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The **Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research (ELRDR)** is an ICPEL publication of doctoral research in education leadership and a companion peer-reviewed journal to the Education Leadership Review (ELR). Lead authors are recent doctoral graduates with chair or committee member serving as coauthor/s. Research is limited to dissertations, capstones, and action research projects. The purpose of the ELRDR is to disseminate the results of doctoral research in education leadership and school administration.

All manuscripts have been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education

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Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research

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From the Editors

This issue of Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research (ELRDR) continues to celebrate the extensive scholarly contributions of recent doctoral graduates and their research collaborators. In an ever-evolving educational landscape, it remains essential to critically examine existing conditions, persistent challenges, and emerging opportunities within the field of educational leadership and administration. The studies featured in this issue collectively reinforce the importance of rigorous, evidence-based inquiry to inform policy, leadership decision-making, and classroom practice across diverse educational contexts.

The first manuscript in this issue, Pre-Pandemic Analysis: Teacher Inexperience Student Discipline Consequences at Small-Size Texas High Schools, by Thompson et al., examines the relationship between teacher inexperience and student disciplinary outcomes in small Texas high schools. By focusing on a school context that is frequently underrepresented in large-scale research, the authors provide important insights into how staffing patterns intersect with student behavior and school climate. The findings highlight implications for school leaders related to teacher preparation, mentoring, and retention, while also establishing a critical baseline for understanding discipline-related outcomes in small secondary school settings.

Several studies in this issue address student achievement and success through qualitative and quantitative lenses. Olson and Wharton-Beck's qualitative case study, Valedictorians in the Making: A Study of the Influential Factors Affecting Student Success, amplifies the voices of high-achieving students whose experiences are often overlooked. Through the educational journeys of 15 high school valedictorians from urban, suburban, and rural schools, the authors identify key motivational influences and personal qualities that enabled students to overcome adversity. Grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy, marginality and mattering, and habits of mind, the study offers meaningful implications for parents, PK–12 educators, and school leaders seeking to foster resilience, strong personal qualities, and healthy mindsets among students.

Academic performance and equity are further explored through two statewide, multiyear analyses. DeAlba et al. examine the reading performance of Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students by ethnicity and race, revealing consistent performance differences across multiple years. Their findings underscore ongoing disparities and the need for targeted instructional and policy interventions. Similarly, Laminack, et al. analyze English I End-of-Course outcomes by language status, demonstrating that Emergent Bilingual students consistently lag behind their Non-Emergent Bilingual peers across all performance standards and years examined.

Teacher development, support, and retention are central themes across several contributions. Conrad, et al. explore central office administrators' perceptions of teacher professional learning, highlighting both the benefits of flexible delivery formats and the challenges associated with meeting teachers' evolving needs. Walter and Lewis focus on

international teachers in the United States, using a mixed-methods approach to examine emotional and professional challenges during relocation and onboarding. Their findings demonstrate that intentional, low-cost support strategies can strengthen belonging, reduce stress, and enhance teacher self-efficacy and retention.

Wagner's qualitative study of veteran teachers in K–6 schools in South Suburban Chicago further contributes to the teacher retention literature. Examining retention through the lenses of human, social, structural, and psychological capital, the study provides rich narratives that illuminate the conditions educators identify as critical to remaining in the profession.

Instructional innovation and student support are also addressed in Pierce and Lewis's study on peer tutoring in high school mathematics. Grounded in improvement science, this mixed-methods research demonstrates that structured peer tutoring enhances both mathematical achievement and self-efficacy for tutors and tutees, offering actionable insights for practitioners seeking to strengthen student learning and confidence.

Finally, Farley and Augustine-Shaw examine superintendent departure and the often-overlooked role of the outgoing superintendent in supporting leadership transition within a rural school district. Drawing from a qualitative case study, the authors explore how intentional leadership behaviors during departure – such as establishing a clear transition timeline, defining a firm endpoint, and communicating with stakeholders with the future leadership in mind – can contribute to district stability and early success for the incoming superintendent. Grounded in a servant leadership perspective, the study offers practical recommendations for school boards and superintendents related to communication boundaries, knowledge transfer, and succession planning, highlighting how thoughtful exit practices can meaningfully support leadership continuity in rural school systems.

Collectively, the manuscripts in this issue reflect the breadth and complexity of educational leadership today. From student achievement and instructional practices to teacher support, leadership transitions, and systemic equity, these studies contribute meaningful insights to both research and practice. We hope this issue encourages continued inquiry, reflection, and dialogue among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers committed to advancing education.

As always, we extend our sincere appreciation to the authors for their rigorous scholarship, to the reviewers for their thoughtful feedback, and to our readers for their continued engagement with Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research.

Sincerely,

Jafeth E. Sanchez, PhD
Editor, The Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research

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A Pre-Pandemic Analysis: Teacher Inexperience and Student Discipline Consequences at Small-Size Texas High Schools

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In this statewide, multiyear investigation, the relationship between teacher inexperience levels and student discipline assignments into in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements at small-size Texas high school campuses with an enrollment of less than 1,000 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 statistically significant relationships between teacher inexperience and student disciplinary consequence assignments. The number of students assigned exclusionary discipline consequences was higher when higher percentages of inexperienced teachers were present. Implications and recommendations for future research were made.

Keywords: discipline, classroom management, suspension, teacher experience, enrollment size

The school district's geographic location influences how desirable a position is for prospective teachers, even after considering other personal factors (Engel et al., 2014; Seelig & McCabe, 2021).). Many rural schools face many challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers due to low salaries and remote locations (Huan et al., 2024). Like their urban counterparts, these schools frequently serve large populations of minority students, low-income families, and academically underachieving students—all of which have been linked to teacher shortages (Hammer et al., 2005; Wesley et al., 2024). Although working in a rural school is sometimes cited as having benefits like small rural class sizes, close-knit communities, and other characteristics, the realities of rural life might make it difficult to attract highly qualified instructors (Azano & Steward, 2015; Wesley et al, 2024). Indeed, some have suggested that the main issue facing rural schools is a shortage of teachers, and this issue deserves greater attention (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Huan et al., 2024).

As school size declines, there is a decreased amount of anonymity among the student population. As a result, students are more likely to know each other as either classmates or in other ways through school organizations. A suspension of a student at a small rural school could lead to social exclusion among their peers because parents disassociate their children from friends who have been removed from the classroom for a disciplinary reason (Jacobsen, 2020).

Although this study is not a strict analysis of schools classified as rural, many of the campuses discussed here are classified as rural by the Texas Education Agency. Of the 714 schools in Texas used for this study which have a student enrollment of less than 1,000 students, 22.8% are classified as rural according to the Texas Education Agency (2024). Rural high school campuses face some similar difficulties as their urban campus counterparts such as large populations of minority students, low-income families, and academically underachieving students (Hammer et al., 2005; Huan et al., 2024). However, rural high school campuses are usually not susceptible to the number of violence and crime incidents influencing their school discipline consequences (Burr et al., 2024; Roscigno et al., 2006; Rumberger, 2011). Students who attend schools in a rural community typically live in an environment in which the education levels of their parents and income are not at the same level as students who live in urban areas with a larger enrollment (Grace et al., 2006). According to Taie and Lewis (2023), during the 2020-2021 school year teacher turnover rate in rural school districts was 7.6%. By comparison, teachers who left the profession were 7.3% for districts classified as city, and 7.1% for districts classified as a town during the 2021-2022 school year.

Student Discipline

Ample research articles are available on student disciplinary practices across different geographic locales, specifically in urban, suburban, and rural schools. Exclusionary discipline is associated with poor student outcomes in terms of academic performance (Anderson et al., 2019; Arcia, 2006; Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Cobb-Clark et al., 2015; Hilberth & Slate, 2012; Skiba & Rausch, 2004), grade retention and dropout rates (Anderson et al., 2019; Balfanz et al., 2014; Cobb-Clark et al., 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011; Marchbanks et al., 2014; Swanson et al., 2017), and engagement in the juvenile criminal

system, according to a substantial body of research (Eckford et al., 2019; Fabelo et al., 2011; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Many authors have postulated discipline practices are determined and implemented based on the characteristics of the community where the school is located (Blau, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Roscigno et al., 2006; Shedd, 2015; Tyson, 2011). Today, more rural and suburban schools are becoming more diverse and less homogeneous. Suburban schools have experienced a growth of Black and Hispanic students over the last few decades (Chapman, 2013; Tefera et al., 2011).

Research investigations into the effects of suspension-reducing measures in rural communities and Southern states are scarce. Suspension-reducing measures could include policies put in place to decrease the number of suspensions issued by school administrators either by the local school district or by state law (Anderson, 2020). According to Smith and Harper (2015), southern states are particularly prone to a larger number of suspensions and more specifically, racial inequities in suspension rates. In a single year, 13 Southern states accounted for 50% of the nation's Black student suspensions and 55% of all nationwide suspensions (Smith & Harper, 2015). School disciplinary procedures are intended to keep children in a secure and productive learning environment by minimizing the amount of time educators and other leaders must spend dealing with disruptive behavior. One piece of that system, exclusionary discipline practices, may have a detrimental effect on students' academic performance, engagement, social and emotional development, and even their prospects for employment (Anderson, 2020; Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019; Pearman et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2014). Before deciding on a disciplinary measure, school administrators are required under the policy framework of many of the most popular exclusionary disciplinary procedures (i.e., suspensions) to exercise their own judgment and discretion regarding the seriousness of a behavioral episode. As a result, educational leaders are crucial in determining consequences (Skiba et al., 2014; Sorensen et al., 2021).

Researchers have addressed whether racial/ethnic racial disparities are present in student discipline actions because of the disciplinarian approach. Edwards et al. (2023) investigated the outcomes of disciplinary actions resulting in racial disparities from a school leader’s standpoint. Using data from the Texas Education Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin during the 2014-2018 school years, over 7,000,000 public school students in the state of Texas were analyzed. The researchers investigated the patterns of in-school suspension placement along ethnic groups and geographic locales. Their findings were that Black students are to receive, disproportionately as a percent of the campus enrollment, an in-school suspension placement regardless of geographic location even when controlling for student, administrator, and school variables. In addition, Black student disparities with respect to an in-school suspension assignment are most frequent in a town, suburban and sometimes rural campus when compared to urban schools (Edwards et al., 2023). Also revealed were differences between schools classified as urban as opposed to schools classified as suburban or town based on the geographic locale defined by the National Center for Education Statistics. In cases where Black students were likely to be interacting with an administrator of the same race, the frequency

of an in-school suspension assignment was reduced in urban schools; however, the opposite trend was present in suburban and town schools.

The geographic location of smaller schools when analyzing the discipline practices of smaller schools is important to note. Based on the discipline experiences of students of color in various geographic locations, non-urban schools frequently have racist policies and practices, colorblindness, and discriminatory practices. It is possible that historically White, small towns and rural communities are more vulnerable to racial and ethnic stereotypes and discriminatory policies and practices (Burr et al., 2024; Cook et al., 2018; Leitner, 2012), which could have a negative effect on student outcomes given the growing racial and ethnic diversity of non-urban neighborhoods and communities in recent years (Lacy, 2016).

During the 2015-2016 school year alone, over 11,000,000 days of instruction were lost among students in Grades K-12 across the United States because of an out-of-school placement (Losen & Whitaker, 2018). About half of those suspensions were distributed for minor incidents which were not considered violent in nature. These incidents include dress code violations, texting on a cell phone or a more generic minor infraction labeled as a disruption or defiance (Anderson & Slate, 2025; Losen et al., 2015, 2017). It should be noted these suspensions punish a child's typical development behaviors as well as being ineffective at changing the negative actions of the adolescent. Moreover, these suspensions results in negative effects on the child's academic achievement and engagement (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Skiba et al., 2014).

The relationship established between student and teacher can have an influence on student discipline in public schools. Many researchers (Cornelius-White, 2007; Kunter et al., 2013; McGrath & van Bergen, 2015; Roorda et al., 2011; Vandenbroucke et al., 2018) support the belief that when students experience a sense of appreciation and support from their teachers, they are more likely to achieve improved results in the areas of affection, behavior, and academia. Conversely, the misbehaviors of students in the classroom can make the teacher feel rejected, and as a result, act as a barrier to establishing strong relationships with their students (Spilt et al., 2011). The biggest influencer of teacher stress is the misbehavior of students, which includes disruptions, disrespect, and disciplinary problems in the classroom.

Teacher Burnout and Retention

With respect to teachers, secondary schools are more prone than primary schools to face difficulties (Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2017; You & Conley, 2015). Teachers can flourish professionally and better serve the needs of their students when they feel valued and supported (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). In addition, teachers are the most valuable educational resource for raising student achievement (Ladd & Goertz, 2015; Stronge et al., 2007). Teachers' general commitment to the teaching profession, their desire to stay in the field, and their dedication to their existing schools are all closely correlated with the relationships they have with their pupils (Collie et al., 2011). They typically feel more supported and a part of the school community at schools with lower

rates of aggressive and violent behavior, fewer suspensions, less concerns with student behavior (Cohen & Geier, 2010; Gregory et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2011). Employees who feel ready when they first start their jobs are less likely to become burned out (O'Brennan et al., 2017).

However, the COVID-19 epidemic has made teacher staffing issues worse, leading to higher levels of stress and challenging working conditions that hasten teachers' burnout (Institute of Science, 2022; Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022). According to Tran et al. (2023), rural schools face different staffing issues than urban schools because they are frequently situated in isolated areas that are despised by many and seen as being "in the middle of nowhere." These areas also have few local facilities, such as large-scale fine arts performances, amusement parks, and retail malls.

O'Brennan et al. (2017) conducted a study to identify "salient staff perceptions and school contextual factors that relate to staff reports of professional burnout" (p. 167). They sent out the Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools School Climate Survey in the spring of 2012. They received responses from over 3,000 staff members, including teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff, from 58 high schools. Half of Maryland's school districts were represented with 50% of the responses coming from suburban areas, 28% from rural, and 22% from urban districts. They discussed less burnout by staff members when they thought they had the ability to handle pupils who presented behavioral challenges. Burnout is probably partially caused by the convergence of emotional detachment from students and other staff members in the school community as well as self-efficacy in managing behavioral issues. Lastly, reports of burnout were substantially correlated with the suspension rate at the school level (O'Brennan et al., 2017).

According to Borman and Dowling (2008), higher rates of teacher turnover are linked to more negative effects on "high needs" rural and urban environments (i.e., schools where a significant portion of economically poor and academically underachieving pupils of color attend). High burnout staff members also report having less influence over their classrooms, being less committed to their work as teachers, being more likely to resign, and having higher absenteeism rates (Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Schonfeld, 2001). Burnout has been linked to a higher frequency of student discipline issues as well as a lack of support from peers and authorities (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). The location of the school may influence burnout as teachers in urban schools reported more disruptive and maladaptive conduct in the classroom than were reported by teachers in suburban and rural schools (Provansnik et al., 2007).

To address retention, it is necessary to stop competent and "good teachers from leaving the job for the wrong reasons," including stress or a lack of opportunity for professional growth (Kelchtermans, 2017, p. 965). Chronically high teacher turnover rates in schools can lead to interruptions in continuity, a reduction in trust, strained ties with the community, and a decline in student accomplishment (Boyd et al., 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Schools can improve relationships, lower safety risks, prevent staff burnout and high turnover rates, and set standards for how all staff members should interact with students and each other by defining clear behavioral expectations for all parties (Bradshaw

et al., 2010). The role of the campus administrators is important as well. Teachers are more likely to be happy with their careers and stay in the classroom longer than teachers who do not believe that their administration will assist them in carrying out their professional responsibilities (Boyd et al., 2011, Curtis, 2012; Djonko-Moore, 2016; Ingersoll, 2003; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Podolsky et al., 2016; Redding & Henry, 2018; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Tickle et al., 2011).

An abundant amount of research studies is available on teacher burnout in urban areas. Geographical factors exacerbate educational inequality within urban school districts in cities with limited resources as well as between affluent suburban and urban school districts (Walters, 2007). According to researchers (Au & Blake, 2003; Burstein et al., 2009; Farahmandpour & Voelkel, 2025; National Commission on Teacher and America's Future, 2003), the likelihood that pupils in urban districts will have teachers without experience or certification is twice as high. The New Teacher Project (2012) reported that in urban schools, the educators who yield the highest levels of student accomplishment are also the most likely to quit within the first five years of their employment. Student achievement is negatively influenced by teacher turnover, particularly in the areas of mathematics and English language arts. This negative influence is exacerbated in schools where a larger proportion of underachieving African American pupils attend (Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

Considerable financial resources are devoted to training and developing newly recruited teachers in schools that already lack enough resources, and it is also more probable that these hires will leave the school. With a higher turnover rate, schools lose their already limited resources when qualified teachers leave. This cycle is repeated when new teachers require the same training expenditures every year (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Tran et al., 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Removing students from the normal classroom environment for discipline purposes and assigning disciplinary consequences of in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements can have negative consequences on student academic achievement, leading to a lower probability of high school graduation or lower achievement exam scores on 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 these disciplinary consequences in comparison 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). 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 studies on student discipline are about the disproportionality of students removed from the classroom by

ethnicity/race. Existing literature is lacking to establish the relationship between student discipline and the professional experience levels of teachers based on the enrollment size of the high school campus. Greater emphasis should be placed to prepare teachers for classroom management and establishing relationships with students which could lead to a decrease in the removal of students from the classroom. Findings from this study may be used to demonstrate the need to retain teachers in the classroom, especially as they become more experienced. 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 does 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 three exclusionary discipline consequences (i.e., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements 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 determine the degree to which relationships were present between the experience level of teachers on small-size high school campuses and the total number of exclusionary discipline placements into in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements 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, and 2018-2019). As such an analysis was conducted to determine 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. In the most recent articles that could be located, Thompson et al. (2025a) addressed the relationship of teacher inexperience with exclusionary discipline consequence assignments at large-size high schools. They documented that teachers with six years or less of teaching experience had higher frequencies of assigning exclusionary discipline consequences to their students than did teachers with more than six years of experience. In a related investigation, Thompson et al. (2025b) addressed the issue of teacher inexperience and student exclusionary discipline consequences at moderate-size high schools. Their findings were congruent with the Thompson et al. (2015a) study, and with the results of this multiyear investigation. More teachers who are inexperienced is

associated with higher rates of students being assigned to exclusionary discipline consequences.

In this multiyear investigation, the relationship between the professional experience levels of high school teachers and the exclusionary discipline placements of students at small-size high schools was examined. The goal was to take a broader analysis of campuses to see campuses with higher percentage of inexperienced teachers were more likely to have more student discipline placements. Many, but not all, of the schools analyzed in this study are located within rural communities as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2023**)**. Results from this multiyear analysis could also shed some light on the need to train and assist novice 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 experience and student removal from the classroom for discipline consequences may assist campus and district administrators and teacher preparation programs to alter their curriculum to address teacher retention and implementation of effective classroom management techniques in smaller school settings.

Given the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on student behavior, findings from this multiyear investigation may serve as a baseline for future studies. Data on student misbehavior in years following the pandemic can be compared to the results of our pre-pandemic data. As such, any increases or changes in the types of student disciplinary consequences can be established.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study: (a) What is the relationship between teacher inexperience and in-school suspension assignments at small-size high schools in the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years?; (b) What is the relationship between teacher inexperience and out-of-school suspension assignments at small-size high schools in the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years?; and (c) What is the relationship between teacher inexperience and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements at small-size high schools in the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years?

Methods

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 could not 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 year or more of professional experience). The dependent variables were the number of students who were assigned to an exclusionary discipline consequence (i.e., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement) in the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years. These three school years were selected as results from their analyses may be used as a baseline prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Participants and Instrumentation

Participants in this study were Texas public high school students who were enrolled and assigned exclusionary discipline consequences, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement in Grades 9-12 on small-size campuses with less than 1,000 students during the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years. Henceforth, these campuses will be referred to as small-size high schools. Exclusionary discipline consequences were in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement. 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 Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement, a temporary educational setting in which a student is expelled or placed to either an on-campus or off-campus Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement 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 was 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.

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 for Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements.

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 was ranged from a high of 69.86 in the 2016-2017 school year to a low of 65.76 in the 2017-2018 school year. The median number varied from a high of 49.00 in the 2016-2017 and 2018-2019 school year to a low of 45.00 during the 2017-2018 school year.

Table 1

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

School Year	ISS		OSS		DAEP	
	M	*Mdn*	*M*	*Mdn*	*M*	*Mdn*
2016-2017	69.86	49.00	34.05	20.00	73.00	64.00
2017-2018	65.76	45.00	33.31	22.00	72.52	64.00
2018-2019	19.49	16.00	20.70	17.00	23.85	19.00

Results for In-School Suspension for All Three School Years

With respect to the 2016-2017 school year, to determine whether a statistically significant relationship was present between teacher inexperience and in-school suspension assignments at small-size high schools, a Pearson *r* was calculated and yielded a statistically significant result, $r(506) = .23$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen,

Table 2

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

School Year	ISS	OSS	DAEP
	r	*r*	*r*
2016-2017	.23	.24	.22
2017-2018	.20	.19	.21
2018-2019	.24	.26	.25

1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and in-school suspension assignments. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and in-school suspension assignments overlapped 5.29%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of in-school suspensions. Revealed in Table 2 are the correlations that were calculated to address the previously mentioned research questions.

For the 2017-2018 school year, a Pearson *r* yielded a statistically significant result, $r(506) = .20$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and 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* yielded a statistically significant result, $r(522) = .24$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and in-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements into in-school suspension overlapped 5.76%. 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 36.26 in the 2018-2019 school year to a low of 33.31 during the 2017-2018 school year. The median number of assignments ranged from a high of 23.00 during the 2018-2019 school year to a low of 20.00 during 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* yielded a statistically significant result, $r(318) = .24$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and out-of-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements into out-of-school suspension overlapped 5.76%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of out-of-school suspensions. Table 2 contains the information for the correlation analyses.

With respect to the 2017-2018 school year, a Pearson *r* yielded a statistically significant result, $r(337) = .19$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and out-of-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher experience and out-of-school suspensions overlapped 3.61%. 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, $r(344) = .26$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and out-of-school suspension. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and out-of-school suspensions overlapped 6.76%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of out-of-school suspensions.

Results for Disciplinary Alternative Education Program Placements for All Three School Years

Descriptive statistics were computed for the average number of Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements by teacher years of experience prior to correlation calculations. The average number of Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements ranged from a high of 23.85 in the 2018-2019 school year to a low of 19.49 during the 2016-2017 school year. The median number varied from a high of 19.00 during the 2018-2019 school year to a low of 16.00 during the 2016-2017 school year. Delineated in Table 1 are the descriptive statistics for Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements.

For the 2016-2017 school year for Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements, the Pearson *r* yielded a statistically significant result, $r(325) = .22$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements overlapped 4.84%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements. Revealed in Table 2 are the correlation analyses.

With respect to the 2017-2018 school year, a Pearson *r* yielded a statistically significant result, $r(307) = .21$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements overlapped 4.41%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements.

Regarding the 2018-2019 school year, a Pearson *r* yielded a statistically significant result, $r(311) = .25$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant positive relationship was revealed between teacher inexperience and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements. Squaring this *r* value indicated that teacher inexperience and student placements overlapped 6.25%. Higher percentages of inexperienced teachers at a school campus were related with higher numbers of Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements.

As delineated in Table 3, the percentages of teachers were calculated by their levels

of experience. In the 2016-2017 school year, almost 30% of the teachers in this sample had 0 to 5 years of experience. Similar percentages were present for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school year. With regard to experienced teachers, about 70% of our sample of teachers had 6 or more years of teaching experience in each of the three school years.

Table 3

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

School Year	0 to 5 Years of Experience	6 or More Years of Experience
	M(%)	*M(%)*
2016-2017	29.90	70.10
2017-2018	30.95	69.04
2018-2019	30.21	69.79

Discussion

In this multiyear investigation, relationships between teacher inexperience and in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements on small-size Texas high school campuses in the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years were 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).

Statistically significant relationships were present between teacher inexperience and in-school suspension assignments. More in-school suspensions were assigned when higher percentages of inexperienced teachers were present than when high percentages of experienced teachers were present at the school campus. With respect to out-of-school suspension, statistically significant relationships were present between teacher inexperience and student placements to an out-of-school suspension. More out-of-school suspensions were assigned when higher percentages of inexperienced teachers were present than when high percentages of experienced teachers were present at the school campus. Statistically significant relationships were present between teacher inexperience and student placements to Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements for all three school years. More placements were assigned to students when higher percentages of inexperienced teachers were present than when high percentages of experienced teachers were present at the school campus.

Connections to Existing Literature

The average number of exclusionary student discipline placements based on teacher inexperience was determined in this multiyear analysis. In this study, positive relationships were revealed between teacher inexperience and students assigned to an exclusionary discipline placement for small-size Texas high school campuses. Few research studies have been performed on the relationship between teacher inexperience

and the use of exclusionary disciplinary placements in public schools. In the one recent article by Thompson et al. (2025a), similar findings were established. At large-size high schools, inexperienced teachers had higher rates of assigning students to exclusionary discipline consequences than did their more experienced peers. In a related investigation, Thompson et al. (2025b) addressed the issue of teacher inexperience and student exclusionary discipline consequences at moderate-size high schools. Their results were commensurate with the findings of Thompson et al. (2025a) and with the findings of this multiyear investigation. More inexperienced teachers at high schools is clearly related to higher rates of student exclusionary discipline consequences.

In the three years of data analyzed in this study, about 30% of the teachers had less than 6 years of experience. According to Caples and McNeese (2010), teachers who have been teaching for a longer time will depend more on established methods of classroom management to allow misbehaving students to remain in their regular educational environment. The out-of-school suspension rates of Black students in middle school classrooms with teachers who have fewer than three years of experience can be predicted (Williams et al., 2020). In addition, a shortage of qualified instructors in urban classrooms may probably slow down efforts to lessen or eliminate discipline differences among Black children (Feng, 2010; Greenlee & Ogletree, 1993; Meister & Melnick, 2003). Thus, the need to provided teachers with professional development to manage student discipline behavior issues and retain teachers in the profession past their fifth year of experience is critical to the academic success of public school students.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings from this statewide multiyear investigation provide implications for both policy and practice. Campus and district administrators should disaggregate their student discipline data within each campus among inexperienced teachers, identify any trends that demonstrate an increase in exclusionary student discipline consequences and address issues that are present to improve student achievement. School administrators should ensure inexperienced teachers are properly educated and prepared and supported to handle student misbehaviors successfully in the classroom. Further, administrators at the district level should ensure that steps needed to retain teachers past their fifth year in the field are taken.

As far as school district policies are concerned, the district must evaluate their procedures and policies related to Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placements. Lenderman and Hawkins (2021) discussed the effects of placement or repeated placement to Disciplinary Alternative Education Program on high school graduation rates. Higher education and alternative teacher certification programs should ensure that their curriculum to prepare new teacher candidates provides the necessary training needed to handle classroom management and student misbehaviors.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this multiyear statewide analysis, several recommendations for future research can be made. The three school years of data preceding the COVID-19 pandemic were a part of this statewide multiyear analysis. First, an analysis of the relationship between teacher inexperience and student exclusionary discipline placements since the Covid-19 pandemic should be conducted beginning with the 2021-2022 school year. In addition, an analysis of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on student discipline compared to before the pandemic should be conducted. Within this study, an analysis of student exclusionary discipline assignments from an aggregate standpoint was conducted. Future researchers should break down student discipline data by race, special education classification, or economic status and teacher inexperience.

Addressed in this article were small-size high schools with an enrollment of less than 1,000 students, regardless of the geographic location and student exclusionary discipline. Researchers are encouraged to examine exclusionary discipline assignments among schools with a larger enrollment by their geographic location as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics and teacher experience. The Thompson et al. (2025) study provides pre-pandemic information at the large-size high school level but needs to be extended to post-pandemic times. Data on elementary and middle schools should also be analyzed in a similar manner as was performed in this article. Researchers are also encouraged to extend this investigation to other states.

Conclusion

In this Texas multiyear investigation, the relationship between teacher inexperience and students assigned to in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement on small-size Texas high school campuses was established. Analyses revealed the presence of a statistically significant relationship between teacher inexperience and student discipline placements across all three school years. A higher percentage of inexperienced teachers was related to a higher number of exclusionary discipline placements for all three school years of data that were analyzed.

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Valedictorians in the Making: A Study of the Influential Factors Affecting Student Success

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One of the most underutilized resources in education are the experiences of our top achievers. This qualitative case study highlights the educational journeys of 15 high school valedictorians from urban, suburban, and rural schools. Researchers uncovered the sources of motivation that drove valedictorians to relentlessly achieve excellence throughout their educational careers. The findings of this research revealed influences in the lives of valedictorians. These influences lead to the development of personal qualities. Those strong influences coupled with the development of personal qualities became paramount to overcoming adversities they faced. Those factors were explained and supported through three theoretical frameworks: Culturally responsive pedagogy, marginality and mattering, and habits of mind. Implications and recommendations for parents, PK-12 educators and school officials focused on building robust supports for students and teaching strong personal qualities for a healthy mindset.

Keywords: valedictorians, honor students, achievement, student success, academics, healthy student habits

The title of valedictorian is given to students with the highest GPA (Lang, 2007). This study specifically researched valedictorians in the midwestern United States who attended public or private high schools in urban, suburban, or rural settings. These scholars possessed a driving energy that enabled them to persevere through the difficulties of life and motivated the child to deliver nothing short of excellence. This study uncovered the sources of motivation and perseverance that drove top students to relentlessly achieve to the highest degree throughout their educational careers. The findings revealed factors that could potentially change the academic trajectory of less-achieving students. If PK-12 educators leverage the strategies of graduates who have achieved tremendous academic success, they could accelerate growth in struggling learners. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on a resource of information that is often overlooked, our most successful students. The limited research on valedictorians, indicates that their experiences have been underutilized. Studying their journey and accomplishments can reveal important details on how to best support the entire student body.

Research Question

An examination of students' lived experiences as valedictorians provided an opportunity to expand upon the following questions. How do top high school graduates—also known as valedictorians—in the Midwestern United States describe their educational journey and achievement story? What factors experienced in PK-12 learning environments proved most influential to their success?

Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical frameworks informed this research. Ladson-Billing's (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering, and Costa and Kallick's (2000) theory, habits of mind, each connected to the data which emerged from the findings. The three theories are important because this research considers the whole child and all aspects of a person that could contribute to academic success.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1995) called for teachers across the country to develop engagement in their students, especially when the culture of the students differed from the majority population in the area. Educators must believe every learner is capable of success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Cooperative learning, student and teacher connection, and creating a classroom community are all important factors in a thriving learning environment. (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The relationship between teacher and student is paramount for a trust connection. Hammond (2015) devoted an entire chapter to establishing an alliance between teacher and student. Hammond (2015) explained the culturally relevant teacher promotes all students as leaders. Instead of competitive or individual achievement goals, the focus should be on students helping each other to achieve a high-level of academic success for the whole class. The existence of many

stakeholders in a child's academic success encourages and promotes a mindset of learning as a way of life, leading to a successful student. Teachers need to show passion about learning while scaffolding information for students. When assessing, educators should present options for evidence of understanding.

Marginality and Mattering

Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering served as the second theory used to analyze the data. Schlossberg (1989) identified marginality and mattering as antonyms. Marginality points to people in all stages of life who feel unwanted or unnoticed. Marginality occurs when a person feels the pull of two different domains of life and cannot commit to one and reject the other. A person identifying with two different cultures may feel permanently marginalized (Schlossberg, 1989). This factor is especially apparent when one of the cultures is considered invisible or less than the dominant culture in that region. This may shed light on the disparity of graduation rates between ethnic groups. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that Hispanic students graduated at a rate of 81%, Black students at 79% and Native students at 74% (Ricker, 2019). Asian students graduated at a rate of 92% and white students at 89% (Ricker, 2019). Apart from Asian American students, whose culture may align more closely with white American school objectives, the minority groups mentioned graduated at a significantly lower rate. This is an example of a possible state of permanent marginalization.

Mattering indicates we believe we matter to at least one other person (Schlossberg, 1989). This belief drives a person's actions. Schlossberg (1989) indicated five dimensions of mattering: "attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence and appreciation" (para. 19). The theory of marginality and mattering may have strong ties to student success. Feeling noticed, important to others, connected, needed, and appreciated all promote a positive alliance or tie to people at the school. This positive alliance or feeling of acceptance in the school space may be a necessary part of student achievement. The dimensions of mattering were a common thread between valedictorians. Because valedictorians indicated these dimensions as essential to their success, educators can see it is imperative for the success of other students, as well.

Habits of Mind

Costa and Kallick (2000) described habits of mind as, "broad, enduring, and essential lifespan learnings" (p. 98). In an ever changing and therefore chaotic world, these 16 habits that serve to develop thoughtfulness, cooperation, and compassion in students of all ages (Costa & Kallick, 2008). Of the 16 habits Costa and Kallick reveal, five proved to be especially evident in this research. They include: persisting, metacognition, striving for accuracy, applying past knowledge to new situations, and remaining open to continuous learning (Costa & Kallick, 2008). Not all valedictorians exhibited all habits addressed in this study; however, each student displayed multiple and overlapping habits which they attributed to their success.

Methodology

Recruitment

The recruitment process to find valedictorians began with an internet search for schools in the Midwest that honored students who achieved the status of valedictorians and graduated from urban, suburban, and rural schools. The following criteria was used in the online search engine: historical data for valedictorian recipients in the past ten years; students from all settings including public and private schools; students from multiple ethnic backgrounds with differing socio-economic upbringing. School officials, social media, and personal references served as primary sources for obtaining contact information. Each prospective participant completed a survey to collect relevant data such as demographics, graduation date, and confirmation of their school and valedictorian status. Valedictorians also submitted their graduation speech if one was given. The final list comprised of four male and 11 female valedictorians. Nine valedictorians matriculated from urban schools, five from suburban, and one from a rural district. The valedictorian's ethnic breakdown includes three African American students, 11 white students, and one Hispanic student. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Subsequent contact included verifying information, asking valedictorians to approve transcripts of their interview and selecting pseudonyms. Purposeful random sampling (Patton, 2015) benefited the study due to its random nature. Being purposeful about selection of participants assured participants came from the various demographics as described above. During data collection, purposeful random sampling provided for numerous possible experiences which influenced successful students.

Data collection

Four types of data emerged during the data collection process. First, valedictorians participated in interviews via a media video conferencing site. Through computer generated written documentation and audio recording, each interview was transcribed. After each interview participants received a transcript for their approval. The most accurate information from each interview was the highest priority. During the interviews, participants provided artifacts influential in their education. Sample artifacts included letters of commendation, honor roll certificates, letters from and to teachers, scholarships, and report cards. Other artifacts included books, cell phones, plants, study spots, and religious artifacts. Documentation and coding of each artifact as well as its meaning and connection to the participant supplied the second form of data collection.

Seven speeches in two forms, written documents and audio recordings served as the third point of data. Not all valedictorians gave speeches at graduation, so the number of speeches does not coincide with the number of valedictorians. Coding of these speeches for patterns and commonalities played an important role in the data along with codes from interview, artifact, and observer's notes. Finally, observer's notes included tones, inflections, and vocal patterns through the interviews and document analysis of valedictorian speeches. These notes acted as a fourth data point. Observer's notes captured the nuances which would not have been apparent in written transcripts.

Themes

A software-based program assisted with coding data from all four research collection types. Coding is defined as "the process of labeling and organizing your qualitative data to identify different themes and the relationships between them" (Medelyan, 2019, p. 1). Seale (2018) defined the purpose of coding as ease in making sense of the data and summarizing the information gained from the data (p. 367). These codes developed during several readings of the data. Some codes for this research included relationships, learning styles, and pivotal moments. Common themes across the cases emerged after identifying codes (Yin, 2014). These themes were arranged on a spreadsheet which became a framework for the next phase of the research process. Patton (2015) described the next step as the interpretive phase. The interpretive phase included extracting meaning, comparisons, constructing frameworks, and drawing conclusions.

Validity

As defined by Creswell and Poth (2018) triangulation refers to "researchers making use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of their study" (p. 328). Triangulation was achieved using four data sources: interviews, graduation speeches, artifacts, and field notes.

Accuracy in recording, transcribing, and coding data was of high importance. The validity of the study relied on accuracy at every step. Checks and double checks performed by myself, my chairperson, and two editors, throughout this research ensured a high level of accuracy.

Findings

Three distinct themes emerged through the process of interviewing, coding, and data analysis. Those themes included: Influences, personality traits, and adversities. A variety of influences in a student's life contributed to the development of their personal qualities. Personal qualities are characteristics which define how a person approaches life situations. With these qualities valedictorians overcame obstacles in their personal and academic lives. All students encounter obstacles and difficulties. However, these valedictorian students used what they learned from the influences in their lives to develop characteristics needed to not only overcome obstacles but to excel academically through the highs and lows of living.

Influences

The influences in the lives of valedictorians which proved to develop personal traits needed to persevere through difficult times while continuing to exceed academic expectations include family, schools, faith, peers, and artifacts. Each of the 15 participants first described their parents and families as significant influences in their academic success. One participant, Dennis, described his parent's influence. "My parents really wanted me to be academically successful. They kind of said like being successful in

that way is like the key to financial freedom, [and] emotional freedom." Valedictorians described home life as robust and full of learning experiences including family outings, and intentional development of the child's curiosity then, satisfying that curiosity through research and experiments. Participants described home life to include rich conversation about character traits and topics of interest. Gloria recalled fond memories of early childhood when her parents fostered curiosity in her by asking questions and helping her to search for answers. These are traits found in the habits of mind theory by Costa and Kallick (2000). Costa and Kallick (2000) describe curiosity as responding with wonderment and awe.

Parental Roles

Twelve of the 15 participants described their family life as a two-parent household. In all those cases, the students had close relationships with their mother who supported their education in multiple ways. This support included homework help, character development, and emotional support. Many fathers played a significant role in the education and encouragement of these highly successful children, as well. Some examples included reading to children at young ages and character development. For the three valedictorians who came from single parent households, mothers were their primary caregiver. In their households, students recalled that their parents placed a high value on education. In addition to parental influences, valedictorians also named siblings, god-parents, and grandparents as highly influential in their academic achievements.

Emotional Support

Whether in single or two parent households, valedictorians experienced support from families to accomplish academic endeavors to the best of their ability. This requires persistence as described by Costa and Kallick (2000). Throughout life's ups and downs, all 15 valedictorians named at least one family member they could rely on for encouragement. These family members provided different levels of help at each point in the students' academic lives. However, students reported the emotional support and expectations of family members got them through difficult times especially when reminded of positive early learning experiences. Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering discussed the need for students to have that emotional support from others.

Early Learning

Six participants recalled early learning experiences through parents or close adults who read to them or worked on academics prior to their first official school experience. Most valedictorians looked back fondly on memories of their early learning experiences. Valedictorians felt their early learning gave them an upper hand and confidence in their academic skills. Although they may not have shown appreciation at the time, as young adults, valedictorians saw how those experiences cultivated a culture of learning. At some point in their academic lives, the students reflected on these activities to gain confidence and review family expectations. These reminiscences aligned with Costa and Kallick's (2000) theory on using past experiences to gain confidence and knowledge in new situations.

Prioritizing Education

The expectations from families promoted a mindset of success. Families originally taught and promoted these expectations from an early age. All valedictorians interviewed came from families which verbally reminded the children of the value of education. Each of these families promoted education in their own way. Valedictorians described family members' promotion of education as prioritizing academic activities first above other pursuits, dedication, and excellence in educational activities. Three participants described their parents and siblings as engulfed in their own learning on an informal level. They served as role models for their children.

Transferring High Expectations to Children

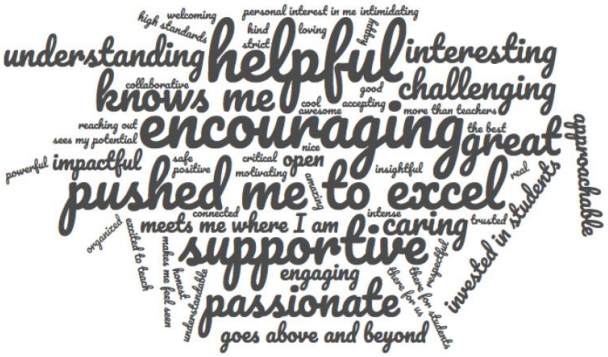
Families communicated their expectations throughout most of the students' grade-school years. As parents observed students' internalizing these expectations and carrying them out without reminders, families allowed students to take the lead, and reduced or stopped the verbal reminders of expectations. However, families also relied on school influences to promote academic success. In this instance, parents communicated their belief that the child is capable of success, as Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests.

Positive Influences at School

Schools and teachers gained considerable influence in the lives of these students because school influences extended into the homes as a high priority. Participants described the bulk of their teachers as great educators who embodied positive influence on their academic understanding and interest in learning. This was exemplified through higher level work assignments, teachers expressing confidence in student abilities, and personal connections between student and teacher, as discussed by Hammond (2015) as an alliance between student and teacher.

Figure 1

Valedictorians' Description of K-12 Teachers



Note. Word Clouds increase the size of the words and phrases each time a word or phrase repeated, so the largest words and phrases most frequently occurred in interviews by valedictorians while describing their teachers.

