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Sponsorship

The *Journal of Advances in Education* is sponsored by the Office of Academic Affairs and the School of Education at Campbellsville University in Kentucky.

Letter From the Editor

November 30, 2025

The second edition of the *Journal of Advances in Education* comes exactly as planned, six months after the first. This edition continues to honor and move forward the original vision of the journal: a wide scope of topics, nationwide presence, no fees, rapid decision times, and significant feedback provided regarding submissions that were not accepted.

The scope of the second edition includes professional learning, technology, wellness, and cultural diversity. The edition kicks off with an article exploring the connection between professional learning conditions and student achievement, resulting in a very sobering conclusion. Three mini-themes then follow: technology, wellness, and cultural diversity. Two articles explore wellness, one regarding preservice teachers and one regarding current professionals. Two articles explore technology, one pertaining to computer simulations for preservice teachers and the other to flourishing at life in a digital age. Finally, two articles focus on cultural diversity, with one exploring pedagogy for refugee background students and the other translanguaging in a high school classroom.

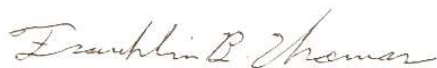
Between the first two editions, seven states are now represented with peer reviewers and/or authors hailing from California, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, South Carolina, and Tennessee. A call for submissions even went out to Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Edition three of the journal, which is anticipated in late May of 2026, has already had three submissions, one of which has been accepted. That article includes authors from Indiana and Wyoming, bringing the number of states represented by some means in the journal to ten.

The original goal was to notify authors whether or not submission guidelines were met within five days. The mean time for this first decision is currently 3.2 days. The original goal was to notify authors whether or not a submission was accepted after peer review within 30 days. The mean time for this decision is currently 17.5 days. When that decision was one of non-acceptance, at least a full page of feedback was provided to the authors.

An upcoming goal for the journal is to get listed with the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) or a similar directory. Even ahead of such listing, according to the service providing the Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) for the articles in the first edition, those articles have been viewed 183 times and downloaded 85 times.

Finally, I would like to thank Vanessa Gonsalves, web and digital marketing specialist with Campbellsville University, for her expertise and patience as she has gone above and beyond to help me with the journal's website.

Happy Reading,



Dr. Franklin B. Thomas, Editor
Journal of Advances in Education

Teacher Professional Learning Conditions and Student Achievement in Kentucky High Schools

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Abstract

Teacher professional learning (PD) is a critical educational investment, yet its link to improved student achievement remains inconsistent. This quantitative study analyzes statewide data from 227 Kentucky high schools, utilizing teacher perceptions from the *Impact Kentucky Working Conditions Survey* and Kentucky Summative Assessments (KSA) data, to explore the relationship between professional learning conditions and student outcomes in reading and mathematics. Descriptive analysis reveals that while nearly half of high school students achieve proficiency in reading, mathematics outcomes lag, suggesting a key instructional challenge. Correlation analysis showed weak, nonsignificant associations between professional learning conditions and student achievement across the statewide sample. These findings align with the literature suggesting that the *availability* of professional learning is insufficient. We conclude that future investments must prioritize structures that support teacher enactment, collaboration, and reflection to realize meaningful gains in student outcomes.

Keywords: teacher professional learning, student achievement, working conditions, professional development

Introduction

Teacher professional learning has long been regarded as a cornerstone of educational improvement. Across the United States, policymakers, districts, and schools invest billions of dollars each year in professional development (PD; teacher professional learning, often referred to as professional development, is used synonymously throughout this study) intended to enhance teacher practice and, ultimately, student achievement (Desimone, 2009). Recent estimates suggest that districts routinely spend between 2% and 5% of their operating budgets—amounting to thousands of dollars per teacher annually—on professional learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Despite these substantial investments, questions persist about whether and how PD translates into improved student outcomes.

The stakes of this debate are particularly high given the current educational climate. Nationally, schools are grappling with teacher shortages, declining retention, and increasing demands for instructional innovation. Early-career teachers often report feeling underprepared for the complexities of contemporary classrooms (Stewart & Jansky, 2022), while veteran teachers must adapt to new standards, accountability systems, and technologies. Within this context, professional learning is expected to serve both as a mechanism for teacher support and as a lever for systemic improvement. Yet, the evidence base remains mixed: while case studies and qualitative reports highlight examples of transformative teacher growth, large-scale quantitative studies often reveal weak or inconsistent relationships between PD and student achievement (Hill et al., 2013; Yoon et al., 2007; Kennedy, 2016; Ventista, 2023; Sims et al., 2025; Lynch et al., 2025).

Federal Policy and the Expansion of Professional Development

The modern landscape of professional development in the United States has been shaped significantly by federal policy, particularly the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (NCLB, 2002). NCLB required that every classroom be staffed by a “highly qualified teacher” and positioned professional development as the primary mechanism to achieve this goal. Through Title II, Part A, states and districts were allocated substantial funds that had to be directed toward “high-quality” PD. The law defined “high-quality” as sustained, intensive, classroom-focused, and content-specific learning, rather than the short-term workshops that had previously dominated professional development. Moreover, NCLB linked teacher PD directly to student achievement in tested subjects, which fueled both an expansion and a narrowing of professional learning. Districts were expected to demonstrate that PD supported gains in reading and mathematics, which encouraged alignment with state standards and assessments. At the same time, this narrowed focus often left out broader aspects of teaching, such as relationship building, social-emotional learning, or culturally responsive pedagogy.

NCLB also spurred significant research into PD effectiveness, as policymakers sought evidence that investments translated into higher student performance. Reviews such as Yoon et al. (2007) emerged directly from this accountability climate, with more recent meta-analyses (Lynch et al., 2025; Sims et al., 2025) asking whether professional development could be causally linked to student learning. Although many initiatives under NCLB fell short of their intended impact—often defaulting to compliance-driven or fragmented PD—the law nonetheless established enduring

expectations that teacher professional learning should be sustained, evidence-based, and explicitly connected to student outcomes. These expectations continue to shape how states, districts, and researchers conceptualize and evaluate professional learning today (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sims et al., 2025).

Kentucky Context

Education conversations in Kentucky illustrate the tensions that have been described. The state has prioritized educator development and accountability through initiatives such as the Impact Kentucky Working Conditions Survey, which gathers teacher perceptions of professional learning opportunities, leadership, and school climate. At the same time, the Kentucky Summative Assessments (KSA) provide detailed data on student performance across reading and mathematics. These paired datasets offer a unique opportunity to examine whether the working conditions that support teacher professional learning are associated with measurable differences in student achievement outcomes. Such analysis is particularly timely as Kentucky, like many states, faces challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, especially in high-poverty and rural schools. Few studies have analyzed paired statewide teacher working condition data and student outcome data at this scale.

Understanding the relationship between teacher professional learning conditions and student outcomes is thus both a state and national priority. If professional development is to fulfill its promise as a mechanism for educational improvement, policymakers and practitioners need evidence not only about whether PD “works,” but also about the conditions under which it supports student learning. Research shows that professional learning that is sustained, job-embedded, and aligned with teacher and student needs holds the greatest

promise (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009). Yet, much of what is offered to teachers remains fragmented, short-term, and disconnected from classroom practice (Yoon et al., 2007).

This study analyzes statewide data from 227 Kentucky high schools to explore the relationship between four teacher professional learning working-condition variables— (1) the perceived value of opportunities, (2) opportunities to explore new ideas, (3) learning new teaching strategies, and (4) overall professional learning—and student achievement outcomes in reading and mathematics. By situating Kentucky findings within the broader national and international literature, this study seeks to illuminate both the potential and the limitations of quantitative measures (Ventista, 2023; Sims et al., 2025) of professional learning, and to raise critical questions about how teacher development can best be structured to support student achievement in an era of heightened accountability and persistent workforce challenges.

Literature Review

The assumption that stronger professional development (PD) should translate into higher student achievement seems straightforward. Yet reviews consistently reveal a more complicated reality (Ventista, 2023; Filderman et al., 2025; Lynch et al., 2025). For example, Yoon and colleagues (2007) examined more than 1,300 studies across reading, mathematics, and science according to the What Works Clearinghouse standards. What Works Clearinghouse is an initiative by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences to evaluate the reliability of educational research. This standard requires studies to have a strong research design, comparable groups, valid

outcomes, low attrition, and a clear description of the PD studied. This is no small threshold to meet these requirements, and Yoon and colleagues (2007) only found nine that met this strict standard. In those nine studies, intensive PD averaging 49 hours produced substantial gains that showed students performed about 21 percentile points higher than control groups. PD experiences of fewer than 14 hours showed no significant effect. This points to the potential for improved student learning outcomes from sustained, content-focused professional learning, but there is little evidence of this occurring in the literature.

Even when PD improves teacher knowledge, the link to student learning outcomes often remains far off. Hill et al. (2013) noted that despite decades of policy investment, much PD research yields weak or null effects, a pattern confirmed in (Ventista, 2023; Rice et al., 2024), because of short study windows, inadequate fidelity of implementation, and limited measures of teacher practice. Garet et al. (2016) offered a striking illustration: their large-scale randomized trial of a content-intensive mathematics PD program improved teachers' knowledge and even certain instructional practices, yet it failed to generate measurable gains in student achievement. Kennedy (2016) complicates this picture by showing that design features like duration or coaching, while often emphasized, are not reliable predictors of effectiveness. Instead, the critical factor is how PD helps teachers enact new ideas within the complex "noise" of classroom practice. Teachers may learn new approaches in workshops, but entrenched routines, competing demands, and the problem of enactment often blunt their translation into classroom change.

Characteristics of Effective Professional Development

Although impact studies like the ones discussed previously are inconsistent as to the effectiveness of teacher PD on student learning outcomes, there is a broad consensus among researchers regarding the features that make PD effective. Desimone (2009) articulated a framework for effective PD as including the following components: content-focused, including active learning, coherence, collective participation, and duration, principles that continue to receive empirical support in recent meta-analyses (Filderman et al., 2025; Rice et al., 2024; Lynch et al., 2025). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) examined 35 studies of teacher PD that showed a positive outcome across PD, classroom practices, and student outcomes, and subsequent meta-analytic work reinforcing these findings (Sims et al., 2025; Ventista, 2023). From these studies, they identified seven elements that were consistently associated with positive teacher and student outcomes: content focus, active learning, collaboration, modeling of practice, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration. Other large-scale survey evidence supports these principles. Garet et al. (2001) found that PD emphasizing content knowledge, active learning, and coherence with broader instructional goals was most strongly linked to positive teacher outcomes. Cordingley et al. (2015) concluded that sustained, collaborative, and subject-specific PD is most effective.

One of the clearest ideas presented in the literature is the inadequacy of short-term or one-off workshops. Yoon et al. (2007) noted that studies providing fewer than 14 hours of PD produced no significant effects. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) similarly critiqued the prevalence of "drive-by" workshops in U.S. schools and highlighted

job-embedded, collaborative PD as more effective alternatives.

