modern educational systems loosen inequalities and provide opportunities for children from lower class backgrounds (Prior, 2013).

Limitations

This qualitative study uses a single case to offer deep, context-specific insight (Geertz, 1973). While limited in generalisability, it offers transferable lessons for similar settings (Wellington, 2000). Drawing on Yin's (2017) comprehensive case study methodology, it explores curriculum innovation through the voices of adult stakeholders, leaders, teachers, trustees, and parents (Littlefair et al., 2023). However, the absence of pupil voices is a key limitation, which future research will address to provide a fuller understanding of curriculum impact.

Conclusion

This case study presents a compelling model of what a future-facing, socially just, and community-rooted curriculum can look like. It shows how the freedoms granted by Free School policy can be harnessed not for standardisation or marketisation, but to foster meaningful innovation, collaborative leadership, and transformative learning experiences.

While any school has the potential to develop an innovative, holistic curriculum that nurtures the whole child, many are constrained by the dominant forces of neoliberal education policy and the prescriptive nature of the National Curriculum. The marketisation of schooling, through league tables, performance metrics, and accountability regimes, has prioritised standardised testing and narrow definitions of success, often at the expense of creativity, wellbeing, and broader developmental aims (Gunter, 2011; Robinson and Aronica, 2015). Schools face significant pressure to demonstrate rapid, measurable academic outcomes, which can discourage risk-taking, interdisciplinary learning, and the integration of arts, sport, or socio-emotional education. The National Curriculum, while offering some flexibility, still reinforces subject hierarchies and a one-size-fits-all model that limits local adaptation and culturally responsive pedagogy. As a result, even visionary leaders and educators may feel unable to fully realise more expansive educational models, despite having the expertise and commitment to do so. The issue, therefore, is not a lack of capacity or imagination within schools, but the systemic constraints that curtail autonomy and innovation, especially in under-resourced or high-stakes environments. Addressing these barriers requires a shift in policy discourse toward trust, flexibility, and a broader

conception of educational purpose. Curriculum innovation is not a luxury but a necessity in a rapidly changing world.

As Mitra (2015) warns, education must evolve to meet new societal and technological demands. Innovation, as Gilbert (2020) argues, can disrupt entrenched inequalities by expanding access to rich, relevant learning. This school exemplifies such change, embedding creativity, lateral thinking, and the 4Cs of 21st-century learning into its curriculum. Building on Dewey's (1916) vision of education for both personal growth and the common good, this study reinforces innovation as a moral imperative. Education must support who students are now and who they might become (Petrovic, 2016), creating environments where all feel seen, valued, and empowered.

With its extended school day and a curriculum enriched by music, sport, and an inclusive ethos, this school broadens the definition of success beyond standardized test scores. It creates a professionally rewarding environment for teachers and offers parents holistic opportunities they themselves believe are frequently absent in local state schools. Its strong leadership, ongoing teacher development, and supportive evaluation ensure that innovation is cohesive and sustainable (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2014). As a Free School, this institution serves as a test-bed for innovation. Its journey provides practical lessons and conceptual insights for others designing equitable, creative curricula. It shows not only how to innovate, but why we must. Free schools were intended to be engines of innovation, but as Wiborg et al. (2018) note, many have fallen short. This case demonstrates what is possible when autonomy is embraced. It shows that innovation, when grounded in care, community, and creativity, can transform schools into places where all children can thrive.

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