Figure 1 illustrates the adjectives and characteristics the valedictorians used to describe their PK-12 teachers. The use of the words “encouraging” and “helpful” occurred 14 times each, while “pushed me to excel” occurred 13 times. This Word Cloud encompasses the top words participants used to describe teachers.

Great Teachers

None of the valedictorians described their favorite teachers as easy. Rather, teachers who had difficult curriculum and made strong connections with students, demonstrating they really cared, fell into that category of favorite teachers. Teachers especially good at their trade made the list of favorites, as well. Students felt more connected to their learning when educators were easy to talk to and excellent communicators of their subject matter. Kevin expanded on this idea, “[the teacher] was able to describe these really in-depth concepts and in ways that were very approachable.” This example supports Ladson-Billings (1995) findings on social relations and how important that student and teacher connection is to student learning. In addition to classroom teachers and single subject teachers, valedictorians also included specialist and world language teachers as their favorites. These educators often taught students for several years so the relationship between teacher and student developed over the course of many years. This longevity helped students develop long-term relationships with adults in their schools.

Relationships were one of the factors students brought up most often about their teachers. Students attributed feelings of safety in school to relationships. Maria explained, “I was able to share what was going on in my life outside of school [with my teacher]. [I shared] what was going on at home and they were very supportive of that.” Difficulties at home could be balanced by leaning on teachers for consistent support and comfort. Maria described a relationship with teachers in which she knew she mattered. This is an example of Schlossberg’s (1989) theory on marginality and mattering. Students need to know they matter to someone at school which promotes belonging.

Being socially comfortable with teachers was not the only factor which affected students. Valedictorians reported teachers who knew their students well academically and encouraged those students not working up to their potential, to step up their effort. Participants reported that teachers knew how hard to push each individual and had appropriate expectations.

Grades

About half the valedictorians indicated that grades were a motivating factor in their success. For some, it was a quantitative way to track a competitive nature either with self or close friends. Others felt grades were motivating because parents emphasized the importance of good grades. Still others reported that grades were initially important however, they recognized that making academic learning a priority over grades reduced anxiety and made learning more enjoyable. Those students continued to experience the

same excellent grades but with less stress and more joy in learning. The same joy was attained when recalling accomplishments.

Prior Successes

Past personal achievements contributed to valedictorians' confidence levels and mindset. From preschool through high school, in school and at home, participants built on past success. Matt remembered, "Those are skills that I very much feel like I had going into high school and really was able to just lean on. I think a lot of that came from my middle school experience during the History Day project." Achievement in early years provided students with a grounded feeling that they were capable of similar successes in later years. This is an example of Costa and Kallick's (2000) tenet of applying past knowledge to new situations. This not only transfers knowledge beyond the initial situation, but it promotes confidence. In addition, during times of doubt or low motivation, these students looked back on their early achievements and gained confidence from the feeling of success, giving them the desire to tackle new learning in and out of school.

Extracurricular Activities

Outside of the academic hours, most schools offer extra-curricular activities. Honor students participated in the following activities: clubs, drama, sports, and volunteer work. Students can feel more connected to school through extracurricular activities. These activities can promote a feeling of mattering as described by Schlossberg's (1989) dimension of dependence. Students can feel that their teammates depend on them to be present. Beyond the walls of the school, valedictorians held part time jobs and engaged in faith-based activities. Participants were involved in multiple extra-curriculars or took one to extended lengths. Students found that time spent in this way was an outlet for stress and offered practice working with others. However, the extra demand on their schedules was a restraint they each had to overcome. Overwhelmingly, valedictorians juggled their schedule to include many extra-curricular activities, all while maintaining excellent grades. Extra-curricular pursuits also provided a venue to meet other students.

Like-Minded Peers

Peers also influenced the academic and social/emotional lives of each of the interviewees. Valedictorians found support in surrounding themselves with like-minded peers. Even the most competitive personalities found that working together in study groups or academic conversations proved mutually beneficial. During the pandemic, these conversations moved to text, telephone, and conference calls. Some students sought additional resources for information related to class and shared among peers. In these pods of learning communities, students supported each other socially and academically. These learning communities are similar to those described by Ladson-Billings (1995) when she called for cooperative learning as a part of every student's learning experience. That was not to say friendly competition did not exist amongst students in supportive groups of classmates. An interesting side note, the students who leaned on friends for academic support came from schools which supported a valedictorian title for anyone reaching a

GPA of 4.0. Those valedictorians who came from schools honoring only one student described a life of academic silos, which made learning more difficult.

Family, school, employment, faith, and peers affected top students in positive ways. Families and school personnel walked children through educational experiences. Extra curriculars provided an outlet and promoted time management. Faith and peers supported children in a variety of ways to achieve their standing as exceptional students. All these influences contributed to the personal traits of valedictorians which made each student successful. These influences helped to develop personal qualities in students. Valedictorians recognized these qualities as contributing to their academic success.

Personal Qualities

Mindset

Personal qualities contributed to students' academic standing as well as affected their large and small choices. These qualities included mindset and how to continue to learn when interest runs low, personality and anxiety vs. personal best. In addition, initiative, effort, curiosity, confidence, the joy of learning, habits, and routines were factors. One strong correlation between valedictorians involved a strong mindset. This is in alignment with the habit of metacognition as described by Costa and Kallick (2000). Intentionality about personal qualities had a positive effect on learning.

Pascal (n.d.) understood mindset when he stated, "Our achievements of today are but the sum total of our thoughts of yesterday. You are today where the thoughts of yesterday have brought you and you will be tomorrow where the thoughts of today take you". One valedictorian shared this quote to demonstrate her understanding of the connectedness of our thoughts and actions over time. All other participants exhibited this type of mindset, as well. This strong mindset also served to boost self-confidence.

Personal Best

Participants ranged from outgoing and outwardly confident to reserved, with a quiet grit. Each valedictorian possessed the desire to do well in school however, not one of the students interviewed described a title of valedictorian as their overall academic goal. Rather, these students expressed a need to do their best through most of their academic lives. Whether living by the idea that effort has a direct connection to outcome, growth mindset, always reach higher, or complete self-responsibility for academic outcomes, these students all had a positive mindset that drove their academic achievements.

Strategies When Interest Is Low

When interest in a specific academic area ran low, students had well thought out strategies to work to the best of their abilities. These strategies included looking for one or two points of interest and connecting them to the areas of low interest and working to the best ability with the understanding that cultivating good work habits will benefit future endeavors. These strategies must always be accompanied by the ability to manage time well.

Time Management

Valedictorians all indicated once they mastered the management of their own time, learning fell into place. Those valedictorians who mastered time management earlier, leaned on that skill and felt it served them well. Valedictorians who struggled to manage their time and learned it later, felt earlier learning of this skill would have saved them many difficulties and anxious moments throughout their PK-12 experiences.

Anxiety

Anxiety was a factor for some valedictorians. A participant expressed her feelings of anxiety in this way, “If I didn't feel like I got something right, from a young age, I've always been like very stressed about … not getting the ‘A’ because I held myself to a standard.” Living up to the expectations of self and others created anxious feelings. As difficult as anxiety made life, it was a driving force for achievement in some students. However, each student felt that allowing anxiety to drive their education was not a sustainable practice. Other valedictorians took the approach of personal best. That meant being satisfied with self when putting forth best effort, no matter the outcome. This practice reduced the stress of expectations and kept the focus on learning which was found to be more enjoyable.

Initiative

A positive attitude can lead students to show initiative in their academic work. All 15 valedictorians had a history of showing initiative in their schoolwork and other areas of their lives. Initiative was exemplified in Ellen’s creation and funding of the Recycle Club at her school. In this case, Ellen saw a need for recycling awareness. She approached school administration about her idea to start a recycle club. When she realized financing was needed to get her club started, she researched opportunities to obtain that funding. In her spare time, Ellen wrote a grant to secure the necessary start-up items for her new club. From the captain of a sports team, to achieving academic award, initiative was a common thread observed which seemed to spark and energy in students to continue to grow and become academic leaders. In many cases, that drive to take initiative could best be described as taking responsible risks from Costa and Kallick’s (2000) habits of mind. Using initiative to start an after-school club or leading the design of a play for the theater department takes some personal risks.

Curiosity

That initiative may have been ignited by a need-to-know trait described by participants. From the most outgoing to those more reserved, valedictorians found motivation to raise their hands in class, ask clarifying questions and regularly attend office hours or meet with teachers after school for help with academics. Some valedictorians attributed this need-to-know to a curious spirit, nurtured in their home from a young age. That curiosity fits with Costa and Kallick’s (2000) dimension of responding with wonderment and awe which they describe as being intrigued by the world.

Persistence

Valedictorians agreed that education isn't necessarily about being smart, rather the time and effort put into studies is a better determiner of the outcome. Gabriella explained, "I continually work until in my mind it is perfect." This is an example of persistence as described by Costa and Kallick (2000) as a habit of mind. Coupled with past achievements, this effort created a confidence in students. That confidence can reciprocate a driving force in student effort. Students felt they possessed the skills to perform well academically, so these 15 valedictorians proffer the effort needed to do well. Confidence in themselves as capable learners could positively affect the joy they feel in learning new information.

Love of Learning

Valedictorians expressed a deep love of or joy in learning, although they all showed an unmistakable satisfaction in their achievements. Dennis explained, "So I kind of like identified myself as maybe a student that was going a little bit above and beyond, and I enjoyed it." This love of learning seemed to bond the all-in effort they expressed, as well. For those whose anxiety overshadowed their joy in learning, the pandemic gave them an opportunity to step back and re-evaluate their mindset. An intentional decision to focus on learning for the sake of learning rather than a fear of not living up to expectations relieved anxiety but kept an excellent GPA intact. High GPA standing, in turn, was supported by good study habits and personal routines in learning scenarios.

Good Habits

Collins English Dictionary (n.d.) defined habit as "something you do often or regularly." Establishing regular routines in schoolwork or routine worktimes and spaces may be considered a habit. Valedictorians often relied on habits to promote learning. Valedictorians included in their academic habits: daily reading on the bus in elementary school; choosing a dedicated study area for intense focus; and intentional use of planners to track homework, tests, and projects. Other habits included completing tasks ahead of the due date, which relieved them of a cramming or "just get it done" mentality. Students also mentioned prioritizing their lives including health related activities like sleep. This often meant missing out on screen time or working for quality over quantity in their social lives.

Each of the valedictorians expressed a strong message of developing personal traits which promote good habits and a positive attitude toward school. For each of the participants, these traits matured at different points in their lives. However, learning these essential habits and traits earlier served to make academic life easier. In addition, keeping a mindset that they were capable individuals, able to learn whatever presented itself, provided the motivation needed to get through challenging times.

Adversities

No one escapes this life without encountering adversities. It is easy to think top

students have easy lives, free of difficulties. However, valedictorians experienced life issues just like the rest of the population. Using the traits discussed above, valedictorians worked through these difficulties while maintaining excellent grades. Students in this study experienced adversities that many of us have not, including: loss of a coveted spot in a summer program due to a surprising undocumented status; suicide of someone close; and being a newcomer to our country. These adversities were the most difficult, however valedictorians also experienced more common difficulties like: bullying; the feelings of imposter syndrome; academic struggles; fears; sexism; ill preparedness; poor teachers, and poor time management skills. The valedictorians interviewed also described hardships such as: parental divorce, social drama, high mobility, burn out, rejection and the pandemic. Valedictorians experienced the same kinds of pitfalls and difficulties as other students. However, the personal qualities they developed provided an unyielding sense of perseverance and drive. Using these skills, valedictorians continued to give their best in any circumstance.

Implications and Recommendations

There are many implications from the findings of this study that lead to recommendations for various stakeholders connected to students. Those implications, paired with recommendations include adult relationships to students, prioritizing education and beginning education at an early age, promoting academic success, teaching and modeling personal characteristics, modeling, metacognition, engagement, and learning communities.

Adult Relationships

The findings of this research revealed important implications for many stakeholders in a child's educational upbringing. Although individual children possess unique needs and abilities, commonalities between the highest achievers exist with a potentially positive impact on current and future students, including their trajectory toward graduation. The highest achieving students from various demographics connected with adults in their lives who supported them. Each valedictorian identified adults in their homes and schools who believed in their ability to achieve and supported their efforts in doing so. These students gained a sense of importance believing how they did in school mattered to those around them as Schlossenberg, (1989) described in the theory of mattering.

Parents and teachers can act in similar roles by sharing stories of their personal successes and challenges. These stories provide a platform for students to ask questions about their own journey and to feel more connected to the adults in their lives. Parents and/or significant adults including teachers should engage in conversations with children often about choices they make and help them strategize for future choices, including goal setting. These findings align with Ladson-Billings (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy and the belief that teachers need to engage students to promote learning. Finally, parents and teachers should remind students on a regular basis that they are available and able to be depended upon. This is supported by Schlossberg's (1989) findings on mattering. Just giving attention to a child and promoting the idea that each child

is important enough to give their attention to, tells children that they matter.

For teachers, building relationships with students is paramount. Schools need to ensure every student feels connected to at least one adult in the institution. This relationship gives students another resource for information as well as a feeling of mattering, as described by Schlossberg (1989). Getting to know students' personal and family culture promotes a feeling of authenticity in a relationship. Teachers may find ease in connecting with high achievers. Place more time and effort into relationships with lower achieving students who may need the extra help and connection. Knowing someone cares enough to give their time and energy could make all the difference, as Schlossberg (1989) described in marginality and mattering.

Prioritize Education

Valedictorians overwhelmingly had parents who prioritized education. Those valedictorians believed this was a stronghold in their own priorities of education over other pursuits. Parental support when choosing how to spend their time promoted education before other extracurricular activities. Making children aware that education needs to be a high priority is essential to students' mindset. Engage learners in frequent conversations about schoolwork, friendships, and goals. When children are young, early literacy sets the stage for developing educational practices by reading *to* children; as they grow and acquire reading skills, reading *with* them; and engaging in conversation about everything. Through books, activities, early learning, this educational priority can start early.

Early Childhood Education

Valedictorians believed they benefited from early childhood education, either formal education in a preschool setting or from parents at an age too young for school. Valedictorians indicated these experiences provided academic knowledge, allowing them to begin the kindergarten year at a higher level than most. Another resounding factor throughout the interviews included the confidence valedictorians felt as a result of early education. Both the academic knowledge and confidence presented as significant factors in their experiences continuing throughout their educational careers. These early experiences give way for early opportunities in academic success from which to build.

Academic Success

The valedictorians in this study often looked back on past experiences to gain confidence for a current struggle. Children need successful experiences to build upon. At early grades, it is important to ensure each student experiences plenty of successes authentically grounded in each academic area and praise students for achievements so those success can be recalled in the future. This is the groundwork for building confidence in students. Parents and teachers should remind students of past successes when confidence runs low, prompting children to realize their ability for continued achievement. Costa and Kallick (2000) agree using past experiences can aid in current situations by giving confidence based on those past successes.

Personal Characteristics

Most of the valedictorians believed the personal traits they possessed stemmed from early learning prior to and including formal education years. This implies time and effort by parents and teachers used to build personal skills in young children may last throughout their academic lives. Valedictorians identified these skills as curiosity, time management skills, effort, motivation to accept a challenge, humility to learn, self-control, and self-confidence. Participants in this study believed these skills to accelerate academic progress. In addition, when students faced adversities, these skills along with a strong mindset, helped them overcome difficulties and continue to excel in their academic endeavors. Beginning in early elementary, but not limited to those grades, educators need to teach and promote personal characteristics for success as discussed above. Learning these traits promotes healthy mindsets for learning in children of all ages. The theory habits of mind includes many personal characteristics including persistence, responding with wonderment and awe, and taking responsible risks.

Modeling

It is recommended that parents and teachers explicitly model, teach, and promote personal characteristics such as those mentioned above. Modeling is a key factor in embedding personal characteristics in children. Valedictorians often referred to adults as they modeled desired behaviors and traits. Those models put parents' words into action. Ladson-Billings (1995) exemplified this when writing about teacher passion for their subject and building trust relationships with student. Parents and teachers, be genuinely curious about the world with children. Model how to develop intellectual curiosities as well as how to act on them. Walk through the process of investigating with a child what intrigues them. Developing this culture of curiosity will allow a child to transfer those skills to other areas of their lives. Additionally, parents should teach their children about a balanced life. Parents are a child's first and most important teacher because they have the most influence in their lives. Modeling and talking through balanced living will promote a healthy lifestyle in children. Further, it is important to watch for signs of stress. Children who want to do their best in school can easily put too much pressure on themselves, as many of the valedictorians did, neglecting to balance difficulties with stress-relief, resulting in mental health issues.

Metacognition

Thinking about a person's own thinking is one area each valedictorian had to learn on their journey. Understanding how powerful the brain can be and how it affects the body is an important part of learning and named as one of Costa and Kallick's (2000) habits of mind. Teachers should model by thinking out loud and verbally processing complex issues. In addition, students need to be aware of how their minds work. Knowing how mindsets affect academics and overall wellbeing will help students to regulate themselves and begin to take control of their learning.

Engagement

Engaged students are more likely to stay in school and display academic excellence which is supported by Ladson-Billing's (1995) tenet, conception of self and others. Valedictorians were most engaged during school when teachers recognized their strengths. Not everyone can claim they are the best at something, but everyone can claim a strength. Calling out and drawing on those strengths is a recipe for engagement. Ladson-Billings (1995) described excellent teachers as those who promote student engagement in all their learners. Another way to promote engagement is through learning communities.

Learning Communities

Schools which allowed anyone who reached the standard to be valedictorian, promoted learning communities. Students learned the value of working together over competing for the top seat, as promoted by the single-valedictorian model. Support for one another developed a deeper understanding for the child giving the information, while the student learning receives a different point of view than the teacher provides. This is supported by Ladson-Billing's (1995) thoughts on cooperative learning. In addition, learning communities can develop new friendships and connections among students. Schlossberg went on to say that the feeling of mattering to another at a learning institution "kept them engaged in their learning" (1989, p.5). When students feel connected to others, or that they matter to others, they are more likely to devote effort to their learning. This was evident in all positive student and teacher relationships throughout the valedictorian interviews. These relationships gave students a stronghold when faced with adversities.

Withstanding Adversities

Although some may look at valedictorians as sailing through easy lives, these students were not immune to the life struggles that all people encounter. Valedictorians attributed their daily success as well as overall academic success through larger scale life struggles to the above-mentioned personal skills. Whether those issues are large or small, students needed coping skills to work through them. The above-mentioned personal skills combined with a strong support group of peers and adults helped students move through complicated seasons of life while continuing to keep academic achievement a priority. Using academic excellence as a way of life, valedictorians relied on these skills as well as the people in their lives, to get through whatever life held, including that unhealthy competition nurtured by some honors systems.

Honors and Recognition

It is worth restating that students felt unhealthy competition when there was only one valedictorian allowed. However, students who attend schools that allocate the title of valedictorian to anyone who achieves the criteria, expressed a much different experience. For those students, learning as a community and helping one another achieve became the norm. This productive environment created a healthy learning atmosphere for all, as supported by Ladson-Billings (1995). The findings of this study suggest setting criteria for valedictorian and all other honors, allowing anyone who fulfills the criteria to be named.

These learning communities connect with the theories of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) because the small groups help students feel they are important to the group. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) also supports these communities called cooperative learning communities as best practices. Because of this radical difference in how schools determine valedictorians, school administrators and school board members need to reconsider how they honor students.

Future Research

More research needs to be conducted to learn additional information about some specific groups of learners including high achievers who reside in poverty areas and low achieving students in various settings. I found the experiences of low-income, BIPOC valedictorians were significantly different and more challenging than their white counterparts in affluent communities. Stories such as a valedictorian learning of their undocumented status while applying to summer programing, or the difficulties another valedictorian faced while dealing with high mobility, made life more difficult. Their stories need to be amplified in research. More research on this subsection of valedictorians is needed to understand the specific needs of students in low-income and BIPOC communities. Finally, 13 of the 15 participants in this research were first-born children in their families. Studying the birth order characteristics may lead to a deeper understanding of how valedictorians acquired the personal traits needed to be successful.

Limitations

This study contained few limitations. To begin with, only valedictorians who achieved public recognition, were included in this study. Not all schools make public record of their valedictorians creating difficulty in location of those students. In addition, not all schools award an honor of valedictorian to the top-ranking student(s). The inability to reach the highest achievers in every school limits the number of interviews. This, in turn, potentially limits the expression of experiences valued as influential in the lives of highly successful students. Additionally, participants may have taken for granted and therefore may not have mentioned some of the most influential factors in their success. Finally, as time passes, participants may have more difficulty recalling pertinent information about their experiences. Therefore, those who graduated ten years ago may not have the same recall as those who interviewed during the year of their graduation.

Conclusion

Valedictorians remain as diverse as the rest of the population. These students learned healthy personal skills at an early age. Valedictorians go through the same difficulties in life as others but their determination and devotion to their academic careers remained a priority.

There are many reasons why students fail to graduate high school in four years. This study, by no means, suggests strategies to remove all barriers that cause students to drop out. However, incorporating elements academically successful students found beneficial may assist some struggling students toward more success in school.

Valedictorians felt they mattered to adults in their lives and fit into the school environment. Early learning at home led them to feel confident that they could "do school." This self-assurance allowed them to explore how they preferred to learn. Beginning at home, and continuing on through their school years, valedictorians developed personal characteristics that helped them survive difficult times and thrive.

The findings of this research could be viewed as a bicycle (see Figure 2). Each of the wheels, personal qualities and human influences, plays a key role in supporting a student's academic success. Each wheels impacts the other wheel and strengthens the student, academically. For example, the human influences such as parents, peers, and teachers help to develop personal qualities in a child. Personal qualities also affect how others interact with the student. Both human influences and personal qualities work together to provide the essential elements for students to progress, academically. With two sturdy wheels in place, riding a bicycle requires staying upright and moving forward while maintaining balance and learning how to navigate the rough terrain of obstacles along the journey. The bicycle must always move forward while the rider focuses on the road ahead. Likewise, students need a positive (upright) mindset with forward thinking to maintain a balanced life while navigating the ups and downs of a PK-12 education. They must continually propel themselves forward, focused on what is to come.

Figure 2

Student Success Bicycle

Teaching personal skills and mindsets mentioned in this study to all students may increase graduation rates and improve the lives of many future generations. Educating parents on their important role in student success and improving schools to meet the many needs of the ever-changing student populations will not be easy but is necessary for a better tomorrow. The words of Nelson Mandela are as true today as the day he first exclaimed, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" (2003).

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Central Office Administrator Perceptions of Teacher Professional Learning in the Aftermath of COVID-19: A Descriptive Qualitative Study

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This descriptive qualitative study explored the perceptions of central office administrators supporting teacher professional learning since the COVID-19 pandemic. Through semi-structured interviews with eight administrators, the study uncovered the benefits of format options and technology in professional learning post-pandemic. Virtual formats offer convenience, flexibility, and enhanced collaboration, while technology integration has improved training efficiency and effectiveness. Three themes emerged regarding challenges—meeting the needs of teachers, helping teachers meet the needs of students, and changing attitudes toward and expectations of teacher professional learning. These insights underscore the importance of quality professional development in teacher recruitment and retention.

Keywords: teacher professional development, teacher professional learning, pandemic, technology

Teacher attrition charges school districts $8.5 billion annually across the United States (Carroll, 2007). Typically, the support teachers receive through various forms of professional development (PD) impacts a teacher's decision to leave the profession early (Podolsky et al., 2019). Strong PD support in the initial years of a teacher's career can make a teacher twice as likely to stay as one who does not receive similar support (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Although many factors impact a teacher's decision to resign (Podolsky et al., 2019), leaders must consider quality professional learning a necessary means to retain teachers.

Aside from influencing teacher retention, PD improves the quality of teaching and impacts student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Teachers who engage in high-quality PD support in their early years have faster growth and more enhanced student achievement than teachers who do not receive high quality PD (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Additionally, campus and district leadership play a role in teacher PD (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2022), which then impacts teacher retention (Hughes et al., 2015; Podolsky et al., 2019) and student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009).

The COVID-19 global pandemic generated three significant changes in teacher PD: (a) a shift in format (Perry, 2023), (b) a change in content (Boltz et al., 2021; Kalman et al., 2022), and (c) an impact on social networks and communities (Alwafi, 2021; Mankki & Ràihà, 2022). The magnitude of changes to PD experienced during the pandemic persisted into the 2022–2023 school year and beyond after states lifted most pandemic restrictions is unknown. This study explored administrators' perceptions regarding teacher PD in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following research questions shaped this study:

1. What are the perceptions of central office administrators regarding the benefits of the current practices used for teacher professional development since COVID-19?
2. What are the perceptions of central office administrators regarding the challenges of the current practices used for teacher professional development since COVID-19?

Understanding the current state of teacher PD following the pandemic will equip those who design, plan, and implement PD with improved knowledge to better address the needs of teachers. Further, research is still being conducted to determine if the advantages and disadvantages of teacher PD during the pandemic impacted decisions made after restrictions were lifted. Since quality PD can serve to attract and retain teachers (Podolsky et al., 2019), understanding how to maximize benefits and minimize limitations may help teachers feel more supported.

Theoretical Framework

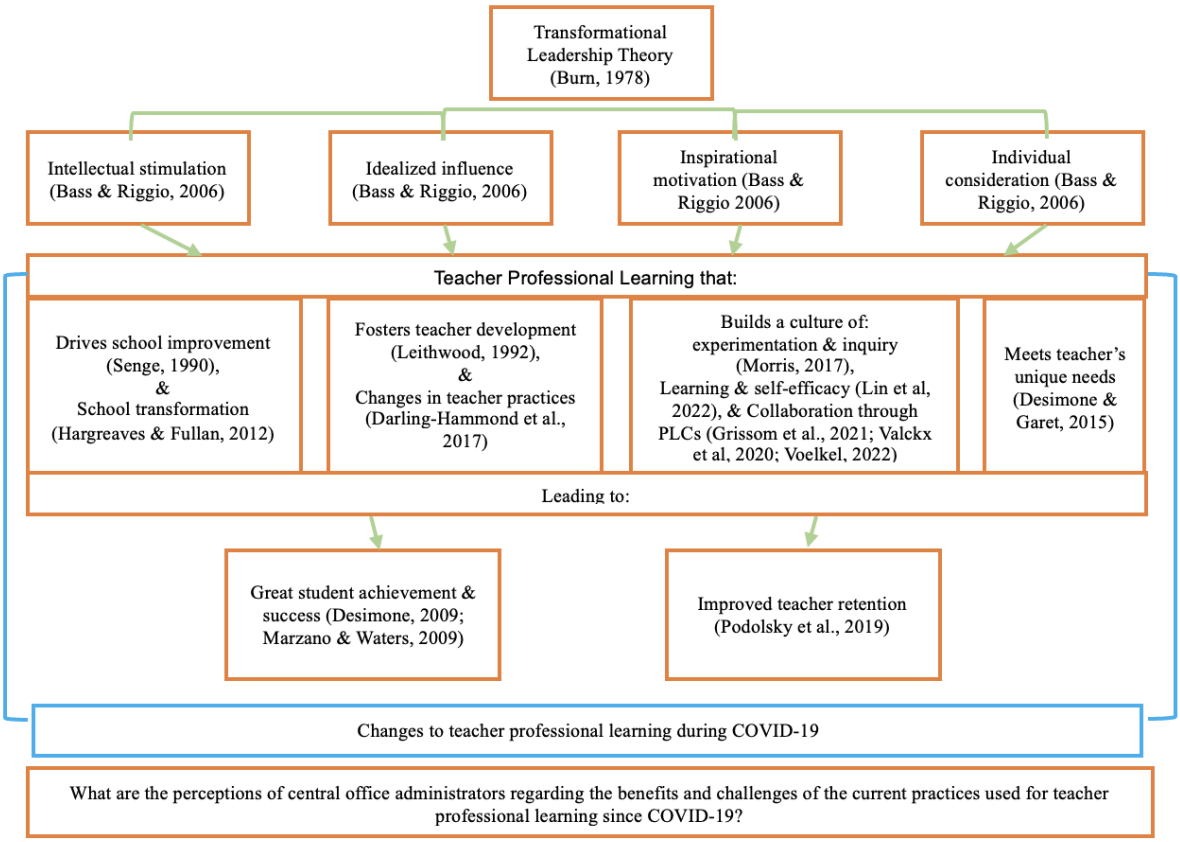
Transformational leadership is the overarching theory that steered this study (Figure 1). Transformational leaders employing intellectual stimulation challenge their staff to continuously learn, grow, and look for ways to improve (Bass & Riggio, 2006). When teachers continue to learn and grow, these efforts drive school improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Senge, 1990), change teacher practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017),

and lead to teacher and student success (Desimone, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009). In addition, transformational leaders positively impact teacher PD and student outcomes by creating a school culture of learning and experimentation (Lin et al., 2022; Morris, 2017).

Transformational leaders who focus on individual consideration build trust and relational capacity, giving staff members autonomy to make decisions (Bass & Riggio, 2006). When teachers report high levels of autonomy, they also tend to have high levels of self-efficacy, which impacts reflection, collaboration, and innovation (Messmann et al., 2022; Valckx et al., 2020; Voelkel, 2022). Individual consideration is crucial in designing teacher PD, since teachers can experience the same training but experience different outcomes (Desimone & Garet, 2015).

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Inspirational motivation involves creating a shared understanding of the organization's vision and its members' beliefs so that people make choices based on this passion and purpose (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders use idealized influence when they model behaviors that align with the organization's vision and beliefs (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Both dimensions are particularly impactful for teacher PD through the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) (Grissom et al., 2021;

Valckx et al., 2020; Voelkel, 2022). PLC's invite collaboration, and leadership support of the PLC process is vital.

This framework results in a literature critique examining the changes in teacher PD due to COVID-19. It aims to determine how PD adapted during the pandemic and if these changes continued into the 2022-2023 school year, after the expiration of most COVID-19 restrictions. Administrators' perceptions regarding the continuation or cessation of these changes can be analyzed through the lens of transformational leadership. This analysis will reveal how administrators' decisions impact teacher motivation, learning, and feelings of support.

Review of the Literature

As school systems worldwide closed their doors and moved classes online, teacher PD in some schools was initially on hold as administrators worked to manage the new reality of schooling (Perry, 2023). Since school systems closed their doors and teachers mostly worked from home, most teacher PD was switched to online to minimize face-to-face interactions (Kalman et al., 2022; Perry, 2023). These format shifts for PD persisted even as school systems returned to hybrid or in-person learning (Kalman et al., 2022).

Another format shift was the widespread use of web-conferencing systems in teacher PD. Tools such as Zoom or Google Meet incorporated some aspects of collaboration and connectivity within online PD, particularly as teachers became more adept at using these tools in their teaching practice (Amador et al., 2021). These systems were incorporated in many ways, including individual, group, and full-class formats, and each had different levels of success in facilitating collaboration and improved student outcomes (Nagovitsyn et al., 2023).

The rapid shift to online teaching also impacted what teachers needed to learn. In the first weeks of the pandemic, teachers had to quickly develop technology skills to create online learning experiences for their students (Kalman et al., 2022). The technical knowledge teachers sought fell into three categories: general skills, learning centered on specific teaching platforms and software, and techniques for creating instructional videos (Mankki & Ràihà, 2022). School systems had to scramble to create online learning opportunities to support this technological skill development, notably to support the software newly purchased to teach remotely.

Teachers had to figure out how to manage boundaries for working from home, deal with anxiety from constant uncertainty, multitask their jobs while dealing with personal situations, and devote substantially more time to creating remote learning plans and supporting students online (Boltz et al., 2021). Because of this, teachers sought PD on how to cope with the stresses and anxiety of teaching during a global pandemic (Mankki & Ràihà, 2022). Additionally, teachers and school systems sought training on working with students who were experiencing or had experienced trauma to support their well-being (Perry, 2023).

Educators have used multiple social media platforms for learning and community

building for years (Greenhow et al., 2020). It is no wonder teachers turned to social media even more during the emergency scenario of moving teaching online. During the pandemic, teachers built more extensive online PLCs to learn informally from a global community (Mankki & Ràihà, 2022) and connected at higher rates on social media than before the pandemic (Aguilar et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers increased their Twitter use to gain insight into remote learning strategies, assist with reflecting on their practice, foster camaraderie, and reduce anxiety about the drastic changes they were experiencing (Greenhow et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in various changes to teacher PD, which provided unexpected benefits to both teachers and school systems. Teachers experienced more autonomy in choosing the PD they pursued to match their needs and interests (Perry, 2023). In addition to greater autonomy, teachers found more highly personalized content (Bichler et al., 2021) and greater flexibility in both time and place for their PD (Perry, 2023). Virtual PD also decreased costs because teachers did not need to travel to attend learning, and many vendors reduced their registration costs (Hasanah et al., 2021; Perry, 2023).

Another benefit of the changes in PD during COVID-19 was providing new, more pervasive ways for educators to connect. Studies conducted during the pandemic have reported that the increased use of social networks and online communities provided a way to connect people both formally (Hasanah et al., 2021) and informally (Alwafi, 2021; Greenhow et al., 2021) across distances. This connectedness helped to reduce isolation, particularly for teachers who were already physically isolated from colleagues in rural areas or because they taught more specialized content (Rolandson & Ross-Hekkel, 2022).

Teacher learning was also limited and hindered by the changes in professional PD brought about by COVID-19. Like K–12 students, teachers were inexperienced and lacked confidence in working online (Kalman et al., 2022). If teachers had difficulty with connectivity or lack of Internet accessibility, this problem was magnified (Kalman et al., 2022). Teachers were also frustrated that few online learning providers developed courses with high-quality pedagogy (Bragg et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers bemoaned the lack of discussion with other teachers in required online training and experienced screen fatigue and burnout (Perry, 2023).

Since teachers are not a homogenous group of learners, mitigating factors surrounding teacher PD during the pandemic have also been investigated (Dindar et al., 2021). For example, some teachers reported that the PD format changes allowed them to participate in many more opportunities than before the pandemic (Perry, 2023). Other teachers, however, found that they had to limit their participation because, despite the ease of access, they were now balancing the incredible demands of their families and personal situations at home (Perry, 2023).

Avidov-Ungar et al. (2023) found that although all teachers turned to informal learning through online searches and communities, this was particularly true for middle- and late-career teachers. Researchers discovered that the teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn significantly increased with years of experience. Also, the researchers

discovered that as years of experience increased, teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn significantly increased. Research during the pandemic also suggests that both the role of the facilitator and the use of learning goals (Amador et al., 2021), as well as teachers' expectations of the quality and value of online professional learning (Wu et al., 2022) impacted the effectiveness of and satisfaction towards pandemic teacher PD.

Teacher professional development involves stakeholders beyond teachers. District and campus administrators play a key role by facilitating PD, curating and providing access to external resources, and setting expectations for teacher learning. While most research on the pandemic's impact on teacher PD reflects teachers' perspectives, it's crucial to include administrator viewpoints. These perspectives offer insights into the complexities of navigating a landscape where flexibility in teacher PD is now the norm.

Method of Procedure

Data collection for this study occurred between March and April 2024. Eight central office administrators from public school districts were purposefully selected to participate through a multi-step recruitment process. The participants' combined eight school districts serve over 216,000 students and employ over 28,000 teachers. Demographic and background information was collected at the beginning of a single-phase, in-depth semi-structured interview. An expert panel was used to review proposed interview questions prior to the start of the research.

The researcher conducted 45-minute to hour-long Zoom interviews, asking open-ended questions and using follow-up questions to gain further clarity. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. The transcribed interviews were uploaded into NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023) and coded and analyzed for themes and patterns. The author used member checking to address reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher provided an opportunity for each participant to review transcriptions of the interview responses and the data coding to ensure that the codes accurately reflected participant responses.

The researcher used both a deductive and an inductive process for data analysis, as described by Marshall et al. (2022). The researcher used a deductive process to create research questions based on the literature review. Next, an inductive process was used to analyze interview responses and develop a deeper understanding of the data. The researcher analyzed data from the bottom up, moving from concrete observations to more abstract themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Subsequently, the researcher went back and forth between the observations and the analysis to see if the categories and threads made sense.

Findings

In this study, eight female participants were interviewed, all of whom held leadership positions. Positions included: district coordinator, director, executive director, or assistant superintendent. They had an average of 4.25 years in their current roles, ranging from 3 to 8 years. Individual participant descriptions have been omitted to

maintain anonymity.

Findings for Research Question 1: Benefits

Research Question 1 asked: What are the perceptions of central office administrators regarding the benefits of the current practices used for teacher professional development since COVID-19? Two themes emerged from the data analysis: the benefits of format and the benefits of technology (Table 1). Nodes, or sub themes, also emerged for each of the themes. The benefits of format theme had several nodes, including convenience and flexibility, efficiency, collaboration and connection, and differentiation. The benefits of technology theme included two nodes: increased prevalence and increased comfort. Representative quotes from participants are included to help elucidate the themes and trends.

Table 1

Themes and Nodes for Research Question 1

Theme	Node
Benefits of Format Options	Convenience and Flexibility
	Efficiency
	Collaboration and Connection
	Differentiation
Benefits of Technology	Increased Prevalence
	Increased Comfort

Benefits of Format Options

Convenience and Flexibility. This node surfaced in almost every interview as participants described how format options for PD have created greater convenience and flexibility for both participants and presenters. The use of virtual professional development increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and participants were able to take advantage of synchronous and asynchronous virtual PD opportunities that were previously unavailable.

Participant 7 discussed her perception of why teachers like asynchronous PD. She explained. “The asynchronous online training, I think, is here to stay. Teachers like that because they can do it at their own pace, at their own time, especially over the summer.”

Participant 4 noted that, as a central office administrator, she had the challenge of adapting to support the convenience benefit for teachers.

Teachers really saw the ability to manage their time and not having to travel to all

these places and being able to have professional learning come directly to them. And we've been trying to adapt to that because they still believe that's important.

Efficiency. Although like convenience and flexibility, this theme appeared when participants explained specifically how virtual options saved time and were more efficient than in-person learning.

Participant 6 described how her district uses virtual PD and virtual meetings to save time and be more efficient. She stated,

I think it's been a time saver. I think it probably in some ways has allowed us to be a little bit more responsive because you can just reach people faster. And I think people are more willing to engage in asynchronous learning. So, I would say, that's a benefit.

Participant 1 gave a specific example of how the efficiency of a virtual learning option has helped with their mentor teachers:

We are going to Zoom in with all the mentors after school for 45 minutes for the purpose of getting feedback [...] But we're like, "We don't need to bring them all here to do that; we could do that virtually, especially since it's the end of the year." So, we still are utilizing virtual for some things. I think the efficiency piece of it, where we can say, "Oh, let's just jump on a Zoom and talk about that," [...] We can get teachers together for different committees, or [...] get feedback or input coming from all over the district. I do see there are efficiencies with it.

Collaboration and Connection. The third node involves connecting people across campuses and long distances. This benefit seemed relevant in small districts that may be growing and adding campuses and vast districts with many campuses to connect people.

Participant 8's district launched district-wide PLCs this year. She explained that "all the third-grade teachers in the whole district are coming together for what we call team time." She noted that some components of this time are virtual, which has made it much easier for everyone to get together simultaneously.

Participant 1, who works in a fast-growing district, explained how using Zoom has helped with alignment and collaboration, which has become essential as the district has grown. She stated,

We've got two middle schools now, and that was a big thing because we'd only had one for a long time. So, we are really focusing on the teachers working together and being aligned, and they can jump on a quick Zoom, and the coaches can be there to help support.

Differentiation. This node appeared both as a benefit and a challenge. As a benefit, participants described how strategies, tools, and formats discovered during the pandemic make differentiating PD more accessible and more effective. This ability to differentiate was mentioned as a benefit for teachers but described as a challenge for those who support teacher PD at the central office.

Participant 7 described how teachers in her district "really want differentiated PD. They really want it to where they don't have to sit through that beginner level if they've sat through this for 5 years." She explained that a benefit from the pandemic of having new professional learning formats is that these tools help with differentiation, mainly by offering some PD asynchronously. This process has allowed her district to review content PD virtually while keeping new learning face-to-face.

Participant 3 stated, "I'm seeing a lot of our content-based people do more choice sessions, which is something that they got better at over the pandemic time." She sees this differentiation as beneficial because it helps teachers "drive their own learning."

Benefits of Technology

Increased Prevalence. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced educators to many technology tools still being utilized post-pandemic. Intentionally incorporating these tools into teacher PD has allowed central office staff to model the type of technology they want to see in classrooms. Additionally, participants are looking ahead to additional technological movements that will need to be integrated into teacher PD in the coming years.

Participant 7 revealed that a lasting impact of COVID-19 was bridging technology use between teachers and students. She noted that

COVID really pushed professional development more in a technology aspect. To where we're really showing, "This is how we need to be using technology in our classrooms. This is how our kids are already using it." Especially now with AI. AI is going to be the big thing this year in professional development [...] I don't know if all of that would have come out as fast without COVID.