Professional Development as a Cognitive and Contextual Process

While much of the literature previously discussed emphasizes structural features of effective professional development, Kennedy (2016) offers a critical reappraisal of these assumptions. In her review of 28 experimental and quasi-experimental PD studies, Kennedy concluded that these commonly cited design elements did not reliably predict whether PD improved student learning outcomes. PD initiatives that adhered closely to these frameworks were just as likely to show null effects as positive ones. Kennedy argued that the critical factor in whether PD is effective or not is how it supports teachers in enacting new ideas within the constraints and complexities of classroom life (Lynch et al., 2025). Recent work (Sims et al., 2025) similarly emphasizes that the quality of enactment mediates PD effects more than duration or format. Prescriptive PD models, which present teachers with discrete strategies to adopt, often falter because they fail to address the persistent dilemmas teachers face—managing competing instructional goals, balancing classroom management with engagement, or adapting strategies for diverse learners. PD that encouraged teachers to reason about problems of practice, make principled instructional decisions, and integrate new ideas into their existing systems of practice showed stronger promise for improving student outcomes.

Opfer and Pedder (2011) conceptualize teacher learning as a systemic process influenced by individual beliefs, school culture, and policy environments. From this perspective, professional development cannot be divorced from the conditions under which teachers work. Timperley et al. (2007) emphasize that when

PD is organized around collective inquiry into student learning, supported by leadership and aligned with school priorities, it can foster cultural change that extends beyond individual teachers. Case studies such as Polly and Hannafin's (2011) also demonstrated how learner-centered PD can shift teacher beliefs and classroom practices, even when standardized test outcomes remain unchanged, consistent with recent meta-analytic findings showing stronger effects on teacher outcomes than student test scores (Rice et al., 2024). Cordingley et al. (2015) likewise document how collaborative, practice-based PD improves not only teaching but also coherence across grade levels and schools. Yet, scaling such approaches remains challenging, particularly in resource-constrained systems.

Taken together, these studies reveal why measuring the impact of PD on student achievement is elusive. Teacher learning needs, cognition, the school context, and systemic supports determine whether professional learning translates into classroom practice. Because of this, teachers may report opportunities to explore ideas or learn new strategies, but the impact on student achievement depends on whether these opportunities align with their needs, beliefs, and instructional practices. Therefore, buying into or actively developing new ways of thinking about teaching acquired through PD experiences is one of the few ways teachers can exercise agency in contemporary contexts, and as such, there is a mixed bag of results that show PD may or may not lead towards improvements in student learning. Recent large-scale meta-analyses continue to document these mixed effects while providing greater precision about conditions under which PD succeeds (Lynch et al., 2025; Sims et al., 2025).

Research Questions

The guiding question for this research was “Which types of professional learning for teachers influence student achievement?” The following specific research questions sought to identify the linear relationship between four different working conditions predictor variables and four student achievement outcomes:

1. How do Kentucky high schools compare statewide in reading and mathematics proficiency based on a comparative analysis of descriptive statistics?
2. How do Kentucky high school statewide data describe professional learning conditions related to the value of opportunities, exploration of new ideas, and development of new teaching strategies through comparative descriptive analysis?
3. To what extent are teacher working conditions, such as value of opportunities, opportunities to explore new ideas, and learning new teaching strategies, associated with student achievement in reading and mathematics across Kentucky high schools, according to statewide correlations?

Answering these questions will provide useful information for current and aspiring teachers, school and district leaders, local boards of education, teacher preparation colleges and universities, state legislatures and other education advocacy or authorizing bodies, in Kentucky, from where the data were collected, and across the nation, where documented concerns about teacher shortages, professional learning, and community support threaten the availability and preparation of school teachers. Though there is an impressive collection of research on professional learning opportunities for

teachers, there is little recent quantitative research on the relationship between working conditions predictor variables and student achievement, in the Commonwealth of Kentucky or elsewhere.

Methodology

The *Impact Kentucky Working Conditions Survey* asked educators to reflect on the PD opportunities available to them and the extent to which these experiences influenced their teaching. Specifically, teachers were asked to evaluate the value of PD, the opportunity to explore new ideas, and the usefulness of learning new strategies. These prompts align with a growing body of research emphasizing that PD’s effectiveness depends not only on its availability but on how teachers process and enact new learning within their specific instructional contexts.

This quantitative research study analyzes multiple working conditions variables of teacher professional learning to determine the extent to which they correlate with student achievement in the areas of high school reading and mathematics as measured by the Kentucky Summative Assessments (KSA). The quantitative research uses the Pearson correlation coefficients to measure the linear relationship, including both direction and degree, between four different working conditions predictor variables and four student achievement outcomes.

For each of the predictor variables and student achievement outcomes, data from 227 Kentucky public high schools were used. The data were extant in nature and collected from multiple “open house” websites hosted by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE). Unless indicated otherwise, the data comes from the 2023-2024 school year. The researchers assumed the data were reported in

accordance with KDE guidelines and were thus accurate.

Findings and Analysis

The following sections present a comprehensive analysis of student achievement outcomes and professional learning working conditions across Kentucky high schools during the 2023–2024 academic year. First, descriptive statistics are used to summarize statewide student performance in reading and mathematics (See Table 2), including variability in novice and proficient/distinguished achievement levels. The performance levels used in Kentucky’s state assessment system are novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished. This is in order of increasing performance level. Next, teacher perceptions of professional learning conditions are

examined using statewide survey data (See Table 3). Finally, correlations are reported between professional learning conditions and student outcomes at the statewide level (See Table 4) to explore potential correlations between teachers’ professional learning environments and student academic performance. Collectively, these analyses provide a multidimensional perspective on the relationships among working conditions, professional learning, and student achievement in Kentucky high schools.

Student Contextual Data Comparisons

Incorporating data from the Kentucky School Report Card Dashboard for the 2023-2024 school year (Kentucky Department of Education, 2025), Table 1 provides context for several student data categories. Data are shown for all high schools in the state of Kentucky (N=227).

Table 1

Kentucky High Schools (N = 227) Statewide Student Contextual Data (2023-2024)

Student Data Category	KY
Enrollment	206,096
% White	70.7
% Black	10.9
% Hispanic	10.8
% Annual Average Daily Attendance	92.3
% Economically Disadvantaged	57.1
% English Language Learner (ELL)	7.8
% Individual Education Plans (IEP)	18.2
% 4-Year Graduation Rate	92.3

During the reporting year, Kentucky public high schools enrolled a total of 206,096 students. The racial and ethnic composition of the student population was predominantly White (70.7%), with smaller proportions of Black (10.9%) and Hispanic (10.8%) students. The state’s Annual

Average Daily Attendance rate was 92.3%, indicating consistent student participation across schools. More than half of Kentucky’s students (57.1%) were identified as economically disadvantaged, reflecting substantial socioeconomic diversity within the student body. Additionally, 7.8% of students were classified as English

Language Learners (ELL), and 18.2% received services through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), highlighting the presence of varied instructional and support needs. Kentucky's 4-year high school graduation rate stood at 92.3%, demonstrating relatively strong completion outcomes in comparison to national averages (Kentucky Department of Education, 2025). Collectively, these data provide an overview of the demographic composition, economic context, and educational performance indicators of the state's K–12 student population.

Student Achievement Data

Like many states, Kentucky uses numerous methods to measure student achievement. To meet federal and state testing requirements, students take the Kentucky Summative Assessments (KSA). Classroom teachers in Kentucky develop these assessments, which align with the Kentucky Academic Standards. The KSA is an annual summative assessment and measures proficiency on content standards. The content standards in Kentucky create goals identifying what all students should know and be able to do. The KSA is an online assessment that includes extended response and technology-enhanced items for students to demonstrate critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Guidance from the KDE Associate Commissioner in the Office of Assessment and Accountability (OAA) indicated that the best data to use for this research was the percentage of students scoring proficient or distinguished, and the percentage of students scoring novice, in the areas of reading and math (R. Sims, personal communication, April 26, 2023).

For KSA, students receive a performance level (distinguished, proficient, apprentice, or novice). Performance levels are descriptive, differ by content area, and indicate performance on groups of items that measure similar skills (Kentucky

Department of Education, 2025). The performance levels for reading (assessed in grade 10) are as follows:

- **Distinguished:** A student performing at the Distinguished performance level for grade 10 Reading can read closely to provide an in-depth analysis of the author's choices. The student consistently cites relevant and thorough evidence to support analysis of how themes, central ideas, and elements are developed over the course of texts. The student can develop sophisticated analyses of how authors create and use effects, such as word choice, structure, point of view, and perspective and rhetoric, within texts in order to impact the reader and/or audience. The student will also critically analyze a subject across diverse media and how the author draws on and transforms source material in their work.
- **Proficient:** A student performing at the Proficient performance level for grade 10 Reading can read closely to analyze the author's choices. The student can cite relevant and thorough evidence to support analysis of how themes, central ideas, and elements are developed over the course of texts. The student can develop basic analyses of how authors create and use effects, such as word choice, structure, point of view, and perspective and rhetoric, within texts in order to impact the reader and/or audience. The student will also demonstrate the ability to analyze a subject across diverse media and how the author draws on and transforms source material in their work.

- Novice: A student performing at the Novice performance level for grade 10 Reading demonstrates minimal ability to read and analyze the author's choices. The student inconsistently cites relevant evidence to support analysis of how themes, central ideas, and elements are developed over the course of texts. The student displays minimal understanding of how authors create and use effects, such as word choice, structure, point of view, and perspective and rhetoric, within texts, and is unable to analyze how they impact the reader and/or audience. The student is rarely able to identify a subject across two diverse media and how the author draws on and transforms source material in their work.
- Proficient: A student performing at the Proficient performance level for grade 10 Mathematics often makes sense of quantities and their relationships in problem situations. The student usually demonstrates the ability to flexibly choose among methods and strategies to solve contextual and mathematical problems, understand and explain their approaches, and produce accurate answers efficiently. The student generally interprets mathematical relationships. The student reasonably identifies key features and applies correspondences between multiple representations, such as equations, verbal descriptions, tables, and graphs.
- Novice: A student performing at the Novice performance level for grade 10 Mathematics displays little understanding of how to make sense of quantities and their relationships in problem situations. The student rarely demonstrates the ability to flexibly choose among methods and strategies to solve contextual and mathematical problems, understand and explain their approaches, and produce accurate answers efficiently. The student interprets mathematical relationships ineffectively or inaccurately. The student minimally or inappropriately attempts to identify key features and apply correspondences between multiple representations, such as equations, verbal descriptions, tables, and graphs.