Participant 3 described how she learned to use technology in PD "to organize, deliver things, and engage people." She says, "We now have new tools in our toolbelt that we didn't have, and I think we can be more mindful of how we are using them to that end." She explained how technology has made it easier for people to attend conferences and enjoy "on-demand" PD that did not readily exist prior to the pandemic.

Increased Comfort. The COVID-19 pandemic forced teachers to become familiar with technology they may not have used before. This increased their comfort level with technology, which has continued even after the pandemic. Teachers now have more PD options, due to their increased comfort with technology, although a balance between technology and face-to-face learning is still important.

Participant 6 explained, "I think people are more comfortable and probably a little more competent navigating some technical pieces than they were before the pandemic." Because of this, her district has been more flexible about how they offer professional learning and now allows for more virtual collaboration because teachers feel confident in participating in that manner.

Participant 5 said that teachers in her district are "more comfortable and more

productive with anything virtual" since the pandemic. She stated that she sees this in all aspects of education, not just teacher PD. She continued, "I think that's been beneficial, and that's been something good that has stuck around. And then just the ability to flip and switch gears when the ability to do anything in-person becomes challenging is a big win."

Findings for Research Question 2: Challenges

Research Question 2 asked: What are the perceptions of central office administrators regarding the challenges of the current practices used for teacher professional development since COVID-19? Three themes emerged from the data analysis: meeting the needs of teachers, helping teachers meet the needs of students, and changing attitudes toward and expectations of teacher PD (Table 2). Representative quotes from participants are included below.

Table 2

Themes and Nodes for Research Question 2

Theme	Node
Meeting the Needs of Teachers	Inexperienced Teachers
	Differentiation
	Curriculum, Instruction, and Resources
	Teacher Mental Health and Cognitive Load
Helping Teachers Meet the Needs of Students	Student Behavior and Mental Health
	Student Academic Needs
Changing Attitudes Toward and Expectations of Teacher PD	Boundaries and Motivation
	Meaningful PD

Meeting the Needs of Teachers

Inexperienced Teachers. The reality of hiring in the aftermath of COVID-19 has made supporting teachers with PD particularly challenging. Participants discussed an immense increase in teachers hired with alternative or emergency certification. Additionally, participants mentioned that even if a teacher is not new to the profession, they may have had several years of teaching in a pandemic environment that did not adequately prepare them for the current teaching state.

For Participant 6, the shift in hiring more teachers from alternative certification programs has changed what she needs to emphasize in teacher PD. She noted, "We've hired so many that are doing alt cert, and so they're really not coming in with any background knowledge and skills about what does it take to be a teacher." This shift in new teacher demographics has led to an increased PD focus on using the curriculum and "tightening up" professional learning practices.

Participant 2 said that she thinks the needs of the new teachers she sees in her district are like those of pre-pandemic. However, she noted that because there are so

many more and “most of the experienced ones left,” PD has become challenging. Supporting new teachers in her district used to be accomplished through veteran teachers, but the make-up of staff has shifted to the point that this support must come more from the central office.

Differentiation. As discussed in the findings for Research Question 1, this node was acknowledged as both a benefit and a challenge. Creating more differentiated PD was seen as beneficial for teachers’ engagement and learning but as a challenge for those in the central office who may need more capacity or expertise for the expanded task.

Participant 7 discussed the difficulty of finding something that works for everyone because of varying opinions. She explained,

I think some people really like the virtual [PD] because it can give people options. I know some people just hate Zoom. They don’t want anything virtual because they’re just sick of it. So, I think it is very divided on if you like it or not.

In addition, she described how she must work to provide many more choices for teachers since the pandemic. She said,

I do think a lot more people want different choices of how to receive their professional development now that they have experienced all the virtual learning [...] I think that’s starting to become an expectation.

Participant 5 explained that “very often [teachers] will just ask to join virtually even if it’s in-person,” so one of the significant challenges now is “holding the line sometimes” when she feels it is vital for people to be face-to-face. Being adamant that some learning must take face-to-face has put her at odds with some teachers who feel she is not supporting their needs through differentiation.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Resources. Due to the pandemic, teachers have moved away from using district curricula and resources and are now searching for resources that can be easily used online. To address this need, PD is being developed to realign instruction with the curriculum and use pre-pandemic instructional strategies. Additionally, districts have adopted numerous new resources that have required continuous PD for teachers.

Participant 3 explained, “We are having a re-emphasis [in PD] on curriculum implementation.” She continued, “COVID became this time of do what you have to do to survive, and things got a little lax.” Because of this, central office and campus staff have been conscientiously trying to support teachers in “narrowing things back down” to what the district curriculum says they should be using and teaching.

Participant 2 described how her district is working to incorporate just-in-time training to support teachers in using the curriculum. She stated, "What teachers are struggling with is using the curriculum, understanding the curriculum, how to breathe life into the curriculum and make it their own.” She explained that “our just-in-time trainings are centered on the curriculum” and that these are new offerings since the pandemic.

Teacher Mental Health and Cognitive Load. Participants discussed what they perceived to be the increased workload of teachers since the pandemic. The increased demands were considered a challenge to implementing PD because teachers' mental capacities were already wholly taxed. Additionally, because of these increased demands, participants perceived a new challenge: creating PD that supported teachers' mental health and stress relief.

The greatest challenge for PD for Participant 5 is "balancing what I know is on their [teachers'] plates, which I think is greater post-COVID." She said, "The job of the teacher in the classroom is a lot more challenging than prior [to the pandemic]," so she must try to strike the right balance between new learning and all the other demands on a teacher's time and energy. Because so much teacher time and energy go toward helping vast student needs, she feels putting anything else on their plates is challenging.

Participant 4 described how the "community rang loud and clear" that mental health was important for students and teachers. With the more significant needs of students and teachers, they found that their pre-COVID PD calendar did not meet their needs. Therefore, they met this challenge by embedding more student breaks and PD days for teachers throughout the year. She also explained that they have "even embedded different wellness and those kinds of activities within our professional learning." In particular, she explained that they have incorporated yoga, food trucks, and giveaways into their teacher PD, "and the staff have loved it."

Helping Teachers Meet the Needs of Students

Student Behavior and Mental Health. Managing extreme student behavior, which several participants discussed as a symptom of struggling mental health, was a prominent node in the interviews. Participants described how this was the most significant content change for teacher PD since the pandemic. Elementary behaviors were perceived as more of an issue than secondary behaviors, requiring added training for elementary teachers.

Participant 6 stated, "In terms of topics of professional learning that we're still struggling with, it's supporting student behavior. We're still seeing kids coming in with really extreme behaviors." She explained, "It's been a struggle to help teachers build their skills in terms of having to manage that. How do you set a student up for success? How do you maintain emotional control? All of those kinds of things." This area of PD is something her district will continue for the foreseeable future.

Participant 1 noted increased demand for PD in behavior management from elementary teachers. She explained, "I'd say that the main difference with our elementary-age teachers is wanting more tools, training, and help with how to deal with severe behaviors. And I think that's probably a direct correlation with COVID."

Student Academic Needs. In addition to supporting teachers as they deal with student behavior and mental health, participants also described the challenge of supporting teachers as they work with students with more significant academic needs. Teachers have more students with learning gaps in their classrooms and are looking for

training to help fill those gaps. This poses a challenge since the number of students with needs and the breadth and diversity of the needs have grown.

Participant 6 explained that a challenge she faces is trying to support teachers in "responding to gaps in student learning." She commented, "Kids are struggling. They're struggling more than they have. I think education is still seeing the impact of virtual learning and kids being home for multiple semesters." To support teachers facing this issue, she stated, "We're trying to be responsive to closing those gaps among students. And one way for us to do that is to better build the curriculum literacy capacity of our teaching staff through PD." She explained that the challenge of supporting teachers in closing student learning gaps existed before the pandemic but that "it's a little bit different now than it was [pre-pandemic]."

Participant 4 described how "mathematics has been an area where we continue to see a need," Therefore, the district has had to create PD opportunities for teachers. She explained that math was a need before the pandemic, but the need has been exacerbated by the pandemic learning loss and lost classroom time.

Attitudes Toward and Expectations of PD

Boundaries and Motivation. This node reflects discussion about teachers' perceived changed attitudes about when they will participate, how they want to be compensated, and how motivated they are to engage in teacher PD. Participants mentioned changes in teachers' willingness to do PD after school and during the summer. They also discussed challenges to improve the situation, such as a lack of funding for compensation and difficulty finding subs to cover for teachers so they can do PD during the school day.

Participant 3 explained, "I would say that the staff that we are getting now into our system have different professional boundaries and cleaner boundaries of what they're willing to do. They're much cleaner with their use of time." She described how, previously, teachers did a lot of work outside of contract hours and were not compensated. She said, "We were a small school system and a real tight-knit community, and people just did what they needed to do, and it wasn't necessarily questioned at the time." She commented that this practice in the past "probably wasn't a good thing," so a positive is that the district is figuring out how to compensate teachers for their time.

Participant 2 described a shift in attitude and motivation toward PD because of teacher fatigue since the pandemic. She stated,

> It has been a struggle post-pandemic because people are tired. So, number 1, they don't really want to go to professional learning because they're tired. Number 2, if they show up, they want to be paid, which is hard right now. All of us are struggling financially. And even if you pay them right, they still don't want to show up.

Meaningful PD. Participants discussed a greater need post-pandemic to make PD meaningful for teachers. This was related to teachers' fatigue, lack of time, and their

expectation that their time would not be wasted. Although meaningful and worthwhile PD benefits everyone, participants revealed it was a challenge post-pandemic to meet those expectations from the central office perspective.

Participant 8 explained,

I do think [expectations] have changed, particularly in, like, "What is worth my time and what is not worth my time," post-pandemic. Our teachers are under so much pressure and scrutiny, and just some ugly behavior from the community and from parents, that it really does have an effect on them [...] So, therefore, the tolerance level for what is and isn't worth their time, I think, that has changed for teachers.

She said part of the challenge for central office is supporting campus leaders in creating meaningful PD for teachers since "that's not always everybody's strong suit."

Participant 5 discussed the pressure to make PD meaningful for teachers. She explained, "Teachers have more on their plates now than they ever have." She said,

There's so many more expectations and meetings and red tape and forms to fill out. I get where they are. So, it's my goal to make professional learning engaging and have them walk away and feel like they have something that they can take and implement rather than just wasting their time.

Additional Findings

Six participants discussed how teacher PD relates to teacher recruitment and retention in their districts. Participants described how teachers want to know if and how they will be supported. Most participants agreed that teachers feeling supported and more effective led to greater retention. One participant questioned whether PD could impact a teacher's decision to stay considering the other challenges facing the teaching profession.

Participant 4 noted how recruitment was essential to her district before the pandemic, but now it is even more of an issue. She stated,

It's [professional learning] a marketing and a recruitment tool that we use in our district to attract people. They want to know that they're going to be supported. They want to know the kinds of support they're going to get and the kind of resources available to them. Are they going to get trained? Will they have a mentor in the support? We heard that before COVID, but we hear it even more after COVID.

Participant 2 discussed the importance of teacher PD but also said,

I think there's so many things that are driving off teachers from the profession that have absolutely nothing to do with the school district and everything to do with the state. So, I don't know if I could say that fabulous professional learning would be something that would reinvigorate their practices and them to be like, "Yes, I could do this for another year, 2, or 10."

Social Media

The literature review described how social media for teacher PD changed dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, participants had minimal comment on the role of social media in teacher PD post-COVID. The participants' sentiment was that social media use was not a high priority in their worlds of teacher support. Participant 3 said, "I feel Twitter is used mostly as PR [public relations] more than it is as a platform for learning." Participant 2 stated, "I don't see them [teachers] using social media."

Discussion of Findings

Findings from this study provide insight into how Bass and Riggio's four elements of transformational leadership theory (2006) can be applied post-pandemic to create quality teacher PD that leads to student achievement and retention. First, intellectual stimulation involves sparking creativity and problem-solving (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The findings from this study indicate that PD centered on problem-solving student behavior, mental health, and academic needs will be particularly powerful for current teachers. As funding for PD post-pandemic becomes a growing challenge, administrators must find sustainable ways to meet teachers' and students' diverse and evolving needs.

Second, idealized influence means setting a compelling example for followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The emerging theme of the benefits of technology describes how central office staff can use technology in PD to model the technology teachers should use in the classroom with students. Incorporating technology into PD provides both the technical learning and the influence to incorporate it into the classroom. Transformational leaders only ask people to do what they are willing to do themselves. However, it is essential to consider that while teachers have become more comfortable with technology due to the pandemic, there must still be a balance in the amount of technology used in training to best support teachers' diverse needs.

Third, inspirational motivation is tightly linked to the findings from this study. An emerging theme from this study was that teachers' motivation to participate in PD outside of their contract has diminished post-pandemic. Teachers have more defined boundaries about when and where they will do PD. This study also showed that teachers value the autonomy and flexibility that online learning provides. Considering this, transformational leaders must consider other ways to inspire and motivate teachers to be continual learners and create different structures that honor these boundaries. Administrators will need to balance high-quality, face-to-face learning with the demand for virtual options, as many teachers now expect this flexibility.

Fourth, individual consideration involves considering each learner's unique needs when planning PD (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The findings from this study indicate that the benefits of format options provide multiple avenues for central office administrators to differentiate for teachers' learning needs. This study highlights the continued benefits of virtual learning options post-pandemic, including flexibility and convenience, which

district administrators should incorporate to support teacher autonomy, collaboration, and professional growth. Additionally, these format options allow teachers to select the learning mode that best meets their needs and circumstances.

Beyond the elements of transformational leadership, this study also highlights the link between teacher retention and teacher PD within the theoretical framework. As the teaching profession becomes increasingly challenging, the findings indicate that administrators need to pay close attention to how they support new teachers as a marketing strategy for new employees. The study also reveals the significant cognitive load and mental health stress experienced by teachers, suggesting that central office staff need to make PD more purposeful, meaningful, and differentiated to engage an overstretched workforce. Administrators who are conscientious of maintaining a balance between PD expectations and the other demands on teacher capacity will strengthen their teacher recruitment and retention.

Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is recommended to address this study's limitations and enhance the understanding of administrator perceptions of the current state of teacher PD. First, additional research should be conducted in other areas and regions to determine if similar trends exist. Second, a future study should be conducted to understand if administrators in rural areas are experiencing the same themes of benefits and challenges to teacher PD post-pandemic. Third, additional research should be conducted with campus administrators to see if their perceptions are similar or different from those of central office staff.

Beyond research to address this study's limitations, this study sparks intriguing questions about the state of teacher PD post-pandemic that should be addressed. First, since student behavior and mental health have become such a priority, what teacher PD initiatives have districts found particularly successful in supporting this need? Second, if the number of inexperienced teachers is making the support of new teachers a challenge, how can this be done effectively? Third, if teachers have more defined professional boundaries, are there systems that have gotten creative in implementing PD that honor these new limits? Last, what can be learned from other industries to support teachers' continual learning, recruitment, and retention post-pandemic? Investigating these questions will help support teachers' continued growth, student achievement, and retention of teachers in the future.

Conclusion

This study explored central office administrators' perceptions regarding teacher PD changes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interviews with eight administrators, the study uncovered the benefits and challenges of these changes. The findings highlight the benefits of format options and technology in PD post-pandemic. Virtual formats offer convenience, flexibility, and enhanced collaboration, while technology integration has improved training efficiency and effectiveness. However,

challenges persist in meeting the diverse needs of teachers, helping teachers meet the growing needs of students, supporting teacher well-being, and addressing shifting attitudes and expectations toward PD.

These insights underscore the importance of quality PD in teacher recruitment and retention. Administrators must leverage virtual options effectively, ensuring high-quality content and meaningful engagement. Additionally, they must balance meeting teachers' needs and respecting their professional boundaries. Although this study provides valuable insights, limitations exist that suggest avenues for future research. Further exploration is needed to understand regional variations and perceptions among campus administrators. Additionally, investigating successful initiatives for addressing student behavior and mental health, supporting new teachers, and adapting PD to evolving expectations will be crucial for teachers' continual growth and retention post-pandemic

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From Surviving to Thriving: A Framework to Mitigate the Emotional Challenges Faced by International Teachers in the U.S.

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Amid a persistent teacher shortage, U.S. schools have increasingly turned to international educators, with North Carolina emerging as a leading destination due to the state's rising demand for dual language immersion programs. Yet limited research has explored improvement-based interventions that address the emotional and professional challenges international teachers face during the relocation process.

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, beginning with surveys and followed by interviews of 13 international teachers to examine both their transition experience and the impact of two low-cost support strategies: an online reflective discussion around a question of the day, and monthly community-building gatherings. Findings revealed that participants encountered significant logistical barriers and a lack of emotional support from recruitment agencies and school districts. They also reported gaps in professional development around cultural and interpersonal skills. The interventions were reported to strengthen belonging and reduce stress, illustrating how small-scale supports can yield meaningful improvements in adjustment and well-being.

The results point to practice implications for onboarding and human resource practices, underscoring the need for intentional, sustained emotional support to enhance teacher self-efficacy and retention. Future longitudinal research should examine how these interventions and broader support systems shape international teachers' long-term success and student outcomes.

Keywords: international teachers, teacher shortage, emotional support, professional development, teacher retention

Over the past two decades, teaching in the U.S. has been increasingly devalued due to poor working conditions, heightened accountability and instructional demands, and low pay (Edsall, 2022; Will, 2019). The outcome has been a steady surge in teacher shortages with districts grappling to fill teaching vacancies (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Over 40% of educators leave the profession within 5 years (Sutcher et al., 2016). To address these shortages, school districts often hire international teachers through recruitment agencies or sponsor them with work visas (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 2009). North Carolina has become a leading destination, employing roughly 2,100 international educators, up from 1 in 200 teachers nearly a decade ago (Walkenhorst, 2022).

International teachers face numerous challenges adjusting to a new educational system

and culture, intensified by temporary employment status (Barlett, 2013; Kombe, 2016; Waite, 2009). However, there is a gap in the research literature regarding strategies to support the emotional needs of international teachers. This study, grounded in improvement science methodology, proposes interventions to help teachers navigate these challenges, improving their effectiveness and self-efficacy. Two research questions guided this work: What are the challenges that international teachers face upon moving to the U.S.? How does emotional support affect transitioning challenges for international teachers?

Without proper support, international teachers may experience higher attrition, leading to economic costs and poor instructional outcomes. As such, this study has significant implications for international teachers, school administrators, and HR personnel, aiming to improve working conditions. It suggests that socio-emotional interventions can reduce the challenges international teachers face when moving abroad, easing their adjustment. The research highlights the need for school administrators to build capacity and understand the unique needs of international teachers, emphasizing that they should not be treated the same as native-born teachers. The findings offer actionable strategies to help administrators better support international teachers.

The findings also provide human resources personnel with an understanding of what international teachers undergo once they move to the U.S. and underscores the need for ongoing amplified support. The improvement measures highlighted in this research represent a safety net, which may contribute to higher adaptability rates among international teachers, thus lowering their attrition rates. The theories and strategies included in this study should cascade from human resources to school level administrators as a concrete framework to leverage international teachers' transition and ultimately to increase their productivity in the classroom.

The study also highlights issues of equity and social justice, acknowledging that international teachers, due to their temporary visa status, can be vulnerable to exploitation and unfair labor practices. While this study does not fully address these systemic issues, it proposes interventions to ease adaptation challenges, creating a more equitable experience for international teachers, improving their transition, boosting classroom

effectiveness, and supporting teacher recruitment.

This research is set in Sunshine County Schools, a pseudonym for a large district in central North Carolina serving nearly 70,000 K-12 students across 126 schools. Since becoming the top recruiter of international teachers in 2005, the district has consistently hired foreign teachers. In 2023, it employed 139 international teachers through North Carolina-based private recruitment agencies.

Review of Literature

Teaching in the U.S. has become a less attractive profession (Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy, 2022; Wiggan et al., 2021). Symptoms include low enrollment in teacher preparation programs, rising attrition rates (Knox, 2022; Will, 2019), exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023). As a result, school districts are increasingly turning to alternative recruitment methods, including hiring teachers from abroad, to fill vacancies (Bala, 2021; Kombe, 2016). This section examines the Theory of Belongingness and the Hierarchy of Basic Needs, the overarching theoretical foundations upon which this study is grounded. It explores key areas in existing research on international teachers in the U.S., focusing on teacher attrition, the profile of international teachers, challenges they face, and available supports.

The Theory of Belongingness and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

This study applies two theories to practice: the Theory of Belongingness and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The Theory of Belongingness, rooted in Freud's ideas and Bowlby's attachment theory, emphasizes the human need for interpersonal connections. The notion of belongingness can be linked back to Sigmund Freud, who argued that human beings have the need to belong to a certain group (Freud, 1975). Next, psychologist John Bowlby, famous for his attachment theory, postulates that early bonding relationships between infants and their caregivers carry long-term positive effects on children (O'Gallaher, 2015). While the Theory of Belongingness has been firmly embedded in the field of social psychology since Bowlby, it was not prominently applied to other fields until Baumeister and Leary (1995) framed the most prominent Belongingness Theory, becoming the most widely used in research with over 30,000 citations (Allen et al., 2022). They posit that inherent to human beings is the necessity to have interpersonal bonding relations with other individuals. If that were not the case, then human beings would live in isolation and solitude, and communities would hardly exist. Aristotle's famous quotation that "man is by nature a social animal" supports the notion of this Theory of Belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995) also argue that the absence of belongingness may trigger health issues and may pose pernicious and harmful effects on individuals' behaviors, emotions and cognitive systems. Connectedly, building a strong sense of belongingness may underpin good physical and mental health (Theisen, 2021). Thiesen notes that reduced levels of stress and anxiety in an individual may be attributed, according to psychological research, to a heightened sense of belongingness. "When we feel we have support and are not alone, we are more resilient, often coping more effectively with difficult times in our lives. Coping well with hardships decreases the physical and mental effects of these situations"

(Theisen, 2021, p. 1). A sense of belongingness has also been linked to declining levels of stress and reduced suicide risks.

These assertions grounded in research validate the relevance of the Theory of Belongingness for the purpose of this study and illustrate how closely it ties into the context of international teachers. International teachers leave behind their circle of interpersonal relationships. In their new culture and social ecosystem, they must build fresh connections to survive and thrive. Exposing teachers to a framework rooted in the Theory of Belongingness as part of a set of interventions for this study is anticipated to equip teachers to become better prepared to face the undeniable challenges that will arise when moving to the United States. This may represent a major undertaking as when you move to another country, it may take considerable time to establish a network of personal relationships or a group with which you can affiliate. Therefore, this framework or intervention encompasses systems in place, which will generate opportunities and spaces for individuals to have interpersonal relationships with other educators and consolidate this idea of belongingness and affiliation with a group.

This study is also grounded in Maslow's Theory of Basic Needs, also known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This theory was proposed by American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943), becoming one of the most popular theories of motivation. Maslow groups the basic human needs into five categories, which are conceptualized in a pyramid or triangle. These categories are physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. On the first level of the hierarchy or base are the

physiological needs, which include those related to survival such as food, water, shelter, clothing, sexual reproduction and breathing. Next, at the second level are the safety and security needs, which include actions triggered by financial security, health and wellness and safety against accidents. Social needs come next on the hierarchy and materialize with friendships, family and romantic relationship relationships and community groups to name some. The fourth level comprises the esteem needs. These encompass the need for appreciation, respect, sense of accomplishment, all of which promote increased self-esteem. At the last level of the hierarchy are the self-actualization needs. Maslow (1943) says self-actualization "refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow, 1943, p. 383). In other words, self-actualization may concomitantly presume this idea of self-realization and achieving one's full potential as an individual (Cherry, 2018).

The pyramid illustrates that people must meet basic needs first before addressing more complex ones. Therefore, at the base of the pyramid are those needs that are more basic while at the top of the pyramid are those that are more complex in nature. Maslow's Hierarchy of Basic Needs mirrors, to a great extent, the overarching reality faced by international teachers when they move to a new country. In fact, upon arriving to the United States, international teachers must act fast to ensure those basic needs featured in

Maslow's pyramid are met diligently for the sake of survival. While the physiological and safety needs form the base of the pyramid, social needs follow immediately. Establishing interpersonal relationships is equally crucial for international teachers' survival and adjustment. This framework closely parallels the challenges faced by international teachers adjusting to life in a new country, where basic needs must first be secured before addressing higher-order needs.

Furthermore, intersecting with the social needs outlined by Maslow is the Theory of Belongingness, substantiating the importance of being able to possess membership to a given group to avoid potential mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Taken together, both the Theory of Belongingness and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs closely align with each other and provide a solid foundation on which to ground this study. Overall, at the core of these theories is the concept of survival and the need for individuals to have networks for social support and belongingness purposes, something which international teachers must develop from the ground up to successfully transition into their new setting. The aim of this study is to develop and implement a framework of practical strategies and tools that help meet international teachers' need for social support and belonging to mitigate the challenges encountered when moving to the United States to teach.

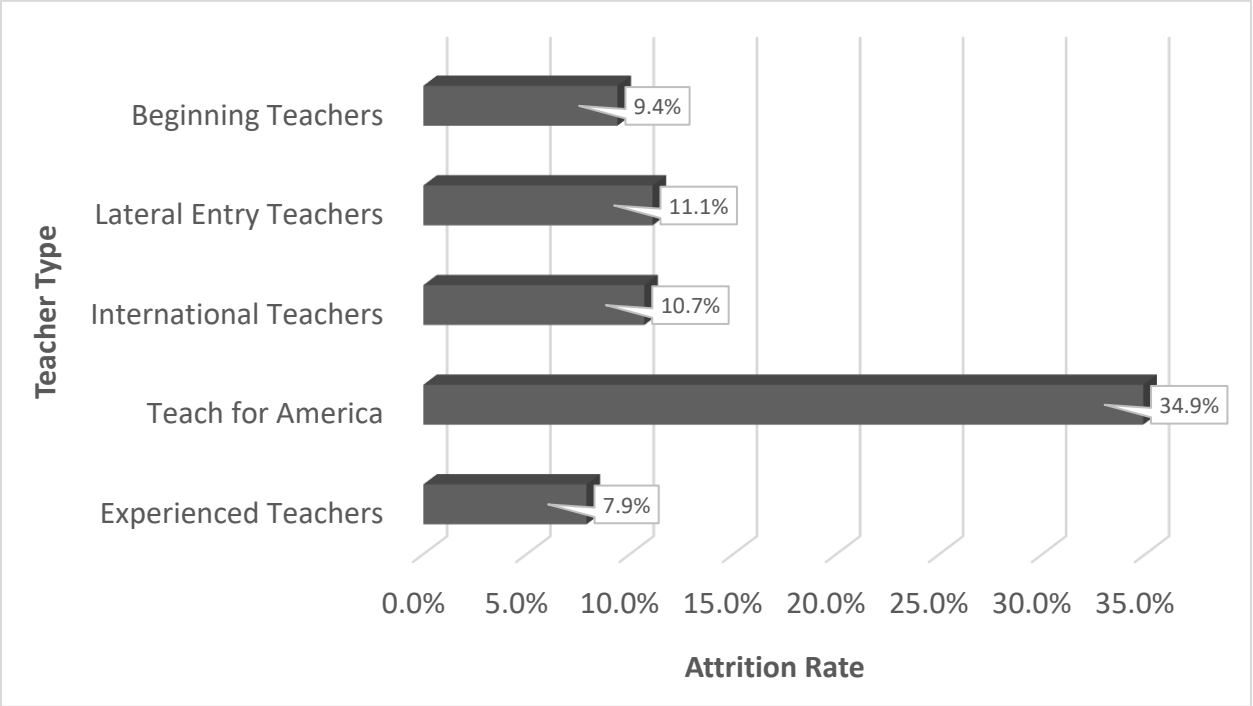
Teacher Attrition

The U.S. is facing a significant and persistent teacher shortage, largely driven by high teacher attrition rates (Bastian & Fuller, 2021; Carter, 2021; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The shortage is particularly pronounced in high-poverty and high-minority areas, with specific fields like special education, math, and science most affected (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2021). Sutcher et al. (2016) suggest that by 2025, 316,000 new teachers will be needed annually to address the decline. While student enrollment has increased (Wiggan et al., 2021), the teacher workforce has increased but not at a significant rate (Ingersoll et al., 2021), leading to a mismatch between supply and demand.

Locally, North Carolina has struggled with teacher shortages since the 2008 recession, facing similar challenges to the rest of the U.S. (Berry et al., 2021). Despite past investments in teacher pay and academic rigor, the state's teacher attrition rates have risen. A 2020-2021 report from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, 2021) found the overall attrition rate was 8.2%, with beginning teachers and lateral entry teachers leaving at even higher rates. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Teacher Attrition Rates in 2021 in North Carolina by Category



Teacher shortages lead to lower student achievement (Miller et al., 2020), especially in underserved schools, as experienced teachers are replaced by emergency-certified or less qualified teachers. This undermines instructional quality and negatively impacts academic performance, especially in high-poverty and high-minority areas (Garcia and Weiss, 2019). As a response, many school districts have turned to international teachers, offering work visas to fill vacancies (Wiggan et al., 2021). According to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in 2009 there were approximately 19,000 international teachers in U.S. classrooms on temporary visas, although this approach is critiqued for failing to address the root causes of the shortage.

The Portrait of the International Teacher

The U.S. has long relied on foreign workers to meet labor demands, including teachers, with transnational teacher migration dating back to the 1960s and increasing in the last 20 years (Barlett, 2013). International teachers are those who were trained and taught abroad but work in U.S. public schools on temporary visas, such as the J-1 (cultural exchange) or H-1B. These teachers, referred to as transnational, foreign-born, or foreign-trained, are expected to return to their home countries after a set period, typically 3 to 5 years, though some may eventually seek permanent residency.

Studies on transnational teachers are limited but increasing, highlighting that international teachers come from diverse countries such as Mexico, India, the Philippines,

Canada, and Spain (Bala, 2021; Furuya et al., 2019; Seah, 2018). These individuals often possess strong content knowledge and advanced degrees (Hutchison & Jazzar, 2007), with motivations varying between economic need and adventure. Some teachers are classified as "embracers," viewing their stay as temporary, while others are "aspirers," (Bartlett, 2013) using the opportunity as a steppingstone to permanent residency.

Two main visa routes for these teachers are the J-1 (Exchange Visitor Program) and the H-1B visas, both allowing temporary employment in the U.S. but with distinct differences. The J-1 visa, designed for cultural exchange, requires specific qualifications such as teaching experience, a relevant degree, and English proficiency. However, it has limited pathways to permanent residency and may include a two-year home-country return requirement. Despite these challenges, the J-1 visa remains popular due to its flexibility, lack of visa caps, and no need for labor certification (Barlett, 2013). Unlike the J-1 visa, the H-1B visa provides the opportunity for foreign professionals to work in the U.S. while seeking permanent residence status.

The process of moving to the U.S. to teach begins when candidates apply to a recruiter or sponsor organization, which assesses their qualifications and conducts interviews. After screening, candidates interview with schools and may receive job offers. Participate, Inc. (formerly VIF), is among the most prominent sponsor organizations that facilitate this process (Holland, 2012; Waite, 2009). North Carolina has been a leading destination for international teachers. Recruiting agencies may charge school districts significant fees—up to $15,000 for their services—and sometimes charge teachers as well (AFT, 2009).

Data on international teachers in the U.S. is scarce, with federal migration data not publicly available. Estimates suggest that around 15,000 international teachers were working in the U.S. in the early 2000s, with 10,000 in public schools (Barber, 2003). This trend has grown, with up to 19,000 teachers on temporary visas in 2007, and by 2017, foreign-born teachers made up 8.6% of the workforce (AFT, 2009).

The benefits of hiring international teachers are widely acknowledged. They are seen as cultural ambassadors, enhancing students' cultural awareness, and connecting with multilingual families (Holland, 2012; Furuya et al., 2019). They also serve as role models, particularly for diverse students, and help bridge cultural gaps. International teachers contribute to diversifying the teacher workforce and fostering a more inclusive learning environment (Broutian, 2016).

International teachers face numerous challenges when relocating to the U.S., particularly related to cultural differences and their temporary employment status (Cabaniss, 2014; Kombe, 2016). International teachers must adapt to a new culture with different social norms, which can affect their teaching effectiveness. Their prior knowledge, shaped by their home country's educational system, may not transfer smoothly, leading to challenges in classroom management and adapting to the U.S. education system. Cultural misunderstandings, particularly regarding student behavior and discipline, can create tensions with students, parents, and colleagues, leading to

negative classroom dynamics and difficulties in maintaining job security. In addition to these issues, international teachers may face language barriers, prejudice, and challenges in understanding school structures and curricula.

In addition to culturally rooted challenges, the temporary nature of many international teachers' visas adds vulnerability regarding job security, with limited rights and fewer protections compared to native-born teachers (Barlett, 2013). This can lead to anxiety, fear of job loss, and exploitation by recruiters and school districts. Furthermore, recruitment practices for international teachers can sometimes be misleading or exploitative (AFT, 2009). Some agencies promise unrealistic expectations about life in the U.S., including salary and job conditions, leaving teachers vulnerable upon arrival. Additionally, because agencies sponsor teachers' visas, they hold significant power, including the ability to terminate visas at any time, further increasing job insecurity. Advocacy non-profit organizations, such as the Alliance for Ethical International Recruitment Practices (2014), have sought to address these issues by establishing ethical recruitment standards in response to increasing concerns regarding unethical and unfair recruitment practices. In partnership with different stakeholders, including recruitment corporations, union representatives and school districts, this agency released The Teacher's Code of Ethical International Recruitment to highlight best practices for the recruitment of international teachers to safeguard their integrity and advocate for their rights.

Support for International Teachers

Research highlights the importance of providing robust support systems for international teachers to help them adjust to their new roles in U.S. schools, addressing cultural, emotional, and professional challenges (Dunn, 2011; Gibson, 2009; Kombe, 2016; Oriaro, 2007). While there is agreement on the benefits of professional development, emotional support, and targeted assistance for international teachers, many teachers report inadequate support, especially during their initial transition (Bala, 2021; Beck, 2010).

Many international teachers receive short, deficient orientation sessions that focus primarily on administrative tasks (e.g., paperwork, tax forms) rather than providing useful, classroom-related information. These orientations often fail to prepare teachers for the cultural and pedagogical challenges they will face. Studies suggest that orientations should include cross-cultural awareness, classroom management, culturally relevant pedagogy, and teaching strategies for diverse students (Ainsworth, 2011; Bartlett, 2013; Lee, 2005; Sethna, 2008; Waite, 2009).

Beyond basic orientations, international teachers need more tailored support. Pre-arrival induction sessions and follow-up support upon arrival are crucial. These programs should provide deeper cultural understanding, insights into American school dynamics, and mentoring by experienced teachers. Yearlong mentoring programs and observation opportunities in experienced classrooms can help new teachers adjust more effectively (Kombe, 2016).

To ease cultural adjustment, school districts should facilitate conversations between American and international teachers about their respective cultural backgrounds. Building a supportive, collaborative work environment is also key to improving emotional wellness (Bala, 2021). Overall, the existing support structures for international teachers are often insufficient. Sustainable and continuous support, including pre-arrival induction, targeted professional development, and emotional wellness initiatives, are essential for international teachers to thrive in their new teaching environments.

Methods

This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to alleviate the challenges faced by international teachers moving to work in the U.S. The study was framed within collaborative improvement science (Perry et al., 2020), where a network of study partners collaborated to implement and evaluate interventions. The study employed a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle of improvement (Langley et al., 2009), which involves iterative testing small-scale changes in real-world settings, gathering data, and refining the interventions based on what worked and what did not work.

The investigation was conducted using explanatory sequential mixed methods, beginning with quantitative data collection to gain insights into the problem, followed by qualitative data to evaluate the impact of the interventions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This combination of methods allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of the problem and the effectiveness of the intervention. The PDSA cycle helped answer three key questions (Perry et al., 2020):

1. What are we trying to accomplish?
2. How will we know if the change is an improvement?
3. What changes can we make to achieve improvement?

This approach enabled ongoing refinement and adaptation of the interventions to ensure they effectively address the challenges faced by international teachers.

The research was conducted in collaboration with a group of partners, including a social worker, an ESL teacher coach, and an ESL teacher. Each partner had extensive experience working with multicultural populations and shared a strong commitment to addressing challenges. Their contributions were documented through meeting minutes, interviews, and surveys, and they played a key role in executing the research.

Participants

The population group is defined as the group designated to receive the improvement intervention in the study (Roberts, 2019). The target population for this study included international teachers. As described previously, international teachers are those that come to teach to the United States on J-1 visa or H1-B visa. According to Creswell (2002) sampling is defined as the target population subgroup that the researcher plans to study for generalizing about the target population. A convenient sample of international teachers

Table 2

Demographics of International Teachers that Participated in the Study

Participant's Alias	Sex	Subject	Country of Origin	Teaching Experience	Years in the U.S.
Jim Reeves	M	HS Math and Algebra	Ghana	15	3
Pollux	M	Elementary ESL	Colombia	14	2
Jay P.	M	High School ESL	Honduras	8	3
Irazu	F	Elementary ESL	Costa Rica	10	3
Olivia Green	F	Elementary ESL	Macedonia	7	3
Sebastian Hernandez	M	High School ESL	Colombia	21	3.5
David One	M	Elementary ESL	Colombia	10	2
Mr. Nebolous	M	Middle School ESL	Argentina	15	1
Dani	F	Elementary ESL	Colombia	14	1.5
David Two	M	High School Spanish	Spain	16	3
Lisa	F	High School Math	Jamaica	20	3
Hedwig	F	High School Statistics	Philippines	21	2
Nikita	F	High School Spanish	Colombia	30	8 (2 terms)

was used for participation in surveys and interviews. This nonprobability or nonrandom sampling method was the most convenient method to access as it entails using individuals who are available and willing to be part of this study (Etikan et al., 2016).

Those who volunteered to participant in the study consisted of 13 international teachers who taught across different subjects and grade levels. From a gender perspective, seven teachers were male and six were female. Of those 13 teachers, seven were high school teachers, five were elementary and there was one who worked at the middle school level. Regarding their subject and content placements, eight participants taught English as a second language, three taught math, and two taught Spanish. While one of the teachers was about to complete his first-year teaching in the United States, the rest of the study participants had been teaching in the United States for an average of 2.5

years, with the exception of two teachers who already had international teaching experience as they had taught before in the United States. In contrast, with reference to their overall experience as educators, two teachers had 1-5 years of teaching experience, two had 5-10, five teachers had 10-15 years of teaching experience, and one had over 20 years. See Table 2.

Instrumentation

The data for this improvement-based study was collected with two instruments. Initially, online surveys were given to participants to gather quantitative data used to establish a baseline. Surveys were delivered and data were subsequently collected using the Qualtrics software to ensure confidentiality and accuracy in the data collection process. Qualtrics is a survey tool that helps scholarly practitioners and researchers build and distribute surveys, view reports and tabulate and analyze participants' responses. Participants received follow-up reminders about the emailed surveys. Survey data collection lasted 3 weeks.

Survey data were securely stored in a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive cloud service. Furthermore, the survey included a cover letter explaining the purpose of it and reminding participants of confidentiality measures in place with clear directions for them to complete it. The survey asked participants questions regarding their demographics, years of professional experience in the field, and attitudes or opinions about teaching in the United States or the challenges associated with it. Moreover, questions were purposefully crafted leaving ambiguities aside, avoiding the use of double-negatives, leading and double-barred questions. I used both Likert-Scales questions and open-ended questions. One of the most often used methods for survey data gathering, Likert-Scales questions are understandable, replies are easily measurable, and the data can be readily compared to that from open-ended questions (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014).

The second instrument employed was interview questions. Interview questions were constructed to elicit qualitative information regarding the intervention effectiveness to mitigate the challenges faced by international teachers. They were the result of thoughtful, careful, and collaborative work that I assumed as a scholarly practitioner with the assistance of my study partners to examine thoroughly the efficacy of the interventions.

The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. Moreover, they were recorded and transcribed using the transcription tool from Microsoft Teams. Interviews were semi-structured in nature, consisting of open-ended questions and some yes-no questions that had been created prior to the interview but could be formulated in any order with room for follow-up questions as needed. To reduce the risk of bias and enhance objectivity, interviews were conducted by my study partners after receiving the participants' informed consents and voluntary agreements to participate. Documenting the results of interviews and gaining access to their transcriptions for future use were the post-interview tasks.

Both surveys and interview questions were validated before using them in the field

with study participants through a pilot study. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the instruments to ensure that both surveys and interview questions would provide the data necessary to conduct this study (Roberts, 2019). Pilot study participants had been selected randomly and were second- and third-year international teachers who had voluntarily agreed to participate. One teacher was from Spain, one was from the Philippines, and one was from Colombia. From a gender perspective, two teachers identified as female and the other as male.

Procedures

The study consisted of three phases. Phase I began in late spring/early summer 2023, with the focus on understanding the challenges international teachers face when moving to the U.S. A collaborative, improvement-based approach was used, following the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model to guide the study.

Following the pilot, the instruments were revised based on participant feedback. Changes included more inclusive language and more specific survey categories. After refining the instruments, approval was sought from both the school district and university to begin data collection and intervention implementation.

Once the selected measurement tools were piloted, the next step was to seek official district approval to be able to start the data collection and intervention implementation in the field. To obtain district approval, several documents were compiled and submitted to fulfil the school system's internal Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements. Simultaneously, IRB documentation was submitted to seek university approval to conduct research. After the school district and the university granted the research approval and the research proposal defense was successfully conducted, all the necessary groundwork had been laid to officially begin the research project. The next steps included analyzing the quantitative survey data using Qualtrics and statistical software (SPSS and JMP). This data analysis, completed by winter 2024, informed the design of the improvement interventions. Overall, Phase I proved to be crucial to gather quantitative foundational data and was used to craft the interventions designed for this improvement-based study in Phase II.

Phase II specifically focused on designing and implementing interventions to provide emotional support for international teachers navigating their transition to the U.S. Based on survey and pilot data, two interventions were chosen. The first was a daily discussion board Question of the Day. The daily question aimed at fostering community, sharing values, and providing a space for teachers to learn from each other. The second intervention was monthly restaurant outings. These were social gatherings intended to help international teachers build a support network and enhance their sense of belonging, supported by research showing that shared meals strengthen social bonds and well-being. These interventions were designed to address emotional challenges and meet basic psychological needs for successful teacher transition, drawing from Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Both interventions were implemented over five weeks. Teachers were given 24 hours to respond to the daily questions on Padlet, with restaurant outings occurring at the start of each month. Feedback about these activities, such as participation rates and engagement levels, was monitored. After implementation, the study team analyzed the effectiveness of the interventions by reviewing data on participation rates for the Question of the Day and restaurant outings. Following the analysis, no significant changes were needed for the interventions, as they were deemed successful in achieving their goals of providing support and fostering a sense of community among international teachers.

Table 1

Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Steps by Phase

PDSA	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Plan	Planning of surveys and interviews; Pilot study to test data collection tools.	Developing improvement interventions and implementation plan.	Planning outcome data collection (interviews).
Do	Conducting surveys with voluntary participants to gather baseline data and determine challenges.	Carrying out implementation plan.	Carrying out outcome data collection plan.
Study	Analyzing baseline data with study partners.	Analyzing intervention implementation.	Analyzing data collected.
Act	Identifying with study partners baseline data & research literature improvement interventions.	Making changes to implementation as needed.	Sharing findings with stakeholders.

Lastly, Phase III focused on evaluating the effectiveness of the interventions implemented in Phase II. The primary data collection method was qualitative, through personal interviews with study participants. Interview questions were carefully developed and piloted to ensure relevance and validity. See Table 1 for a summary of the PDSA steps by phase of the study.

Data Analysis

All phases of the data collection process (initial survey and exit interviews) and natural interactions that were observed throughout both interventions (the Question of the day and restaurant outings) among international teachers provided ample relevant information to answer the study questions. Questions 6-14 and question 20 from the initial survey afforded the opportunity to access quantitative data pertaining to the challenges

faced by the international teachers from Sunshine Public Schools when moving to the United States. As noted previously, I used Qualtrics to create, administer, and analyze part of the survey data. Qualtrics provided feedback as questions were generated to improve or make them clearer; furthermore, the data are presented with a variety of graphs, making it easier to analyze. Descriptive statistics, namely percent to total and frequency distribution, were utilized to aid with analysis of survey data collected.

Later, the initial survey, which included open ended questions and exit interview transcripts, were uploaded to NVivo for coding purposes. NVivo is a software program that can also help with qualitative data analysis by saving time during the analysis and write-up phases and making analysis faster, more accurate, and reliable. With NVivo, I initially used open coding as the goal was the exploration and discovery of emerging patterns and concepts, allowing me to break the data into smaller discrete excerpts. The codes represented a label, description, definition, or category name. These codes produced in a round of open coding were meant to be loose and tentative and subject to evolve and change in further rounds. Later, in order to find categories connecting participants within the larger group, I used axial coding to compare the smaller codes labeled in open coding. Axial coding allowed me to compare and find relationships between individual participants and to analyze every category. In certain instances, the examination of codes during this phase led to the combination of codes or the development of new codes that were not previously identified during the coding of participant data. On a different note, the mixed method approach allowed the use pf multiple data sources. Quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated to increase the accuracy of study results by analyzing data independently, identifying convergences and divergences, and integrating findings (Stringer, 2013). The culminating task during this phase was the identification of recurring themes or threads that emerged from the coding and thematic analysis.

Findings

The findings of this study are organized by each of the research questions: challenges faced by international teachers at Sunshine Public School and the impact of emotional support interventions on transitioning challenges.

Challenges Faced by International Teachers at Sunshine Public Schools

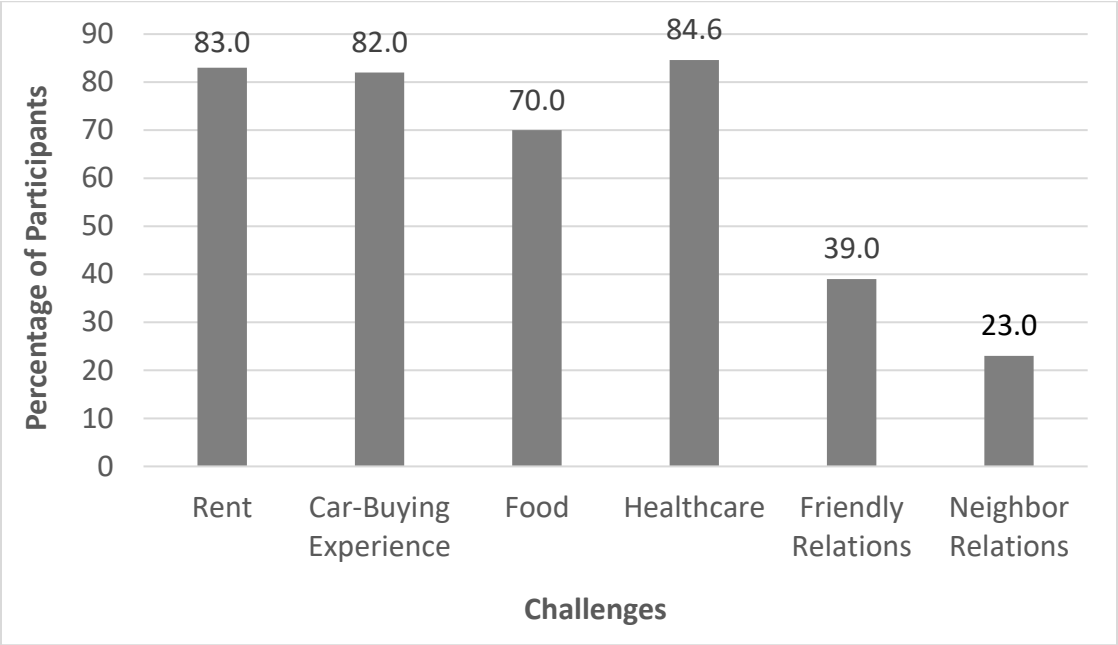
Three key themes emerged from the data analysis regarding the challenges international teachers face when moving to the U.S. Firstly, teachers experienced logistical challenges without proper support. They struggled with renting apartments, securing transportation, accessing healthcare, and adapting to local food culture. Survey data reinforced these accounts, as shown in Figure 2. Hedwig, a third-year international teacher, explained:

The limited insurance options provided by the agency for international teachers are a source of frustration for me, as they offer minimal coverage, leaving me to cover significant medical expenses, especially for my daughter's asthma treatment and vaccinations, which are ENTIRELY uncovered. I know many Americans are facing the same challenges in their

own country, however, that is not a consolation for me. I wish we were at least given the same insurance policy as the other teachers who are not international.

Figure 2

Most Frequent Challenges Faced by International Teachers by Percentage



Another international teacher, Nikita, when asked about ways to improve the transition experience also brought the healthcare issue "Another thing is the medical insurance! We should have the right to choose the one we want or allow us to join the one the district offers. The one we have is really a nightmare." Likewise, David Two, another international teacher in his second year concurred with Nikita. "I also agree that some options for dental and vision should be provided by the agency. Navigating a new medical system, and not having support at all, is quite challenging." He sympathized with one teacher who had to wait until the school year was over and went back home to have surgery there since the medical insurance coverage made the surgery unaffordable in the United States. Together, these accounts illustrate how health coverage challenges became one of the most pressing barriers for international teachers.

Other relocation challenges emerge when international teachers have just arrived and after a short orientation at a hotel, they start looking for housing with no credit or apartment rental history in this country. Whilst just one teacher mentioned that he had been able to secure his apartment from his home country before moving to the United States, all agreed that renting an apartment resulted in a stressful and hassling experience upon arrival. Olivia described her experience trying to secure housing:

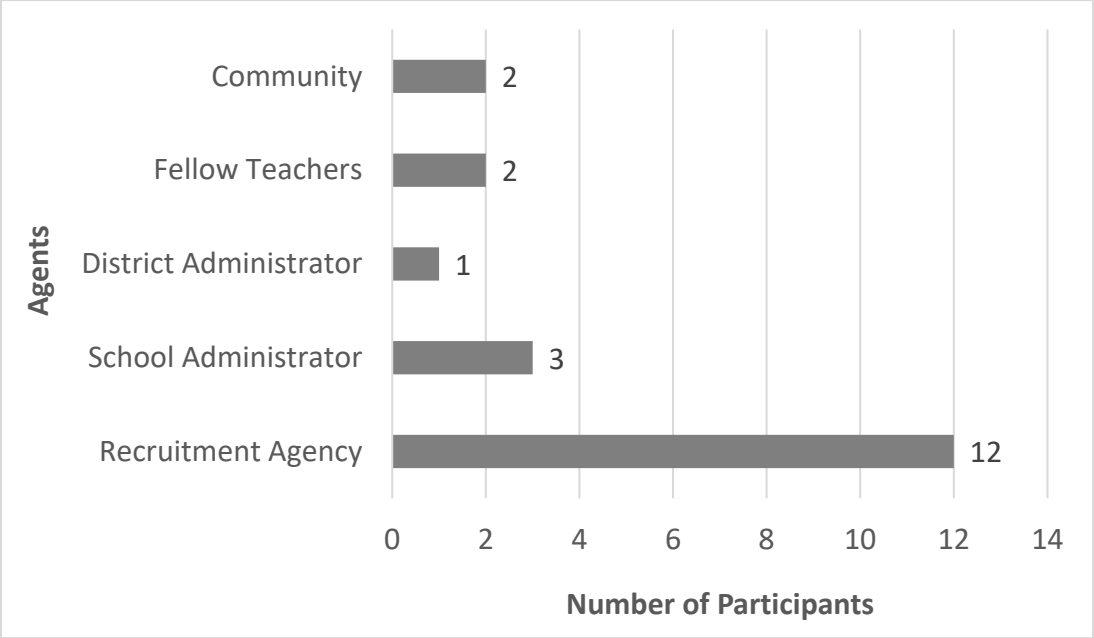
After three days in the hotel, I desperately tried to find an apartment, however, having no credit history and no rental history, the only thing I had was the job contract.

Apartment complexes were not keen on accepting that document as “insurance”. So, I called and emailed the agency to help me get situated somewhere with my child, but their answer was “I am so sorry that you are having trouble finding an apartment.” When I asked if they could vouch somewhere for me, they would answer “I hope you find something soon!” and how sorry they felt… The agency was not helpful again, and I was without a salary until the end of the month.

Furthermore, some difficulties, like lacking a U.S. credit history, were unavoidable; others (e.g., classroom management, building workplace relationships) were job-specific and could have been mitigated by proactively installing systems in place. Almost three-fourths of teachers (85.0 %) found classroom management to be a significant issue while 31.0 % reported it to be a moderate one. This was also corroborated by many of the study

Figure 3

Number of Agents who Could Help Prevent Challenges Faced by Participants



participants as they described the hurdles they encountered with students. Jay P., a third-year international teacher, reflected on classroom management challenges

Classroom management has been one of my biggest challenges as I found it hard to enforce some of my classroom expectations. Students at the beginning would not listen to me…probably because of my accent and the fact that I am foreign-born; pair that up with parents and families that are unresponsive and stand up for their students regardless of their wrongdoing!

Overall, teachers felt they received no support from recruitment agencies or school districts during this process. As illustrated in Figure 3, survey responses highlighted these gaps.

Secondly, lack of emotional support emerged as another prevalent barrier. In fact, during the initial transition, teachers experienced homesickness and emotional distress with little to no support. The absence of emotional support was particularly harmful, as teachers had no resources or networks to help them cope with feelings of isolation. In fact, all participants were open and vulnerable to share their emotions and feelings. For instance, Pollux acknowledged that "Being away from my family and my culture has been one of my biggest challenges, I've missed everything." Similarly, Nikita reflected about her being homesick: "A challenge that I have been facing is dealing with loneliness. It is true that, I am surrounded by people, but it is not the same as having my loved ones close to me." Likewise, Dani spoke about the implications of feeling lonely: "So feeling lonely makes you feel that you want to come back and don't finish this process, right? So, in I think in that way emotions can affect the process and being unable to continue and get back home."

The same view was echoed by Sebastian who is still grappling with being away from his home country:

Still remains a challenge to be away from your own country of course, and that involves everything and everybody, beginning with the most important people in your life: la familia! Missing the important 'episodes,' it is not the same to share through a video call or text, or any of that.

Olivia described how initial enthusiasm gradually faded as teachers left the honeymoon phase and adjusted to reality:

We first enjoyed the new life, and that phase lasts for a little while. And then the enthusiasm drops down, and we sometimes feel homesick. And all that, and we need friends. We've had friends back home for a very long time, a support system, and now we are here by ourselves, so having more, some more emotional support and somebody who can actually relate to what you're feeling would be very beneficial.

These overlapping narratives reveal a common thread: international teachers consistently struggled with isolation, which they linked directly to retention risks. These findings highlighted a gap in previous research, which had not directly addressed the emotional struggles of international teachers.

Finally, data showed that teachers were exposed to insufficient onboarding for cultural and soft skills. Onboarding programs were brief and content-heavy, focusing on instructional strategies rather than cultural adaptation. Furthermore, teachers lacked training in cross-cultural communication, self-care, time management, and wellness techniques, making the transition harder. Participants emphasized the need for ongoing, sustainable onboarding rather than short, information-dense sessions. Sebastian criticized the training he received shortly after arriving in the United States:

They focus on teaching you how to be a teacher, but they already hired you because you have experience and they are focusing on strategies to have classroom management, focus on how to contact parents. All the differences that we don't have in our countries.

He strongly believes that training should include emotion regulation strategies to support mental health:

But if you focus on emotional support to teachers, that feature is going to make their work more effectively, because that's one thing that is going to be out of their plate and they will have more room to really focus on the things that matter, which is teaching, because if you are thinking that you are having a struggle, the least thing that you wanna think about is the teaching is the planning, is the job that you were hired for.

Sebastian did not specify whether the school district or recruitment agency should be responsible for this. However, he acknowledged that this type of professional development and self-care activities should begin as soon as possible and be maintained throughout the school year. Moreover, Lisa's ideas coincided, to a great extent, with Sebastian's. In her view, international teachers do not necessarily just benefit from pedagogical strategies and innovative approaches to teaching. She believes that they should get mentors with whom you can build a close relationship. Her idea of mentorship resembled those systems that are in place for American beginning teachers who receive a mentor during their first years as educators:

Yes, it makes a difference…because you need to talk. You need to have the chance to express how you feel and why you feel that way and frustrations and questions and emotions and all of that. So, it would be amazing if schools made this like sort of like meetings with the teacher.

These findings align with previous studies, underscoring the cultural and interpersonal challenges faced by international teachers and the need for continuous support programs to foster successful transitions.

Impact of Emotional Support Interventions on Transitioning Challenges

Three overarching themes emerged from the data analysis regarding the effects of emotional support interventions on international teachers' transitions. First, emotional support was found to significantly reduce transition stress. All participants unanimously agreed that ongoing emotional support is essential for easing the transition process. In fact, emotional support was linked to lower attrition rates and increased teacher efficacy. David One, for example, was convinced of the benefits of emotional support for international teachers during the crucial transition period:

Because international teachers come here with knowledge from books, I can say mostly course books and how exposed we are to the culture on TV and all that. But once you get here, the reality, real life is not the same. And building our community from the very beginning and talking to people who are going through the same and having those questions of the day would be beneficial.

Jim concurred with David One and expanded on the advantages of establishing emotional support systems for international teachers as well as pre-arrival preparation to address potential challenges: "That will be a plus for the program, for the international

teachers as well, but they also need to be aware of if you are single you are going to be alone, you're going to be by yourself." On the same page, Dani elaborated on the importance of sustainable emotional support, particularly at early transitional stages. She cautioned about the direct dynamic correlation between emotional support and high retention rates of international teachers: "Being lonely makes you feel going home and don't finish this process. The emotions can affect make you unable to continue being an international teacher. The risk of quitting the program decreases if you get the emotional support." She concluded by acknowledging that recruitment companies that bring international teachers do not care about providing emotional support. The lack of current emotional support programs highlights a major gap in international teacher onboarding.

Furthermore, reflection and journaling aid adjustment. In other words, using an online platform (e.g., the Question of the Day) for journaling and reflection helped teachers vent, reflect, and heal during the early stages of relocation. These interactions provided a safe, solution-oriented space, reducing stress and anxiety. Olivia admitted that the Question of the Day resulted in a daily reflection tool:

It allowed me to do a self-assessment about the emotions that we have, about the life that we are living here, and about the things that we are doing here. I also like them better compared to traditional professional development because I had many more opportunities to meet people and share my experiences and learn from their own life experiences.

Nikita commented on the how Question of the Day can be more functionally helpful as opposed to standard professional development topics: "I think those types of questions might be more beneficial compared to the classroom management sessions that we got…how to teach and how to manage a classroom, not like building a community and just chatting with other people". In like manner, Hedwig stressed the therapeutic effects of the Question of the Day as he used it as a reflective practice to uncover personal emotional reactions that were rooted deep inside himself:

Now having those interventions and giving me the chance to reflect every day during those weeks, it hits different…it just helped me to reflect and to understand and see what are the things that I have been achieving until now, just about reflection, basically.

This intervention is a new contribution to the field, as prior studies emphasized emotional support's importance but did not offer specific, tested interventions.

Lastly, face-to-face interactions foster connection, collaboration and reduce anxiety. In-person gatherings (restaurant outings) significantly helped teachers feel less isolated as teachers valued the organic, community-driven conversations, which promoted camaraderie and problem-solving. The relaxed, informal setting encouraged meaningful social connections, making the transition smoother. All teachers pointed out the importance of interactions that took place during restaurant outings among teachers. Pollux commented, "So I think that those kind of activities would help because it helps a lot when we get together on weekends and hang out together and talk about the things that

were happening." Similarly, Dani stressed the value of community building to confront unexpected issues and challenges:

When we socially interact, we build a support system for each other. If we're sick, if we have issues with rent, if we have issues with our district, I mean, we can get feedback or opinions from our brothers and sisters and it would definitely provide some solutions to the problems, potential problems that we face.

Relatedly, Mr. Nebolous argued that social interactions among fellow international teachers and mental health are fundamentally linked:

If you got those kind of restaurant get togethers, they're going to help with your mental

health. So you will get better. You will. You will now not feel bad about it, about being alone here. So I think those gatherings will be helpful for you if you come here the first time you got somebody to talk.

Participants emphasized in different ways how simple social interactions created a critical support system. These findings underscore the critical role of structured emotional support systems—both virtual and in-person—in reducing stress, fostering connection, and promoting successful transitions for international teachers.

Limitations

Three main limitations were identified in this study and were related to sample population, time limitations and data reliability. The study involved only 13 international teachers from an urban district in central North Carolina, recruited through two specific agencies. The findings may be limited to the practices of these agencies and may not represent the experiences of teachers hired by other organizations. Moreover, the sample included educators from nine countries, but not from conflict-affected regions, which may limit insights into discrimination-related challenges.

Additionally, the short research cycles may have affected the outcomes, as teachers had limited time to fully engage with the interventions. Despite the time constraints, the data gathered still offers valuable insights for guiding future research and improving emotional support frameworks. Finally, a pilot study was conducted with veteran international teachers to field-test the data collection tools. Their feedback improved the survey and interview design (e.g., rewording questions for clarity), enhancing the tools' reliability. The pilot study did not

influence the interventions themselves, ensuring the validity of the emotional support framework. Despite these limitations, the findings provide meaningful insights into addressing the emotional challenges international teachers face during relocation.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study highlight several practical implications for improving the transitional experience of international teachers. The study underscores the significant

challenges international teachers face during relocation, including logistical hurdles and lack of emotional support. Recruitment agencies and school districts should revamp orientations and provide continuous emotional support throughout the teachers' first year. Conversely, school administrators must be aware of these challenges and create support networks to foster belonging and reduce feelings of isolation.

Secondly, the study revealed that small-scale, low-cost interventions (e.g., online journaling and face-to-face gatherings) can significantly improve teacher well-being. All participants found the interventions effective for building community and social capital, demonstrating their practicality for broader use. Lastly, another implication that stems from this study is that emotional support enhances teacher morale, mental health, and productivity, leading to greater levels of classroom engagement. Improved teacher well-being may boost student learning outcomes, as teachers experience a smoother, less stressful adjustment process. These findings emphasize the importance of sustainable, emotionally supportive practices that school districts and recruitment agencies can implement to improve international teachers' transitions.

Implications for Equity

The findings also have equity-related implications, as the study highlights the emotional and adaptational challenges international teachers face due to the lack of emotional support. The emotional support framework introduced in this study serves as an equity-promoting tool, helping international teachers navigate the adjustment process with greater affirmation, self-development, and reduced stress. It fosters teacher efficacy by addressing the emotional needs often overlooked in the current system. Furthermore, by providing fair support and opportunities, the framework reduces disparities between international and American teachers. It encourages inclusivity by fostering a more welcoming and supportive environment for international educators. Overall, the action-oriented framework promotes social justice and equity, ensuring international teachers have the emotional support needed to thrive in their new roles.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Study

Several recommendations for practice emerge from this study. School districts and recruitment agencies should foster a culture of belonging by providing sustainable emotional support systems. In like manner, emotional support is key to adaptation, performance, and talent retention. This study underscores the need for both school districts and recruitment agencies to collaborate on sustainable, cost-effective support, rather than relying solely on brief post-arrival orientations. Additionally, recruiters should hold teacher companions accountable for providing consistent support. This study also calls for a need to build capacity among school leaders by training them on international teachers' challenges to provide better support. In fact, principals could facilitate regular check-ins and create opportunities for relationship-building to prevent isolation and should get opportunities for overseas trips to enhance cultural empathy. Moreover, immigration policies should be reformed to allow pathways to citizenship for effective international teachers, preventing forced return after five years.

Further research is needed to explore additional emotional support interventions and their effectiveness. Studies should examine whether interventions are more effective when provided by districts, recruiters, or both in partnerships. Future studies should also compare the onboarding experiences of international and U.S. beginning teachers to assess their impact on adaptation and performance. Research could also explore whether international teachers who relocate with families experience easier or more difficult transitions. Finally, long-term research is needed to analyze the impact of emotional support on self-efficacy, success, and retention rates of international teachers.

Conclusion

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of two interventions designed to alleviate the emotional challenges faced by international teachers transitioning to work in the U.S. The results revealed that both interventions were highly effective. All participants found the restaurant outings helpful in easing emotional struggles by fostering community building, social bonding, and interaction. Additionally, 90% of the teachers valued the Question of the Day platform, as it promoted a sense of community and provided a space for teachers to connect with each other and exchange ideas.

The study identified three key challenges faced by international teachers during their transition to U.S. classrooms. Teachers experienced logistical difficulties during relocation, often receiving little to no support from recruitment agencies or school districts. Additionally, there was a notable lack of emotional support, exacerbating the stress associated with moving and adjusting to a new cultural environment. Further compounding these issues was insufficient personal and professional development, especially in areas such as cultural understanding, interpersonal interactions, and soft skills, which are crucial for successfully integrating into U.S. classrooms.

The study's emotional support interventions effectively addressed these challenges and yielded significant findings. Specifically, providing emotional support was shown to substantially reduce stress, making the teachers' transition period more manageable. Additionally, online journaling and reflective discussions with peers offered valuable support during the early stages of relocation, helping teachers better understand and navigate their experiences. Finally, face-to-face interactions among international teachers were particularly beneficial in alleviating feelings of isolation, reducing anxiety, and promoting a stronger sense of belonging and community.

Ultimately, international teachers play a vital role in driving cultural awareness, boosting student achievement, and filling vacancies in struggling school districts. Given their significant contributions, it is essential that they receive adequate emotional and professional support.

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Increasing High School Students' Math Achievement and Self-Efficacy Through Peer Tutoring

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This study examined the effects of peer tutoring on high school students' mathematical self-efficacy and performance. Through an explanatory sequential mixed methods design rooted in improvement science, the researchers investigated how structured peer relationships shape confidence, performance, and attitudes toward mathematics. Data collection involved surveys, focus groups, interviews, and standardized test scores. Findings reveal that peer tutoring establishes a supportive learning environment benefiting both tutors and tutees, resulting in enhanced academic outcomes and strengthened self-efficacy in mathematics.

The research demonstrates how peer-to-peer learning creates unique opportunities for knowledge transfer unlike traditional instruction. Tutors reinforced their own understanding through teaching, while tutees received personalized support from peers who shared similar learning challenges. Grounded in improvement science, the study provides actionable insights for practitioners seeking strategies to improve mathematics achievement and student confidence.

Keywords: *peer, tutoring, high school math, self-efficacy, math proficiency, student relationships, confidence*

Multiple factors contribute to the increasing number of teacher vacancies in schools nationwide. Pay dissatisfaction, high workload, excessive paperwork requirements, and concerns with educational policy rank among the primary reasons teachers cite for leaving the profession (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). While research indicates there is no uniform national teacher shortage, data reveal that 45% of public schools report at least one teaching vacancy (Wong, 2022). More concerning, vacancy rates in higher-poverty areas and special education positions are significantly higher than in other educational settings, creating inequitable access to qualified educators precisely where they are most needed.

Although inadequate compensation contributes to recruitment challenges, it is not the most significant factor driving the teacher shortage across states. Teachers leaving the profession or choosing alternative careers most frequently cite increased accountability demands, excessive paperwork, competition created for public education, high-stakes evaluations, political interference, flawed policies, and continual changes in expectations from states and administrators (Strauss, 2017). This growing exodus of qualified educators, combined with inadequate recruitment efforts that fail to address the underlying causes of the weakened teacher pipeline, creates a critical situation for K-12 education.

Impact on Mathematics Education

The mathematics education landscape faces challenges in this environment. Students face social, emotional, and academic challenges, while too few qualified educators enter the profession to meet demand (Capp et al., 2018). Teacher preparation program enrollment has declined by an alarming 35% in just five years, while educators rapidly exit the profession to pursue alternative employment, retire, or abandon teaching altogether (Berry & Shields, 2017).

As student enrollment increases and the availability of highly qualified mathematics teachers decreases due to professional stressors and systemic changes, achievement gaps in mathematics continue to widen at the school level (Ingersoll, 2001). Schools contend with both stagnant performance and reduced instructional effectiveness. Research shows that success in meeting goals is directly tied to mathematics proficiency, yet only 12% of high school seniors achieve mathematics proficiency before graduation (Dobbins et al., 2014).

Exploring Peer Tutoring as an Intervention

This research focuses on utilizing peer tutoring as a strategy to improve mathematics performance among high school students. As deficits in mathematics achievement persist alongside the demand for highly qualified teachers, alternative instructional supports must be explored to provide students with effective strategies for improving mathematics outcomes. Peer tutoring represents one potential approach to help address this educational imbalance (Falchikov, 2001). As such, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How will the implementation of a peer tutoring program in Math 1 and Math 3

classrooms affect student growth toward mathematics proficiency performance?

2. What effect does participation in a peer tutoring program have on the mathematical self-efficacy of tutored students?

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated existing educational challenges through school closures and the transition to online instruction. Gregg and Shin (2021) compared the performance of students receiving face-to-face tutoring before the pandemic versus online tutoring during pandemic response measures, finding improved performance in both delivery formats. Additional research indicates that lower-achieving students in high-poverty areas demonstrate higher mathematics success rates when paired with tutors, regardless of the tutors' mathematical ability (Karsenty, 2010). This effect may stem from increased confidence and improved school acclimation among tutees, further supporting the potential effectiveness of classroom peer tutoring programs.

The State of Mathematics Education

Multiple factors contribute to the current mathematics education crisis. Research identifies several barriers, including insufficient classroom teachers with appropriate training, inadequate school resources and funding, single-parent home environments, and discrimination toward minority and female students (Di Martino & Gregorio, 2019). By eighth grade, most students are taught only basic mathematics skills, which they rarely master, necessitating current educational reform initiatives. With only 12% of high school seniors demonstrating mathematics proficiency at graduation as they transition to higher education or the workforce, significant intervention is required (Dobbins et al., 2014).

Educational leaders have focused on implementing Curriculum-Based Evaluation (CBE) and Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) tools to address mathematics achievement gaps. These approaches involve frequent progress monitoring of student performance and teacher accountability for instructional strategies through consistent assessment practices (Kelley et al., 2008).

Teacher Preparation and Content Knowledge

Districts, schools, administrators, and teachers face accountability for meeting state-mandated academic achievement goals (Bal, 2016). While teachers are expected to deliver high-quality instruction and pedagogy daily, many lack the proper training to do so effectively. Individual support for developing teachers' pedagogical content knowledge is essential for addressing lower-than-desired student achievement (Baumert et al., 2010).

Teacher content knowledge plays a crucial role in student engagement and learning outcomes. When teachers lack a clear understanding of their instructional responsibilities or pedagogical approaches, student engagement suffers. This engagement is critical for mathematics success and demonstrates a direct relationship with decreased dropout risk (Duran, 2017). Research has examined various curricula for effectiveness across diverse classroom settings. While effectiveness varies among programs, common criteria for

successful implementation include teacher mathematics knowledge, positive attitudes toward mathematics, and effective classroom differentiation practices (Agodini & Harris, 2016).

One contributing factor to inconsistent mathematics knowledge among teachers is the presence of educators without full licensure in classrooms. These teachers, more likely to be underprepared for subject-specific instruction, are hired when highly qualified teachers are unavailable. Such situations are particularly common in high-poverty areas where qualified teachers are most needed. Underprepared teachers may lack effective teaching strategies and demonstrate deficiencies in lesson planning and content mastery (Starr, 2012).

Student Self-Efficacy in Mathematics

Self-efficacy, a strong predictor of student success (Heslin & Klehe, 2006), develops through experience, encouragement from peers and adults, and positive social-emotional health. Mathematical self-efficacy significantly determines academic achievement in the subject. Students with high self-efficacy demonstrate willingness to embrace challenges rather than avoiding difficult work (Ahmad & Safaria, 2013). These students typically exhibit a stronger work ethic and persistence when faced with obstacles. Research has shown that students with high self-efficacy score higher on mathematics assessments even when achievement levels are otherwise equal. Additional studies indicate that high school students' self-efficacy must increase significantly to improve mathematics achievement (Liu & Koirala, 2009).

Building self-efficacy is particularly important for lower-performing students, as it influences attitudes, self-concept, and emotional states affecting academic performance (Robinson et al., 2005). Future career opportunities often depend directly on student mathematics and science interests and achievement. To compete globally, students need greater confidence in these areas.

Many students report boredom with mathematics or fail to recognize its importance, leading to avoidance behaviors. Implementing effective pedagogy, maintaining high expectations with equity for all students, and incorporating real-world examples can decrease mathematics anxiety while increasing student self-efficacy (Furner & Berman, 2005). As one of several effective predictors of achievement and motivation, self-efficacy influences students' perceptions of their academic capabilities, driving persistence and effort in learning environments (Zimmerman, 2000).

Math performance in high school can have a significant impact on a student's academic and career prospects (Froiland & Davison, 2016). Students' performance is measured by the grades received in math courses and standardized testing scores. High scores on these assessments can open doors to college admissions and scholarships, making strong math performance critical for those planning higher education, as many college majors and career paths require a strong foundation in math (Liu & Koirala, 2009).

Math self-efficacy specifically refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform

math-related tasks and solve math problems. This concept, derived from Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, emphasizes the role of self-beliefs in shaping behavior and performance (Ewen, 2010). High math self-efficacy is associated with greater motivation, persistence, risk-taking, and effective learning strategies in mathematics. Students with strong math efficacy are more likely to choose advanced math courses and pursue math-related careers (Hoffman, 2010).

The Youth Mentoring Model and Student Peer Assisted Mentoring

Two research-based theoretical models inform this study's approach. The Youth Mentoring Model and Student Peer Assisted Mentoring, when integrated, enable students to develop deeper mathematical understanding while building essential life skills. These complementary frameworks provide study partners with perspectives needed to support students' development as independent learners and capable individuals.

High school student self-efficacy refers to students' belief in their competence to succeed in academic and non-academic tasks (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016). Self-efficacy is a crucial psychological concept that can greatly influence a student's academic performance, motivation, and overall well-being. As students' self-efficacy increases, they believe more strongly in their capacity to succeed academically in all subject areas, therefore influencing their willingness to tackle challenging coursework (van Rooij et al., 2017).

Increased self-efficacy can significantly impact a student's study habits, making them more likely to use effective study strategies, manage their time efficiently, and seek help when needed. Students with higher self-efficacy tend to persevere in the pursuit of their goals, even when encountering challenges or failures. This concept extends beyond academics to influence students' willingness to engage in extracurricular activities, which can contribute to positive relationships with peers and adults (Forgeard & Benson, 2019).

There are multiple advantages to the Youth Mentoring Model (YMM) and the Student Peer Assisted Model (SPAM) frameworks being implemented for students in high school while being peer tutored in math. The frameworks contribute to higher student engagement and an increased desire to learn, even when that is difficult (Kirkham & Ringelstein, 2008). They reinforce positive relationships between mentor and student, whether that is peer-to-peer or peer-to-teacher (Keller, 2005). SPAM uses three overarching principles that the peer tutor or mentor can work with the tutee or mentee on. This could work directly from class on a certain skill set by utilizing a scaffolding reciprocal approach, self-help to ensure the learner is becoming an independent worker, and lastly, meeting to address a tutee's academic or emotional needs. Kirkham and Ringelstein (2008) state that SPAM has been highly effective in building student retention and learning at a much deeper level for both tutor and tutee, as they are both held accountable for learning. The tutor is learning more leadership skills-based abilities, while the tutee is crafting the academic skill in a less threatening manner due to the strong rapport offered by a peer relationship. SPAM offers students a sense of belonging. SPAM can build the confidence of both peer tutor and peer tutee, increasing confidence and helping students find a sense of belonging (Pye et

al., 2016). SPAM is like Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. There is an actual level of understanding and a potential level of understanding that a student can get to through the guidance or collaboration of a capable peer (Eun, 2019). The key is to keep students engaged in their learning, allow them to assess themselves and others, and feel as though they have the potential to mentor or teach others (Duran, 2017).

The Youth Mentoring Model**,** resembling SPAM, works through positive relationships and student engagement. YMM reinforces relationships that can be complex. This may be a network of relationships between a child and another child, or a child and an adult or mentor (Keller, 2005). This framework is built on the belief that through trust in a mentoring relationship, students will improve in their social-emotional development, academic development, and socially. By doing so, relationships will improve at home and at school, causing better behaviors, grades, and emotional state (Dubois et al., 2011). Perhaps one of the most important aspects of YMM is that this framework, in a realistic setting, does not have to be huge moments full of success. Instead, it may be many small, boring moments, even frustrating moments, using humor, or vulnerable moments that help form bonds (Rhodes, 2005). Much like parenting, children need to feel that they can speak about things without feeling threatened by someone who is positive and models appropriate behaviors. Tutors can act as a security blanket for some students and help with other relationship matters that students are dealing with.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring is a strategy where one student provides assistance, explanation, and support to another, fostering collaborative learning (Ali et al., 2015). This approach can be beneficial for both the tutor and the tutee, as it fosters collaboration and a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

The effectiveness of peer tutoring depends on the correct pairing of students and the consideration of self-efficacy. The social credibility of the tutor influences student success (Madaio et al., 2017). When implemented properly, peer tutoring can increase self-esteem and math confidence for both the peer tutor and peer tutee (Tang et al., 2022). This cooperative learning strategy offers collaboration and has the potential to greatly benefit all students in terms of self-concept, attitudes, and academic performance (Ansuategui & Miravet, 2017).

Peer tutoring helps struggling learners increase math knowledge and understanding while also assisting students in their ability to focus, engage, and support positive behaviors (Capp et al., 2018). Students assigned a peer tutor often feel less threatened and develop a sense of confidence that enables them to lower barriers to learning (Madaio et al., 2017). When paired appropriately, peers create a safe space where students do not feel embarrassed or self-conscious about their learning needs.

Peer Tutoring in High School Mathematics

Peer tutoring in high school mathematics is particularly beneficial as it allows tutors to break down complex mathematical concepts for struggling students in a more relatable

manner (Gan & Hong, 2010). This approach provides several advantages:

1. Tutors explain complex concepts in ways that resonate with peers,
2. Tutors develop valuable communication and teaching skills,
3. Tutees experience increased confidence and willingness to ask questions,
4. Instruction can be personalized to match individual learning styles,
5. Regular progress assessment benefits both tutors and tutees (Moliner & Alegre, 2020),
6. Positive relationships foster a sense of community and support within the classroom, and
7. Tutors reinforce their own understanding of mathematical concepts by teaching others.

While some question the practical application of certain mathematical concepts, proficiency in math remains a requirement for high school graduation. Peer tutoring offers a valuable strategy to address this issue, particularly for students with learning challenges who need support and alternative instructional methods.

Methodology

To address the mathematics achievement gap, the core intervention explored in this study was a structured peer tutoring program in Math 1 and Math 3. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design grounded in improvement science was utilized. This approach was selected to capture both quantitative outcomes of the intervention and qualitative insights into student and teacher experiences. Quantitative data were collected and analyzed first to determine patterns in mathematics achievement and self-efficacy, followed by qualitative data collection to provide explanations and deeper understanding of the quantitative findings. The design was implemented across three phases, each guided by Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles of continuous improvement.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a rural Title I high school in eastern North Carolina. Enrollment for the 2023–2024 school year was approximately 766 students, with demographics including 45% White, 27% Black, 14% Hispanic, 11% two or more races, and 3% Native American. The intervention targeted all students enrolled in Math 1 and Math 3, as these courses are state-tested through End-of-Course (EOC) exams and are central to school accountability measures. Participation was automatic unless parents opted their child out of the study as part of the informed consent provided. A total of 94 students (43 male, 51 female) enrolled in Math 1 and Math 3 participated in the study. All participants, labeled as tutees, completed the pre- and post-surveys. To capture qualitative perspectives, eight of the tutees, balanced by gender, race, and ethnicity, participated in three rounds of focus groups across the length of the school semester during which peer tutoring was conducted.

Peer tutors were recruited through the Collaborative Action in Rural Education (CARE) Corps program. This program is a partnership with a local university that selects

and trains tutors. Eligibility criteria included maintaining a minimum grade point average of 2.5, teacher recommendations, and demonstrated proficiency in mathematics. Tutors underwent training in two frameworks: the Youth Mentoring Model (YMM), which emphasizes relationship-building and socioemotional support, and Student Peer Assisted Mentoring (SPAM), which stresses reciprocal learning and student engagement. Five peer tutors (three female, two male) and all four classroom teachers (two Math 1 teachers, two Math 3 teachers) were interviewed to provide further insights into the tutoring process.

Procedures

The study unfolded in three phases:

Phase I: Planning and Development.

This phase included a pilot study to refine instrumentation and procedures. Mock interviews, surveys, and focus groups were conducted with staff and honor society students not directly involved in the intervention. Instruments were revised for clarity and reliability.

Phase II: Implementation.

Peer tutoring was embedded in Math 1 and Math 3 classrooms. Tutors provided small-group and one-on-one support to peers under the supervision of classroom teachers. Administrative teams analyzed Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and benchmark data to identify areas of need and guide tutoring strategies.

Phase III: Evaluation and Analysis.

Post-intervention data were collected to assess changes in student outcomes and perceptions. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups with tutees, tutors, and teachers captured attitudinal and experiential data, while benchmark and EOC test scores provided quantitative measures of growth.

Data Collection

For this study, three primary forms of data were collected:

1. Surveys. Pre- and post-intervention surveys measured student attitudes toward mathematics, self-efficacy, and perceptions of peer tutoring.
2. Interviews and Focus Groups. Math teachers, peer tutors, and randomly selected Math 1 and Math 3 students participated in structured interviews or focus groups exploring perceptions of the intervention.
3. Academic Performance Data. Standardized assessments included district benchmarks and North Carolina End-of-Course (EOC) exams. Results were compared against Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) projections to determine whether growth measures were met.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from surveys and standardized assessments were analyzed descriptively and comparatively to identify changes from pre- to post-intervention. EVAAS projections provided context for evaluating academic growth. Qualitative data were coded manually through a thematic analysis process. Codes were grouped into categories and themes reflecting instructional impact, socioemotional factors, and mentoring relationships. Triangulation across multiple data sources enhanced validity. Peer debriefing and collaborative analysis further supported dependability. Pilot testing of all instrumentation used in this study was conducted prior to implementation. Lastly, study partners assisted collaboratively with the thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected.