The performance levels for mathematics (assessed in grade 10) are as follows:

- Distinguished: A student performing at the Distinguished performance level for grade 10 Mathematics consistently makes sense of quantities and their relationships in problem situations. The student routinely demonstrates the ability to flexibly choose among methods and strategies to solve contextual and mathematical problems, understand and explain their approaches, and produce accurate answers efficiently. The student effectively interprets mathematical relationships. The student is adept at identifying key features and applying correspondences between multiple representations, such as equations, verbal descriptions, tables, and graphs.

All Kentucky High School Data

The following table provides context for several student achievement indicators using data from the Kentucky School Report Card Dashboard for the 2023-2024 school

year (Kentucky Department of Education, 2024). Data are shown for all high schools in the state of Kentucky (See Table 2).

Table 2

Kentucky High Schools (N = 227) Student Achievement Variables Descriptive Statistics (2023-2024)

Student Achievement Indicator	M	SD	Min	Max	CV
Reading Novice %	26.52	10.18	5	66	38.39
Reading Proficient & Distinguished %	47.03	12.30	5	73	26.15
Mathematics Novice %	33.34	10.51	5	73	31.52
Mathematics Proficient & Distinguished %	36.38	12.84	5	81	35.29

For all Kentucky high schools, the mean for Reading Novice percentage is 26.52, with a standard deviation of 10.18. The minimum Reading Novice percentage is 5.0, and the maximum Reading Novice percentage is 66.0. The coefficient of variance is 38.39. The mean Reading Proficient and Distinguished percentage is 47.03, with a standard deviation of 12.30. The minimum Reading Proficient and Distinguished percentage is 5.0, and the maximum Reading Proficient and Distinguished percentage is 73.0. The coefficient of variance is 26.15.

For all Kentucky high schools, the mean for the Mathematics Novice percentage is 33.34, with a standard deviation of 10.51. The minimum Mathematics Novice percentage is 5.0, and the maximum Mathematics Novice percentage is 73.0. The coefficient of variance is 31.52. The mean Mathematics Proficient and Distinguished percentage is 36.38, with a standard deviation of 12.84. The minimum Mathematics Proficient and Distinguished percentage is 5.0, and the maximum Mathematics Proficient and

Distinguished percentage is 81.0. The coefficient of variance is 35.29.

Analysis

The results indicate that while nearly half of Kentucky high school students met proficiency or distinguished benchmarks in reading, mathematics outcomes lagged, with approximately one-third of students performing at the novice level and only slightly more than one-third achieving proficiency or higher. The disparity between reading and mathematics suggests that mathematics achievement may present greater instructional challenges at the high school level, consistent with broader national trends in secondary education performance.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the data represent a single academic year and therefore cannot capture trends over time. Second, results are descriptive and do not establish causal relationships between school-level factors and student outcomes. Finally, factors such as student demographics, teacher quality, and socioeconomic conditions were not

included in this analysis but may substantially influence achievement results.

Implications for Practice

These findings suggest several implications for educational practice. First, the higher percentage of novice students in mathematics indicates a pressing need for targeted interventions in this subject area, such as enhanced instructional supports, tutoring, and teacher professional development in math pedagogy. Second, schools demonstrating stronger outcomes may serve as exemplars, providing insight into effective practices that could be adapted

in lower-performing schools. Finally, school and district leaders should closely monitor student achievement patterns at both the aggregate and school levels to identify achievement gaps and allocate resources strategically.

Working Conditions Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 provides context for three working conditions indicators (and the Professional Learning Topic Total) using data from the Impact Kentucky Working Conditions Survey (Panorama, 2024) for the 2023-2024 school year. Data are shown for all high schools in the state of Kentucky.

Table 3

Kentucky High Schools (N = 227) Working Conditions Descriptive Statistics – Professional Learning (2023-2024) (Percent Favorable Responses)

Working Conditions Indicator	M	SD	Min	Max	CV
Value of Opportunities	56.93	17.09	11	97	30.02
Opportunities to Explore New Ideas	47.01	16.48	13	100	35.06
Learning New Teaching Strategies	62.34	14.22	25	94	22.01
Professional Learning (Topic Total)	54.88	14.16	21	97	25.01

For all Kentucky high schools, the mean for Value of Opportunities favorable response percentage is 56.93, with a standard deviation of 17.09. The minimum Value of Opportunities favorable response percentage is 11.0, and the maximum Value of Opportunities favorable response percentage is 97.0. The coefficient of variance is 30.02. For all Kentucky high schools, the mean for Opportunities to Explore New Ideas' favorable response percentage is 47.01, with a standard deviation of 16.48. The minimum Opportunities to Explore New Ideas favorable response percentage is 13.0, and the maximum Opportunities to Explore New Ideas favorable response percentage is 100.0. The coefficient of variance is 35.06.

For all Kentucky high schools, the mean for Learning New Teaching Strategies' favorable response percentage is 62.34, with a standard deviation of 14.22. The minimum Learning New Teaching Strategies favorable response percentage is 25.0, and the maximum Learning New Teaching Strategies favorable response percentage is 94.0. The coefficient of variance is 22.01. For all Kentucky high schools, the mean for Professional Learning (topic total) favorable response percentage is 54.88, with a standard deviation of 14.16. The minimum Professional Learning (topic total) favorable response percentage is 21.0, and the maximum Professional Learning (topic total) favorable response percentage is 97.0. The coefficient of variance is 25.01.

Analysis

The results indicate that while professional learning opportunities are moderately favorable across Kentucky high schools, important disparities exist both statewide and at the school level. The relatively higher endorsement of learning new teaching strategies suggests that professional development activities are perceived as practical and applicable. However, the lower scores for opportunities to explore new ideas highlight a potential gap in fostering innovation and teacher agency in shaping their professional growth.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the data rely on self-reported survey responses, which may be influenced by individual perceptions or biases. Second, while the statewide sample provides robust descriptive information, it limits generalizability to other locations. The descriptive nature of the analysis also precludes establishing causal relationships between professional learning conditions and teacher or student outcomes.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest several implications for practice. District and school leaders should consider prioritizing professional learning structures that encourage teacher innovation and exploration of new ideas, which received the

lowest ratings. Efforts to increase teacher voice and choice in professional development planning may enhance engagement and effectiveness. Tailored support for schools with consistently low ratings may also be necessary to reduce disparities and promote equity in teacher development opportunities.

Professional Learning and Student Achievement Correlations

Creswell (2019) defines correlation coefficients between .20 and .35 as “slightly statistically significant” and correlation coefficients between .35 and .65 as “statistically significant.” Additionally, correlation coefficients between 0.0 and .29 are considered “weak”, correlation coefficients between .30 and .49 are considered “moderate”, and correlation coefficients between .50 and .79 are considered "strong." Only two of the 16 correlations were greater than or equal to $r(225) = .20, p < .05$. Although slightly statistically significant, these data provide only limited predictive qualities. Table 4 displays the Pearson correlations between four professional learning working condition variables and four student achievement outcomes among Kentucky high schools ($N = 227$). The correlations ranged from $r(225) = .06, p < .05$ to $r(225) = .27, p < .05$. Although several positive associations were observed, none of the correlations reached statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 4

Kentucky High Schools (N = 227) Pearson's Correlations Between Professional Learning Working Conditions and Student Achievement Variables

Working Conditions Favorable Response	Reading Novice	Reading Prof/Dist	Math Novice	Math Prof/Dist
Value of Opportunities	.21	.14	.06	.08
Opportunities to Explore New Ideas	.27	.19	.06	.06
Learning New Teaching Strategies	.19	.17	.11	.09
Professional Learning (Topic Total)	.22	.15	.07	.08

Note. None were statistically significant at $p < .05$

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between the value of opportunities and student achievement. There was a weak, positive correlation between the two variables, ranging from $r(225) = .06, p > .05$ to $r(225) = .21, p > .05$.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between opportunities to explore new ideas and student achievement. There was a weak, positive correlation between the two variables, ranging from $r(225) = .06, p > .05$ to $r(225) = .27, p > .05$.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between learning new teaching strategies and student achievement. There was a weak, positive correlation between the two variables, ranging from $r(225) = .09, p > .05$ to $r(225) = .19, p > .05$.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between professional learning and student achievement. There was a weak, positive correlation between the two variables, ranging from $r(225) = .07, p > .05$ to $r(225) = .22, p > .05$.

Analysis

The findings indicate that, at the statewide level, professional learning conditions show limited associations with student achievement outcomes. The weak and nonsignificant correlations suggest that teacher perceptions of professional learning may not directly translate into measurable differences in student performance across large populations. This result is consistent with prior research noting that broad survey measures of professional development often fail to capture the nuanced qualities of effective learning opportunities.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the statewide correlations are based on perceptual survey data, which may not fully reflect the actual quality of professional learning experiences. Second, all analyses were correlational, precluding causal inference. Finally, none of the relationships reached statistical significance, underscoring the need for caution in interpretation.

Implications for Practice

Despite the nonsignificant findings, district leaders and school administrators should consider investing in professional learning opportunities that emphasize

innovation, teacher collaboration, and the acquisition of new instructional strategies. These elements showed the strongest alignment with student performance indicators in the smaller sample. Furthermore, targeted examination of high-performing schools may yield practical insights into how professional learning conditions can be structured to support student success.

Summary of Findings and Analysis

Analysis of 2023–2024 statewide data revealed that Kentucky high school students perform moderately well in reading but continue to struggle in mathematics, with a substantial proportion scoring at the novice level. Considerable variability exists across schools, suggesting that local context plays an important role in shaping student achievement outcomes. Future research should explore longitudinal patterns and investigate the influence of school- and community-level factors on performance to inform evidence-based strategies for improving achievement across Kentucky high schools.

Overall, professional learning conditions in Kentucky high schools during the 2023–2024 academic year were rated as moderately favorable, with particular strengths in learning new teaching strategies and notable weaknesses in fostering opportunities for innovation. Statewide analyses highlight substantial variability across schools, pointing to the importance of local context in shaping teacher experiences. Future research should explore the connections between professional learning conditions, teacher retention, and student outcomes to further understand the impact of professional development environments in K–12 education.

Lastly, the analysis of professional learning conditions across Kentucky high schools revealed weak and nonsignificant associations with student achievement at the

statewide level. These findings highlight the complexity of linking teacher professional development experiences to student outcomes, as well as the importance of examining local contexts more closely. Future research should employ larger samples with multilevel or longitudinal designs to better understand how professional learning conditions influence student achievement.

Discussion

Findings from the Kentucky data reflect both the promise and limitations of current PD approaches. Simply providing opportunities is insufficient. Kentucky districts may need to invest in structures—such as collaborative studies or teacher action research—that help teachers discover and enact new ideas. Consistent with national trends, correlations between PD working conditions and student achievement were weak (Ventista, 2023; Sims et al., 2025). However, this does not suggest that professional learning is unimportant. Rather, it underscores the need to attend more closely to PD’s design, duration, and contextual fit.

This study highlights the need for mixed-methods research that goes beyond checklist-style evaluations of PD. Future studies should explore how teachers interpret, adapt, and sustain new practices in ways that support student learning. For policymakers, the implication is clear: investments in PD must be accompanied by structures that support enactment—such as collaborative inquiry and time for reflection—if they are to yield meaningful improvements in student outcomes.