Results

Self-efficacy strongly influences student performance and motivation (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016). Self-efficacy is a crucial psychological concept that can greatly influence a student's academic performance, motivation, and overall well-being. Increased self-efficacy can significantly impact a student's study habits, making them more likely to use effective study strategies, manage their time efficiently, and seek help when needed. Students with higher self-efficacy tend to persevere in the pursuit of their goals, even when encountering challenges or failures. This concept extends beyond academics to influence students' willingness to engage in extracurricular activities, which can contribute to positive relationships with peers and adults (Forgeard & Benson, 2019).

The findings from this study were intended to determine if peer tutoring in the Math 1 and Math 3 classrooms improved student self-efficacy, confidence in math, and achievement in math. This study explored literature of peer tutoring at the secondary level, efficacy in learning, youth mentoring intervention, and differentiated teaching approaches. Aligned with Youth Mentoring Model and Student Peer Assisted Mentoring, this study was designed to place peer tutors with peer tutees.

Peer Tutee Surveys

There are benefits of peer tutoring regarding attitude and emotional outcomes toward school and sense of self (Robinson et al., 2005). Tutors may be security blankets for some students in social and cognitive turmoil, and they may depend on the bond with a peer (Rhodes, 2005). Peer tutoring can very much be utilized as an instructional tool that may increase student learning simply by improving students’ attitudes towards instruction (Li et al., 2021). The study supported this literature as students involved had a positive mindset when working with peer tutors. They preferred working with peers as they felt more confident to ask questions when there was a lack of understanding causing them to learn more.

The survey contained seven questions, with six showing increased agreement from pre- to post-implementation. Agreement with "Math is an important subject to me" increased from 31.3% (rating of 4) to 39% post-implementation. Question 2, "I best learn

math by using manipulatives, gaming, etc.," demonstrated a slight decline in neutral responses from 38.3% to 37.2%. For Question 3, "I enjoy it when other students help me understand math," positive responses (rating of 4) increased from 32.2% to 40%. Question 4, "I have friends at school," showed the strongest positive response, with ratings of 5 increasing from 56.6% to over 70%. Question 5, "It is easy for me to ask a peer questions in class when I do not understand something," saw an increase in positive responses (rating of 4) from 27.8% to 74%. For Question 6, "I will use Math1/Math 3 content in my post-graduation plans," neutral responses (rating of 3) increased from 32% to 35.7%. Finally, Question 7, "I am satisfied with my grades in math," showed strong growth with ratings of 5 increasing from 30% to 44.5%.

Peer Tutee Focus Groups

Participants in the focus groups responded to five questions during each session. Through manual coding of the transcripts, initial descriptive and emotional codes were identified, including mentoring and guidance, disposition, behaviors, student cognition, and synergy. These codes were then categorized into tutoring and teaching, student emotions and reactions, student actions and characteristics, learning and understanding, and group dynamics. Final themes emerged from this analysis:

1. Effective learning and instruction promote cognitive development,
2. Motivation and engagement can be influenced by both positive and negative social-emotional factors, and
3. Growth and development in learning are significantly influenced by the mentoring relationship.

Effective Learning and Instruction Promote Cognitive Development

Students in focus groups emphasized how peer tutoring helped them better understand math concepts. Many said that peer tutors explained problems in simpler terms and at a slower pace, making the material easier to grasp. Unlike teachers who sometimes move on too quickly, peer tutors were seen as more relatable and patient. This supportive learning environment allowed students to feel more comfortable asking questions and staying engaged, ultimately improving their academic experience.

Motivation and Engagement Can Be Influenced By Both Positive and Negative Social-Emotional Factors

The second theme from the focus groups was more pronounced than expected. While the extent of the growing social-emotional needs of students is evidence, I did not anticipate the severity. Words like comfortable, confident, excel, overwhelmed, embarrassed, worry, suffer, are just some of the phrases students used that helped form this theme. One participant explained that he is easily embarrassed at his lack of knowledge in math class. Many other participants shook heads in agreeance. He stated,

I hate worrying that I will be called on to give an answer in class that

I know I will have wrong. I feel like the teacher kinda does it on purpose.

But, if I can work it out with the tutor first, then I feel better about talking

in front of the class.

Growth and Development In Learning are Significantly Influenced By the Mentoring Relationship

Many students shared that having a peer tutor made them feel more at ease when asking for help, especially in math. They described the tutors as patient, approachable, and less intimidating than teachers, which made it easier to speak up without fear of judgment. Some even mentioned that working with a tutor changed how they felt about math altogether, boosting their confidence and helping them stay motivated. From their comments, it was clear that the mentoring relationship played a big role not just in improving their understanding, but also in shaping a more positive attitude toward learning.

Peer Tutor Interviews

Peer tutor interviews provided valuable insights, highlighting the need for more one-on-one instruction and assistance. Tutors observed that students require someone who understands their learning progress and creates a comfortable environment for seeking help. Key themes from these interviews included:

1. Student motivation to learn tends to increase in small group learning settings,
2. A positive and supportive tutor boosts students' willingness to engage with content,
3. Students often fear larger environments for learning, and
4. Both tutors and tutees could benefit from additional one-on-one time.

Student Motivation to Learn Tends to Increase in Small Group Learning Settings

The peer tutors felt strongly that the students show a much better understanding then the content was simplified and was offered in a small group or one-on-one setting. Quotes from the peer tutors include, “Students in the classroom really need small group or one-on-one help in math,” “I remember what it was like learning math and I did better in smaller group settings than with the entire class lecture style.” One tutor believed learning in small groups helped him be a better tutor because he knows what it is like to need more personal attention in class. Another peer tutor shared that “often times there is embarrassment or even anxiety if you are asked to answer a question in a large group setting. It is much less scary to be with just a few people that you do not feel are judging you.”

A Positive and Supportive Tutor Boosts Students’ Willingness to Engage with Content

It was seen in the data collected that engagement and motivation of tutees were found through excitement of the tutors. When students feel that they have a personal connection to a person helping them, they will engage in the content and be more willing to

ask questions, learning to better comprehension. Motivation and engagement can be hard to find, especially in a content area where one finds learning difficult. One peer tutor felt that tutoring can help struggling students with motivation in class. She shared, “Some students shut down quickly when they do not understand. Being there to walk them through work slowly helps the stress melt away.” Another tutor followed, “There are times when a student just needs to walk away and take a break. Sometimes we can be there just to be a friend to them on a bad day.” Another peer tutor shared, “There are times when students just need someone to be nice to them and to just explain things in a way they can understand. Sometimes that is what we are.”

Students Often Fear Large Environments for Learning

Students are often hesitant to ask questions in large classroom settings due to fear of judgment or embarrassment. Peer tutors noted that some students who typically remain silent in class are more likely to speak up in smaller, more personal settings. One tutor observed that these students would start by engaging outside of class, then gradually become more comfortable asking questions directly to a tutor rather than the teacher. Tutors emphasized that once these students were placed in small groups, they became more open and willing to seek help, leading to better understanding of difficult math concepts.

Both Tutors and Tutees Could Benefit From Additional One-on-One Time

Each of the tutors expressed a desire for more individual time with students to help improve outcomes in math. The tutors believe that tutee understanding of the content increase as students continue to engage in the tutoring sessions and tutors’ ability to help increases as well with each session. Tutors shared that for the tutoring model to improve “more time in the classrooms with the students individually would be ideal.”

Teacher Interviews

Analysis of teacher interview data revealed alignment with focus group and peer tutor findings, with teachers acknowledging the value of the peer tutoring program. By the end of the study, teachers overwhelmingly supported the inclusion of peer tutors in their classrooms. Initially hesitant, some educators admitted they were unsure of how helpful the tutors would be. However, as the program unfolded, it became clear that the tutors had a strong and positive impact, especially with students who typically struggled or were reluctant to participate. Teachers noticed that students were more comfortable asking questions and engaging in lessons when working with a peer. Tutors had a way of restating lessons in simpler terms, helping classmates move closer to understanding, even when they had not grasped the material from the teacher.

Teachers also observed that the tutors brought more than just academic support; they helped foster trust, emotional connection, and a sense of safety. Some students opened up in ways they had not before, even sharing personal concerns or just needing someone to talk to before they could focus on learning. In many cases, tutors instinctively stepped into these roles without needing direction, taking initiative and building genuine

relationships with their peers. Their presence often helped teachers better understand the needs of their students based on the interactions they witnessed.

Overall, educators felt that peer tutors contributed to increased motivation, stronger communication, and better classroom dynamics. Students showed improved self-confidence and collaboration skills, and some even looked forward to class more when tutors were present. The frequency of words like *student*, *peer*, *kind*, and *willing* in teacher feedback reinforced how central these relationships were to the success of the classroom environment.

Figure 1

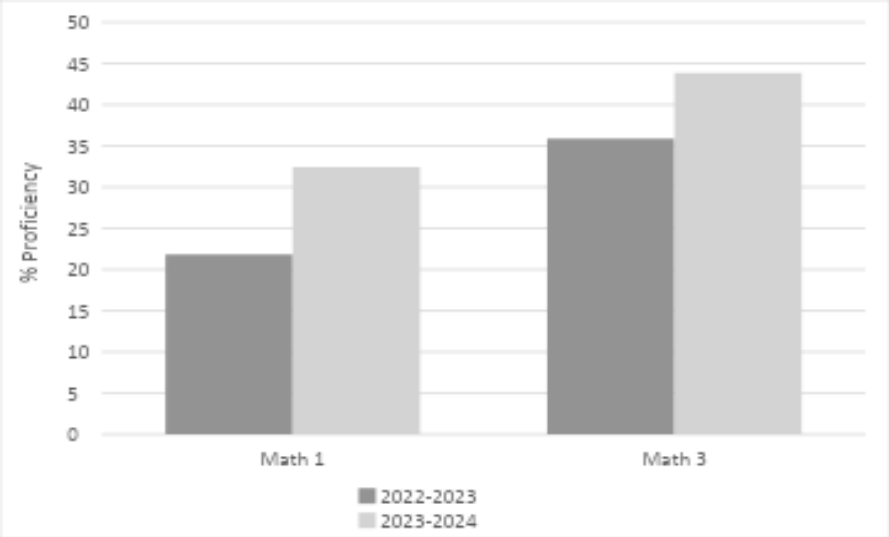
Word Cloud of Prominent Words Used Across Peer Tutee Focus Groups, Peer Tutor Interviews, and Teacher Interviews

End-of-Course Assessment

Math proficiency showed significant improvement following implementation of the peer tutoring program. Math 1 proficiency increased from 21.84% in 2022-2023 to 32.43% in 2023-2024, while Math 3 proficiency rose from 35.88% to 43.88%. Though the school did not meet overall expected growth for 2023-2024, it increased by one letter grade, removing its low-performing status. See Figure 2.

Figure 2

Math 1 and Math 3 End-of-Course Tests Proficiency for 2022-2023 and 2023-2024



Individual teacher results varied. For Math 1, Teacher 1 had 37 students complete the EOC, with 26 meeting or exceeding growth as determined by EVAAS. Teacher 2 had 21 students complete the EOC, with 14 meeting or exceeding growth. For Math 3, Teacher 3 had 19 students complete the assessment, with 17 meeting or exceeding growth, while Teacher 4 had 24 students, with 17 meeting or exceeding growth.

Discussion

This study set out to explore whether peer tutoring in Math 1 and Math 3 classrooms could improve students' confidence, self-efficacy, and overall achievement in math. Conducted at a traditional high school in rural eastern North Carolina, the study was rooted in improvement science and aligned with the Youth Mentoring Model. The goal was to match peer tutors with students needing support, creating a learning environment built on trust, relatability, and consistent academic reinforcement.

Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the findings suggest that peer tutoring played a valuable role in increasing student motivation and improving attitudes toward math. Students reported feeling more confident and engaged, and they were more likely to ask questions when working with peers rather than in whole-class settings. The one-on-one or small-group interactions helped reduce common barriers to participation, especially for those who previously hesitated to seek help.

The study was conducted in the wake of academic setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which had deeply affected student performance, particularly in math. However, since implementing peer tutoring, Math 1 and Math 3 have shown notable improvements in proficiency. End-of-course (EOC) data revealed a 10.6% increase in Math 1 and an 8.0% increase in Math 3 compared to the previous year. Of the 94 students involved, 66 met or exceeded their growth targets as measured by EVAAS. These

improvements not only contributed to individual student success but also played a significant role in boosting the school's overall accountability grade from a D to a C.

While math achievement was a highlight, it is only one piece of a much larger accountability framework that includes subjects like English 2, Biology, and key indicators like graduation rates and ACT scores. Despite Math 1 and Math 3 seeing real gains, challenges in other subjects, particularly English, had a substantial impact on overall school growth metrics. Still, math's upward trend was a major factor in the school's improved performance rating.

Teachers involved in the study were initially unsure about the role of peer tutors but became strong advocates by the end. They observed that tutors often had a unique rapport with students and were able to explain content in ways that resonated more effectively than traditional instruction alone. Beyond academics, tutors helped create a supportive environment that addressed students' social-emotional needs, something teachers felt was essential for learning to take place.

Student feedback highlighted the importance of connection, motivation, and support, with frequently used words like *feel*, *motivation*, *helping*, and *dedicated* underscoring the emotional aspects of learning. These findings align with existing research on the value of mentoring and peer support in educational settings. Peer tutoring not only helped students grasp math content but also contributed to a classroom culture where students felt seen, supported, and more willing to engage.

Limitations

There were several limitations that may have influenced the results of the study. Two Math 1 teachers were on maternity leave during the year, creating instructional gaps. Additionally, some peer tutors had limited availability due to dual enrollment commitments, leading to inconsistencies in the level of support across classrooms. Further, the lead researcher's position as the school's administrator may have also influenced participant responses.

Additionally, given that the study was conducted as a single rural Title I high school, the findings herein may not generalize to large, more urban, or demographically different schools. Since peer tutors were selected from a pool of academically capable and recommended students, selection bias is a limitation that should be accounted for when considering the findings of this study.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study highlight several implications for school leadership, particularly for principals seeking to improve mathematics outcomes and student self-efficacy. First, principals play a central role in fostering a school culture that values peer support and collaborative learning. By intentionally promoting peer tutoring as a viable instructional strategy, leaders can empower both teachers and students to view learning as a shared responsibility rather than an isolated task.

Second, principals must ensure structures are in place to identify, train, and support peer tutors. This includes setting clear selection criteria, providing ongoing professional development for student tutors, and aligning tutoring activities with classroom instruction. Leadership support in scheduling, resource allocation, and accountability is essential to maintaining program fidelity and sustainability.

Third, the study underscores the importance of principals serving as instructional leaders who monitor the effectiveness of interventions. Incorporating data from surveys, focus groups, and End-of-Course assessments into regular school improvement conversations ensures that decisions are evidence-based. By modeling data-informed leadership, principals can build teacher trust and commitment to continuous improvement.

Finally, principals should consider peer tutoring not only as an academic intervention but also to strengthen school climate and student engagement. Supporting programs that build mentoring relationships among students can enhance social-emotional well-being, which in turn contributes to higher levels of achievement. In this way, principals act as both instructional and cultural leaders who create conditions for peer-to-peer learning to thrive.

Recommendations for Future Study

Looking ahead, there is strong potential for expanding this model beyond high school math. Future studies could examine the impact of peer tutoring in earlier grades or in other subject areas such as English, where reading and comprehension challenges often mirror those seen in math. There is also value in exploring how professional development for both tutors and teachers can strengthen the impact of such programs.

Conclusion

This study underscores the powerful impact peer tutoring can have on students' self-efficacy, mindset, and math achievement. The evidence suggests that peer tutoring is more than just an academic support tool; it is an effective instructional strategy that boosts performance while also building student confidence and fostering positive peer relationships. Introducing structured peer tutoring programs into math classrooms can serve as a meaningful intervention. It ensures that students not only receive the academic support they need but also benefit from a collaborative environment that promotes social and emotional growth.

Even amid systemic challenges, such as teacher shortages and lingering disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, educators still have agency in how they support students. This research positions peer tutoring as a highly effective approach to improve students' attitudes toward math, build confidence, and increase overall achievement. It is a practical way to create a more supportive and connected classroom, even when external pressures make teaching more difficult.

Listening to student feedback and responding with thoughtful adjustments can lead

to more responsive instruction and a stronger school culture. When students feel heard, they are more likely to engage; and when they support each other, everyone benefits. Peer tutoring fosters leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills. Just as importantly, it helps create a safe space where students are encouraged to ask questions, make mistakes, and grow from the experience. This kind of environment leads to higher motivation, deeper engagement, and improved academic outcomes.

Students who participated in this study showed significant growth in mathematics while also taking ownership of their learning. Peer tutoring did not just improve test scores; it empowered students to believe in themselves and in each other.

As education continues to evolve, solutions like peer tutoring remind us that meaningful change is possible. When used intentionally, this strategy strengthens student confidence, builds peer connections, and helps foster classrooms where all learners can thrive.

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A Pre- and Post-Pandemic Analysis of the Reading Performance of Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual Students by Their Ethnicity/Race: A Multiyear Statewide Analysis

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Examined in this multiyear investigation was the reading performance of Emergent Bilingual students by their ethnicity/race (i.e., White, Hispanic, Black, Asian) for the 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-22, and 2022-2023 school years. Archival data were obtained from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System for all Grade 8 students for the two years prior to the pandemic and the three years following the pandemic. A higher percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students consistently met the Grade 8 STAAR Reading Approaches Grade Level and Meets Grade Level standards compared to White Emergent Bilingual students, Black Emergent Bilingual students, and Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. Statistically significant differences were present for four of the five years examined on the Masters Grade Level standard.

Keywords: emergent bilingual; economic status; approaches grade level; meets grade level; masters grade level; ethnicity/race

The 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling established that segregation of students based on race was unconstitutional. Since then, diversity in schools in the United States has steadily increased, prompting federal and state initiatives to eliminate the multiple achievement gaps that persist between students based on ethnicity, race, and language minority status (Growe & Montgomery, 2003). Between 2010 and 2021, student enrollment in the United States shifted significantly, with the percentage of White students decreasing from 52% to 45%, the percentage of Black students remaining at 15%, and the percentage of Asian students slightly increasing from 4% to 5% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Hispanic students demonstrated the most substantial population growth, from 20% to 28%. Additionally, the number of Emergent Bilingual students (formerly referred to as English Language Learners or Limited English Proficient) experienced a notable increase, rising from 4.5 to over 5 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 required individual states to undergo annual assessments and demonstrate progress based on state-established criteria (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The failure to consider the effect of language background has placed an additional burden on schools. To achieve adequate yearly progress, schools have been forced to perform "double duty," developing a student's language proficiency in addition to proficiency in academic content (Abedi, 2004). State-required assessments, administered only in English, neglect the distinct needs of Emergent Bilingual students (Castro & Artiles, 2021; Dakroub et al., 2020).

Regarding Texas, in the 2022-2023 school year, student enrollment was comprised of 53% Hispanic students, 26% White students, 13% Black students, and 5% Asian students (Texas Education Agency, 2023a). The percentage of students classified as Emergent Bilingual increased from 17% in the 2012-2013 school year to 23% in the 2022-2023 year. Along with focusing on the state's Emergent Bilingual population in this article, an emphasis was placed on the reading performance of Emergent Bilingual students by their ethnicity/race. Emergent Bilingual students are a heterogeneous group, and the utilization of a single descriptor fails to acknowledge the diversity within the group (Francis et al., 2019). In the 2022-2023 school year, the Emergent Bilingual student population was 2% Black, 7% Asian, 3% White, and 87% Hispanic. These percentages are important because multiple researchers (e.g., David & Marchant, 2015; McGown, 2016; Shockley, 2021) have established the presence of achievement disparities between ethnic/racial groups. Given that a majority of the Texas population is identified as Emergent Bilingual, the relationship between their reading performance and their ethnicity/race must be addressed to improve student outcomes.

In a national investigation, David and Marchant (2015) examined trends in reading and mathematics performance for the 2000 to 2013 school years for Grade 4 and Grade 8 students. Data were collected from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and examined by the variables of ethnicity/race, poverty, and gender. Specifically examined was the performance of Black, White, and Hispanic students by levels of poverty and gender. Interestingly, the authors concluded that the race gap surpassed the poverty gap.

In reading and mathematics assessments, Black students had the largest gap in reading achievement followed by students in poverty and then by Hispanic students. When examining achievement by the variables of ethnicity/race and poverty, White students were more affected by poverty than were Black and Hispanic students in reading and mathematics. Lastly, in the analysis comparing poverty by gender within ethnicity/race, White and Black boys and girls were affected equally in reading and mathematics. David and Marchant (2015) noted that Hispanic boys in poverty were more affected in reading achievement than girls and Hispanic girls in poverty were more affected in mathematics than boys.

In a similar study, Davis-Kean and Jager (2013) addressed academic achievement within ethnic/racial groups to determine if the gaps decreased from kindergarten to Grade 5. Data were collected using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort for 8,062 students for six school years. Davis-Kean and Jager (2013) documented that White students had the highest average in reading followed closely by Asian and Hispanic students. Black students had the largest percentage of below-level trajectories for reading (Davis-Kean & Jager, 2013). Notably, Davis-Kean and Jager (2013) also noted that Asian students had the highest average in mathematics followed closely by White and Black students. Hispanic students had the largest percentage of below-level trajectories for mathematics.

In a Texas study, Schleeter (2017) analyzed the reading performance of Grade 3 students as a function of their ethnicity/race. Archival data from the state-mandated test were analyzed for the 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2015-2016 school years for Emergent Bilingual students by their ethnicity/race (i.e., Asian, White, Hispanic, and Black). Asian Emergent Bilingual students consistently outperformed the three other ethnic/racial groups followed by White Emergent Bilingual students and Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. Black Emergent Bilingual students had the lowest reading performance of the four ethnic/racial groups examined. Interestingly, across the three reporting categories, White, Hispanic, and Black Emergent Bilingual students achieved similarly low levels of achievement.

In another Texas study, Resilla (2017) investigated the degree to which differences existed in reading, mathematics, and both subjects college-readiness by the ethnicity/race of Emergent Bilingual students. Archival data were obtained from the Texas Education Agency for the 2004-2011 school years. During five of the seven school years examined, Asian Emergent Bilingual students demonstrated higher reading college-readiness skills, whereas, for two of the school years Black Emergent Bilingual students had the higher reading college-readiness skills. White Emergent Bilingual students consistently underperformed compared to the other ethnic/racial groups. In mathematics, Asian Emergent Bilingual students demonstrated higher college-readiness skills for six of the seven school years. No White Emergent Bilingual students met the mathematics college-readiness standard in all seven school years. In regard to both subjects of college-readiness, Asian Emergent Bilingual students consistently outperformed all the other ethnic/racial groups. Similar to the outcomes for reading and mathematics college-

readiness, no White Emergent Bilingual students met standards for college-readiness in both subjects.

In another Texas investigation, McGown (2016) addressed the performance of Grade 3 students on the state-mandated reading assessment as a function of their ethnicity/race. Data were collected from the Texas Education Agency for the 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015 school years for Asian, White, Hispanic, and Black students. Statistically significant differences were present for all three school years. Asian students had the highest performance, followed by White, Hispanic, and Black students across each reporting category. Commensurate to the findings of Schleeter (2017) and Resilla (2017), Asian students consistently surpassed the performance of the other ethnic/racial groups on the Texas state-mandated tests.

In a more recent study, Slate & Resilla (2023) investigated the reading college readiness of Emergent Bilingual students on the Texas state-mandated assessment by their ethnicity/race. Data were obtained from the Texas Education Agency for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years on the English 1 End-of-Course exam. Results statistically significant differences across each of the three performance standards. Asian Emergent Bilingual students outperformed the other ethnic/racial groups in the Approaches Grade Level and Meets Grade Level standards for the two years examined, followed by Hispanic, Black, and White students. However, in the Masters Grade Level standard, Asian Emergent Bilingual students outperformed the other ethnic/racial groups, followed by White and Hispanic students. Not a single Black Emergent Bilingual student achieved this standard. Of note is that only a small percentage of Emergent Bilingual students reached the Masters Grade Level standard.

In a study specific to Emergent Bilingual students, Shockley (2021) investigated the interconnectedness of race/ethnicity and language status on reading achievement. Participants were Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students from a metropolitan school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Data from the Scholastic Reading Inventory and State Reading Assessment were collected for 362 Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students. In contrast to the existing literature on reading achievement and race, Shockley (2021) established that Black Emergent Bilingual students outperformed White, Asian, and Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students on each of the reading assessments. Recommended were additional studies on student achievement as a function of multiple demographic variables to understand better the achievement gaps that persist. He identified a gap in the literature when examining achievement by multiple demographic characteristics.

Researchers (e.g., McGown, 2016; Slate & Resilla, 2023; Shockley, 2021) have established significant achievement gaps among student subgroups. In the pursuit of improving educational outcomes for Emergent Bilingual students, it is crucial to recognize the diversity within this group (Francis et al., 2019). A thorough review of the existing research literature revealed no published studies on the reading performance of Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students by their ethnicity/race following the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, no published works could be located regarding the performance of Grade 8 students on the Texas state-mandated reading assessment. As such, explored in this

article was the interconnectedness of ethnicity/race and Emergent Bilingual status on the reading performance of Grade 8 students, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this article was cultural-ecological theory (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). This framework was applied as the structure within which to investigate the academic disparities among Emergent Bilingual students, with a particular focus on their ethnic and racial backgrounds. Examined in John Ogbu's theory are the effects of discriminatory practices in schools on the academic performance of minority student groups (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Emergent Bilingual students, classified as an involuntary minority group, believe that despite their abilities, education, economic status, or physical appearance, cannot expect to receive the same treatment in schools as those students from the dominant culture (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Numerous researchers (David & Marchant, 2015; McGown, 2016; Resilla, 2017; Shockley, 2021) have established the presence of ethnic and racial disparities in reading achievement on standardized assessments. However, neglecting to consider the influence of diverse language backgrounds within the Emergent Bilingual student population has led them to be classified as a homogenous group, overlooking their specific needs (Francis, 2019). It is important to thoroughly examine the factors contributing to the achievement gap among Emergent Bilingual students, including a history of institutional discrimination, lowered teacher expectations, and assessments that adequately reflect this unique and diverse group's strengths.

Statement of the Problem

Texas public school students are required to participate in annual assessments in reading in Grades 3-8 (Texas Education Agency, 2023d). Ethnic/racial disparities in student achievement have been established by multiple researchers (David & Marchant, 2015; McGown, 2016; Resilla, 2017; Shockley, 2021). Literacy is a fundamental skill, with a direct link to educational success and securing future employment opportunities (McGown, 2016; Wilson, 2016). Following a detailed and comprehensive review of the existing research literature, no published studies could be located that analyze the performance of Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students as a function of their ethnicity/race on the Texas state-mandated reading assessment. Given the critical role of literacy for future success, this study is necessary to bridge the existing gap in the literature regarding the effect of ethnicity/race on the reading performance of Emergent Bilingual students, specifically for the years following the pandemic.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which differences were present in the Grade 8 STAAR Reading assessment of Emergent Bilingual students by their ethnicity/race. The primary objective was to examine the relationship between ethnicity/race on the reading performance of Emergent Bilingual students by performance standard (i.e., Approaches Grade Level Standard, Meets Grade Level Standard, and

Masters Grade Level Standard). The second purpose was to investigate the degree to which trends were present across five school years of Grade 8 STAAR Reading data (i.e., 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023).

Significance of the Study

Understanding how demographic variables influence student reading performance is critical for addressing the academic disparities that persist among different ethnic/racial groups (Hamilton et al., 2021). However, published studies are scarce on the reading performance of Emergent Bilingual students by their ethnicity/race. Although reading is identified as a fundamental skill, further research studies are warranted (McGown, 2016; Wilson, 2016), specifically to address the gaps related to the ethnic/racial diversity of Emergent Bilingual students. Given the repercussions of illiteracy on student's future outcomes, a need exists for research studies on the effects of ethnicity/race on reading performance.

Following the passage of House Bill 3906, the STAAR Reading test underwent a redesign in the 2022-2023 school year to align more closely with the classroom experience (Texas Education Agency, 2023c). The redesign included the following new features: new question types, online testing and accommodations, evidence-based writing, and cross-curricular passages. This investigation will provide two years of data before the COVID-19 pandemic and three years thereafter.

Research Questions

The primary research question addressed in this study was: What is the difference in the reading performance of Texas Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students as a function of their ethnicity/race (i.e., Black, White, Asian, Hispanic)? Subquestions under this overarching research question were: (a) What is the difference in the Approaches Grade Level standard by the ethnicity/race of Emergent Bilingual students?; (b) What is the difference in the Meets Grade Level standard by the ethnicity/race of Emergent Bilingual students?; (c) What is the difference in the Masters Grade Level standard by the ethnicity/race of Emergent Bilingual students?; and (d) What trend is present in grade level standard performance by the ethnicity/race of Emergent Bilingual students across five school years?

Method

Research Design

Present in this article was a causal-comparative research design (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Archival STAAR Reading data from the Texas Education Agency Public Information Management System for the 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years were analyzed by each of the three performance standards to determine the extent of differences present by the ethnicity/race of Emergent Bilingual students. The independent variable was the ethnicity/race (i.e., Asian, White, Black, and Hispanic) of Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students in Texas. The dependent variables were

the three student performance levels on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness Reading exam (i.e., Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level) for the 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years.

Participants and Instrumentation

Participants in this study were Texas Grade 8 students who were assessed on the STAAR Reading exam in the 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years. The data were acquired from the Texas Education Agency Public Information Management System spanning the aforementioned five school years. A Public Information Request was submitted to the Texas Education Agency requesting: (a) grade level, (b) STAAR Reading performance levels, (c) Emergent Bilingual indicator, and (d) ethnicity/race. The data were then uploaded into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software program.

As indicated in Table 1, the number of Emergent Bilingual students by ethnicity/race has substantially changed in the five school years. In the 2017-2018 school year, there were 1,197 White Emergent Bilingual students, 51,180 Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students, 798 Black Emergent Bilingual students, and 2,163 Asian Emergent Bilingual students. These numbers steadily increased to 2,098 White Emergent Bilingual students, 85,342 Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students, 1,357 Black Emergent Bilingual students, and 4,163 Asian Emergent Bilingual students by the 2022-2023 school year, reflecting increases of 75.2%, 67%, and 70%, respectively. Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the most substantial growth, increasing by 92.5% in the five years examined. Represented in Figure 1 are these percentages across the five school years.

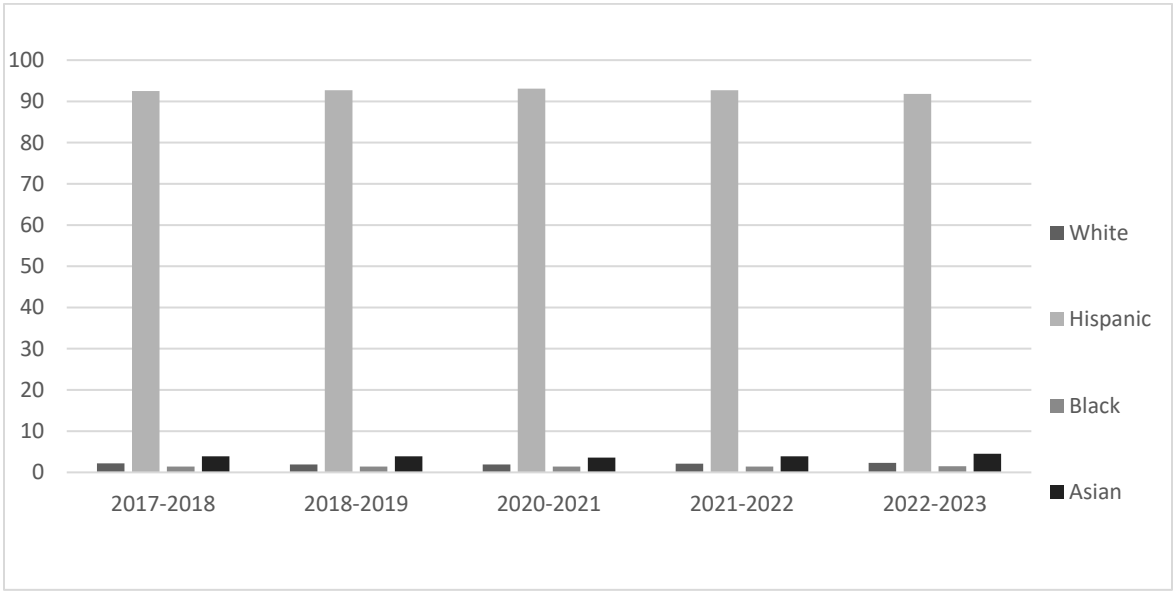
Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Texas Emergent Bilingual Students and Their Ethnicity/Race for All Five School Years

School Year	White *n* (%age)	Hispanic *n* (%age)	Black *n (*%age)	Asian *n* (%age)
2017-2018	*n* = 1,197 (2.2%)	*n* = 51,180 (92.5%)	*n* = 798 (1.4%)	*n* = 2,163 (3.9%)
2018-2019	*n* = 1,238 (1.9%)	*n* = 59,174 (92.7%)	*n* = 917 (1.4%)	*n* = 2,478 (3.9%)
2020-2021	*n* = 1,391 (1.9%)	*n* = 68,257 (93.1%)	*n* = 1,020 (1.4%)	*n* = 2,674 (3.6%)
2021-2022	*n* = 1,651 (2.1%)	*n* = 74,569 (92.7%)	*n* = 1,105 (1.4%)	*n* = 3,137 (3.9%)
2022-2023	*n* = 2,098 (2.3%)	*n* = 85,342 (91.8%)	*n* = 1,357 (1.5%)	*n* = 4,163 (4.5%)

Figure 1

Average Percentages of Emergent Bilingual Students by Their Ethnicity/Race for All Five School Years



Three performance standards are assessed by the STAAR reading test. Achievement in the Approaches Grade Level standard signifies that students are proficient in applying knowledge and skills in familiar contexts, yet they may need focused academic intervention to succeed in the next grade level (Texas Education Agency, 2023d). Students achieving the Meets Grade Level standard have demonstrated proficiency in critical thinking skills when applied to familiar contexts. However, these students may benefit from short-term targeted intervention in the subsequent grade level (Texas Education Agency, 2023d). In the Masters Grade Level standard, students successfully exhibited critical thinking skills and proficiency in applying knowledge and skills in various contexts and are anticipated to be successful in the following grade level with minimal or no intervention needed (Texas Education Agency, 2023d). Additionally, student performance on the STAAR will also be examined by the ethnicity/race (i.e., Asian, White, Black, and Hispanic) of Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students in Texas.

With respect to the psychometric qualities of the STAAR Reading test, the Texas Education Agency contracted with the Human Resources Research Organization to provide an independent evaluation of the STAAR test. The organization concluded that the Grade 8 STAAR reading test was 96.6% fully aligned with intended expectations (Texas Education Agency, 2016). For additional information about the reliability and validity of the STAAR Reading assessment, readers are directed to consult the Technical Manuals on the Texas Education Agency website.

Results

Data Analysis

To determine the degree to which differences might be present on the three performance standards (i.e., Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level), Pearson chi-square analyses were conducted. The Pearson chi-square is the most appropriate statistical procedure when the independent and dependent variables are categorical (Slate, 2023). Before calculating any Pearson chi-square procedures, the underlying assumptions were checked and were verified to have been met.

Approaches Grade Level Analyses Across All Five School Years

For the first research question on the Approaches Grade Level standard for the 2017-2018 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 50.80$, $p < .001$. The effect size for this finding, Cramer's V, was below small, .03 (Cohen, 1988). As revealed in Table 2, 45% of Asian Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level standard followed by Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students, White Emergent Bilingual students, and Black Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was five percentage points higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was one percentage higher than White Emergent Bilingual students and 10 percentage points higher than Black Emergent Bilingual students.

With respect to the 2018-2019 school year, the Pearson chi-square revealed the presence of a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(3) = 35.83$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V was below small, .02 (Cohen, 1988). As delineated in Table 2, a statistically significantly higher percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students, more than five percentage points, met the Approaches Grade Level standard on the STAAR Reading exam than did Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. Similar percentages of Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students and White Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level standard in this school year. Commensurate with the previous school year, Black Emergent Bilingual had the lowest percentage, more than 10 percentage points lower than Asian Emergent Bilingual students and four percentage points lower than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students and White Emergent Bilingual students.

Concerning the 2020-2021 school year, a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(3) = 99.11$, $p < .001$, below small effect size, Cramer's V = .03 (Cohen, 1988). Descriptive statistics for this analysis are contained in Table 2. Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the highest percentage who met the Approaches Grade Level standard followed by Black Emergent Bilingual students, Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students, and White Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was more than nine percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students. Similar percentages of Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students and Black Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level

standard in this school year.

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of the Approaches Grade Level Standard by the Ethnicity/Race of Emergent Bilingual Students for All Five School Years

School Year and Ethnicity/Race	Did Not Meet *n* and %age of Total	Met *n* and %age of Total
2017-2018		
White	(*n* = 727) 60.7%	(*n* = 470) 39.3%
Hispanic	(*n* = 30,556) 59.7%	(*n* = 20,624) 40.3%
Black	(*n* = 553) 69.3%	(*n* = 245) 30.7%
Asian	(*n* = 1,190) 55%	(*n* = 973) 45%
2018-2019		
White	(*n* = 678) 54.8%	(*n* = 560) 45.2%
Hispanic	(*n* = 32,267) 54.5%	(*n* = 26,907) 45.5%
Black	(*n* = 540) 58.9%	(*n* = 377) 41.1%
Asian	(*n* = 1,217) 49.1%	(*n* = 1,261) 50.9%
2020-2021		
White	(*n* = 851) 61.2%	(*n* = 540) 38.8%
Hispanic	(*n* = 41,612) 61%	(*n* = 26,645) 39%
Black	(*n* = 618) 60.6%	(*n* = 402) 39.4%
Asian	(*n* = 1,374) 51.4%	(*n* = 1,300) 48.6%
2021-2022		
White	(*n* = 555) 33.6%	(*n* = 1,096) 66.4%
Hispanic	(*n* = 27,086) 36.3%	(*n* = 47,483) 63.7%
Black	(*n* = 379) 34.3%	(*n* = 726) 65.7%
Asian	(*n* = 851) 27.1%	(*n* = 2,286) 72.9%
2022-2023		
White	(*n* = 634) 30.2%	(*n* = 1,464) 69.8%
Hispanic	(*n* = 28,599) 33.5%	(*n* = 56,743) 66.5%
Black	(*n* = 418) 30.8%	(*n* = 939) 69.2%
Asian	(*n* = 862) 20.7%	(*n* = 3,301) 79.3%

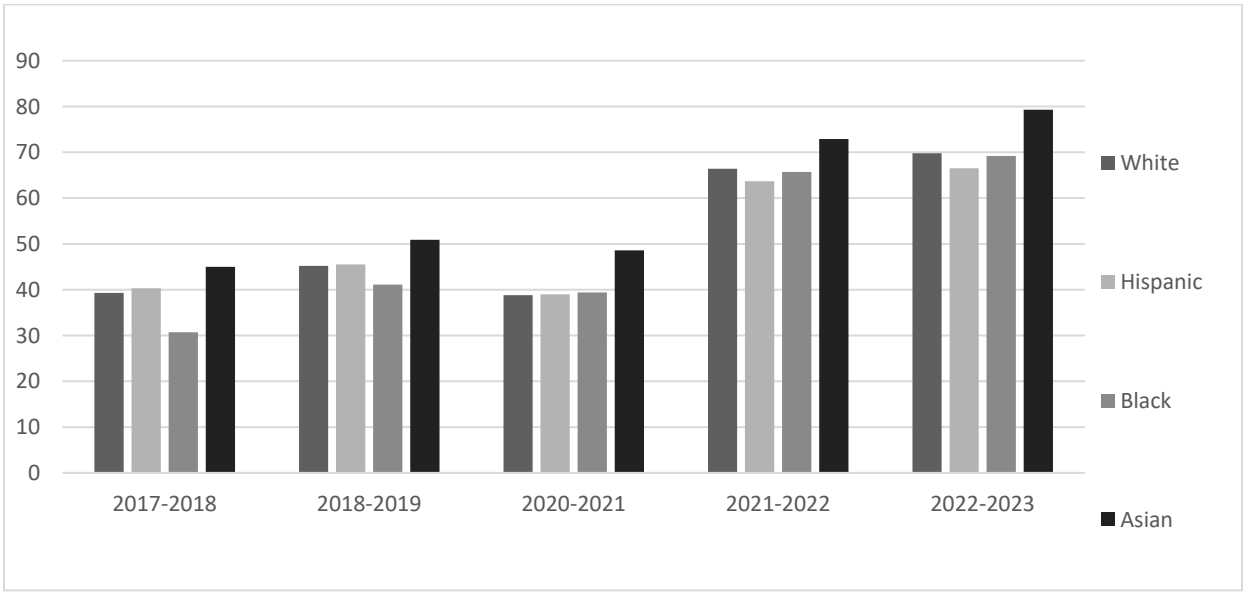
For the 2021-2022 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 115.70$, $p < .001$, below small effect size, Cramer's V = .03 (Cohen, 1988). Consistent with the previous school years, Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the highest percentage who met the Approaches Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Black Emergent Bilingual students, and Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was more than six percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of White Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was one percentage higher than Black Emergent Bilingual students

and two percentage points higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are contained in Table 2.

Lastly, for the 2022-2023 school year a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(3) = 304.47$, $p < .001$, below small effect size, Cramer's V = .05 (Cohen, 1988). Congruent with all previous school years, Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the highest percentage who met the Approaches Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Black Emergent Bilingual students, and Hispanic students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was more than nine percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students. Similar percentages of White Emergent Bilingual students and Black Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level standard in this school year. Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students had the lowest percentage, more than 12 percentage points, than Asian Emergent Bilingual students. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are revealed in Table 2. The results across all five school years are depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Average Percentages by Ethnicity/Race Who Met the STAAR Reading Approaches Grade Level Standard for All Five School Years



Meets Grade Level Analyses Across All Five School Years

For the first research question on the Meets Grade Level standard for the 2017-2018 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 60.78$, $p < .001$. The effect size for this finding, Cramer's V, was below small, .03 (Cohen, 1988). As revealed in Table 3, 15.4% of Asian Emergent Bilingual students met the Meets Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students, and Black Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who

met the Meets Grade Level standard was more than four percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of White Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was almost one percentage higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students and more than three percentage points higher than Black Emergent Bilingual students.

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of the Meets Grade Level Standard by the Ethnicity/Race of Emergent Bilingual Students for All Five School Years

School Year and Ethnicity/Race	Did Not Meet *n* and %age of Total	Met *n* and %age of Total
2017-2018		
White	(*n* = 1,060) 88.6%	(*n* = 137) 11.4%
Hispanic	(*n* = 45,823) 89.5%	(*n* = 5,357) 10.5%
Black	(*n* = 736) 92.2%	(*n* = 62) 7.8%
Asian	(*n* = 1,830) 84.6%	(*n* = 333) 15.4%
2018-2019		
White	(*n* = 986) 79.6%	(*n* = 252) 20.4%
Hispanic	(*n* = 49,265) 83.3%	(*n* = 9,909) 16.7%
Black	(*n* = 747) 81.5%	(*n* = 170) 18.5%
Asian	(*n* = 1,858) 75%	(*n* = 620) 25%
2020-2021		
White	(*n* = 1,146) 82.4%	(*n* = 245) 17.6%
Hispanic	(*n* = 58,367) 85.5%	(*n* = 9,890) 14.5%
Black	(*n* = 875) 85.8%	(*n* = 145) 14.2%
Asian	(*n* = 2,039) 76.3%	(*n* = 635) 23.7%
2021-2022		
White	(*n* = 1,060) 64.2%	(*n* = 591) 35.8%
Hispanic	(*n* = 51,131) 68.6%	(*n* = 23,438) 31.4%
Black	(*n* = 751) 68%	(*n* = 354) 32%
Asian	(*n* = 1,766) 56.3%	(*n* = 1,371) 43.7%
2022-2023		
White	(*n* = 1,272) 60.6%	(*n* = 826) 39.4%
Hispanic	(*n* = 57,656) 67.6%	(*n* = 27,686) 32.4%
Black	(*n* = 843) 62.1%	(*n* = 514) 37.9%
Asian	(*n* = 1,896) 45.5%	(*n* = 2,267) 54.5%

With respect to the 2018-2019 school year, the Pearson chi-square revealed the presence of a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(3) = 124.95$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V was below small, .04 (Cohen, 1988). As delineated in Table 3, a statistically significantly higher percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students, more than four percentage points, met the Meets Grade Level standard on the STAAR Reading exam than did White Emergent

Bilingual students. The percentage of White Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was almost two percentage points higher than Black Emergent Bilingual students and more than three percentage points higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students.

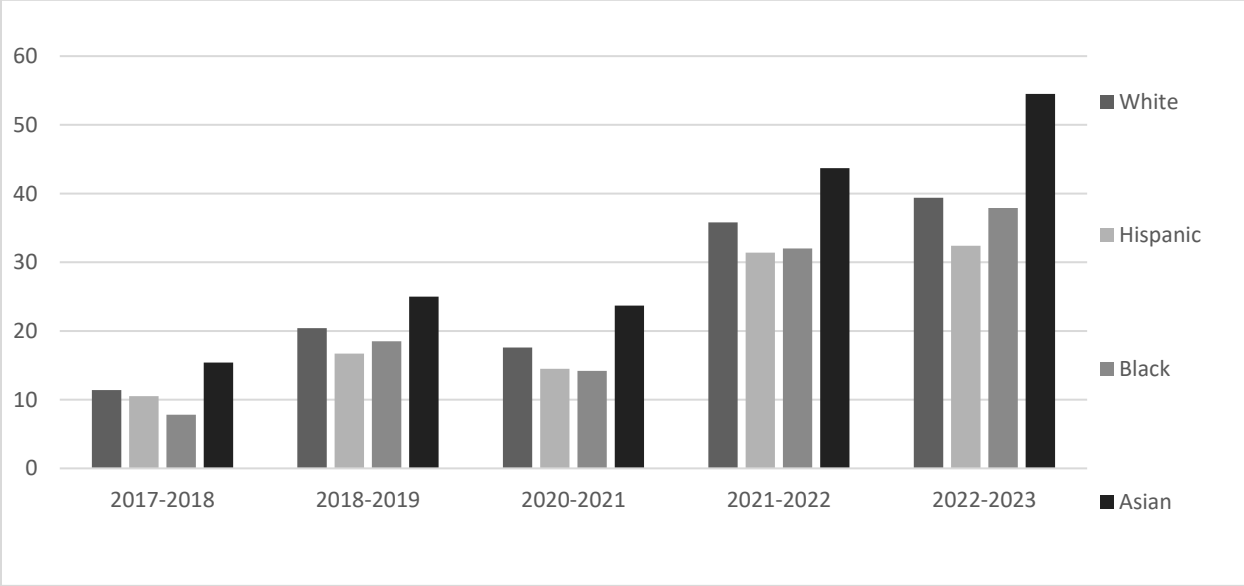
Concerning the 2020-2021 school year, a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(3) = 182.76$, $p < .001$, below small effect size, Cramer's V = .05 (Cohen, 1988). Descriptive statistics for this analysis are contained in Table 3. Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the highest percentage who met the Meets Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students, and Black Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was more than six percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students. Similar percentages of Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students and Black Emergent Bilingual students met the Meets Grade Level standard in this school year.

For the 2021-2022 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 219.48$, $p < .001$, below small effect size, Cramer's V = .05 (Cohen, 1988). Consistent with the previous school years, Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the highest percentage who met the Meets Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Black Emergent Bilingual students, and Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was more than seven percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of White Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was more than three percentage points higher than Black Emergent Bilingual students and more than four percentage points higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are contained in Table 3.

Lastly, for the 2022-2023 school year a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(3) = 904.44$, $p < .001$, small effect size, Cramer's V = .10 (Cohen, 1988). Congruent with all previous school years, Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the highest percentage who met the Meets Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Black Emergent Bilingual students, and Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was more than 15 percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of White Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was two percentage points higher than Black Emergent Bilingual students and more than seven percentage points higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are revealed in Table 3. The results across all five school years are depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Average Percentages by Ethnicity/Race Who Met the STAAR Reading Meets Grade Level Standard for All Five School Years



Masters Grade Level Analyses Across All Five School Years

For the first research question on the Masters Grade Level standard for the 2017-2018 school year, the result was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 9.62$, $p = .02$. As revealed in Table 4, only 4.3% of Asian Emergent Bilingual students met the Masters Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students, and Black Emergent Bilingual students.

With respect to the 2018-2019 school year, the Pearson chi-square revealed the presence of a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(3) = 145.35$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V was below small, .05 (Cohen, 1988). As delineated in Table 4, a statistically significantly higher percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students, more than two percentage points, met the Masters Grade Level standard on the STAAR Reading exam than did White Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of White Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was more than one percentage point higher than Black Emergent Bilingual students and more than two percentage points higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students.

Concerning the 2020-2021 school year, a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(3) = 142.94$, $p < .001$, below small effect size, Cramer's V = .04 (Cohen, 1988). Descriptive statistics for this analysis are contained in Table 4. Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the highest percentage who met the Masters Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Black Emergent Bilingual students, and Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who

Table 4

Frequencies and Percentages of the Masters Grade Level Standard by the Ethnicity/Race of Emergent Bilingual Students for All Five School Years

School Year and Ethnicity/Race	Did Not Meet *n* and %age of Total	Met *n* and %age of Total
2017-2018		
White	(*n* = 1,149) 96%	(*n* = 48) 4%
Hispanic	(*n* = 49,520) 96.8%	(*n* = 1,660) 3.2%
Black	(*n* = 775) 97.1%	(*n* = 23) 2.9%
Asian	(*n* = 2,070) 95.7%	(*n* = 93) 4.3%
2018-2019		
White	(*n* = 1,159) 93.6%	(*n* = 79) 6.4%
Hispanic	(*n* = 56,700) 95.8%	(*n* = 2,474) 4.2%
Black	(*n* = 870) 94.9%	(*n* = 47) 5.1%
Asian	(*n* = 2,254) 91%	(*n* = 224) 9%
2020-2021		
White	(*n* = 1,320) 94.9%	(*n* = 71) 5.1%
Hispanic	(*n* = 65,723) 96.3%	(*n* = 2,534) 3.7%
Black	(*n* = 978) 95.9%	(*n* = 42) 4.1%
Asian	(*n* = 2,455) 91.8%	(*n* = 219) 8.2%
2021-2022		
White	(*n* = 1.358) 82.3%	(*n* = 293) 17.7%
Hispanic	(*n* = 63,394) 85%	(*n* = 11,175) 15%
Black	(*n* = 951) 86.1%	(*n* = 154) 13.9%
Asian	(*n* = 2,328) 74.2%	(*n* = 809) 25.8%
2022-2023		
White	(*n* = 1,834) 87.4%	(*n* = 264) 12.6%
Hispanic	(*n* = 77,745) 91.1%	(*n* = 7,597) 8.9%
Black	(*n* = 1,194) 88%	(*n* = 163) 12%
Asian	(*n* = 3,218) 77.3%	(*n* = 945) 22.7%

met the Masters Grade Level standard was more than three percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of White Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was one percentage point higher than Black Emergent Bilingual students and more than one percentage point higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students.

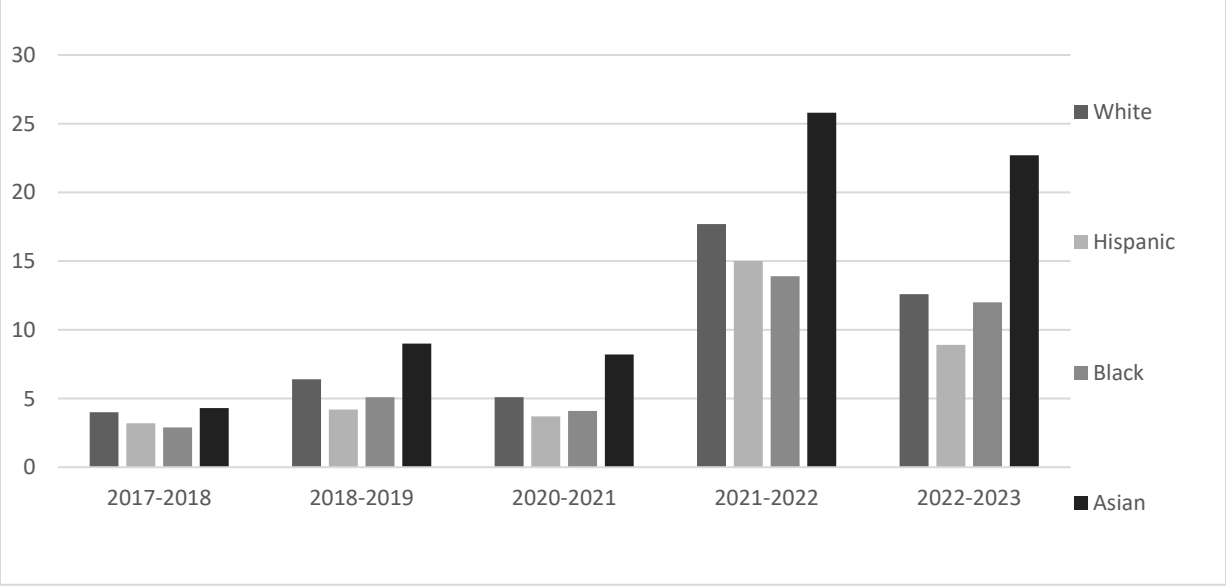
For the 2021-2022 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 277.60$, $p < .001$, below small effect size, Cramer's V = .06 (Cohen, 1988). Consistent with the previous school years, Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the highest percentage who met the Masters Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students, and Black Emergent Bilingual students. The

percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was more than eight percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of White Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was more than two percentage points higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students and more than three percentage points higher than Black Emergent Bilingual students. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are contained in Table 4.

Lastly, for the 2022-2023 school year a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(3) = 897.47$, $p < .001$, small effect size, Cramer's V = .10 (Cohen, 1988). Congruent with all previous school years, Asian Emergent Bilingual students had the highest percentage who met the Masters Grade Level standard followed by White Emergent Bilingual students, Black Emergent Bilingual students, and Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was more than 10 percentage points higher than White Emergent Bilingual students and more than 13 percentage points higher than Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students. Similar percentages of White Emergent Bilingual students and Black Emergent Bilingual students met the Masters Grade Level standard in this school year. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are revealed in Table 4. Illustrated in Figure 4 are the results across all five school years.

Figure 4

Average Percentages by Ethnicity/Race Who Met the STAAR Reading Masters Grade Level Standard for All Five School Years



Discussion

This investigation was a causal-comparative research design in which the reading performance of Texas Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students was addressed by their ethnicity/race (i.e., Asian, White, Black, Hispanic). Archival data from the Texas Education Agency's Public Education Information Management System were collected for all Grade 8 students for the two years prior to the pandemic (2017-2018 and 2018-2019) and the three years following the pandemic (2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023). Three Grade Level standards were examined: Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level. Statistically significant results were present for all five school years at the Approaches Grade Level and Meets Grade Level standards, whereas, for the Masters Grade Level standard, statistically significant differences were observed in four of the five years examined.

In the two years preceding the pandemic (2017-2018 and 2018-2019), a higher percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual met the Approaches Grade Level standard than the other ethnic/racial groups, achieving 45% and 50.9%, respectively. Lower percentages of Black Emergent Bilingual students met the standard, with 30.7% and 41.1%, a disparity of five and nine percentage points. However, in the three years following the pandemic (2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023), a lower percentage of Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level standard, with 39%, 63.7%, and 66.5%, respectively. In contrast, higher percentages of Asian Emergent Bilingual students consistently met grade level performance standards than all the other ethnic/racial groups, with 48.6%, 72.9%, and 79.3%, respectively.

With respect to the Meets Grade Level standard, in the two years before the pandemic (2017-2018 and 2018-2019), a higher percentage of Asian Emergent Bilingual students met the standard compared to the other ethnic/racial groups, achieving 15.4% and 25%, respectively. Lower percentages of Black Emergent Bilingual students met the standard in the 2017-2018 school year whereas Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students had the lowest percentage points in the 2018-2019 school year. In the first year following the pandemic (2020-2021), lower percentages of Black Emergent Bilingual students met the standard. However, in the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years, lower percentages of Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students met the standard, with 31.4%, and 32.4%, respectively. In contrast, higher percentages of Asian Emergent Bilingual students consistently met the standard compared to all the other ethnic/racial groups in the three years following the pandemic, with 23.7%, 43.7%, and 54.5% respectively.

Regarding the Masters grade level standard, statistically significant differences were observed in four of the five years examined. Higher percentages of Asian Emergent Bilingual students consistently met the standard compared to all other ethnic/racial groups. Conversely, lower percentages of Black Emergent Bilingual and Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students met the standard across the five school years. In the most recent data for the 2022-2023 school year, lower percentages of Hispanic Emergent Bilingual students met the standard compared to the other ethnic/racial groups.

Connections to Existing Literature

Texas public school students are required to participate in annual assessments in reading in Grades 3-8 (Texas Education Agency, 2023d). Ethnic/racial disparities on standardized assessments have been documented by multiple researchers (McGown, 2016; Resilla, 2017) in the years before the pandemic. The findings from this study were consistent with the findings from previous researchers (e.g., David & Marchant, 2015; McGown, 2016; Resilla, 2017; Shockley, 2021), confirming that statistically significant differences exist in the reading performance of Texas Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students by their ethnicity/race. However, no published articles have examined the effect of ethnicity/race on the reading achievement of Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students after the COVID-19 pandemic. This investigation addresses a gap left by previous researchers (Resilla, 2017; Slate & Resilla, 2023; Shockley, 2021), who focused on reading performance differences among elementary and high school students.

Connections to Theoretical Framework

The findings from this multiyear investigation are in agreement with Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory that Emergent Bilingual students, classified as an involuntary minority group, perceive that regardless of their abilities, education, economic status, or physical appearance, they do not receive the same treatment in schools as those students from the dominant culture (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Numerous researchers (David & Marchant, 2015; McGown, 2016; Resilla, 2017; Shockley, 2021) have established the presence of ethnic and racial disparities in reading achievement on standardized assessments. However, failing to consider the influence of diverse cultural and language backgrounds within the Emergent Bilingual student population has led to their classification as a homogenous group, thus overlooking their specific needs (Francis, 2019).

Emergent Bilingual students are a heterogeneous group, encompassing diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds (Nunes, 2019). Grouping these students into a single category diminishes their identities and leads to a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to meet the unique needs of this heterogeneous group (Verkuyten et al., 2019). The disproportionate effects of the pandemic on Emergent Bilingual students and students of color further contributed to the achievement gap (Obinna, 2021; Sahakyan & Cook, 2021; Villegas & Garcia, 2022). These students were less likely to have access to virtual learning, had limited opportunities for language services, and received minimal support from parents who were considered essential workers and unable to stay home and help their children navigate online schooling. Consequently, the underperformance in reading by ethnic and racial differences was exacerbated in the years following the pandemic (2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023).

Implications for Policy and for Practice

As demonstrated in this study, ethnicity/race negatively affects student reading performance. Based upon the results herein, several implications for policy and practice are recommended. Different approaches, other than standardized assessments, could be

used to evaluate the knowledge of Emergent Bilingual students. Multiple researchers (Ascenzi-Moreno & Seltzer, 2021; Del Carmen Unda & Lizarraga-Duenas, 2021; Giles, 2017;) advocate for states to evaluate students through various methods for accountability, instead of depending exclusively on test scores. Despite the redesign of the STAAR Reading test in the 2022-2023 school year to better reflect classroom experiences (Texas Education Agency, 2023c), educational leaders should utilize multiple data sources beyond the state-mandated assessment to determine students' knowledge and abilities across different languages, contexts, and circumstances (Ortiz et al., 2022). Strengthened collaboration between all school stakeholders is needed to promote equitable educational opportunities for Emergent Bilingual students, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

With regards to policy, as the enrollment of Emergent Bilingual students in Texas continues to surpass that of other states (Texas Education Agency 2023b), additional funding needs to be allocated to schools with large populations of these students. Senate Bill 560, enacted in January 2023, was designed to improve the educational outcomes of Emergent Bilingual students in Texas by providing schools with the necessary resources to effectively support them (Texas Education Agency, 2023b). These additional funds could be used to increase stipends to recruit and retain highly qualified bilingual teachers and staff to assist Emergent Bilingual students recover from the learning losses caused by pandemic-related school closures.

Lastly, in terms of practice, district leaders should provide targeted, continuous professional development to support teachers in implementing effective literacy and culturally responsive instructional practices which are crucial for the success of secondary Emergent Bilingual students (Sikes & Villanueva, 2021). School districts should also consider extending bilingual support to the secondary grades to assist students who have not been reclassified. Additionally, school leaders should invest in the purchase of multilingual texts and classroom resources to ensure that all students, regardless of their ethnic, racial, or language backgrounds, feel recognized and valued, thereby fostering educational equity.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several recommendations for future research are proposed as a result of this multiyear investigation. It is suggested that researchers conduct similar studies in states other than Texas, as the current analysis was focused solely on Texas Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students. Another suggestion is to replicate this study using data exclusively from the revised STAAR Reading assessment to determine the consistency of results. Researchers are encouraged to reproduce this study in different grade levels to determine if the observed achievement gaps are consistent across other grades. Furthermore, it is suggested to expand this study to include other subject areas assessed in Grade 8, such as mathematics, science, and social studies, is suggested. Lastly, researchers should examine Emergent Bilingual students by other demographic characteristics, such as special education status and economic status, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their academic performance.

Conclusion

In this multi-year investigation, the extent to which differences were present in the Grade 8 Texas state-mandated reading assessment for Emergent Bilingual students by their ethnicity/race (i.e., Black, White, Asian, Hispanic) for the 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-22, and 2022-2023 school years was addressed. Archival data were collected from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System for all Grade 8 students for the two years prior to the pandemic (2017-2018 and 2018-2019) and the three years following the pandemic (2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023). In each of the five years examined and across the three grade level performance standards, statistically significantly higher percentages of Asian Emergent Bilingual students met the grade level standards than the other ethnic/racial groups. Notably, post-pandemic percentages were higher than pre-pandemic with the exception of the 2020-2021 school year. In all three performance standards, a decrease in the percentage of students who met standards was present in the first year following the pandemic. Interestingly, the percentage of students who met the grade level standards for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years surpassed the achievement levels of the two pre-pandemic years.

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Reading College Readiness and Language Status: A Texas Multiyear Pre- and Post-Pandemic Analysis

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In this statewide multiyear investigation, the extent to which differences were present on the STAAR English I End-of-Course exam for Texas high school students as a function of their language status (i.e., Emergent Bilingual, Non-Emergent Bilingual) for two years pre-COVID-19 pandemic (2017-2018 and 2018-2019) and three post-pandemic years (2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023) was explored. Archival data from the Texas Education Agency's Public Education Information Management System were obtained for five school years. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level standards were statistically significantly lower than the percentages of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met these three grade level standards. Findings were consistent across all five school years on all grade-level standards.

Keywords: Emergent Bilingual; Approaches Grade Level Standard; Meets Grade Level Standard; Masters Grade Level Standard; Reading College Readiness; State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness

According to the National Education Association (2020), by 2025, one out of every four students in schools in the United States will be an Emergent Bilingual student. The National Center for Education Statistics (2024) updated its online report, Condition of Education: English Learners in Public Schools, in May 2024. The update included that the number of Emergent Bilingual students in the United States had increased to 5.3 million students in 2021 from 4.6 million students in 2011. Included in the English Learners in Public Schools report were the 10 most commonly reported home languages, with Spanish being the most common at 4,023,289 or 76.4%. To achieve academically, Emergent Bilingual students must master the content while proficiently learning a new language (Hopkins, 2024).

In the National Center for Education Statistics Condition of Education: Reading Performance (2023) report updated in May 2023, Grade 4 Emergent Bilingual students scored lower, 190, than their Non-Emergent Bilingual peers, 222, on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress. This gap has been the trend since 1998. For Grade 8 Emergent Bilingual students, the 2022 trend was similar, with Emergent Bilingual students scoring lower, 225, than their Non-Emergent Bilingual peers, 264. Again, this gap was present from 1998 to 2022. For Grade 12 Emergent Bilingual students, performance trends continued, as they scored 235 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress compared to 288 by their Non-Emergent Bilingual peers. Again, this gap was present from 1998 to 2022. With one exception for Grade 12 students, the achievement gap for Emergent Bilingual students and Non-Emergent Bilingual students increased by seven points from 1998 to 2022.

On June 16, 2021, the 87th Legislative Assembly in Texas passed Senate Bill (SB) 560, which mandated the Texas Education Agency, The Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission to enhance the scope and effectiveness of support for Emergent Bilingual students in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2023b). Based on the Texas Education Agency's Public Education Information Management System 2021-2022 data (Texas Education Agency, 2023a), the state has approximately 5.5 million students enrolled in public schools. Of this number, 21% are Emergent Bilingual students. Emergent Bilingual students have been identified to be present in 99% of all Texas public schools. Texas serves 1 in 5 of all Emergent Bilingual students in the United States (Texas Education Association, 2023a).

With respect to the reading performance of Emergent Bilingual students, several researchers have conducted studies about their performance in the State of Texas. For example, Schleeter and Slate (2023b) analyzed Grade 3 State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Reading Exam data collected from the Texas Education Agency for the 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015 school years to determine the extent to which differences existed for Grade 3 Emergent Bilingual students by their economic status. Three strata of economic status (i.e., not poor, moderately poor, and very poor) were identified. For all three years of data analyzed, statistically significant differences were present in student reading performance. Schleeter and Slate (2023b) noted that a "clear stair step of achievement was revealed for Emergent Bilingual students by their

economic status" (p. 138). Emergent Bilingual students who were not in poverty performed the best, followed by Emergent Bilingual students who qualified for the reduced-price lunch, and then by Emergent Bilingual students who were in poverty.

In another investigation of the reading performance of Emergent Bilingual students, Schleeter and Slate (2023a) analyzed the reading performance of Emergent Bilingual students by their gender. Using the same archival data set as their previous study, the researchers established that Emergent Bilingual girls had statistically significantly better results on the STAAR Grade 3 Reading exam than Emergent Bilingual boys. A 5.9% achievement gap was documented to be present between Emergent Bilingual boys and girls on the passing standard of the STAAR Grade 3 Reading exam and a 2.7% achievement gap on the Advanced Performance standard.

In a recent investigation, Martin and Slate (2023) analyzed data from the Texas Education Agency's Grade 4 STAAR Writing Exam over three years (i.e., 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019). The study's three years were before the COVID-19 global pandemic and the STAAR test redesign. The researchers sought to determine if differences existed in the performance of Grade 4 students based on their language status (i.e., Emergent Bilingual or Non-Emergent Bilingual). In all three school years, Emergent Bilingual students answered statistically significantly fewer questions correctly than Non-Emergent Bilingual students in all three categories. In the 2016-2017 school year, 42.9% of Emergent Bilingual students did not meet the Approaches Grade Level standard (the passing standard) compared to 28.6% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. In the 2017-2018 school year, 44.2% of Emergent Bilingual students did not meet the Approaches Grade Level standard compared to 27.1% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. Finally, in the 2018-2019 school year, 39.0% of Emergent Bilingual students did not meet the Approaches Grade Level standard compared to 23.0% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students.

In another recent Texas investigation, Resilla and Slate (2023b), using archival data spanning two years pre-COVID-19 pandemic and the STAAR test redesign from the Texas Education Agency's STAAR English I End-of-Course Exam, established the presence of differences on the Texas English I End-of-Course exam by the language students of students in poverty. A key finding by the researchers was that Non-Emergent Bilingual students experiencing poverty were twice as likely to meet the Approaches Grade Level standard (the passing standard for Texas) than Emergent Bilingual students experiencing poverty.

In a similar study, Resilla and Slate (2023a) analyzed data from the same pre-COVID-19 pandemic and before the STAAR test redesign school years (i.e., 2017-2018 and 2018-2019). Their focus was on the language status of boys on the STAAR English I End-of-Course Exam. In their study, Non-Emergent Bilingual boys had a success rate that was three times higher than the success rate of Emergent Bilingual boys on the Approaches Grade Level standard. In the 2017-2018 school year, Non-Emergent Bilingual boys met the Meets Grade Level standard at a rate that was nine times higher than the rate of Emergent Bilingual boys. In the 2018-2019 school year, Non-Emergent Bilingual boys met the Meets Grade Level standard at a rate that was seven times higher than the rate for Emergent

Bilingual boys. Boys generally performed poorly at the Master's Grade Level standard for both years analyzed; however, Non-Emergent Bilingual boys met the Master's Grade Level standard at a rate that was five to nine times higher than the rate of Emergent Bilingual boys.

Resilla and Slate (2023c) continued with an examination of the same two years of data (i.e., 2017-2018 and 2018-2019) concerning the degree to which language status of Texas public high school girls influenced their performance on the STAAR English II End-of-Course exam. The researchers established the presence of a statistically significant difference in the performance of Emergent Bilingual girls compared to Non-Emergent Bilingual girls. In 2017-2018, 80.4% of Emergent Bilingual girls did not meet the minimum passing standard in the STAAR English II End-of-Course exam; only 25.0% of Non-Emergent Bilingual girls did not meet the Approaches Grade Level standard. In 2018-2019, 77.3% of Emergent Bilingual girls did not meet the minimum passing standard; only 22.9% of Non-Emergent Bilingual girls did not meet the Approaches Grade Level standard. More alarming is that Resilla and Slate (2023c) revealed that less than 1.0% of Emergent Bilingual girls achieved the Masters Grade Level standard (the highest standard) for the two years of the study. Resilla and Slate (2023a) contended that Emergent Bilingual students have been denied opportunities to participate in certain courses due to their End-of-Course exam performance.

Affirming the findings of Resilla and Slate (2023a, b, c), Villalobos and Slate (2023) determined the extent to which differences were present for Emergent Bilingual boys and girls in their performance on the STAAR English I and II End-of-Course exam for three school years (i.e., 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019) using archival data from the Texas Education Agency. Villalobos and Slate (2023) established the presence of a statistically significant difference in the performance of Emergent Bilingual boys and girls at the Approaches and Meets Grade Level standards, with Emergent Bilingual girls outperforming Emergent Bilingual boys. At the Masters Grade Level standard, boys and girls achieved this standard at 1.0% or less for all three years on both the STAAR English I and English II End-of-Course exams.

As readers are well aware, the COVID-19 global pandemic had a tremendous impact on student learning as it resulted in closed schools and, for many students, ended education altogether (Moran, 2021). Marginalized student groups, ethnic/racial minorities, Emergent Bilingual students, and students experiencing poverty, already suffering educational challenges were more affected by the pandemic than were their White or Asian peers (Ansorger, 2021; Dorn et al., 2021; Herold & Kurtz, 2020; Landson-Billings, 2020; Moran, 2021; Teachman, 2022). In a 2020 Urban Institute study, six risk factors associated with remote learning were identified: (a) linguistic isolation, (b) crowded living conditions, (c) lack of access to a computer or internet, (d) no adult in the house with at least a high school education, (e), a disability, and (f) poverty (Urban Institute, 2020 as cited in Moran, 2021). Hispanic students were determined to be the most at risk of facing multiple factors at once, severely deterring their education.

Another post-pandemic challenge for Emergent Bilingual students was the passage

of House Bill 3906 in June 2019 (HB 3906, 2019). This legislation required a redesign of the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness exams. The four areas of the exams addressed in the redesign were (a) online testing and accommodations, (b) new question types, (c) cross-curricular questions, and (d) evidence-based questions (Texas Education Agency, 2022a). The new Reading Language Arts assessment contains both reading and writing components; Emergent Bilingual students will experience an extended constructed response or essay at every tested grade level (Texas Education Agency, 2022a).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this article was John U. Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory. Ogbu contended that involuntary minorities (i.e., Emergent Bilingual students) "resent the job ceilings, the schools with few resources and poorly trained staff, and the general lack of opportunities afforded them" (Worrell, 2014, p. 337). Schools battle challenges outside of the school that have a distinct impact on the academic performance of Emergent Bilingual students. In the cultural-ecological theory, there are numerous ways educators can aid Emergent Bilingual students ranging from building trust to maintaining high expectations to implementing culturally responsive instruction (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). Researchers (Martin & Slate, 2023; Resilla & Slate, 2023; Schleeter & Slate, 2023; Villalobos & Slate, 2023) have documented the relationship between language status and academic performance; their research affirms Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory supporting the fact that involuntary minorities (i.e., Emergent Bilingual students) and their academic performance are significantly influenced by their status as involuntary.

Statement of the Problem

By 2025, one in four students in the United States will be an Emergent Bilingual student. Approximately 5.5 million Emergent Bilingual students in Texas are enrolled in public schools (Texas Education Agency, 2023a). Emergent Bilingual students' performance on the annual STAAR English I End-of-Course exam greatly affects the accountability rating of Texas public schools. Additionally, Texas is expected to be financially affected by the lack of college readiness of its high school graduates (George W. Bush Institute & Texas 2036, 2023). Numerous research studies are available about language status and its relationship to academic performance. Of importance is that very few published studies are available about academic performance on the STAAR English I End-of-Course exam pre- and post-pandemic and after the STAAR test redesign by the language status of students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this article was to analyze performance on the STAAR English I End-of-Course exam by language status. Data from the two school years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., 2017-2018 and 2018-2019) and the three years (i.e., 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023) following the school shutdowns were analyzed herein. The extent to which language status was related to performance on the three grade level standards (i.e., Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level) on the STAAR

English I End-of-Course exam was determined.

Significance of the Study

Several published articles are available on STAAR performance by language status. No published literature could be located, however, about STAAR performance by student language status pre- and post-pandemic and post-STAAR redesign. As such, findings from this multiyear article will add to the existing body of literature, as well as provide information to practitioners, policymakers, students, and parents.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this article: (a) What is the difference on the STAAR English I End-of-Course Exam Approaches Grade Level standard for Emergent Bilingual students?; (b) What is the difference on the STAAR English I End-of-Course Exam Approaches Grade Level standard for Non-Emergent Bilingual students?; (c) What is the difference on the STAAR English I End-of-Course Exam Meets Grade Level standard for Emergent Bilingual students?; (d) What is the difference on the STAAR English I End-of-Course Exam Meets Grade Level standard for Non-Emergent Bilingual students?; (e) What is the difference on the STAAR English I End-of-Course Exam Masters Grade Level standard for Emergent Bilingual students?; (f) What is the difference on the STAAR English I End-of-Course Exam Masters Grade Level standard for Non-Emergent Bilingual students?; and (g) What trends are present before and after the pandemic?

Method

Research Design

A causal-comparative, non-experimental research design was present in this study (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Using a casual-comparative research design, relationships can be addressed between independent and dependent variables (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). An archival data set of STAAR English I End-of-Course exams was examined to determine the relationship between language students and reading performance. The independent variable for this study was language status (i.e., Emergent Bilingual, Non-Emergent Bilingual). The dependent variables were the STAAR English I End-of-Course grade level standards: (a) Approaches Grade Level, (b) Meets Grade Level, or (c) Masters Grade Level for the 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years.

Participants and Instrumentation

Data were collected from the Texas Education Agency's Public Education Information Management System for the 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data are not available for the 2019-2020 school year. The Texas Education Code defines a person as Emergent Bilingual when a student's "primary language is other than English and whose English language skills are such that the student has difficulty performing ordinary classwork in English" (Texas Education Code, 29.052, 2021). Anyone not identified by a school's Language

Proficiency Assessment Committee is known as a Non-Emergent Bilingual student (Texas Education Agency, 2023a). In Table 1, at the high school level, the state experienced a 69% increase in Emergent Bilingual students and only a 5% increase in Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students increased in four of the five years with the most significant gains in the final two years of the study. Non-Emergent Bilingual students, by percentage, decreased in three of the five years and consecutively in the final two years of the study, with their lowest percentage in the 2022-2023 school year.

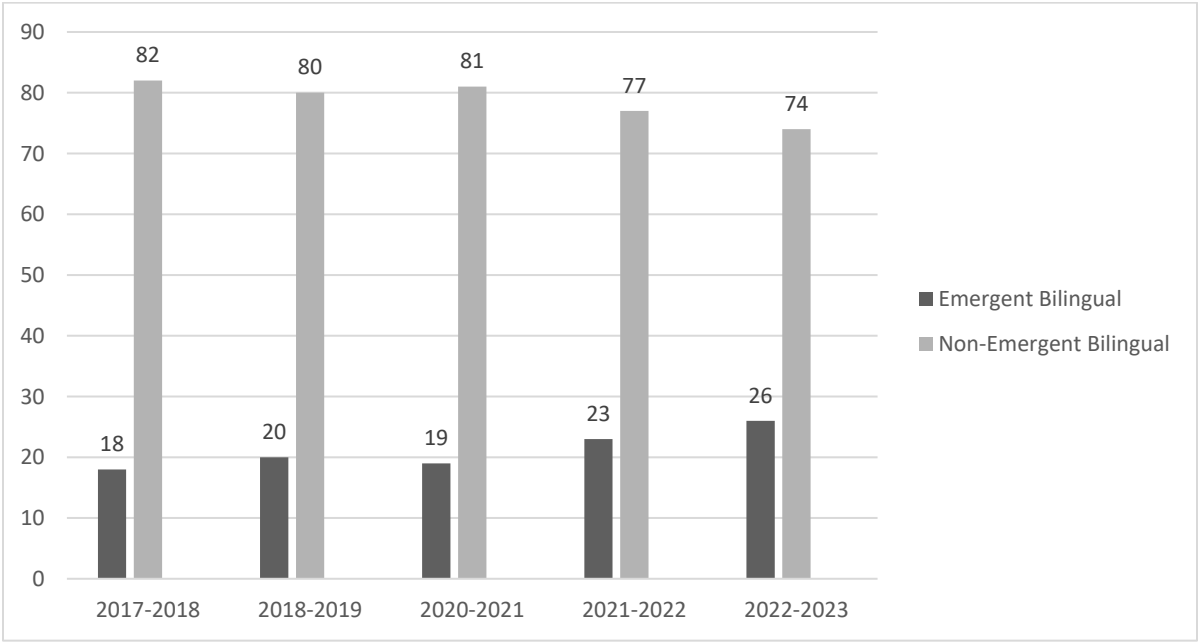
Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Texas High School Students by Language Status for All Five School Years

School Year	Emergent Bilingual *n* (%age)	Non-Emergent Bilingual *n* (%age)
2017-2018	*n* = 78,752 (17.6%)	*n* = 368,247 (82.4%)
2018-2019	*n* = 84,102 (20.2%)	*n* = 331,990 (79.8%)
2020-2021	*n* = 88,477 (19.1%)	*n* = 374,404 (80.9%)
2021-2022	*n* = 116,106 (23.0%)	*n* = 388,005 (77.0%)
2022-2023	*n* = 133,027 (25.6%)	*n* = 386,215 (74.4%)

Figure 1

Average Percentages of Texas High School Students by Language Status for All Five School Years



Public high school students in Texas must take and meet the Approaches Grade Level standard, at minimum, on five different tests to qualify for graduation. Beginning in Grade 9 students participate in the STAAR English I End-of-Course exam. If a student is not successful, they must continually attempt the exam until the Approaches Grade Level is met. This study's three categories of note will be the Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level standard. Performance at the Approaches Grade Level standard indicates that students will likely be successful at the next grade level with the assistance of targeted interventions. Performance at the Meets Grade Level standard means that students will most likely be successful at the next grade level but will need short-term targeted intervention. Students who meet the Masters Grade Level standard are expected to succeed at the next grade level with no academic support (Texas Education Agency, 2017).

The Texas Education Agency began conducting validity and linking studies in 2009. The Texas Technical Advisory Committee is a group of national experts explicitly created for Texas that provides continuous support to the Agency regarding test validity (Texas Education Agency, 2022b, Chapter 4, p. 33). Readers are directed to the Texas Education Agency's Student Assessment Technical Digest for more information regarding STAAR End-of-Course exam validity.

Results

Data Analysis

To determine whether differences were present on the STAAR English I End-of-Course exam by student language status, Pearson chi-square analyses were conducted. The Pearson chi-square analysis is the appropriate statistical procedure because of the nominal nature of the Grade Level Standards (i.e., either Met or Not Met) (Slate, 2023) and of the nominal nature of the independent variable of language status (i.e., Emergent Bilingual, Non-Emergent Bilingual). Due to the statewide sample size and categorical data type, the underlying assumptions of this procedure were met.

Approaches Grade Level Analyses Across All Five Years

For the first research question on the Approaches Grade Level standard for the 2017-2018 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 42038.89$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .31, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). As revealed in Table 2, a statistically significant lower percentage, 18.4%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level standard compared to 58.6% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was more than three times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard.

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of the Approaches Grade Level Standard by the Language Status of Texas Students for All Five School Years

School Year and Language Status	Did Not Meet *n* and %age of Total	Met *n* and %age of Total
2017-2018		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 152,476) 41.4%	(*n* = 215,771) 58.6%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 64,290) 81.6%	(*n* = 14,462) 18.4%
2018-2019		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 132,588) 39.9%	(*n* = 199,402) 60.1%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 65,701) 78.1%	(*n* = 18,401) 21.9%
2020-2021		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 125,320) 33.5%	(*n* = 249,084) 66.5%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 64,366) 72.7%	(*n* = 24,111) 27.3%
2021-2022		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 119,954) 30.9%	(*n* = 268,051) 69.1%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 78,152) 67.3%	(*n* = 37,954) 32.7%
2022-2023		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 90,737) 23.5%	(*n* = 295,478) 76.5%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 70,775) 53.2%	(*n* = 62,252) 46.8%

With respect to the Approaches Grade Level standard for the 2018-2019 school year, a statistically significant difference was revealed, $\chi^2(1) = 39219.71$, $p < .001$**,** Cramer's V of .31, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant lower percentage, 21.9%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level standard compared to 60.1% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was almost three times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Concerning the 2020-2021 school year for the Approaches Grade Level standard, a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(1) = 45646.61$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .31, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). As delineated in Table 2, a statistically significant lower percentage, 27.3%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level standard compared to 66.5% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was more than twice as less as the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard.