This study offers important insights into the relationship between teacher professional learning conditions and student achievement, but several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of survey-based measures from the *Impact Kentucky*

Working Conditions Survey captures teacher perceptions of PD opportunities but does not assess the quality, depth, or enactment of those experiences. As Kennedy (2016) argues, the availability of PD is not sufficient; its impact depends on how teachers integrate new learning into their instructional reasoning and practice.

Second, the correlational nature of the analysis limits causal inference. While associations between PD conditions and student achievement were examined, it is not possible to determine whether PD directly influenced student outcomes, or whether other mediating factors—such as school leadership, curriculum alignment, or teacher collaboration—played a role. Additionally, the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) data reflect performance in tested subjects only, which may not capture broader instructional impacts of PD, such as improvements in engagement, equity, or social-emotional learning.

Third, the exploratory dataset used to examine nonlinear or context-specific associations was limited in size and scope. While it provided valuable insights, its findings should be interpreted cautiously and warrant further investigation through larger, more diverse samples.

Finally, the study did not include qualitative data, such as teacher interviews or classroom observations, which could have enriched the understanding of how PD is experienced and enacted in practice.

Conclusion

This study contributes to ongoing conversations about the role of professional development in supporting student achievement by analyzing statewide data from Kentucky high schools. While the

correlations between PD working conditions and student outcomes were modest, the findings align with national research suggesting that PD's effectiveness depends not only on its design but also on its enactment within complex instructional contexts (Kennedy, 2016; Lynch et al., 2025; Sims et al., 2025). The literature reviewed underscores that PD must be sustained, job-embedded, and responsive to teacher and student needs to yield meaningful change. Yet, as Kennedy (2016) and others have shown, even well-designed PD may falter if it does not support teachers in reasoning through and adapting new practices to their classrooms. The Kentucky data reflect this tension: teachers report opportunities to learn and explore, but without deeper support for enactment, the impact on student achievement remains limited.

For policymakers, the implication is clear: improving PD is not just about offering more opportunities, but about ensuring teachers have the time, trust, and collaborative structures to enact what they learn. Future efforts must move beyond surface-level evaluations of PD availability and toward deeper inquiry into how professional learning transforms instructional practice. Mixed-methods research, longitudinal studies, and context-sensitive designs are needed to capture the full arc of teacher learning and its impact on students. In an era of heightened accountability and persistent workforce challenges, understanding how to design and support effective PD is not just a research priority—it is a moral and educational imperative.

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Developing Preservice Teachers' Instructional Readiness Through Mursion Simulation Microteaching: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Effective teacher preparation requires more than theoretical knowledge; it requires opportunities for preservice teachers (PSTs) to engage in authentic, practice-based learning. This qualitative study examines the integration of *Mursion*, a mixed reality simulation platform, into the Reading Endorsement curriculum in an English Education program. Mursion provides PSTs with a virtual classroom environment where they can deliver reading-focused lessons, practice classroom management, and adapt instruction in real time with student-like avatars. Through reflective analysis and peer debriefing, this study investigates how participation in Mursion simulations supports PSTs in developing instructional confidence and responsiveness during reading instruction. The findings highlight Mursion's effectiveness in bridging the gap between coursework and live classroom experience. The simulations provide a safe and controlled environment for risk-taking, reflection, and skill development, serving as a critical transitional practicum. Implications for teacher preparation and the future of simulation-based learning are discussed.

Keywords: preservice teachers, teaching simulation, reading pedagogy, microteaching

Introduction

The transition from theory to practice is a critical component in the development of effective educators. While knowledge of pedagogy and content forms the foundation of teacher education, the ability to translate that knowledge into meaningful classroom practice distinguishes a proficient teacher from a novice. For preservice teachers (PSTs), bridging this gap requires more than coursework; it necessitates deliberate, supported, and situated practice. Practicum-based learning experiences have long served this role, allowing PSTs to build confidence, refine classroom management skills, and implement instructional strategies in authentic settings. However, access to high-quality practicum experiences can be inconsistent due to constraints such as school placement availability, variability in mentor teacher quality, and the high-stakes nature of live classroom environments. Additionally, practicums may not always be able to provide opportunities to practice classroom management skills needed for more challenging behaviors (Hudson et al., 2018).

Emerging technologies, particularly extended reality (XR) platforms, offer promising solutions to these challenges. XR platforms such as TeachLivE, Unity 3D, and Mursion have been increasingly integrated into teacher education programs, yielding positive results for self-efficacy, classroom management skills, and subject-specific knowledge (Wang & Li, 2024). Simulation platforms such as Mursion are gaining traction in teacher preparation programs for their ability to create low-risk, high-fidelity microteaching experiences. Mursion leverages mixed reality technology to simulate classroom interactions using human-controlled avatars, providing PSTs with opportunities to engage in authentic teaching tasks. These simulations replicate

the complexity and unpredictability of real classrooms while offering a safe space for experimentation, reflection, and iterative learning (Hudson et al., 2018). In this way, Mursion functions as a transitional practicum, supporting PSTs as they move from theoretical knowledge toward confident instructional practice (Landon-Hays et al., 2020). Mursion, serving this function, has a growing body of research that demonstrates its positive impact on PST preparedness.

Literature Review

Research indicates that Mursion has been shown to increase the self-efficacy of both general and special education PSTs in teaching by providing practice opportunities that help reduce their nervousness, improve public speaking skills, and hone their use of high-leverage practices (Ferguson & Sutphin, 2022; Peterson-Ahmad et al., 2023). In their 2022 study, Ferguson and Sutphin investigated the impact of Mursion micro-teaching on a group of 32 undergraduate PSTs who were enrolled in an introductory teaching course. They found that participating in the simulation helped the PSTs gain self-efficacy in teaching by providing them with an opportunity to practice their lessons and public speaking skills in a low-risk setting, which helped them overcome their nervousness about teaching.

In a similar study, Peterson-Ahmad et al. (2023) investigated how using Mursion can support the preparation and self-efficacy of general and special education PSTs in using inclusive teaching strategies and collaborative practices. The study involved 36 graduate-level general and special education PSTs. Their results revealed a significant increase in self-efficacy scores for the PSTs, and increased depth in post-teaching reflections. They noted that the PSTs recognized their need to differentiate

instruction and how the repeated practice and feedback allowed them to intentionally refine their lesson plans and use more explicit instruction, model content, and provide scaffolds for student learning.

Evidence shows that Mursion can also boost PSTs' confidence and effective use of classroom management techniques (Hudson et al., 2018; Horn et al., 2023). In their 2019 study, Hudson et al. investigated the effects of using Mursion micro-teaching experiences with preservice teachers on their perceptions of readiness to manage a classroom. They evaluated Mursion's impact on 29 undergraduate special education PSTs who were enrolled in a classroom management course. Results revealed that PSTs value the opportunity to practice managing challenging behaviors and the safe virtual environment, as it fosters a heightened awareness of what skills they still need to learn to become competent teachers (Hudson et al., 2019).

Despite the benefits, it is important to note that previous studies have also identified challenges that PSTs had with using Mursion. According to Ferguson & Sutphin (2022), some PSTs found working with the virtual avatars to be intimidating or awkward. Some viewed the available duration for teaching sessions as too short. Others noted that the avatar's inability to perform certain actions limited their options for teaching strategies. For example, when PSTs used clapping as an attention grabber, the avatars could not use this gesture.

This body of research on Mursion demonstrates that it can be a useful tool for teacher preparation programs to enhance preservice teacher preparedness by boosting self-efficacy and improving skills and classroom management. However, a notable gap in the literature exists, as most of the studies have focused on general procedural skills rather than on Mursion's impact on content-specific instruction, such as reading.

To address this gap, this study explores the integration of Mursion into a teacher preparation program focused on reading instruction. Specifically, it examines how simulated teaching experiences can enhance PSTs' readiness to deliver reading-focused lessons and to adapt instruction in response to students' needs. Situated within the Reading Endorsement curriculum for students in English Education tracks, this research seeks to understand how Mursion simulations contribute to the development of pedagogical decision-making and adaptive expertise in reading instruction.

The study was guided by two research questions:

1. How did participating in a Mursion simulation prepare preservice teachers to teach a reading-focused lesson in the classroom?
2. How did participating in a Mursion simulation prepare preservice teachers for adjusting to instructional needs during reading instruction?

Methods

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were 18 preservice teachers (PSTs) enrolled in an English education program at a large, public, research-intensive university in the southern U.S. As a part of this program, PSTs earn an English education degree, reading, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) endorsements. These PSTs were enrolled in a foundation of reading course as part of the reading endorsement. This required course is designed to equip future educators with the knowledge and skills to develop reading comprehension, oral language, and fluency skills in their students. The course assignments emphasize the implementation of research-based

reading instruction to meet the diverse needs of all learners, including those with special needs and English language learners.

Mursion Simulation Activity

As part of a course assignment, preservice teachers (PSTs) collaborated in pairs to develop a reading lesson plan focusing on phonics, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension. After receiving instructor feedback and refining their plans, each PST individually taught their lesson during a Mursion session. Mursion offers a diverse range of virtual simulations for microteaching experiences, developed in partnership with K-12 schools, research institutions, and non-profit organizations. Mursion's catalog spans from early childhood to high school scenarios, including specialized options for special education, educational leadership, and parent-teacher conferences.

For this study, PSTs engaged in a specific scenario: introducing new academic content to a group of five middle schooler avatars. These avatars were designed with unique personalities, histories, interpersonal relationships, and distinct academic and social strengths and needs. For instance, one female avatar was characterized as an introverted perfectionist who struggled with criticism but possessed excellent memory recall, often participating in trivia nights with her parents, and shared a close friendship with another student. PSTs received detailed resources outlining the characteristics of each avatar.

Each Mursion simulation began with a meeting between the PST and a Mursion facilitator. The facilitator provided an overview of the simulation mechanics and explained the capabilities and limitations of the avatar students. Following this orientation, PSTs had 15 minutes to deliver their chosen reading lesson to the five virtual middle schoolers. The avatars, controlled by a combination of the facilitator

and artificial intelligence, exhibited typical middle school behaviors such as raising hands, asking questions, appearing disengaged (e.g., going to sleep), and having side conversations. Beyond introducing reading content, PSTs were also tasked with managing these behaviors and maintaining student engagement. After completing their reading sessions, PSTs participated in a debriefing session with the facilitator, which included reflective questions about their experience. The Mursion sessions were also recorded, allowing PSTs to review their teaching and further reflect on the experience.