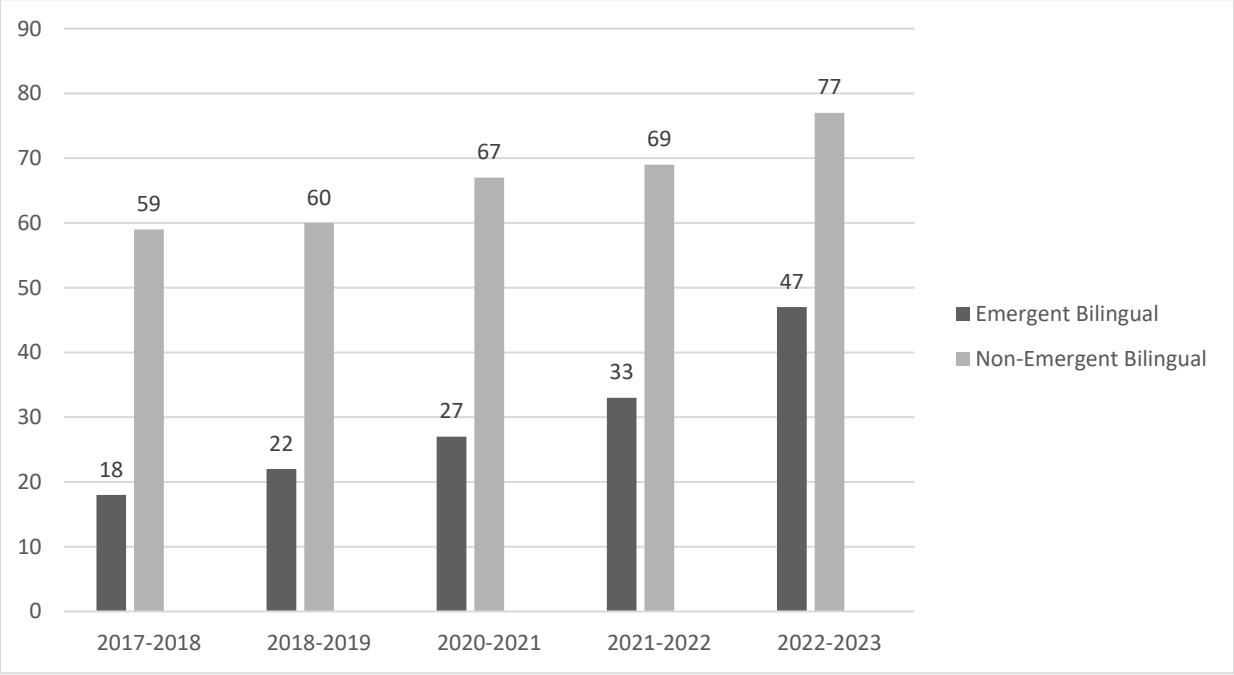
Regarding the Approaches Grade Level standard for the 2021-2022 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 49623.02$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .31, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant lower percentage, 32.7%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level standard compared to 69.1% of Non-

Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was less than half of the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard. Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics for this analysis.

Lastly, for the Approaches Grade Level standard for the 2022-2023 school year, a statistically significant difference was revealed, $\chi^2(1) = 40754.12$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .28, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant lower percentage, 46.8% of Emergent Bilingual students met the Approaches Grade Level standard compared to 76.5% of the Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard was almost a third less than Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard. Revealed in Table 2 are the descriptive statistics for this analysis. Illustrated in Figure 2 are the percentages of students who met this grade level standard across the five school years.

Figure 2

Average Percentages of Met the Approaches Grade Level Standard by the Language Status of Texas Students for All Five School Years



Meets Grade Level Analyses Across All Five Years

For the first research question on the Approaches Grade Level standard for the 2017-2018 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 39032.79$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .30, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). As revealed in Table 3, a statistically significant lower percentage, 5.9%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Meets Grade Level standard compared to 43.3% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of

Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was seven times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard.

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of the Meets Grade Level Standard by the Language Status of Texas Students for All Five School Years

School Year and Language Status	Did Not Meet *n* and %age of Total	Met *n* and %age of Total
2017-2018		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 208,900) 56.7%	(*n* = 159,347) 43.3%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 74,114) 94.1%	(*n* = 4,638) 5.9%
2018-2019		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 171,634) 51.7%	(*n* = 160,356) 48.3%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 76,267) 90.7%	(*n* = 7,835) 9.3%
2020-2021		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 177,662) 47.4%	(*n* = 196,782) 52.6%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 76,580) 86.6%	(*n* = 11,897) 13.4%
2021-2022		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 174,433) 45.0%	(*n* = 213,572) 55.0%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 95,200) 82.0%	(*n* = 20,906) 18.0%
2022-2023		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 147,996) 38.3%	(*n* = 238,219) 61.7%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 97,358) 73.2%	(*n* = 35,669) 26.8%

With respect to the Meets Grade Level standard for the 2018-2019 school year, a statistically significant difference was revealed, $\chi^2(1) = 42349.02$, $p < .001$**,** Cramer's V of .32, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant lower percentage, 9.3%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Meets Grade Level standard compared to 48.3% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was more than five times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Concerning the 2020-2021 school year for the Meets Grade Level standard, a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(1) = 44219.03$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .31, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). As delineated in Table 3, a statistically significant lower percentage, 13.4%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Meets Grade Level standard compared to 52.6% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met this grade level standard was four times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard.

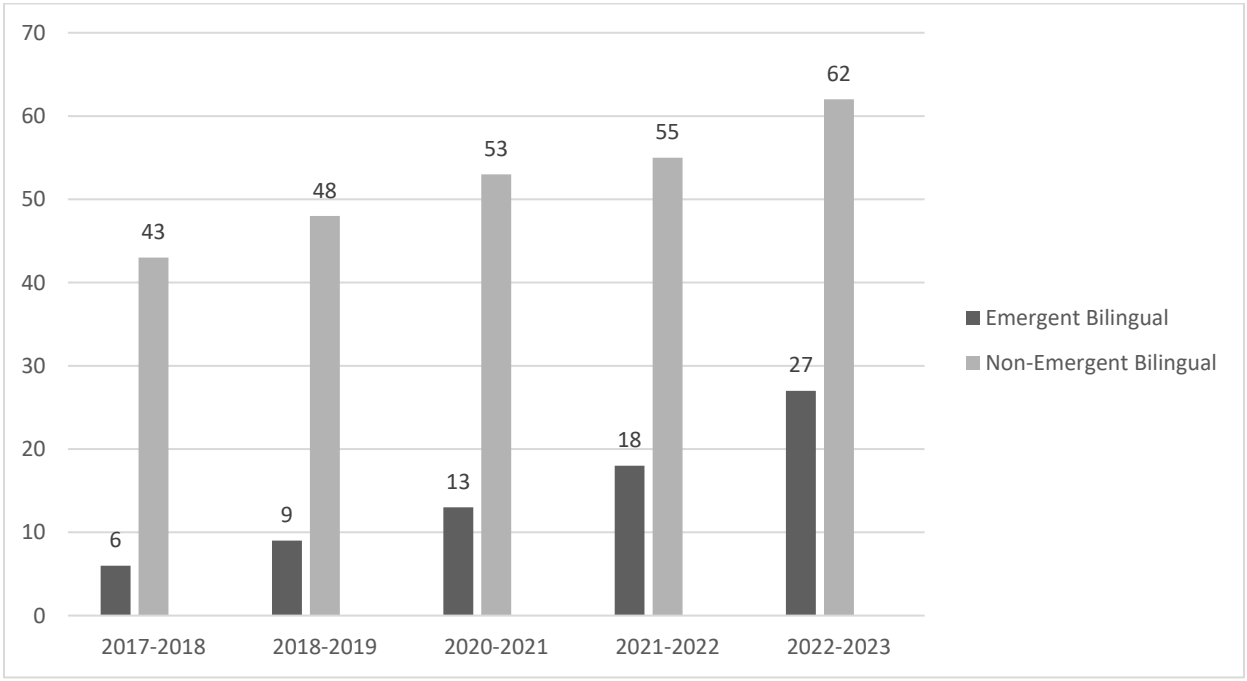
Regarding the Meets Grade Level standard for the 2021-2022 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 49275.39$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .31, moderate effect

size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant lower percentage, 18.0%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Meets Grade Level standard compared to 55.0% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was more than three times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard. Table 3 contains the descriptive statistics for this analysis.

Lastly, for the Meets Grade Level standard for the 2022-2023 school year, a statistically significant difference was revealed, $\chi^2(1) = 48261.77$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .31, moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically lower percentage, 26.8%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Meets Grade Level standard compared to 61.7% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was more than two times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard. Revealed in Table 3 are the descriptive statistics for this analysis. Depicted in Figure 3 are the percentages of students who met this grade level standard across the five school years.

Figure 3

Average Percentages of Met the Meets Grade Level Standard by the Language Status of Texas Students for All Five School Years



Masters Grade Level Analyses Across All Five Years

For the first research question on the Masters Grade Level standard for the 2017-2018 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 6466.02$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .12, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). As revealed in Table 4, a statistically significant

lower percentage, 0.1%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Masters Grade Level standard compared to 7.9% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was 79 times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard.

Table 4

Frequencies and Percentages of the Master's Grade Level Standard by the Language Status of Texas Students for All Five School Years

School Year and Language Status	Did Not Meet *n* and %age of Total	Met *n* and %age of Total
2017-2018		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 339,097) 92.1%	(*n* = 29,150) 7.9%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 78,665) 99.9%	(*n* = 87) 0.1%
2018-2019		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 287,286) 86.5%	(*n* = 44,704) 13.5%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 83,847) 99.7%	(*n* = 255) 0.3%
2020-2021		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 323,533) 86.4%	(*n* = 50,871) 13.6%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 87,841) 99.3%	(*n* = 636) 0.7%
2021-2022		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 336,327) 86.7%	(*n* = 51,678) 13.3%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 114,732) 98.8%	(*n* = 1,374) 1.2%
2022-2023		
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 317,684) 82.3%	(*n* = 68,531) 17.7%
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 130,200) 97.9%	(*n* = 2,827) 2.1%

With respect to the Masters Grade Level standard for the 2018-2019 school year, a statistically significant difference was revealed, $\chi^2(1) = 12062$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .20, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant lower percentage, 0.3%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Masters Grade Level standard compared to 13.5% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was 45 times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard. Descriptive statistics for this analysis are presented in Table 4.

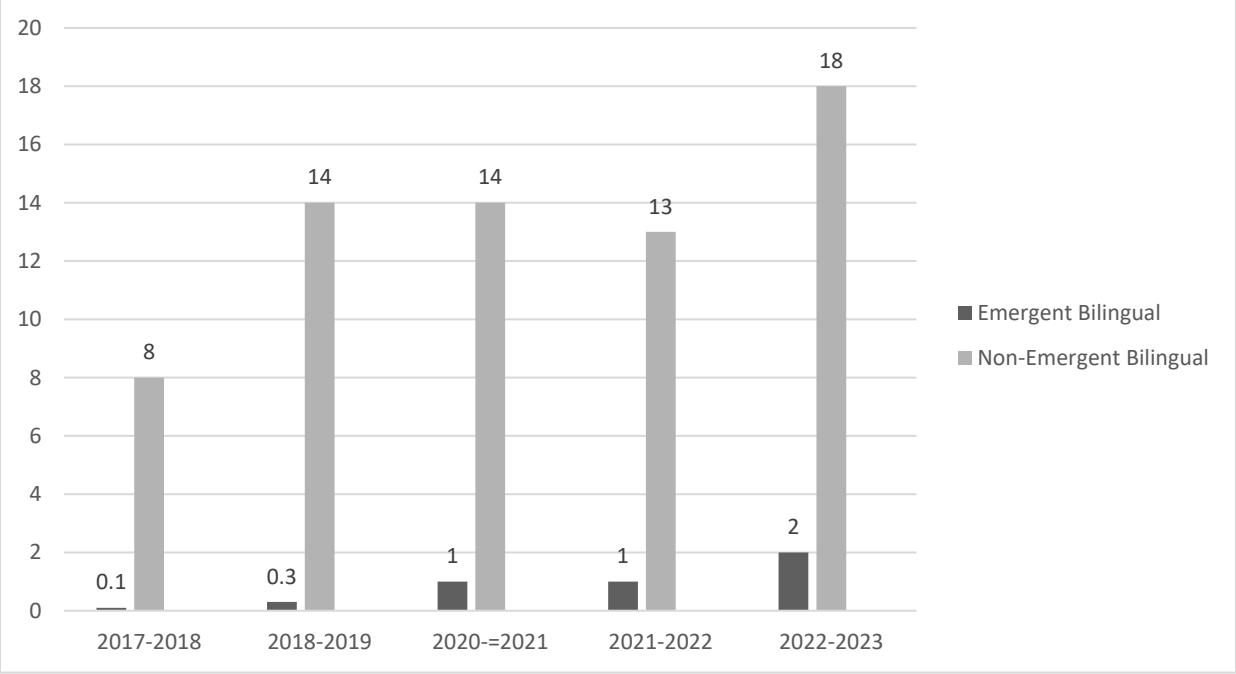
Concerning the 2020-2021 school year for the Masters Grade Level standard, a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(1) = 11983.50$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .16, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). As delineated in Table 4, a statistically significant lower percentage, 0.7%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Masters Grade Level standard compared to 13.6% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was 19 times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard.

Regarding the Masters Grade Level standard for the 2021-2022 school year, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 13976.50$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .17, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant lower percentage, 1.2%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Masters Grade Level standard compared to 13.3% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was 11 times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard. Table 4 contains the descriptive statistics for this analysis.

Lastly, for the Masters Grade Level standard for the 2022-2023 school year, a statistically significant difference was revealed, $\chi^2(1) = 20363.11$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .20, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significant lower percentage, 2.1%, of Emergent Bilingual students met the Masters Grade Level standard compared to 17.7% of Non-Emergent Bilingual students. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was eight times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard. Revealed in Table 4 are the descriptive statistics for this analysis. Illustrated in Figure 4 are these percentages across the five school years.

Figure 4

Average Percentages of Met the Masters Grade Level Standard by the Language Status of Texas Students for All Five School Years



Discussion

This investigation was a causal-comparative research design in which the STAAR English I End-of-Course exam performance for Texas high school students was analyzed as a function of their language status (i.e., Emergent Bilingual, Non-Emergent Bilingual). Archival data were obtained from the Texas Education Agency's Public Education Information Management System for the two years before the COVID-19 pandemic (2017-2018 and 2018-2019) and three post-pandemic years (2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023). The final year also includes the redesigned STAAR test. Data on three grade level standards (i.e., Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level) were analyzed. Statistically significant results were present at all three grade level standards for all five school years by student language status.

For the Approaches Grade Level standard, the percentages of Emergent Bilingual students who met this grade level standard were three times less than the percentages of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met this grade level standard in the 2017-2018 school year and almost three times less in the 2018-2019 school year, the two pre-pandemic years. For the three post-pandemic years, incremental percentage gains were present, with the percentages of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard being almost two and half times less than the percentages of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met this standard in the first year post-pandemic (2020-2021), two times less in the 2021-2022 school year, and almost two times less in the 2022-2023 school year. Both the highest percentages of Emergent Bilingual and Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the Approaches Grade Level standard of all five school years were present in the 2022-2023 school year, which was the first year the redesigned STAAR test was implemented.

At the Meets Grade Level standard, the percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard was seven times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met this grade level standard in the 2017-2018 school year and a little more than five times less in the 2018-2019 school year, the two pre-pandemic years. For the three post-pandemic years, incremental percentage gains were present, with the percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard being almost four times less than the percentage of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard in the first post-pandemic year (2020-2021), almost three times less in the 2021-2022 school year, and more than two times less in the 2022-2023 school year. The final year of the study had the highest percentage of both groups meeting the standard with just over a quarter of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard and two-thirds of Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the Meets Grade Level standard.

Regarding the Masters Grade Level standard, the lowest percentages of students who met this grade level standard were Emergent Bilingual students. For the two years pre-pandemic (2017-2018 and 2018-2019), and the first year post-pandemic (2020-2021), less than 1% of Emergent Bilingual students met the Masters Grade Level standard. The percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard

consistently increased across all five school years (2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023), with the highest percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard in the final year (2022-2023), the first year of the redesigned STAAR test. Non-Emergent Bilingual students increased the percentage of students who Met the Masters Grade Level standard for four of the five years; there was a .3% decline in 2021-2022. Though the percentages of both student groups who met the Masters Grade Level standard increased over the five years analyzed, Emergent Bilingual students closed the gap with Non-Emergent Bilingual students; in the 2017-2018 school year the percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was 79 times less than Non-Emergent Bilingual students who met the standard, and in the 2022-2023 school year the percentage of Emergent Bilingual students who met the Masters Grade Level standard was only eight times less than Non-emergent Bilingual students who met the standard.

Connections to Existing Literature

Researchers (Martin & Slate, 2023; Resilla & Slate, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Schleeter & Slate, 2023; Villalobos & Slate, 2023) have documented the inequities in academic performance differences by student language status. The results of this statewide multiyear investigation are congruent with the results of these previous researchers. No previous published empirical articles could be located about STAAR English I End-of-Course exam performance by language status pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from this article fill the gap in the existing research literature from prior researchers (Martin & Slate, 2023; Resilla & Slate, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Schleeter & Slate, 2023; Villalobos & Slate, 2023) who examined Texas public school students' reading readiness at the elementary and high school levels with varying demographics all before the pandemic and before the redesigned STAAR test.

Connection to Theoretical Framework

John U. Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory was the theoretical framework used to interpret the results of this article about the reading college readiness of Texas high school students by their language status. The degree to which language status affects reading college readiness has been previously established (Martin & Slate, 2023; Resilla & Slate, 2023; Schleeter & Slate, 2023; Villalobos & Slate, 2023). Researchers have documented that Emergent Bilingual students underperform their Non-Emergent Bilingual peers. According to Worrell (2014), part of the cultural-ecological theory is that "the dominant group does not allow them [involuntary minorities] the option of becoming equal members of society" (p. 337). Findings from this multiyear analysis are congruent with this assertion. Of note, Emergent Bilingual students, involuntary minorities, did not experience trust, culturally responsive instruction, explicitly dealing with opposition/ambivalence, role models, high standards, and parent/community involvement (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). As such, this statewide multiyear investigation examined the deleterious effects of current educational legislation and practices that maintain the status quo in reading college readiness for students of color.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Revealed in this statewide multiyear investigation was the strong influence of language on student reading college readiness. As such, implications can be made for both policy and for practice. As Texas experiences an ever-increasing Emergent Bilingual population, current efforts should be expanded and strengthened to manage the growing numbers of students needing service and support. Bolstering financial support in the form of per-pupil spending would allow school district leadership to staff schools appropriately. Additionally, per-pupil spending could enhance Early Childhood programs targeting students from non-English speaking homes. In Texas, secondary English Language Arts teachers must have an English as a Second Language certification, this policy should be expanded to all teachers. Policymakers should consider an incentive program for districts, campuses, and teachers who demonstrate substantial growth and development of Emergent Bilingual students.

Reading is the most fundamental skill necessary to build literacy and education. Several implications for practitioners are recommended. Until it becomes state policy, educators should acquire an English as a Second Language supplemental certification. Basic knowledge of Emergent Bilingual learning is an obligation for each campus-level educator. Professional development for practitioners should be specific, applicable, and ongoing. Every classroom teacher should develop the mindset that they are all reading teachers and encourage reading across disciplines.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of this statewide multiyear investigation, several recommendations for future research investigations can be made. First, researchers could conduct a similar study about the performance of high school boys and girls as a function of their economic status. Researchers could expand studies on economic status to include more years of data. Such a larger time frame could reveal the presence of new trends, especially with more post-pandemic data available. Researchers are encouraged to expand this investigation to other states, particularly for states with substantial populations in poverty.

Secondly, researchers are encouraged to analyze student performance on the STAAR English I End-of-Course exam by student ethnicity/race. The different ethnic/racial groups have distinct subgroups that vary geographically and linguistically. Asian students could originate from any number of countries (e.g., Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam); similarly, Hispanic students may come from various countries (e.g., Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, South or Central America). Researchers should recognize and acknowledge the unique academic characteristics within each ethnic/racial group. Researchers should broaden this ethnic/racial analysis beyond Texas by identifying other states with diverse student populations.

Next, researchers should consider a similar analysis in other disciplines. Replicating

this study and analyzing students by economic status and ethnicity/race in other content areas (e.g., Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies), would add to current research. By addressing similar skills, researchers could highlight the need for cross-curricular instruction. An examination of standardized test performance across content areas from other states should be considered. A national analysis of core subjects for comparison would also be beneficial.

Finally, the research ideas mentioned above should be extended to students at other grade levels, specifically Grades 2-4, 7-8, and 10-12. An analysis of different grades and developmental stages would help identify where, when, and how learning gaps develop. Learning about the developmental characteristics of students by ethnicity/race, language status, and economic status would provide key insight into student development. Again, an investigation about student college readiness could be expanded to a variety of grade levels, as well as to other states.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research investigation was to ascertain the extent to which differences were present in reading college readiness of Texas public high school students as a function of their language status. Also addressed were the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the STAAR test redesign that took effect in the 2022-2023 school year on the reading college readiness of Emergent Bilingual and Non-Emergent Bilingual students. After analyzing the STAAR English I End-of-Course exam for each school year, trends in the performance of Emergent Bilingual and Non-Emergent Bilingual students were established Emergent Bilingual students were less successful at meeting each of the grade level standards than were Non-Emergent Bilingual students across all five school years. Emergent Bilingual students and Non-Emergent Bilingual students posted their best performances at each grade level standard in the 2022-2023 school year, the third year post-pandemic and implementation year of the redesigned STAAR test.

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Superintendent Departure: Exploring Opportunities to Support Leadership Transition in Rural School Districts

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This qualitative research article examines the role of an outgoing superintendent in supporting leadership transition within a rural school district. Emerging from a dissertation case study focused on the transition between a long-serving superintendent and an incoming superintendent, the study explores how leadership behaviors exhibited during departure can influence district stability and early success for the successor. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed using a case study approach informed by Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations framework. Findings indicate that the outgoing superintendent intentionally established a clear transition timeline, defined a firm endpoint to their tenure, and communicated with stakeholders in ways that prioritized the future leadership of the district. The study further highlights the importance of servant-oriented leadership behaviors, clearly defined communication boundaries, and systematic transfer of institutional knowledge. Recommendations emphasize that outgoing superintendents can play a critical role in facilitating effective leadership transitions by preparing districts for change while allowing incoming leaders the autonomy necessary to establish their own leadership identity. These findings offer practical guidance for school boards and superintendents navigating leadership succession, particularly in rural school contexts.

Keywords: superintendent transition, leadership succession, rural school districts, servant leadership, organizational change

The superintendent role is important to the effectiveness of a school district. Furthermore, leadership can directly affect student achievement in a rural school district (Waters & Marzano, 2007). The use of goal setting and establishing an agreed upon vision and path for staff to follow are examples of good leadership traits. A meta-analysis by Waters and Marzano (2007), examined over twenty-seven studies for effective superintendent leadership strategies. The findings demonstrated that superintendents who utilize effective leadership strategies such as communicating clear goals and a direction for their leadership increase their students' academic progress (Waters & Marzano, 2007). Additionally, Waters and Marzano (2007) found there is an effect on student achievement whenever there is a change in superintendent leadership. Outside of student achievement, Sulit's study (2020) gathered data that supports the assumption that distributed leadership as a model for leadership and working with staff can increase teacher retention. Another example of successful leadership was observed in a study by Boren et al. (2021) which observed building leaders utilizing shared responsibilities instead of a top-down approach. For rural school districts, the leadership of the superintendent plays a larger role in the success and well-being of rural district patrons (Myers, 2011). In rural districts that experience superintendent transition, it is equally important for the exit to be as efficient for the outgoing superintendent as it was for their entrance. Rural school districts face significant challenges despite their smaller scale of operation. The array of duties and responsibilities for a rural school superintendent are demanding and can be overwhelming (McHenry-Sorber, 2019). Kansas, as the site for the dissertation study, had 46% rural schools and was above the national average of 30% (Showalter et al., 2023). The need for this study is also evidenced by 9% of Kansas superintendents reporting in August 2021 they had been in their current school districts less than a year along with these superintendents also reporting this was their first superintendent position altogether (Kansas Association of School Boards, 2022). To further highlight the problem, there were 57 superintendent vacancies recorded in Kansas in the 2023–2024 school year (Kansas Association of School Boards, 2022). Leadership is important and with this heightened potential for frequent leadership turnover, insight is needed to help transitioning rural school district leaders navigate during these critical times.

Study Setting

The setting for this study was a rural school district with a student population of less than 350 students. The school district was going through a superintendent change after having the same person holding that position for over 15 years and spending over 30 years of their career in this same district. The incoming superintendent was hired from outside the district, but did have experience leading as a superintendent. With the extensive background of the outgoing superintendent in this district as a leader, the community faced a significant hurdle in transitioning superintendents. For some community members, this individual was the only superintendent they had known, and over their tenure, this person had developed a strong trust among stakeholders in the community.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine in-depth the strategies the outgoing

superintendent used to support the new superintendent. The recommendations from this study are applicable to any district facing transition in the executive leader position, however, each setting is unique in their physical and social constructs, making these recommendations most applicable to small rural school districts.

Research Question

- How and in what ways is the transition from a long-serving superintendent to a newly hired superintendent in a Midwestern rural school district influenced by the leadership behaviors exhibited by the outgoing superintendent?

Study Subjects

Both the outgoing and incoming superintendents were the subjects of a study examining the transition between a long serving superintendent and an incoming superintendent with experience in the superintendency in another district. The dissertation study found that during a transition between superintendents, it is especially important for the incoming superintendent to receive support. The study highlighted that although this support can come from a multitude of sources, the specific strategies employed by the outgoing superintendent in offering this support is especially critical. In this specific case, the involvement of the outgoing superintendent was purposeful and reflective. The support provided by the outgoing superintendent during the transition period was an important factor in the success of the initial 90-days of the incoming superintendent's tenure (Farley, 2024). The reasons for superintendent transitions can vary and depending on the situation, can influence the actual level of involvement of the outgoing superintendent. In this case study, the outgoing superintendent chose to retire after a long career in the district. Upon their retirement, a trail of impactful decisions and interactions balanced the need for support and availability with the challenge of allowing the incoming superintendent to navigate their own way with their individual style as they began to get to know staff, students, and the community itself. This delicate balance of knowing when to help and knowing when to step aside, along with the approach of the new superintendent, allowed the community and staff to transition more smoothly during the first three months.

Literature Review

The literature review is divided into three sections: rural education leadership, change, and leadership transition. Literature highlighting rural education leadership will present research from the following authors: Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Johnson et al., 2011; McHenry-Sorber, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; and Showalter et al., 2019. From this research, the topics of leadership in rural schools, the make-up of rural student populations, and the challenges faced by rural leaders are discussed. The direction of this literature was chosen to support the importance of being efficient in the transition between leaders in a rural setting due to the variety of challenges faced by the leaders themselves in a rural district setting.

The research pertaining to change for this literature review is set forth from the following resources: Davidson et al., 2021; Farley, 2024; Kamrath, 2022; Kersten, 2009;

McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Oreg et al., 2011; Schein, 1984; Shuler, 2016; and Wilson, 2019. Change was identified as an important subject in this research study to highlight the findings that have been found in organizational studies related to leadership transition. Managing change and continuing to move the organization forward is important to the focus of this study.

Finally, the literature on leadership transition is a collection of studies that examined topics related to executive leadership adaptation. Literature examined the transition as a whole from a broad viewpoint. The research collected for this section of the literature review came from the following resources: Christy, 2009; Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2009; and Riordan, 2008.

Rural Education Leadership

Research studies set in rural environments highlight the obstacles faced by school districts in those communities. A community can be considered rural if it is designated to have a specific population density and size based on the latest United States Census Bureau (Johnson et al., 2011). For this study, it is important to understand what is meant when referring to rural areas in order to distinguish between school district demographics. Understanding what characteristics make a school district rural can help in identifying the obstacles faced by a superintendent in these settings. In a research study by Preston and Barnes (2017), students in rural schools made up 24% of the national student population. This research additionally cited that one third of the schools in the United States were categorized as rural. The difference in school size and demographics lends itself to making it difficult for superintendents of rural school districts to navigate the daily challenges they face.

Showalter et al. (2019) detailed in *"Why rural matters 2018 – 2019: The time is now"* that rural education faces assorted challenges that include inequities in per student spending, teacher salaries, reliance on local tax bases, obtaining adequate college preparatory programming, and widespread poverty. In addition to those challenges, diversity is also present in the rural school setting, creating both a challenge and an opportunity (McHenry-Sorber, 2019). Examining diversity in rural school districts, Greenough and Nelson (2015) divided the term rural into three sub-categories to show the relationship between a rural community's distinctive characteristics and the level of isolation: remote, rural / distant, and rural fringe. Greenough and Nelson (2015) found that ethnic representation in rural settings noted Native American students were five times as likely as White students to be in remote settings and Hispanic, Asian, and Black students were five times less likely to be in remote and rural / distant schools. Their work also highlighted an important economic diversity finding stating that 57% of remote students, 49% of distant students, and 39% of fringe students qualified for free or reduced food programs (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). Adding to the natural challenges that rural educational communities encounter is the lack of support from state agencies and professional resources. The importance of this lack of resources and support is that rural superintendents must include advocating for students in their local community to the already lengthy list of duties for the rural superintendent. In rural districts, there exists a

threat of being overshadowed by larger districts for a limited pool of resources and money. The necessity to advocate for essential personnel, money, and outside professional expertise adds another complexity to the role of the rural superintendent.

Showalter et al. (2019) emphasized that the challenges rural schools face is exacerbated by state and federal governance bodies focusing their attention more on larger populated school districts. The dominance of attention to the plight of urban school districts in the United States has caused a shortage of educational policy in rural settings that has contributed to the inability of closing the performance gap and resources that exist between rural and urban settings (Showalter et al., 2019). Despite the lack of resources and acknowledgement from state agencies, an example of the potential academic progress in rural settings taken from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2018–2019 state assessment scores showcase rural students outscoring non-rural peers (McHenry-Sorber, 2019). Despite the challenges in rural education settings, gains in student achievement are possible despite the amount of challenges that exist. To achieve this success, administrators in rural environments need to address existing factors such as lack of resources and challenges attracting teaching staff to isolated areas. These factors can also be linked to superintendent turnover and the amount of involvement and support from the local community.

Rural superintendents are challenged in multiple ways. Community support can often assist superintendents in meeting these challenges. Successful rural leaders found ways to incorporate patron-centered leadership with aspects of leading change and being an agent of change (Preston & Barnes, 2017). More specifically, collaboration between community and rural school staff and administration supported the day-to-day activities in these settings when trust between the community and the school existed. Trust also allowed the curricular needs of the district to be better addressed (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Leaders that share ownership by developing and cultivating a positive climate can improve staff and student performance (DeMarco & Gutmore, 2021). Developing opportunities for collective work and engagement of teachers is important because teachers often look to fellow educators for instructional ideas (Henry et al., 2021). This collegiality in rural settings is especially important because there are a smaller number of teachers and instructional support personnel. In a study conducted by Johnson et al. (2011) in Kentucky, there was no evidence that the performance of students attending school in rural settings and the academic challenges faced by rural administrators played a role in superintendent turnover. In these identified school districts, strong correlational patterns, however, existed between superintendent turnover and district demographics such as enrollment size and fiscal resources (Johnson et al., 2011). In addition, the study showed there was not enough evidence to support a correlation between rural and non-rural school districts with regards to differences in the amounts of superintendent turnover (Johnson et al., 2011). The next section will elaborate on the existing literature studying change leadership.

Change

Understanding and managing change in rural schools is imperative. In a study by Schein (1984), it was found that a new leader coming into an organizational environment from outside of the system can uncover unconscious assumptions about relationships and daily behaviors by asking appropriate questions to staff members who are inside the organization. In another study, McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) found that the rural superintendent must be the bridge between the school and the community to communicate and lead effective change. In rural communities, building a line of communication can be the difference between the superintendent being considered an insider or outsider in the community (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). These findings support that meaningful change is supported by trust and involvement of the staff in the organization (Oreg et al., 2011). The study conducted by Oreg et al. (2011) further substantiated that clear expectations and helping staff better understand the personal impact of a proposed change lessens the ambiguity of the process and puts the organization at ease (Oreg et al., 2011).

In an academic article focused on superintendent leadership written by Kersten (2009), outgoing superintendents can be involved in the selection process of the incoming superintendent through identifying possible internal candidates, supporting the planning and implementation of the hiring process, and contract development. Additionally, Kersten (2009) noted it is important for the outgoing superintendent to have the support of the local school board when discerning their level of involvement in hiring and transition procedures. It is common for the superintendent's performance during their tenure to influence the willingness of the school board to seek the outgoing superintendent's input and involvement. According to Wilson (2019), school boards navigating the impact and magnitude of change caused by superintendent turnover, can involve utilization of third party organizations. In these instances, the third-party representative acting as a liaison between the outgoing superintendent and local school board, can mitigate sensitive issues. A supportive school board not only increases the likelihood of the superintendent staying in the district for a longer tenure but also increases the ability to draw in quality superintendent applicants both externally and internally (Kamrath, 2022). For the school board, the decision of whether to promote from within or hire from outside the district affects the direction the district will travel. Hiring from within the district can be viewed as a desire to maintain current leadership practices, while a hire from the outside can signal the desire to deviate from previous practices, thus creating opportunity for change (Shuler, 2016). In a superintendent transition involving the hiring of a superintendent from outside the school district, it is important for the outgoing superintendent to make themselves available to the incoming superintendent for the purpose of sharing information (Farley, 2024). If communication does not exist between the outgoing and incoming superintendents, it is important for the incoming superintendent to have identified individuals already in the district that are able to communicate the traditions and nuances of the district to avoid missteps in regard to the traditions of the district (Farley, 2024). This perspective is critical to taking steps in leading change.

As a new superintendent steps into the executive leadership role, knowledge of the political landscape and decisions related to the readiness of the district to embark on redesign of organizational priorities or change resulting from leadership style is paramount. In a study by Davidson et al. (2021), survey results showed that newly hired superintendents in their respective districts viewed the outgoing superintendent as not being helpful during the transition period. Important to this study's findings is that 22.5% of the outgoing superintendents responding to the survey had been terminated or non-renewed (Davidson et al., 2021). The research study also acknowledged the nature or reason for the outgoing superintendent's exit influencing the level of support they were allowed to offer the incoming superintendent (Davidson et al., 2021). The study showed that internally hired superintendents viewed the outgoing superintendent support as more helpful than externally hired superintendents (Davidson et al., 2021). Familiarity between the outgoing superintendent and the internal replacement, along with board relations, played a role in those situations. Responses from incoming superintendents studied in this research cited fellow superintendents, district level administration, and administrative assistants as more supportive than outgoing superintendents (Davidson et al., 2021). A new superintendent means change is coming. In leading change, understanding the context of a local school district and community is central to any decisions, small or large, made by the incoming superintendent.

Leadership Transition

Transitions can provide leaders with challenges they have not faced in past leadership experiences (Riordan, 2008). Individuals navigating leadership transitions during their career must be willing to be agile and show adaptability in learning new skills that help achieve success in their new roles. A frequent transition leaders face is the change in job/role (Riordan, 2008). Managing a transition requires the leader to make a conscientious decision to either adjust expectations important to the new environment or move forward to establish their own style and hope it fits the new landscape. The level of performance that encompasses the leader's ability to navigate a transition is determined by the leader's ability to manage the foreign inputs they face in the new environment (Riordan, 2008). Leaders can navigate transitions successfully when they change their mindset or ways of thinking, develop the new skills and competencies needed in the different environment, and adapt their behavior to a new environment (Riordan, 2008).

Transitions to environments that have experienced high performance traditionally present a unique setting for leadership transition. These specific environments present a challenge because the districts have practices and routines worth keeping, results that need to be maintained, and relationships that must be sustained (Christy, 2009). Identifying these areas is a task that needs to be addressed initially during a leadership transition (Christy, 2009). Effective steps for transition for the incoming superintendent identified in Christy (2009) include: 1) identifying features worth saving, 2) communicating throughout the organization, 3) building strong management teams, 4) completing major tasks before the current leader departs, 5) recruiting and training of new leaders, and 6) building social networks. These steps are not all-encompassing but they are important

because they create a deeper knowledge of self within the organization (Christy, 2009). This research validates the need for new executive leaders to offer an array of communication methods, opportunities for staff ownership, and a shared desire by all for the success of the organization.

Leadership transitions contain a level of peril and do not always turn out successful. Leadership turnover contributes to a decline in student achievement (Meyers et al., 2021). In the study by Meyers et al. (2021), data showed the difference between superintendent tenure length in achievement decline over two years as opposed to the rise of achievement over three years. In another study, Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2009), showed that leaders entering a new organization have an increased risk of failure because of the needs required during a transition period. This outside transition is difficult and requires the leader to take more of an active approach in developing relationships with inherited employees. This study articulated a transition period model that could be utilized by new leaders and teams (Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2009). There are two levels involved in this model. During the first level, the leader needs to manage impressions, seek feedback, and align expectations (Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2009). Following this initial phase, communication between the new leader and their employees unfolds and reciprocal communication is developed. This fosters ways to navigate and manage stress through stronger relationships, which makes up the second phase proposed in this model (Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2009). Transitioning into a new leadership role can be a stressful situation and setting appropriate expectations and developing supportive relationships can aid in addressing uncertainty, which contributes to stress and anxiety (Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2009). Following this process, increases the likelihood of a successful transition, producing higher levels of team productivity, healthy relationships, and reduction in leadership stress (Manderscheid & Ardichvili, 2009). Additionally, Alanoglu and Karabatak (2022) found that during transition, successful leaders took on the mindset of maintaining organizational culture and committing to the professional growth of others.

Methodology

The methodology implemented for the study to generate data was based on case study principles that involved interviews as the main data collection tool (Stake, 1995). The comprehensive data collection for the dissertation included the use of a survey, however, the survey data is not included in this article. The focus of this article utilized interviews to generate data to identify the steps taken by the outgoing superintendent to support the incoming superintendent before the leadership change. Data focused on the self-perception of the outgoing superintendent on leadership behaviors utilized in the school district setting. The researcher used interview recordings along with an additional interview with the outgoing superintendent to follow-up on key components and to fill any knowledge gaps in the initial interview transcript materials.

Additionally, the researcher used Roger's Diffusion of Innovations (2003) as a theoretical framework to connect the findings of this case study. The Diffusion of Innovations theory (Rogers, 2003) provides an outline for the findings of the actions

conducted by the outgoing superintendent during the initial stages of the transition period. Rogers' (2003) theory consists of a five-step process that includes knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. Knowledge occurs when the individual learns of the innovation or develops an understanding of the innovation. Persuasion is an individual's perception of innovation. The third step in the process focuses on decision-making, where an individual receives information and then chooses whether to embrace and utilize the information (Rogers, 2003). Implementation occurs when innovation or change is utilized. Confirmation occurs following implementation when the effectiveness and results are considered. (Rogers, 2003). In this study, the outgoing superintendent's departure and the arrival of an incoming superintendent with different ideas is the innovation.

Findings

Findings from the interviews with the outgoing superintendent in the selected rural school district included insights into their individual thinking, methods of approaching a leadership transition, and the communication that occurred with the various groups of stakeholders in the district. The original intent of the interviews was to analyze the leadership behaviors exhibited from both the outgoing and incoming superintendents during the transition period. In this article, findings focus on the interview transcript review of the outgoing superintendent and highlighting the diligence in ensuring steps that were taken to provide a smooth transition for both the district and the incoming superintendent. The findings from the interviews included the intentionality of time, service towards the district, and communicating with key stakeholders.

Establishing a Timeframe

Time played a role in a variety of ways during this superintendent transition. For the outgoing superintendent, sharing the knowledge they had with the board of education was strategic. Following Roger's Diffusion of Innovations theory (2003), the outgoing superintendent shared their intent to retire with the board of education, the group holding the highest amount of influence in the transition. The outgoing superintendent provided the board with over a year and a half notice of their intent to retire. Experience in the superintendent role and working in the same state for the entirety of their career provided the outgoing superintendent with knowledge about the hiring landscape for superintendents. The purpose for the length of this timeline was to give the school district plenty of time to hire a replacement. The desire to retire for the outgoing superintendent wasn't a new feeling, but outside circumstances had left the outgoing superintendent feeling drained, "I didn't know if I could put full energy into it and it was probably a good time [to retire]". Acknowledging the external environment within the state regarding education, the outgoing superintendent felt that over a year and half notice would allow for the completion of projects currently underway in the district, including a bond issue to occur. The outgoing superintendent stated, "You know, when I would think about trying to make it to a certain year, I realized one year wasn't gonna be that big of a deal and I could stay to complete the bond issue." For the outgoing superintendent, a year allowed time to pass the bond putting the district and incoming superintendent in the best possible

position. Throughout the study, this and other examples of leadership showed the investment the outgoing superintendent had in the district.