Instrument

For this study, qualitative data were gathered from PSTs' reflections following their Mursion microteaching experience. Their written reflection assignment consisted of the following seven questions:

1. Did you feel that participating in a Mursion simulation prepared you for instruction as a preservice teacher? If yes, why? If no, why?
2. Did you feel that participating in a Mursion simulation prepared you for adjusting instructional needs during reading instruction? Yes or no, and why?
3. What areas of teaching did the Mursion experience determine that you need to focus on?
4. Did the safe learning space that Mursion provides allow you to make mistakes and learn from them without jeopardizing student learning?
5. How did you feel about Mursion before and after the session?
6. Do the simulations replicate authentic teaching scenarios that helped bridge the gap between theory and practice?

7. How would you describe your self-efficacy (confidence) with teaching reading lessons before and after the Mursion training?

Data Analysis

PSTs' reflections were collected through the course Canvas site. PSTs signed consent forms for the reflection responses to be included as this study's qualitative data. The reflections were stripped of identifying information, assigned individual codenames (P1, P2, P3, etc.), and uploaded to qualitative analysis software, MAXQDA. Only the two researchers had access to this data. Peer debriefing is the process in which a qualitative researcher engages in regular discussions with a peer to examine the study's progress, methodological decisions, data analysis, emerging themes, and interpretations (Spall, 1998). The first author completed the qualitative analysis and performed peer debriefings with the second author through each phase of the analysis. The peer debriefer provided critical feedback, challenged assumptions, and explored alternative explanations, which helps reduce potential bias and enhances the credibility of the analysis.

Braun and Clarke's (2022) six steps for reflexive thematic analysis were used because they offer a structured yet adaptable method for qualitative data analysis, aiming to systematically uncover, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning within a dataset. The process began with Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Data, which involved deep immersion through repeated readings of the participants' reflections. This was followed by Phase 2: Coding, where data segments were systematically labeled using a combination of deductive codes, guided by research questions, and inductive codes, which allow for the emergence of unexpected patterns (Merriam, 1998).

The following phases involved developing and refining those codes into meaningful themes. Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes focused on clustering related codes into preliminary "candidate themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In Phase 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes, these candidate themes were evaluated for coherence and accuracy against the entire dataset, leading to multiple rounds of revisions, combinations, or discarding. This is also the phase where member checking was completed with the participants in order to enhance rigor. Member checking, also known as participant validation (Braun & Clarke, 2022), was conducted to verify the accuracy of the preliminary data analysis and ensure that the findings resonate with the PSTs' experiences. The first author came to the second author's class (which was made up of the PST participants) and presented a slide deck with preliminary analysis results. PSTs were invited to provide feedback on whether the analysis accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. All of their feedback was carefully considered, and the analysis was revised as appropriate to incorporate participants' perspectives and enhance the validity of the findings. A record of the feedback and any resulting changes was maintained to document this process. Phase 5: Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes involved clearly articulating content and essence while assigning them a concise and evocative name. Finally, Phase 6: Writing Up, involved constructing a narrative that presents the identified themes, supported by evidence from the data, and offering insights relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Positionality

For qualitative researchers, it's important to acknowledge how positionality influences every stage of the qualitative research process (Kim, 2024). Various

aspects of researchers' identities, including gender, educational background, and professional experience, inherently shape perspectives and can impact interpretations and interactions with participants. The first author completed the qualitative analysis.

His professional background includes four years as a special education teacher. This experience, particularly during the transition to online and hybrid learning environments due to COVID-19, highlighted the significant potential of technology to deliver individualized and engaging instruction. It also made him acutely aware of the time and resource constraints faced by educators and families. This dual awareness has deeply informed his research interests, driving him to explore and develop more efficient and effective methods for individualized learning, especially through technological solutions.

His passion for understanding how educators can best leverage technology to enhance learning experiences, as seen in the Mursion simulations, is a direct extension of this commitment. To mitigate potential bias stemming from his positionality and ensure a more objective and nuanced analysis, he committed to demonstrating reflexivity throughout this study. This was accomplished through engaging in peer debriefing with the second author throughout all stages of analysis to critically examine his interpretations and assumptions.

Results

The thematic analysis of PSTs' reflections on their Mursion microteaching experience revealed four key themes illustrating the impact of the simulation on their teaching preparedness and pedagogical growth. The first two themes directly addressed the research questions, identified through deductive coding. The third and fourth themes emerged inductively from the

data. These themes include: "Preparation to Teach," discussing how the experience enhanced their confidence and readiness for the classroom; "Reflections on Adjusting Classroom Management and Instruction," which captures PSTs' insights into adapting their teaching strategies; "Mursion is a Safe Space," which highlights the low-stakes environment for practice and feedback; and "Authentic Versus Inauthentic Teaching Experience," detailing the polarized perceptions of realism within the simulation. Each theme is explored below, supported by illustrative participant quotes.

Preparation to Teach

The Mursion simulation significantly contributed to PSTs' perceived readiness for teaching, with 44 statements highlighting how the experience enhanced their overall preparedness. A recurring sentiment was that the experience substantially increased their confidence in teaching. For example, one PST stated, "It made me feel well off with teaching and more confident with the practices I have been taught." Specifically concerning reading instruction, another PST noted, "After the Mursion training, I would say that I have much more confidence with teaching reading lessons." Successfully delivering a lesson in the virtual simulator often represented a significant achievement for some PSTs, as encapsulated by this statement: "I feel more prepared to administer reading instruction than I did before because I was able to see success without any pressure."

The opportunity to apply pedagogical knowledge gained during their teacher preparation program within a safe, simulated environment helped many PSTs increase their self-efficacy. For instance, one PST commented, "It also helped me improve upon my lesson plan so I feel more confident presenting it in an actual classroom." Another observed, "I basically just put into practice what I've learned so

far, and it seemed to go pretty well." Furthermore, several PSTs noted that the virtual teaching experience effectively decreased their anxiety about teaching real-world students. One PST specifically stated, "[Mursion] allowed me to lose some anxieties I have surrounding teaching in general." For some PSTs, the Mursion simulation marked their first independent teaching experience. It provided a solo opportunity that significantly built their confidence in becoming autonomous educators. For example, one PST expressed, "The simulation did build my confidence overall with delivering a Lesson [sic] plan all by myself since I have always had at least one other person alongside me." The ability to practice their lesson plans in Mursion also allowed PSTs to refine them before implementation with real-world students. One PST emphasized this by saying, "Mursion serves as a practice for a lesson plan, and it can help you make noticeable changes when carrying it over into our real-world classrooms."

Reflections on Adjusting Classroom Instruction and Management

The Mursion experience consistently prompted PSTs to reflect on how they either adjusted or should adjust their instructional practices and classroom management during teaching. This theme encompasses two key areas of reflection: adapting instruction and refining classroom management. PSTs made 18 statements detailing how Mursion provided an opportunity to practice adjusting instruction. For instance, one PST noted, "At one point, the student Ethan (avatar) was starting to fall asleep, and Ava went on her phone. I knew that I needed to engage them in a different way from what I was already doing to encourage more participation." Others described how the experience allowed them to modify their questioning frequency or the pace of their lectures. One PST stated, "This taught me to

adapt my instruction by asking the students more questions to ensure they understand the material and to slow down my lesson so that it doesn't become repetitive." Some PSTs also identified areas where they could reduce the amount of support provided. For example, a PST said, "I was able to realize that I perhaps included too much modeling during my lesson. I could tell that the students were losing interest, and that they were all ready to attempt working on the activity together as a class."

The simulation also prompted some PSTs to consider introducing new strategies to support student learning. One PST remarked, "I found that I needed to provide more tangible and visual resources to help lessons run more smoothly." While some PSTs felt the experience did not help them adjust instruction, others recognized specific skills requiring further development, such as presenting new information. One PST stated, "I do acknowledge that I need to improve my presentation skills in order to run a smooth classroom." In the context of reading instruction, the Mursion experience helped some PSTs realize the importance of leveraging students' background knowledge. One PST stated, "The biggest area of teaching that Mursion experience helped me determine is that I need to focus on connecting to background knowledge." Another described that they learned the importance of incorporating familiar topics to tap into students' prior knowledge and connect learning to their own experiences.

Regarding classroom management, PSTs made 34 statements reflecting on how the Mursion simulation prompted their consideration of this critical area. Many realized through the experience that classroom management was an area they needed to focus on, with one student noting, "Another thing I notice is that I need to grow to become more confident in my ability to teach as well as my abilities to manage a

classroom." A significant concern for many was time management, as several ran out of time before completing prepared tasks. For example, one PST stated, "I believe the biggest issue I had during the simulation that I will need to adjust for the future is time management." This prompted some to reconsider how they plan to deliver new material in chunks. Others recognized the need to distribute their attention equally among students. One PST described how, during the debrief with the Mursion facilitator, they were advised, "I need to balance my attachment to each student so they don't fall behind." Conversely, some PSTs reported that the experience boosted their confidence in their classroom management skills. One PST confidently stated, "I felt good about being able to manage the classroom." Another stated, "After the exercise, I feel more confident that I can use classroom management techniques in the field and navigate student behaviors and interests."

Mursion is a Safe Space

A significant majority of PSTs described the Mursion microteaching experience as a safe space for practicing their teaching skills. This theme emerged from 27 distinct comments, encompassing various facets of the "safe space" concept. Many PSTs highlighted how interacting with and practicing teaching alongside the virtual avatars fostered a secure environment for skill development. Others specifically mentioned the helpful feedback provided by Mursion facilitators as a boost to their confidence. Furthermore, some PSTs expressed such enjoyment that they desired more Mursion experiences.

A prominent reason cited for this sense of safety was the low-stakes nature of the virtual classroom, where PSTs felt comfortable making mistakes without fear of causing educational harm to students. One PST articulated this, stating, "Through

Mursion, no one's lives are being affected, and if I mess up, there are no repercussions." The perceived lack of permanent consequences for their instructional choices appeared to empower them to experiment with new strategies learned during coursework. Many PSTs had previously expressed anxiety about potential "rookie teacher" mistakes jeopardizing student learning. However, the Mursion simulation provided an invaluable opportunity to practice these skills without the worry of negatively impacting student learning or their own academic progress within the program. For example, one PST noted, "it just allowed me to feel more comfortable knowing if I made mistakes it wouldn't harm me or my students' learning."

The avatars themselves contributed to this supportive environment; when PSTs faltered or corrected themselves, the avatars responded with kindness and understanding, further solidifying a comforting space for practice. This judgment-free zone was highly valued, as one PST commented, "I do believe that this experience has helped me as a pre-service teacher because it allowed me to practice and use certain strategies that we've talked about within a class and a judgment-free zone." While some PSTs initially felt uncomfortable or nervous in the virtual environment, many reported feeling more at ease as the lesson progressed. One PST shared, "I did not feel adequately prepared for the task that I was about to embark on, but as I started talking to the simulation, I got more comfortable and felt a confident boost as I was interacting with the students."

Another key aspect contributing to the safe space was the "practice sandwich" structure of the Mursion experience. This involved an introductory meeting with the Mursion facilitator before the microteaching session and a follow-up debriefing session afterward, where the facilitator provided

targeted feedback. As one student observed, "meeting with the simulated advisor before and after the lesson acted as a wonderful practice sandwich, causing me to pay closer attention to my performance going into the lesson, and then better reflecting on my strengths, weaknesses, and general impression after the fact." Facilitators offered PSTs specific feedback, for instance, on areas like time management, and effectively prompted PSTs to reflect on their own teaching.

While some PSTs initially experienced discomfort with the virtual facilitator, this unease often dissipated with exposure. One PST noted, "when the avatar instructor first came on to the screen, it was a little weird since it was hard to comprehend that there was a real person talking to me, not just an AI generated robot. However, as we talked more, I felt more comfortable and he eased my nerves before the actual lesson presentation began." This facilitative feedback mirrors the immediate guidance PSTs receive from their education professors during in-field teaching experiences.

The perceived positive nature of the Mursion experience led some PSTs to desire additional sessions and recommend it to other aspiring teachers. One PST asserted, "I would recommend for aspiring teachers to use this program as it gives a low-stakes, high-reward opportunity to test out lessons, techniques, and general classroom management skills." Reasons for this desire included wanting to practice with students exhibiting more challenging behaviors and experiencing a wider variety of classroom situations to enhance preparedness. As one PST stated, "I would like to continue the simulation again on a harder level to feel even more prepared for any situations that may take place within the classroom before actually becoming a teacher and having to deal with these situations without

experiencing them." Others specifically wished for longer sessions, with one PST commenting, "I wish this session wasn't as short as it was, because I would have loved to continue practicing." These sentiments underscore the PSTs' strong desire for more opportunities to practice their skills, highlighting how virtual microteaching spaces like Mursion effectively address this need.

Authentic Versus Inauthentic Teaching Experience

The authenticity of the Mursion microteaching experience elicited polarized opinions among PSTs. A primary source of this contention stemmed from the nature of the student avatars themselves. While some PSTs perceived teaching the avatars as authentic, others felt that the avatars' lack of genuine student characteristics led to inauthentic teaching. Additionally, some students noted that inherent limitations within the Mursion virtual environment impacted their instructional capabilities.

For PSTs who found the Mursion experience authentic, many highlighted that despite the avatars being "fake", their appearance and behaviors accurately mirrored observations from real classrooms. For instance, one PST commented, "The situation I was put in during the simulation did feel authentic to what I've seen and experienced in the field thus far." The diverse personalities and quirks displayed by the avatars were frequently cited as contributing to this sense of realism. As one PST put it, "the experience was more accurate to an actual classroom experience with students of different personalities, which helped bridge the gap in my learning between theory and actual practice." Furthermore, given that the simulation scenario established the PST as the avatars' existing teacher, the avatars behaved as if they already knew the PST, leading one PST to state, "at times, the artificial students

actually gave me more of an authentic experience than the students I see in the field since the artificial students treated me as though I had been their teacher all year." The realistic reactions of the avatars were so compelling that PSTs felt rewarded when their teaching strategies proved effective. For example, one PST observed, "it was very rewarding to see the student engaging with the lesson during the think pair share time and displaying an understanding of learning new vocabulary words using the skills that I had taught them."

Conversely, some PSTs found it challenging to overlook the simulated nature of the experience, which detracted from its perceived authenticity. One PST stated, "The issue I found is that since I knew Mursion was a simulation, I felt that my responses and instructions were not entirely authentic." The absence of real students led some to believe that, despite its value, Mursion could not truly replicate an actual classroom. This sentiment was encapsulated by one PST who remarked, "I think there's value in it, but I am viewing it more like an indoor track at the gym, good for practicing but still very different from running outside against other athletes." The student avatars themselves were often identified as the source of these feelings of inauthenticity, with some describing them as "creepy." One PST admitted, "Before going into Mursion, I found the simulated students to be weird and honestly quite hard to look at without being freaked out."

Moreover, multiple PSTs identified specific limitations within the Mursion environment that hindered their teaching abilities. A common concern was the restricted teaching time (e.g., 15 minutes), which often left them feeling they needed more time to delve deeply into their lessons. Other, more specific issues included the absence of a screen-sharing feature from the teacher's perspective and the confined space

for interacting with the virtual avatars (who could only remain at their desks). One PST lamented, "I also didn't like that I couldn't use some of the resources [screensharing] that I usually take advantage of." Given that a primary instructional goal was to teach reading skills, some PSTs felt that the avatars' limitations prevented them from engaging in as comprehensive a reading instruction as they desired.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how Mursion simulation experiences prepare preservice teachers (PSTs) to teach reading-focused lessons, particularly in their ability to adjust instruction in response to student needs. Although the findings were limited, they confirmed that Mursion served as a valuable tool for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application by providing a tailored opportunity for deliberate practice. The results indicated that PSTs experienced increased self-efficacy and confidence, which prompted critical reflection on both their pedagogical skills and the broader instructional practices they have learned throughout their teacher preparation program.

Benefits

Increase Self-Efficacy and Pedagogical Development

A key takeaway was that, for most participants, the Mursion micro-teaching experience enhanced their self-efficacy in teaching reading. Many PSTs described how the simulation helped them bridge the gap between coursework and practical application, allowing them to apply content knowledge and instructional strategies in a realistic setting. The experience also encouraged deeper reflection on reading pedagogical practices, such as the importance of activating students'

background knowledge during reading instruction. The Mursion session highlighted the value of explicit instruction and thorough preparation. One participant shared that the experience emphasized “the importance of really knowing your content.” This experience led many of the PSTs to realize the need for a comprehensive understanding of content. For example, the ability to address multiple definitions of a vocabulary word. One PST was caught off guard when an avatar offered a definition they hadn’t anticipated, reinforcing the need to be fully prepared for a range of student responses.

Impact on Adjusting Instruction and Classroom Management

A major takeaway in this study is that Mursion effectively pushes PSTs beyond simple lesson delivery, compelling them to reflect on and adjust their instructional and classroom management strategies in the moment. The Mursion micro-teaching experience made PSTs acutely aware of student engagement, prompting them to adapt their lessons when they notice students becoming distracted or losing interest. PSTs noted that the simulation provided a valuable opportunity to practice modifying their lecturing pace and questioning frequency in the moment. It also helped them recognize the importance of instructional scaffolds, such as adjusting the amount of modeling they used or incorporating visual supports. A particularly significant takeaway for reading instruction was their acknowledgement of the need to tap into students’ background knowledge to connect new material to their prior experiences.

The focus on in-the-moment adaptation was particularly evident in the context of classroom management, where the limited time forced PSTs to confront the challenges of time management directly. The simulation caused PSTs to quickly

realize how conversations could veer off topic and how much instructional time could be lost to small interruptions. This led to a greater appreciation for thorough preparation, reinforcing that effective time management is foundational for successful teaching. The experience highlighted the importance of being organized, having materials ready, and beginning lessons efficiently to maximize every moment of instructional time.

Mursion Is a Safe, Low-Stakes Environment

Mursion provides PSTs a safe space to practice their teaching skills. A key takeaway from both participants’ experiences and our observations was that the simulation offers a secure space for PSTs to experiment with new instructional strategies learned in their coursework without the risk of negatively impacting actual student learning. This was especially valuable for PSTs teaching independently for the first time. Additionally, Mursion addresses several limitations of traditional practicum settings, such as inconsistent access to school placements and limited exposure to diverse student populations. For instance, the simulation allowed PSTs to engage with avatars intentionally designed with specific characteristics, including those representing English language learners. This ensured they had the opportunity to apply targeted teaching strategies and receive meaningful feedback, experiences that are not always guaranteed in real-world classroom placements.

Limitations and Recommendations

While the overall experience was positive, participants identified several limitations within the Mursion platform. One major concern was the 30-minute session length, which many felt was insufficient, especially since the first eight to nine minutes were often used for facilitator instructions. As a result, PSTs had limited

time to deliver full or even partial lessons. This echoes similar challenges faced in previous research of PSTs using Mursion (Ferguson & Sutphin, 2022). A potential improvement could involve Mursion offering pre-recorded instructional videos or conducting a separate pre-conference meeting before the session. This would allow the full session to be devoted to teaching. Additionally, extending individual session lengths to 45 or 60 minutes would enable PSTs to work through more complete lessons, providing a more authentic and productive practice experience closer to what they will encounter in real classrooms.

As with the previous Mursion studies (Ferguson & Sutphin, 2022), some PSTs found avatars to be “awkward” or “creepy” initially; however, for most, exposure to the virtual environment helped to ease these issues. However, another limitation they identified was the avatars' restricted interactivity with reading materials, especially concerning what they could read on screen. One participant noted that the avatars “can’t read anything on our screen”, referring to the absence of a screen-sharing function with online materials. Integrating a screen-sharing feature would allow PSTs to present online instructional materials similar to how they would during remote instruction or when using a smart board in the classroom. Given the widespread use of screen-sharing technology, this addition would significantly enhance the simulation’s authenticity.

Future Research Directions

Building on these findings, several areas for future research emerged. One potential study would be to conduct a comparative study between Mursion micro-teaching and traditional peer-to-peer role-play simulations. Such a study could quantitatively assess differences in self-efficacy and the application of evidence-based instructional strategies.

Although most current Mursion research focuses on preservice teachers, the platform may also benefit in-service educators. Future studies could explore how incorporating Mursion into school district first-year teacher programs or programs that support the professional development of first-year and/or veteran teachers by offering structured practice in a low-stakes environment during a critical phase of their career.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Mursion simulation experience is a valuable and impactful component of teacher preparation programs. It offers a safe, tailored, and reflective space for preservice teachers to grow professionally. The simulation not only reinforced PSTs' understanding of reading instruction but also promoted critical reflection on essential teaching skills such as classroom management, instructional planning, and adaptability. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, Mursion serves as a powerful tool in preparing more confident, competent, and reflective educators ready to meet the challenges of today’s classrooms.

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Flourishing at Life in a Digital Age: Is Gen Z the Canary?

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Abstract

Concerns around the impact that portable digital technology would have on emerging generations have been circulating for years, but without the evidence from a generation experiencing these devices, it has all been speculation. Now, research is becoming available that shares the results of living in a digital age and the impact it is having on the health and well-being of college students. This essay attempts to demonstrate that it is important that higher education challenge students to intentionally consider the approach they take as to how they allow digital devices (and their programs and applications) into their daily lives. Encouraging Christians to thoughtfully develop a digital philosophy is one way to address the issues surrounding health and the role digital devices play in one's well-being.