The persuasion aspect of Diffusion of Innovations theory (Rogers, 2003) came following the retirement announcement of the outgoing superintendent. The outgoing superintendent encountered a range of reactions to the announcement to retire, including requests to stay in the position. For the outgoing superintendent, the decision was final and this sentiment was communicated to the board of education and traveled through various stakeholder groups in the district. As this message spread, the outgoing superintendent led through their words and actions and stayed consistent in their decision to retire from the position in the established timeframe. Helping the district accept this as a reality was a focus of the outgoing superintendent. As the district got closer to the end of the outgoing superintendent's tenure each day , the outgoing superintendent kept the end in mind. During the transition time period, the superintendent focused on closure of their tenure and the beginning of a new phase of leadership. The outgoing superintendent was intentional in the process and worked to finish important aspects of the position such as the voting process for a bond issue, project completions, and routine requirements of implementing state level mandates. The outgoing superintendent led from a directional standpoint. In addition to the daily roles of the position, the outgoing superintendent influenced the perceptions of district stakeholders through the pacing of projects and outlined work they needed to complete before the incoming superintendent officially joined the district.

Creating a Clear Endpoint

One frequently mentioned strength of the outgoing superintendent's leadership focus was their devotion to the school district. When implementing the third phase of decision in Roger's Diffusion of Innovations theory (Rogers, 2003), the outgoing superintendent spent time with individuals and groups to cultivate a setting that would allow the incoming superintendent and staff to start fresh. Specifically, the outgoing superintendent stated, "[I spent time] trying to mentor them [staff] and work with them. You know, getting them [staff] to understand that you know, you're [the outgoing superintendent] going to be in charge. Your [school principal] is in charge of your buildings but you're going to be working with the new superintendent." Using the bond issue as an example, the outgoing superintendent chose to close out projects that could put the incoming superintendent in a position where the opinions and perceptions of the community had the potential to turn negative. This was not something that was out of the ordinary for the outgoing superintendent to do during their tenure. The outgoing superintendent did not avoid issues and their familiarity with the community and close ties to the school validated the decision to lead the district and community through the bond issue. As a servant of the district, having spent the majority of their career in the district and community, it was important to also leave the stakeholders in the best possible position.

As the board of education worked their way through the hiring process for a new superintendent, they sought out thoughts and opinions from the outgoing superintendent.

Being mindful of the fact that the board of education was responsible for the hiring decision, the outgoing superintendent offered their thoughts on key questions asked by the board. The outgoing superintendent went on to say "I got a call [from the board of education president], who had some questions about what I, you know, what I thought [of the superintendent applicants] and I gave them my thoughts." This advice ranged from thoughts on questions and answers the board had received during interviews to statements made by the applicants. The outgoing superintendent stayed in a supportive role so that the decision stayed with the board of education. Information from years of service to the district was saved and prepared to be given to the board of education clerk and incoming superintendent. New staff hired during the time between the announcement of the outgoing superintendent's retirement and the start of the incoming superintendent's tenure were coached as to what their jobs consisted of in general, but never to the expectations of the outgoing superintendent. Instead, newly hired staff were placed in a position to be prepared to serve the district, which was a neutral position, readying them for the impending direction of the incoming superintendent. While preparing the district for the future superintendent, the outgoing superintendent began to phase out of the future direction and decisions of the district. The outgoing superintendent created a path for the district to pivot the direction it was heading based on the decisions of the board of education and the incoming superintendent.

Communicating with the Future in Mind

The outgoing superintendent was skilled in effective communication. This leader possessed clear communication skills that allowed a focus during the phases of implementation and confirmation aligned to the Diffusion of Innovations theory (Rogers, 2003). Acting as a servant of the district meant that the outgoing superintendent's actions reflected a clear focus on the district, not the leadership. Accompanying these actions was communication between the outgoing superintendent and those involved in the transition between superintendents. The outgoing superintendent first focused on their communication with the board of education. By starting with the governing body of the district, the superintendent was able to establish practices that would continue through the transition period, including the closing out of major projects. This was strategic and allowed for a fresh start for both the incoming superintendent and the school district. The goal was to share necessary information with key stakeholders who would carry on in formal district positions and with informal community groups as important influencers during the actual transition and superintendent change. In doing so, the outgoing superintendent began to phase out as the central figure of the school district.

As the year and a half notice whittled away and the natural processes of the superintendent search came and went, the outgoing superintendent's willingness to be involved did not waiver. The outgoing superintendent communicated with staff and stakeholders in a way that signified the eventual end of their tenure. Conversations were directed towards future ambiguities such as what leadership style would be in place after the outgoing superintendent left. The outgoing superintendent maintained neutrality during these critical conversations and did not lean towards a preferred direction when topics

were brought up. Written communication was also handled in the same manner. Plans were developed to guide the incoming superintendent who lacked knowledge of the district's traditions and history. Information that had been solely held by the outgoing superintendent was recorded, collected, and stored to ensure a smooth transfer between superintendents. New hires. such as an operations director, received training about the entire realm of district facilities and operations instead of only the pertinent pieces included in current position responsibilities. Administrators seeking answers were met with guiding questions and more autonomy to complete the tasks on their own. Conversations and inquiries with stakeholders from the community were met with responses that were carefully crafted as to not affect anything the incoming superintendent or board of education might want to undertake. Instead of sharing currently held opinions, the responses by the outgoing superintendent were supportive of a future direction yet to be determined. The goal of these conversations was to create an opportunity for the incoming superintendent to be judged fairly by the community. Trips out into the community such as the golf course or grocery store required the superintendent to be aware and prepared for interested parties to solicit the outgoing superintendent's thoughts. The outgoing superintendent possessed a keen understanding about how their actions would affect the opportunities of the new superintendent to be accepted by internal and external stakeholders. This statement provides an illustration of how they approached this challenge, "I don't want to be somebody looming over the top trying to nitpick or criticize or anything even if I have an opinion on something." Their actions were deliberate and were critical in ensuring the district would move on.

Recommendations

The findings of this case study guide the recommendations of the researcher. Variables such as the relationship between the outgoing superintendent and the board of education, reason for the outgoing superintendent's departure, and availability of all parties can influence the level of involvement aimed to support the incoming superintendent. The recommendations include exercising individual and situational leadership, developing a system of communication, and respectful communication between superintendents.

Exercise Individual and Situational Based Leadership Behaviors

The first recommendation for leading as a superintendent of a rural school district during a time of transition is to focus on both individual and situational leadership behaviors. Preferably, the actions of the leader should always be focused on a direction to ensure the long-term stability of the district. This should begin during the first days on the job and throughout a superintendent's tenure. The ability to determine what factors contribute to an effective leadership style can take time to identify and should be fluid as new influences are introduced to the district. To be fluid in leadership styles, the superintendent needs to make decisions and act in a way that will keep the district in a positive position. To do this, the leader needs to be open with members of the district and community about these needs and preferences and what the leader deems as important to the success of the district. A superintendent who can pivot between leadership styles

understands that the position of superintendent is larger than one person. They need to act as the caretaker. An uncomfortable fact of any leadership position is that eventually there will be an end point. As a superintendent, the tenure is affected by numerous factors, sometimes out of the superintendent's control. Understanding the purpose of meeting the expectations of the school board, who represent the community, is the priority of the superintendent and time should be devoted to nurturing this relationship. The role of the rural superintendent is to be the caretaker of the school district and to help others influence the day-to-day needs that ultimately affect the students and contribute to positive student performance. The outgoing superintendent stated, "As a district leader, you cannot do everything." Leaders observed in adaptive situations use past experiences and routines to help them navigate complex situations, which also lead to the development of unconventional strategies to solve potential problems (Hemmer & Eiliffin, 2020). Establishing practices that are meant to ensure stability in the district can set a positive course for the district, no matter when a superintendent transition occurs. In this study, the outgoing superintendent shared "As an administrator, the more years that I stayed, the more I became entwined with the school community." This creates a feeling of responsibility for the district and its future. Possessing attributes of multiple leadership frameworks helps keep the end in mind and helps prepare a district for an inevitable transition in the superintendent role.

Respectful Communication Between Superintendents

Setting boundaries extends to individuals hired in the district, including a new superintendent. Boundaries change, but as the leader of the school district, the outgoing superintendent has the responsibility to engage with the school board and the incoming superintendent to assess the level of need or interest in their involvement. In the setting studied in this research, the outgoing superintendent exhibited leadership behaviors that were classified as transformational, distributive, and servant (Farley, 2024). A leader that exhibits servant leadership traits nurtures individual development in the organization through listening, empathy, stewardship, and the awareness needed to build strong ethics and interpersonal relations between staff (Hoy & Miskel, 2012.) Transformational leadership is a form of leadership that is proactive and raises the awareness and achievement levels of its followers (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). A leader who utilizes distributive leadership skills embraces the development of teams and groups to facilitate tasks across an organization (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). Each of these leadership frameworks share the characteristic of the leader being the needed catalyst to achieve the end goal of each framework. For the outgoing superintendent in this study, the school board expressed their desire for the superintendent's involvement in the transition of superintendents. Although the incoming superintendent was experienced, they recognized the importance and need for accepting support. The level of support the incoming superintendent in this research required was less than what an inexperienced superintendent may have needed. The outgoing superintendent had to manage requests for continued involvement with the board of education and balance the limited involvement in board of education questions important to the incoming superintendent as they assumed leadership in the district. Additionally, the outgoing superintendent felt strongly about being a support to the

incoming superintendent, “It's important for someone to be able to help the superintendent coming in to identify someone they can trust and someone they can go to.” In this situation, clear communication about the intent of continued contact of the outgoing superintendent and phasing out this contact was paramount to everyone involved in the transition. In superintendent transitions, the outgoing superintendent needs to have a conversation with the school board to understand their expectations in offering support to the incoming superintendent. It is important to understand that the decisions made by the outgoing superintendent towards the end of their tenure will affect the transition and start of the incoming superintendent. An outgoing superintendent who can separate themselves from the district as the district moves forward with a new leadership style is critically important during the leadership transition.

Developing a System of Communication

Successful leadership is dependent on the transfer of information. Communication between a superintendent and a school board affects the tenure of a superintendent. In this study, the outgoing superintendent shared the following, “Sometimes it’s scary when you tell the board what you think personally or if they don't agree with you but if they want to know the truth, I have always told them”. The outgoing superintendent communicated with transparency. It is important to understand this practice and implement it early as a superintendent. The importance of this practice does not diminish when a leadership transition occurs at the superintendent level. Exchanging information is an important element of carrying forth the responsibilities of the rural superintendent role and responsibilities. This case study highlighted a district in a small rural community in which the outgoing superintendent held many jobs and responsibilities. The outgoing superintendent knew information ranging from the history of negotiations in the district to the location of the water shut off valve for the elementary school building. During and up to the end of their tenure, the outgoing superintendent collected information and materials to share with not only the incoming superintendent, but also other leaders in current positions who needed that information as well. In this case, much of the material was saved digitally, but the method does not matter as much as the presence of this strategy. As an outgoing superintendent, fulfilling the day-to-day duties of the district, while ensuring the history, traditions, and values of the community is recorded before departure and transition is essential. Leaving an incoming superintendent and the district without this vital information can inhibit the transition and responsiveness of the new superintendent and his/her leadership. In situations where the school board does not seek input from the outgoing superintendent during a transition, securing a solid foundation of historical information from the outgoing superintendent can serve as a catalyst for accomplishing this goal. This also allows the incoming superintendent to access and better understand the district community while respecting requested boundaries. Practicing superintendents need to focus on collecting and preparing the information they have accrued during their tenure with those who will remain in the district.

Future Research

The data collected for this study came from an outgoing superintendent choosing to

retire, resulting in an upcoming superintendent transition. Superintendents leave school districts for a variety of reasons. The reason for departure can be relationships between the school board and superintendent, the school staff and superintendent, and the greater community and the superintendent. Future research should explore the different scenarios causing superintendent transitions and deeply study them, creating a greater understanding of how these varied situations inform and impact the transition needs and strategies between the outgoing and incoming superintendent. Although common sense strategies exist for any transition, the ability for outgoing superintendents to support the district and incoming superintendent is affected by the type of departure causing the transition, thus requiring further investigation. As well, the size, location, and organizational structure of a district may impact the superintendent transition, thus, needing further investigation.

Conclusion

The study examined the role of an outgoing superintendent in supporting the incoming superintendent and district during a leadership transition. The studied setting involved an outgoing superintendent who had chosen to retire. Existing literature supports the idea that the reason for the departure can affect the level of support a superintendent is able to provide. The outgoing superintendent in this research established the timeframe for the transition, created a clear endpoint, and communicated with the end in mind. The outgoing superintendent in the study provided the school board with a firm timeline for their departure and immediately began prepping and communicating with staff in beneficial ways, allowing the transition to a new superintendent and leadership style to thrive. The results of the study in this rural school district support the following recommendations: 1) Exercise individual and situational based leadership behaviors, 2) Maintain respectful communication between superintendents, and 3) Develop a system of communication. Future studies need to explore the effect on the variety of reasons that can lead to an outgoing superintendent's departure and identify beneficial strategies in these situations to support the leadership transition. When an outgoing superintendent can effectively support the incoming superintendent and the board of education during their departure, the district is better suited to navigate through the superintendent transition and maintain a focus on student learning.

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Key Factors in Teacher Retention in K-6 Schools in South Suburban Chicago, Illinois

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This study was conducted to discover what veteran teachers in Chicago South Suburban School Districts felt were leading factors that have or would lead to teacher retention in local school districts. Veteran teachers from multiple elementary schools were surveyed and interviewed to discover what is and is not working for them in their schools. The questions and responses were sorted into the roles of human, social, structural, and psychological capital determinants needed to retain teachers. Findings were compounded and shared through the narratives of these teachers in the study's results.

Keywords: teacher retention, veteran teachers, teacher autonomy

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of veteran K-6 teachers in the South Cook Region of suburban Chicago, Illinois, regarding the role of human, social, structural, and psychological capital as they relate to teacher retention. This study uses the "Mason and Matas" Theoretical Framework (2015) to guide the questioning into four major capital components related to teacher retention. Veteran teachers were surveyed and interviewed to discover how to slow the amount of teacher attrition in local schools.

The research questions that guided this study were: (1) How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of human capital regarding teacher retention; (2) How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of social capital regarding teacher retention; (3) How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of structural capital regarding teacher retention; and (4) How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of psychological capital regarding teacher retention?

Review of Literature

The Review of Literature is sorted into four main areas that correlate with a capital section of the framework. It includes a highlighted finding from each of the original components of the review. For the human capital section, the review will discuss professional development. For the social capital section, the review will discuss teacher burnout. For the structural capital section, the review will discuss the effects of teacher shortage. Finally, for the psychological capital section, the review will discuss student behavior.

Professional Development and Educational Stipends

Professional development can support teachers (Clausen et al., 2020; Haug & Mork., 2021; See et al., 2020; Toropova et al., 2021). Schools can enhance teacher skills through professional development. They can do this through external training programs or by facilitating internal workshops where educators exchange successful classroom strategies.

Some teachers find professional development to be supportive in their jobs. Toropova et al. (2021) found a direct relationship between teacher satisfaction and teachers with more exposure to professional development. Additionally, See et al. (2020) found a correlation between offering professional development, especially early in a career, that leads to teacher retention. This evidence demonstrates a powerful desire among teachers to improve their skills, but they require accessible opportunities to do so.

However, the literature states that *not all* teachers agree about professional development, as some do not find it effective (Lander et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2019; Sancar et al., 2021). Martin et al. (2019) said that teacher input is needed when choosing professional development so that teachers truly get what they need. Sancar et al. (2021) stated that collaboration between teachers is needed to find professional development that fits all teachers' needs.

Teacher Burnout

While the need for teachers with experience is important, those experienced teachers are burning out (Haydon et al., 2018; Madigan & Kim, 2021). Teacher burnout in recent years has been significant. Madigan and Kim (2021) said that job demands, and dissatisfaction can lead to burnout in any career. They shared that when job demands are manageable and resources are plentiful, employees experience satisfaction. Conversely, excessive demands and insufficient resources contribute to burnout. They stated that teachers who work in a demanding district with low resources will be pushed to leave. Haydon et al. (2018) shared that teachers are constantly overloaded with work and do not have the autonomy to make decisions for their students and in their classroom, and this lack of choice leads to unhappiness and the need to leave.

One question in the literature is whether teachers who stay in their district for many years believe they have the necessary resources to handle their job demands. It is also important to determine if schools are using their resources to support staff, which could be a reason for teacher loyalty. Gunther (2019) said that teachers respond to both monetary and non-monetary incentives. Some nonmonetary incentives Gunther discovered were manageable class sizes, curricular autonomy, and administrative support. If burnout can be avoided, teachers might consider staying in districts. Understanding what support systems retain experienced teachers can help other districts implement similar programs to prevent teacher burnout.

Teacher Shortage Effects

A teacher shortage begins with a large amount of teacher turnover (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond**,** 2019; García & Weiss**,** 2019). García and Weiss (2019) said the recent and current teacher shortage crisis is real and worse than anyone had predicted. They said that a shortage of teachers harms students, teachers, and public education as a whole. This harm is particularly true for suburban schools like South Cook in Illinois because Goldhaber et al. (2021) said that fewer teachers are hired in suburban districts than in urban or rural schools, and this is because more teachers with emergency credentials are offered positions in areas aside from suburban schools.

Franchi (2020) offered a new perspective when considering the effects on students when teacher shortages occur. When teaching lacks variety in techniques and approaches, students may struggle to find optimal learning pathways. While they might manage basic tasks, limited exposure to diverse, skilled teachers hinders their development and ultimately creates a broader societal issue that will lead to new problems in future years.

Student Behavior

Teacher behavior and perspectives affect students. Student behavior and perspectives affect teachers. Kim et al. (2018) said that the rise in student behavior problems, particularly severe behaviors, is related to the lack of teacher retention in schools. Disruptive student behavior across the country has led many schools to

implement character education programs. This finding is evidence of another new task for teachers because teaching this and the typical core curriculum falls on them. Kim et al. said that these social-emotional lessons and practices are needed more and more for student behaviors, and their need and execution lead to more job dissatisfaction for teachers.

Some promising evidence suggests these programs can be beneficial for new teachers. Corcoran and O'Flaherty (2022) said that because these programs have more recently been implemented in many schools, the newer teachers who have been through the student teaching programs have had an opportunity to practice using and adjusting to the curriculum in their daily lesson plans. Corcoran and O'Flaherty said that because the practice is not a "new thing" for novice teachers to implement like veteran teachers, its execution will be more effective in changing student behaviors and thus positively impacting teachers.

Spanke et al. (2022) discussed this as a reactionary tactic to teacher retention and dissatisfaction. They said this practice responds to difficult students when the energy and effort could be better served to prepare novice teachers to cope with adversity and hard-to-teach children. According to them, this change would improve teachers' ability to withstand the difficulties they may face throughout their careers, from student misconduct to unexpected future situations.

Theoretical Framework

This study was conducted using Mason and Matas's (2015) "Four Capital Teacher Retention Framework. This theoretical framework states that the integration of four capitals (human, social, structural, and positive psychological) is what leads to teacher retention or departure. Mason and Matas stated that teachers are typically retained if they are satisfied in all four components, which relates to this study because it assisted in finding major factors of whether teachers would be retained.

The findings of the case study were condensed and shared using Mason and Matas's framework, which predicted that four interacting theories could lead to teacher retention. Noel and Finnochio (2022) stated that this theory dives into what keeps teachers in their profession aside from any monetary incentive. Additionally, Firkhan Ali Bin Hamid Ali et al. (2021) said that if human needs are not met, they will subsequently fail to achieve self-satisfaction. The person in question will not be able to develop, grow, or feel satisfied in their job. Instead, they will try to meet these needs in other places, and in this case, other districts. Discovering what districts offer that meet these needs was critical to understanding how some districts have higher retention rates.

Design and Method

This study used a qualitative methodology and a descriptive case study design. Qualitative research effectively gave the tools to learn about the participants' experiences and opinions. Qualitative research was best suited to provide meaningful answers and depth to the research questions in this study. Educators were able to give feedback

through the research question that addressed the problem wholly and in a narrative manner to fulfill the purpose of this study.

A survey was created to recruit potential participants from the sampling frame on social media platforms like Facebook. The survey included informed consent, the purpose statement and goal of the study, the inclusion criteria of teachers adhering to the guidelines of 11 years or more in the same district in the South Cook Region, and space to provide contact information of the participant for me to be contacted for an interview.

The sample consisted of eight veteran teachers who volunteered for this population. The eight survey participants were chosen from different districts to get a diverse sample and avoid a single workplace bias. Various teachers of different backgrounds, lengths of tenure, and different school districts were selected to get a variety of experiences.

Limitations

The research focused solely on participant perceptions and beliefs, lacking objective data like academic performance and district retention rates. The small sample size, typical of case studies, and potential self-selection bias among motivated participants could limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, some participants might have provided socially acceptable responses rather than their genuine views.

The mode of interview might have been a limitation. Zoom can cause technological problems and restrict observations that may have been seen in person. There might have been a lack of human connection and sharing because it was done over video. The video recording process might have made participants anxious, possibly hindering them from fully expressing their true thoughts and feelings despite assurances of confidentiality. However, the secure and private nature of the recordings was emphasized.

Findings

Eight teachers from four school districts in the South Cook Region participated in the study. They varied in age, race, and position. They all met the inclusion data of teaching in the K-6 grade bracket in the South Cook Region and had been teaching in their district for at least 11 years.

Research Question 1

How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of human capital regarding teacher retention?

Teachers report widespread dissatisfaction with current professional development practices. They cited a lack of choice, relevant opportunities, and alignment with district needs. They believe professional development could be beneficial if redesigned.

The feedback through questionnaire and interviews indicated that teachers like professional development and consider the concept of this type of reinforcement for teachers to be potentially beneficial when used correctly. Five teachers explicitly said they would like an opportunity to choose the professional development they are provided with.

Two educators said that there are repeated professional developments that they feel waste their time watching, and they would like to see something else. One teacher gave this advice:

Give teachers more options, don't force all the teachers to go to the exact same presentations that they don't feel as relevant to what they're teaching in their grade levels. For instance, in early childhood, they don't need the same progression and professional development as a middle schooler. That's just completely different behaviors that you're seeing, and also developmental levels of the students. So, they don't need the exact same professional development. Maybe more choice, like a choice board type of thing, like they want us to do in our classrooms. They should do this also.

This teacher desires the same level of support and care from their administrators as they are expected to provide their students.

One teacher said professional development is unrelated to her job. Another educator said there are better professional developments for her to experience. Finally, another said the range of options for professional development is limited. These teachers felt that they would feel more aided if professional development were on a topic they could choose or that felt more relevant to them and their skills.

Based on the questionnaire, only one person said that the administration offers choices in professional development. The seven others state that the administration does not ask teachers for their opinions or conduct a poll. Then, it seems they do not use the poll results to choose professional development. Thus, the other seven feel as though the administration is not interested in the input of their needs.

Two teachers reported redundant professional development, leading to feelings of wasted time. Two others criticized mandatory training during non-work hours. Furthermore, two teachers were denied funding for external, relevant professional development, and one reported consistent denial of conference attendance requests. She said, “No, they don't let us go. And I've asked, but you know, we have our 'school university,' so they say, let's talk to the instructional coaches. And maybe they (the coach) can put one of those together. So, you can’t go to this conference.”

One teacher said they asked the district to reimburse them for a conference they were excited about and thought there could be great value in. However, the district denied it and said the administration could have an instructional coach “come up with something similar.” When asked if that ever happened, the teacher said it did not, and the coach would not have been qualified to provide the training anyway.

During the interviews, four teachers expressed frustration that administrators, parents, and others frequently point out problems without providing solutions. For example, the administration told teachers in one district that they had problems with test scores or behavior issues, but then the professional development did not align with finding a way to work with such issues. This teacher indicated a desire for training and support in handling these issues, which are currently lacking.

Research Question 2

How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of social capital regarding teacher retention?

Teachers reported feeling overwhelmed, with work encroaching on their personal lives. They see mentoring as a valuable support system. However, they feel that achieving veteran status increases their workload. Even experienced teachers expressed a desire for mentoring.

Possible work/life issues or incentives for employment conditions were considered when relating social capital to teacher retention. Within the questionnaire, teachers were asked what their workload is like in their district, if they feel supported and balanced, what mentoring programs are like in their district, if they feel they have enough time to get their work done, and what could be improved upon regarding employment conditions. In the interview, the participants were asked to expound upon these thoughts and describe what would lead to success for teachers.

The participants' answers resoundingly agreed that they felt overworked and did not have enough time to do the work their district required. Two teachers described the situation as "they put more on our plates and do not take anything off." One said, "So I have to take it home, which then interferes with the home life because like, my husband will be like, oh, are you getting paid to do all that extra work? I'm like, no." The workload is more than can be handled in a normal workday.

Because of the teacher shortage, veteran teachers are overwhelmed with duties, including mentoring new teachers, a role only they can fill. As the shortage worsens, the burden of mentoring falls more heavily on fewer individuals. One respondent clarified the struggle of balance by saying:

Unless you're a teacher who does it all during your plans, which I don't see happening for most teachers, teachers spend their weekends when they should be with their family, working on lesson plans, grading papers and things of that nature. You know, we can always say, 'oh, give them less assignments, but are they going to have a chance to grasp the concept, which therefore is going to tie into the test scores at the end of the year.

This teacher feels trapped in working weekends to get the results needed to be a successful student and teacher.

Nearly all teachers reported a significant work-life imbalance, with some feeling their administration does not prioritize staff well-being. The expectation of completing unfinished work at home was common, leading to strained spousal relationships. Several teachers described their spouses' concerns about the unfair workload and its impact on their time together.

Though mentoring programs often fall on veteran teachers, veteran teachers agree that they do work. All participants interviewed said that it is imperative and beneficial for new teachers. However, one teacher pointed out that sometimes, the new teachers are

not trained in previous programs and that veteran teachers must inevitably show novice teachers how to provide the resources provided by those initial programs. Two teachers stated that they were paid to be mentors and noted that this was a positive part of the process, as it made them feel valued. Those teachers felt they could help new teachers, but as one teacher stated, with a large turnover, there can be many new teachers, and veterans can feel overwhelmed when they are trying to help them all. When asked if they have been mentoring many teachers, one educator said, “Yes, because there aren't many veteran teachers left.” Another said this can be defeating when new teachers leave because they know they will have to do it again next year.

Two teachers stated that they wished mentoring were more available for veteran teachers. During the interview, they both smiled and indicated that, though they are veteran teachers, they know there is more to learn and felt they would benefit from a peer mentor. While coaching is available, a couple of teachers would like advice, time, and help to work with peers. Several teachers indicated they felt the instructional coach did not consider their needs or suggestions and would not take teacher input. One teacher stated that when they all could work together to learn how to work on Zoom during the COVID pandemic, she felt supported. While mentoring is available to some, it is not available to all. One educator said the teachers were treated as heroes when COVID occurred, but were soon forgotten after the students returned to school. This indicated an instability in teacher support from parents, depending on time and circumstances.

Research Question 3

How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of structural capital regarding teacher retention?

Participants were surveyed about their school's leadership and culture to examine the connection between school structure and teacher retention. The questionnaire explored their classroom autonomy, parent involvement, and how student behavior was managed. During interviews, teachers were asked to elaborate on these points and identify factors contributing to teacher success.

Seven of the eight teachers reported having little to no autonomy to choose their curriculum in the questionnaire. Additionally, 2 teachers said they cannot supplement with other curricula. Moreover, only teachers said they receive reimbursement for items they choose if they are allowed to do so in the first place. One educator described how her students were struggling with fractions, and she knew there was a resource they could have purchased and used that would help, but not only was it frowned upon, it was forbidden. Several teachers described the uniqueness of teachers and their ability to see what children need and work with it, and they felt that this uniqueness and opinion are no longer valued. For example, one educator said a teacher’s uniqueness makes the learning experience so special, and they cannot use that “tool” anymore. Three teachers reported that their curriculum is scripted, and they are just reading and doing what the lesson plan says.

One teacher took the time to also add that they do not feel like they are being trained to the fullest in the curriculum. They said:

We have the afternoon to learn about the new curriculum, but like one of the hours (we have two hours) one of the hours is us watching like the intro video and it is self-paced. And I already know the basics. I don't need to spend an hour watching a video telling me how to make things, then the second hour is with the representative. It's only one hour with that person. Like I feel like I needed, like three or four hours or a chunk of time, not just one little hour with this person.

This teacher reveals a desire for more support in understanding and utilizing the provided curriculum, but feels they are unable to access the necessary information.

The interviews revealed an unhealthy school culture, with teachers reporting the loss of senior staff and a longing for a relationship-building principal. One teacher attributed feelings of isolation to the pandemic. Another teacher stated that “morale is fluid” yearly based on these moves. One teacher said they lack connection at school and said, “But the social aspect of our school doesn't bother me because I have friends outside of the school. So, I kind of come in, do my job, and I don't rely on the school for my friendships.” This data shows a disconnect from school and an unhealthy culture.

Without exception, every teacher surveyed reported that student behavior was unmanageable. One stated that they are not allowed to assign punishments that would accompany such behaviors. For two teachers, there is now administrative support for behaviors. Two teachers described that there are behavior officers in place in their building, and their information conflicted. On one hand, one said hers was very beneficial, and on the other, another said the officers did not help as they should have. These teachers are not in the same building, but this data shows the need for an effective officer if one is utilized. A theme from all veteran teachers is that children’s behaviors are much different from those of past years and affect the school day.

Research Question 4

How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of psychological capital regarding teacher retention?

When asking participants about their psychological capital and the components listed in the questionnaire and interview, every teacher described the difference in student behavior from when they started teaching. All teachers described it as out of control and affecting their experience as teachers. Kim et al. (2018) said that there is a rise in severe behaviors in schools related to teacher turnover and retention. Teachers of the South Cook Region wholeheartedly agreed. One teacher described a behavior officer in the building who seemed to help alleviate some of the problems teachers encountered. However, only one building in the study had this type of resource.

Evaluation of the Outcomes

Research Question 1

How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of human capital regarding teacher retention?

The teachers in the study consistently emphasized that effective professional development must be tailored to their individual needs and offer content options to support their growth. This information aligns with Brigani et al. (2019), who found that ineffective professional development exists and has no purpose in eliciting teacher retention. Teachers want to be able to choose what they learn about and have the autonomy to know what they need to become better educators and take those opportunities to grow and change.

Liu and Phelps (2020) stated that there is a possibility of a structural problem with professional development for teachers, and these participants in the South Cook Region confirm this. Teachers stated that professional development is ineffective and not related to the topics they need in their buildings. Additionally, teachers stated they are not incentivized to find outside professional development with reimbursement because they will not be reimbursed. South Cook Region teachers report this lack of autonomy and alignment for teacher needs as a setback for their job satisfaction.

Research Question 2

How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of social capital regarding teacher retention?

Teachers' responses also aligned with Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2018), who said that the time pressure, discipline problems, low student motivation, large student diversity, conflicts with colleagues, lack of administrative support, and role ambiguity added to the many demands placed on teachers. Participants resoundingly stated that they felt there was too much work and insufficient time. They feel that more responsibility and tasks are consistently added, and nothing is removed. They feel overworked and do not have enough time to feel socially fulfilled.

Research Question 3

How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of structural capital regarding teacher retention?

Due to the teacher shortage, veteran teachers find their workload heavier than that of others. They feel they are consistently relied upon to mentor new educators, fill leadership positions, and provide unique support that their experience allows. García and Weiss (2019) said the teacher shortage is real and worse than anyone had predicted, and based on what these teachers are stating, this is true. Participants reported frequent instances of support staff being reassigned to substitute teach due to a shortage of substitutes. They also described situations where student teachers and paraprofessionals were granted emergency licenses to teach full-time. Franchi (2020) said that it would be the students who also suffer from movements like this, as those who are not equipped educationally to teach will not give students the full exposure to the learning they need.

Teachers described class sizes and said that they felt they were too large. Participants said there is a large amount of teacher turnover. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammon (2019) stated that this turnover leads to a shortage. These veteran teachers feel they do not have the culture they once did in their buildings because new teachers are departing, and even veteran teacher friends feel they have the opportunity to make moves in their own careers and are leaving as well. Those who are staying feel they are struggling in their role.

Research Question 4

How did veteran K-6 teachers describe the role of psychological capital regarding teacher retention?

When asking participants about their psychological capital and the components listed in the questionnaire and interview, every teacher described the difference in student behavior from when they started teaching. All teachers described it as out of control and affecting their experience as teachers. Kim et al. (2018) said that there is a rise in severe behaviors in schools related to teacher turnover and retention. Teachers of the South Cook Region wholeheartedly agreed. One teacher described a behavior officer in the building who seemed to help alleviate some of the problems the teachers encountered. However, only one building in the study had this type of resource.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The implications and recommendations for practice in this study directly relate to teachers in the South Cook Region in Cook County, Illinois. If implemented, there could be a higher rate of teacher retention in the region. Veteran teachers gave insights into what currently helps and potential ideas that could aid their school districts in limiting teacher turnover.

The results of this study indicated that teachers want to choose what professional development they attend or what is offered in their district. This aligns with the current research that states teachers want autonomy and well-fitted opportunities. Martin et al. (2019) said that teacher input is needed when choosing professional development so that teachers truly get what they need. Sancar et al. (2021) said collaboration between teachers is needed to find professional development that fits all teachers' needs. Teachers want relevant professional development, including conferences, that directly support their classrooms and align with their needs.

Along with the choice of professional development opportunities, teachers in the South Cook Region want autonomy in their classrooms. These teachers' statements correlate with Fradkin-Hayslip's (2021) findings, which said that research has, for many years, found a correlation between teacher autonomy and job satisfaction and motivation. The South Cook Region teachers also want autonomy to supplement the curriculum to meet students' needs and would like to be reimbursed when such items are needed. Educators feel overburdened and believe their workload should be reevaluated to remove tasks that no longer benefit the school.

Teachers are feeling the implications of the teacher shortage, just as García and Weiss (2019) said they would. García and Weiss said that when there is more teacher turnover, there is a chance the vacancies might not be filled. This can lead to larger class sizes because the districts must combine vacant classrooms, and veteran teachers will begin to feel burnout from supporting their novice teachers. The South Cook Veteran teachers are being asked to carry the weight of responsibilities that used to be shared among a larger number of veteran teachers in buildings. Teachers need support in addressing unfavorable student behaviors. The behaviors affect the school culture and are not appropriately managed by school administrators.

Conclusions

Teacher retention rates have been in crisis for many years, with attrition rates rising between 5% and 8% annually (Goldhaber et al., 2021). The stories these teachers share paint the difficult circumstances that teachers face daily. Lack of support for them in their human, social, psychological, and structural capital leads to high teacher turnover. Experienced teachers who have remained in their districts offered practical and insightful suggestions for improving teacher retention. Administrators can use these direct recommendations to better support their staff. By acting on these recommendations, schools could see a reduction in teacher shortages. This would increase teacher confidence and focus on student needs. Improved retention rates would ease the workload on experienced teachers, creating a positive impact for all and, most importantly, ensuring students receive quality education from committed educators.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire Data

Questionnaire Data	Code	Category	Participants	Theme
PD is chosen by administration	Choice	Human Capital	T1, T4, T6	Teachers want PD choice and options. They want opportunity to pick relevant material in and out of district.
Pd is conducted in summer/on own time	Time	Human Capital	T1, T8	
Pd has choice	Choice	Human Capital	T5	
Wants Admin to ask for input on PD/PD choice	Value	Human Capital	T1, T2, T3, T4, T7	
Would like more support to attend outside conferences	Value	Human Capital	T2, T6	
Not allowed to supplement and curriculum is scripted	Autonomy	Structural Capital	T1, T4, T7	Teachers want autonomy to choose their curriculum or how to support the curriculum. They feel micromanaged, that parents could help more, and that their days are dictated to them. Student Behavior is a major concern. Teachers would like financial support to choose
Allowed to supplement curriculum chosen by teacher committee	Autonomy	Structural Capital	T2, T3	
Opinions and uniqueness are not valued, believes autonomy would help	Value	Structural Capital	T1, T3, T7, T8	
Learning coach does take teacher input	Value	Structural Capital	T1, T5, T7	
Co planning is dictated	Autonomy	Structural	T1	

by admin		Capital		supplemental material.
District gives little to no autonomy to choose curriculum	Autonomy	Structural Capital	T1, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8	
District offers money to for teacher choice to supplement curriculum for their taste	Autonomy	Structural Capital	T3, T7	
Parent Involvement Helps/ Would help	Parent	Structural Capital	T2, T4, T5	
Fellow senior teachers have left	Relationships	Structural Capital	T1, T7	
Feels Micromanaged	Relationships	Structural Capital	T4, T5	
Student Behavior uncontrolled.	Student Behavior	Structural Capital	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8	
Teachers not allowed to give certain punishments	Autonomy	Structural Capital	T1	
Feels like pressure is too much	Stress	Psychological Capital	T1, T5, T6, T7, T8	Teachers feel pressure is too much. They have considered other jobs, but their degree doesn't transfer. Pensions are beneficial to keeping
Staying because urge to teach	Incentive	Psychological Capital	T2	
Staying because no other job for degree	Stuck	Psychological Capital	T1, T4, T5	
Staying for early retirement in age/ Pension	Perk	Psychological Capital	T1, T6, T7	

Pay for after school Meetings/PD would increase retention	Perk	Psychological Capital	T7	teachers. They would like more incentive of pay for veteran status and extra meetings.
Higher Pay in district would lead to retention	Perk	Psychological Capital	T4, T8	
Remote teaching had negative affect	Remote Teaching	Psychological Capital	T1, T2, T5	
Has considered other professions	Stuck	Psychological Capital	T1, T2, T4, T5, T7, T8	
Believes Extra Pay for Veteran Teachers would Incentivize	Incentive	Psychological Capital	T3	
Too many responsibilities to do it all/ need time/less responsibilities	Time	Social Capital	T1, T2, T4, T5, T7, T8	Teachers would like more time to work and fewer responsibilities. The amount of work makes life harder at home. Mentoring does help new teachers.
Wishes mentoring was more specific to teacher needs	Relationships	Social Capital	T6, T7	
Mentoring Program is beneficial to new teachers	Relationships	Social Capital	T2, T4, T5, T7	
District requires too much time dedicated to meetings	Time	Social Capital	T1	
Work situation makes home life harder	Stress	Social Capital	T1, T3, T5, T6, T7	
Morale is fluid based on year	Relationships	Social Capital	T2	

Appendix B

Interview Data

Interview Data	Code	Category	Participants	Theme
Teachers do not have choice in PD	Choice	Human Capital	T1, T3, T4, T7, T8	Teachers would like choice in PD and do not feel they received it. They would like funding to choose when and what they learn about in PD.
Choice for teachers benefits regarding PD	Choice	Human Capital	T2, T3, T4, T7, T8	
PD that gives solutions instead of highlights problems would help	Help	Human Capital	T2, T3, T4, T5	
PDS are often repeated	Help	Human Capital	T4, T8	
PD is cornered into a "hot, new topic"	Unhelpful	Human Capital	T5, T6, T8	
New teachers do not get training on previous programs	Novice	Human Capital	T5, T7	
Workload continues to increase/ not enough time	Time	Social Capital	T1, T3, T5, T7, T8	Teachers feel the workload is too heavy. It is affecting their home life. They feel the expectations are not realistic and no one is supporting them.
Workload affects home life	Time	Social Capital	T1, T3, T7	
Veteran teachers taking on larger workloads to cover for turnover	Time	Social Capital	T2, T7	
No one checking on teachers' work/life balance	Time	Social Capital	T2	

Departmentalizing helped balance	Time	Social Capital	T4	
Plan time gets taken, leads to more stress	Time	Social Capital	T2, T4, T6	
Expectations for student progress is unrealistic	Expectations	Social Capital	T5, T6	
Teachers do not have a voice	Value	Structural Capital	T1, T8	Teachers do not feel they have a voice. They cannot supplement or have to pay for own supplies. They long for relationships and feel isolated.
Supplies and materials not provided	Value	Structural Capital	T6	
Not allowed to supplement and curriculum is scripted	Autonomy	Structural Capital	T1, T7	
Feels micromanaged	Relationships	Structural Capital	T1, T7	
Teachers not trusted/respected for experience	Relationships	Structural Capital	T1, T5, T8	
Covid affected teacher relationships/ separated, isolated	Relationships	Structural Capital	T2, T8	
Longs for principal to build relationships between coworkers	Relationships	Structural Capital	T3	
Student behavior uncontrolled	Student Behavior	Structural Capital	T4	
Class sizes are too large	Class	Structural Capital	T6	

No longer fulfilled	Stuck	Psychological Capital	T1, T5	Teachers are conflicted and there is no clear answer to whether teachers as a majority have job satisfaction.
Conflicted about fulfillment as a teacher	Conflicted	Psychological Capital	T2, T4, T7, T8	
Feels fulfilled in career	Fulfilled	Psychological Capital	T3, T6	