Keywords: Gen Z, faith and mental health, digital technology and spiritual formation, mental health and digital technology

In 2020, the question arose—*Is Gen Z the Canary?* And in 2024, I believe Jonathan Haidt, along with many other wise and thoughtful researchers, is providing the desperately needed answers to this inquiry. And they are answering this question with a resounding *Yes!* Unfortunately for Gen Z, they became the trailblazers, opening our eyes to how portable digital technology is impacting our culture, and now they are the ones who may be facing challenges from our lack of knowledge, wisdom, and guidance. The concerns, which began for me around 2011 during a second decade teaching in Christian higher education, are being validated now more than ever. Insightful researchers, academics, parents, and pastors are shining a light onto the struggles of a “phone-based childhood” (p. 7) as Haidt (2024) describes it, and I believe this is a siren call to any of us blessed with an opportunity to influence future generations as they enter emerging adulthood. We cannot ignore what we now know.

Spending 52 years living in West Tennessee, I had little exposure to the inner workings of a coal mine, but recent viewings of period dramas have provided me a glimpse into what was, and still can be, a dangerous occupation. As a result, when Cal Newport (2019) uses the phrase “a cognitive canary in a coal mine” (p. 104) in describing Gen Z, the imagery resonated in a new way. Years ago, in the coal mining process, workers would transport a canary in a cage as a warning device against leaking gases. Since these dangerous gases would kill the canary first, the miners would be alerted to exit as quickly as possible to avoid the same fate. Today, I believe Gen Z is the canary warning us of digital dangers that pose a threat to our safety. According to the Cambridge dictionary (2025), the idiom *canary in a coal mine* means “something that gives an early warning of danger or failure,” (top of page) and I believe if we do

not heed the warnings Gen Z is now providing, we will continue to have “an epidemic of mental illness” (Haidt, 2024, front cover). Newport (2019) shares the extensive use of digital devices by this generation and comments,

As most parents or educators of this generation will attest, their device use is constant. (The term constant is not hyperbole: a 2015 study by Common Sense Media found that teenagers were consuming media—including text messaging and social networks—nine hours per day on average.) This group, therefore, can play the role of a cognitive canary in the coal mine. If persistent solitude deprivation causes problems, we should see them show up here first. (p. 107)

As a faculty member in Christian higher education, specifically in the discipline of health and human performance, I feel an intense responsibility for the mental well-being of our students, as well as all eight dimensions of health: emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, vocational, physical, social, and spiritual (Nemec et al., 2015). Each of these dimensions overlaps with the others at various moments in time, much like a Venn diagram, demonstrating the relationship and impact that one area of health has on the others. With the wealth of information available to us from the medical community, it seems we have a greater understanding of the physical health dimension now more than ever before; yet, in some ways, it seems we are lagging in understanding that, not only do we need to be healthy physically, but the other dimensions of health also need attention. And I posit that there is one element in our lives that, without question, significantly impacts all dimensions of our health, and that is the philosophy we embody towards digital devices. It’s time for

us to seek avenues to improve the health and well-being of the canaries that we've helped to damage because we did not understand the consequences that the digital age would bring.

Generational Theory and Emerging Adulthood

To provide a brief overview for this conversation, but not to journey too deep into the weeds, there are two concepts that might need a clarifying explanation because they serve as a foundational framework for the significance of this topic--Generation Z and emerging adulthood. With so many valuable resources currently available about the various generations and their unique attributes, I will avoid sharing that minutia here except to describe who Gen Z is and why this matters to leaders now. I will encourage anyone engaging with this generation to read more, specifically with regard to the setting that provides context for that relationship: parenting, education, human resources, organizational leadership, and especially in faith-based situations. But for now, let's see if we can arrive at a mutual understanding of who Gen Z is. Seemiller and Grace (2019) refer to Gen Z as those born from 1995 to 2010. Having their world completely shaped by the internet, they are often also aptly referred to as digital natives, the Net Generation, or iGeneration. Rachel Jones (2019) uses the descriptor "Generation Rent" (p. 49), which seems applicable when one considers how little ownership this generation actually has, as they *rent* streaming music and videos, textbooks, and even their smartphones which are *rented* as they pay by the month, only to *resubscribe* for an updated version as soon as the previous one is *paid* for. This observation is neither positive nor negative, but when specifically combined with characteristics of emerging adulthood, it can

provide a framework to understanding their sense of instability.

Emerging adulthood is a term uncovered during my doctoral studies that, over the years, consistently describes the season of life for most college students. The term, coined by Jeff Arnett (2000), describes emerging adulthood as the period from approximately 18 to 29 years of age that now constitutes a distinct life stage that is neither adolescence nor adulthood. Arnett describes five features of this stage of life that make it distinctive, including identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and feeling possibilities/optimism. The paradox of possibilities that an emerging adult must grapple with during this season can be overwhelming. Throughout their previous seasons of development, there was often a guide, such as a teacher or parent, who walked them through the steps to reach the next level of development. Now, they are entering a place where the lists to follow, such as a curriculum map, are coming to an end. This leads emerging adults to face tough decisions about not only what they might want to do vocationally with their life, but more importantly, whom they want to become.

Adulthood is an interesting word that modern culture has creatively turned into a verb; a descriptor becoming so popular that one can now purchase stickers related to these unfavorable tasks and adhere them to a calendar in order to feel a sense of achievement. So, instead of the excitement of flourishing in a new season of life, we are faced with emerging adults who view this stage of independence as one to be delayed as long as possible. Returning to their family home after graduating college is no longer taboo; instead, it's a common practice for emerging adults to move in with family members. So, why does it matter if Gen Z chooses to move back home and delay

accepting the full responsibilities of adulthood? I'm sure we could develop an extensive list of reasons both for and against this delay of independence, but my focus here is on what this means for those of us who are walking side-by-side with these emerging adults and attempting to prepare them for both professional and personal lives that flourish. My dream is for our students to emerge from college not only prepared for the next season of life but equipped to flourish in that season. So, let's explore one of the obstacles that might be standing in their way—digital devices.

Device-Versus Play-Based Living

In his book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Jonathan Haidt (2024) explains,

The Great Rewiring is not just about changes in the technologies that shaped children's days and minds. There's a second plotline here: the well-intentioned and disastrous shift toward overprotecting children and restricting their autonomy in the real world. Children need a great deal of play to [flourish]...free play began to decline in the 1980s, and the decline accelerated in the 1990s...Unsupervised outdoor play declined at the same time that the personal computer became more common and more inviting as a place for spending free time. (p. 7)

The debate over organized versus free-play has been a hot topic since the early 1990s when I chose to major in physical education and health; however, Haidt brings this issue to light from a new perspective, in that not only has commercialized sport altered the landscape for children by limiting a play-based childhood, there is now the reality that Gen Z has been the canary for what it looks like to experience a phone-based childhood.

"I use 'phone-based' broadly to include all of the internet-connected personal electronics that came to fill young people's time, including laptop computers, tablets, internet-connected video game consoles, and most important, smartphones will millions of apps" (p. 7). Haidt's central claim in the Great Rewiring relates to "two trends—*overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world*" (p. 9).

Let me attempt to paint a picture for you. On a wide path that meanders among creeks, trees, grasses, critters on the ground, and birds in the trees is a beautiful and relaxing setting, to walk, run, or bike, but what often draws my attention are people. For the most part, they can be divided into roughly two groups: those under the age of 30 and those over. Those *under 30* will often model characteristics associated with what Haidt terms a "phone-based childhood," (p. 7), while those *over 30* likely demonstrate what was a "play-based childhood" (p. 7). Perhaps you can already picture what I'm about to describe. Those *under* the age of 30 on the walking path, passing me heading in the opposite direction, rarely make eye contact, much less offer a verbal greeting, even if their eyes are not focused on their phones. Those *over* the age of 30 will, for the most part, look me in the eye and often offer a verbal greeting such as "Good Morning!" even if they are listening to something via a device. Immersion in digital devices, along with the safety issue of encountering a stranger, has led to a new experience within our culture.

Now, picture a college classroom and multiply this scene by the number of students in the room. This generational disposition of concern for safety carries over into the classroom, where students are hesitant to speak to *strangers* even in a safe setting. This hesitancy to communicate with others alters the tone and mood of the learning environment, creating a more

anxious environment. Haidt (2024) shares the latest research that now exists on one of the causes behind the rising rates of anxiety and depression—the smartphone and other screened devices that remove us from the real world. Building off the ideas that he shared in *Coddling of the American Mind*, that “people born in and after 1996 were different, psychologically, from those who had been born just a few years prior,” (p. 13) Haidt considers the issue as larger than just our devices, it’s also “a historic and unprecedented transformation of human childhood” (p. 14). Haidt offers four foundational reforms that would provide a healthier childhood in the digital age: (1) *No smartphones before high school*, (2) *No social media before 16*, (3) *Phone-free schools*, and (4) *Far more unsupervised play and childhood independence*. He shares the in-depth research supporting each of his reforms and it mirrors what I recommend as developing a digital philosophy for individuals, families, schools, and other communities.

Digital Philosophy

There is not enough space here to share all the valuable information Haidt offers, but many respected researchers and academics are raising a red flag, sharing the potential damage that has been done to a generation of canaries that should no longer be ignored. Whether it is developing a digital philosophy, engaging in reforms, cultivating healthy habits, or just making an intentional decision to let them play, our children need us to act before our culture continues down a road of even more unhealthy futures. The challenge is that *change* means swimming upstream of popular culture, approaching life in a different manner, and protecting the health of our children as we nurture, instruct, coach, guide, or mentor. There are no easy answers, but there might be some simple

ones if we commit to enhancing the culture of our shared life and to one another’s flourishing. We know that “Children [flourish] when they are rooted in real-world communities, not in disembodied virtual networks. Growing up in the virtual world promotes anxiety, anomie, and loneliness. The Great Rewiring of Childhood, from play-based to phone-based, has been a catastrophic failure” (Haidt 2024, p. 293). Now, what can we do to change the future?

One option that I believe is essential to turning the tide for this anxious generation is to engage in meaningful conversation about what it truly means to flourish in life in a digital age. And for this to occur, we *all* need to intentionally create a digital philosophy. A personal moment in coming to see the need for a digital philosophy, which is being affirmed again and again by data, occurred during a faculty dialogue group as we read Jean Twenge’s (2017) *iGen*. Dr. C. Ben Mitchell queried the group to see if we all felt the angst and concern over this emerging generation after reading the statistics Twenge presents on the increasing health issues related to anxiety, stress, and depression. Approaching the information from a different perspective, I shared my experience of *hopefulness* after reading the content. Yes, I am discouraged when I ponder the depressing statistics, but at the same time, if an issue can be identified, then I feel empowered to work towards improvements, if not a remedy, to the problems. Being provided with tangible research explaining the differences being seen in students offers me optimism that we can intervene and become proactive with students to mitigate some of these issues and equip them to have a flourishing life.

In an effort to guide us in creating a digital philosophy and to guide those within our sphere of influence to do the same, we can start with J.M. Comer’s suggestions in *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (2019) to

parent our phones. Again, it seems a simple suggestion, but not one so easily carried out:

Parent your phone; put it to bed before you and make it sleep in. TV's and my phones 'go to bed' at the same time as our kids: 8:30 p.m., sharp. We literally set them to airplane mode and put them in the drawer in the kitchen. Otherwise we burn time and end up frying our brains with blue screens rather than winding down for bed with a good book, or you know, couples stuff. (Comer 2019, pp. 227-228)

When I consider parenting, or any other position of influence over emerging generations, I wonder how many of us have created rules about our phones in the same manner that we have established rules for drinking, cursing, driving, and other forms of behavior, especially when guidance is so often needed during these critical years of development. Amy Blankson (2017) mirrors Comer and many others when she shares,

The further we get from our authentic selves, the further we move from becoming our ideal selves. The way that we prevent that 'mission drift' is by grounding ourselves in a set of guiding principles that inform our behaviors and habits. (p. 37)

To me, this communicates that if we desire to be our flourishing selves, it may be necessary to take a difficult stance and create a digital philosophy grounded in timeless wisdom.

Before discussing this issue as it relates specifically to spiritual formation, I want to share some of the research from a digital dilemmas project by Weinstein and James (2022) that identifies some of the "important gaps between adults' common assumptions and teens' realities" (p. 2) when it comes to digital devices because these gaps impact us regardless of the worldview being used to guide our digital philosophy.

One of these gaps relates to the idea of *digital habits*, where:

Adults assume teens are reluctant to part with their phones or turn off notifications because they are "addicted" ...[but] disconnecting means being out of the loop socially, risking been seen as rude, or worse, being unavailable for a struggling friend. These burdens are a constant tension with parents messages to "get off your phone". (p. 2)

By working together to develop a digital personal or family philosophy, adults and teens address what they really *do* need:

To be sure, schools that create space for digital literacy education. Tech designers who re-prioritize for youth well-being (and policies that ensure it). Caring adults who stay alert to digital dilemmas, set warranted boundaries, and offer empathy, connection and validation. This all requires that we address the fundamental ways digital life is undercutting teens' agency at a developmental moment when it really matters. (p. 162)

By helping teens navigate these complicated dilemmas, we help position them to better cope with the stressors of life that are surely to come. "This begs the question: If teens' digital stresses are often rooted in a sense of compromised agency and control, how can we authentically empower more agency and well-being?" (p. 163) I believe this empowerment can occur with authentic and open communication about the role of digital devices in their life.

One of the key elements to cultivating a digital philosophy is the idea of pre-deciding, which has been extensively discussed by wise communicators such as Andy Stanley, Craig Groeschel (2024), and many more. Groeschel offers,

Your decisions determine your direction, and your direction determines your destiny...So if your life is moving in the direction of your decisions, do you like the direction your decisions are taking you? Do you feel good about who you are and where you are in life? Do you believe God is pleased with your direction? (p. 8)

Sharing three immediate benefits to pre-decision: reducing the number of decisions to make, reducing the fear of deciding wrong, and preventing emotions from taking over, Groeschel encourages all of us to discuss options *before* a decision is actually needed. Personally, as a teenager, this meant having a discussion about *what to do if* a particular situation arose: What if a friend starts drinking and they are the person who drove? What if a date goes badly and you start to feel uncomfortable and need to get out? Because my parents and I had pre-decided how to respond in those highly emotional and stressful situations, I was given personal agency to make the best decision possible. That not only positioned me to make wise decisions in those particular scenarios but also provided the groundwork for adulthood when I needed to make tough decisions on my own. Good parenting strategies, a play-based childhood, and a Christian faith equipped me to live a flourishing life, regardless of what technology would arrive to try to distract me from a life of meaning and purpose.

Spiritual Formation

While there are many resources that offer meaningful guidance to living in a digital age as have been referenced previously, when it relates to conversations about spiritual formation in a digital age and why crafting a digital philosophy is so vital to our health and well-being, three resources I find particularly compelling are C. Ben

Mitchell's *How Do We Live in a Digital World?*, Felicia W. Song's *Restless Devices*, and Tim Challies' *The Next Story*. Mitchell (2021) shares,

Information retrieval, economic growth, digital religion, and access to education represent significant sectors of opportunity that the burgeoning digital revolution is helping us realize. As with nearly every other arena of life, however, there are both benefits and burdens. An accurate benefits versus burdens calculus may help us determine whether or not digital media are a net gain or a net loss; but it may well turn out to be more complex than that...we should develop criteria for making better informed choices. (p. 27)

So, Mitchell continues with a profound question, "Does digital technology contribute to human flourishing?" (p. 27), which leads to the need to examine what human flourishing is and what role leaders are playing in guiding emerging adults.

Turning to Felicia W. Song's (2021) appeal to current church communities to speak into the lives of emerging adults and beyond, she discusses the role of mindfulness and meditation from Christian tradition as a guide to navigating the digital life, which can also be applied to Christian higher education communities. Song offers,

Extending counterliturgies beyond our individual lives, followers of Jesus have opportunities to not just change our own behaviors but actually affect the rules of the game in any given institution for the common good. As nonreligious institutions like art museums encourage contemplative engagement in their sacred space, I can't help but wonder: Do Christians dare to believe the same thing about

our own sacred spaces—in our churches, at our dinner tables, in our beds, in our classrooms, in our relationships with each other? (p. 195)

Wong recognizes that “altering our digital practices is swimming upstream, possibly costing us relationships and our personal and professional reputations” (p. 196). The struggle to live differently is real and organizations of faith should be there to “help, not hinder, our capacity to commune with God, to inhabit time, and to be faithfully present to others and to places” (p. 197). Perhaps, this is what cultivating a digital philosophy will allow us to do: to pre-decide how we will inhabit time with our devices, the people around us, and our relationship to God.

Mitchell, Wong, and Challies recognize that many are grappling with the same questions, whether it’s in the areas of medicine, theology, philosophy, or human performance. What does it look like to flourish at life as a Christian in the digital age? Challies (2015) shares,

We cannot run away from digital technology—mobile phones and computers and the Internet and television are likely to be with us in one form or another for some time. Nor would we necessarily want to run away from them. Certainly, not all technology is harmful or dangerous. Is there a way, then, to live virtuously, immersed in this strange new digital reality? (pp. 13-14)

Wong (2021) adds to this sentiment, Sure, we can try little tricks to restrain our appetites, like charging our phones on the other side of the house...But that is fundamentally different from having our minds, hearts, and consciousness freed from the nagging curiosities of what’s new

on social media...How do we bridge this gap? And what role can the church play in this bridging which is at the heart of one’s spiritual formation? (p. 202)

Through the development of a digital philosophy, we actively engage in more than a self-improvement plan; instead, we choose:

the fundamental disciplines of following after Jesus Christ that we can begin to become a people capable of attending to the hiddenness of God; a people unthreatened by interruption; a people arrested by the natural beauty of the world; a people who show us and ‘go through’ with others in our faithful presence; and a people who can taste what it means to welcome the Sabbath with exuberant delight. (Wong 2021, p. 204)

Wong suggests that:

we need to roll up our sleeves and spend time exploring, contemplating, and investigating the theological resources and historical traditions that we can bring to bear on recovering our sense of place, presence, and personhood within the complex reality of our digital ecology. (p. 207)

Like Mitchell and Wong, Challies (2015) asks us to examine what it means to flourish in life in a digital age as a discerning Christian:

[In] disciplined discernment...a Christian looks carefully at the new realities, weighs and evaluates them, and educates himself, thinking deeply about the potential consequences and effects of using a particular technology...He moves beyond the broad strokes of utter rejection and complete acceptance. Instead, he relies on the Holy Spirit,

who speaks his wisdom through the Bible, to learn how we can live with virtue in this new digital world. (p. 17)

It is this discernment that emerging adults need guidance with, and if we focus on their spiritual formation, rather than the current existing technology, they are then equipped to handle whatever technologies arrive during their lifetime. So, where does a parent, an educator, a coach begin? With a resource that is never outdated. Challies (2015) offers an answer,

Through it all we will let God's Word, the Bible, guide, inform, and convict us. It may seem counterintuitive that in our quest to seek how we can live with virtue in a digital age, we will all rely on a book that is thousands of years old—a book that was first recorded not on a computer or even paper, but on old, dusty scrolls. Before that, it lived only in human memory, passed from one person to the next through oral transmission. Our first impulse may be to scoff at such a thing... Yet it is exactly the Bible's long track record that gives it credence on this topic. It has survived and thrived through every technological change and every technological era. The wisdom that has steered humans since the earliest days can surely direct us as well. And so we begin, trusting God to guide us, as we look at life and faith after the digital explosion. (p. 18)

The reality is that to flourish at life in a digital age means that any suggestions offered must be more:

descriptive than *prescriptive*. I cannot tell you how you should live your life, and I certainly don't want to pretend that I know how to legislate the best way to live with technology in your home, with your family, at your job, or in your church. I want you to take what's true and have these things shape your relationship with technology in a way that suits your unique situation. (Challies 2015, p. 205)

Whatever the role one might have with emerging adults, there is a weightiness to serving as a "guide by their side" while they discover their identities away from their families of origin, while they uncover their gifts and talents, and while they are being transformed into the adults God is creating them to be where they will hopefully find purpose and meaning through various vocations. Encouraging emerging adults to craft healthy habits, like cultivating a digital philosophy, is just one of the many ways Gen Z needs our guidance. As the adults that were a generation ahead, we were not privileged to know in advance how the digital age would impact their childhoods, but now we do know, and I believe we should help them develop coping strategies to deal with the stressors these digital devices have created in their lives, and one of those strategies is helping them cultivate a digital philosophy for themselves grounded in the valuable truth of Scripture that has stood the test of time regardless of what technology that comes along.

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Help-Seeking Attitudes and Behaviors of Graduate Psychology Students

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Abstract

Psychology graduate students (PGSs) encounter significant stressors during training but may not seek professional support despite a need for services. This study sought to expand the existing literature on the topic of help-seeking for PGSs. An online survey was sent to graduate students from accredited doctoral psychology programs to assess the barriers and facilitators associated with help-seeking in this population. We hypothesized that a six-predictor model (gender, anxiety level, years of graduate training, history of help-seeking, knowing a colleague/student in one's graduate program who has sought help, and knowing a professor/supervisor/advisor who has sought help) would predict PGSs' help-seeking attitudes (psychological openness, help-seeking propensity, and indifference to stigma) in addition to predicting professional concerns (important for professional growth/effectiveness, concern with professional credibility, concerns about confidentiality, and need for self-sufficiency). Multiple regression analyses indicated that the model was significant in predicting help-seeking attitudes and professional concerns among PGSs, with the exception of one criterion--concerns about confidentiality. The overall model was found to account for ten percent or greater total variance for the remaining criteria, except for the need for self-sufficiency. For this criterion, the model only accounted for five percent of the total variance. These results indicate that graduate training programs in psychology should consider having more open conversations around the importance of seeking therapy among PGSs who might benefit from such support.

Keywords: psychological help-seeking, graduate psychology students, barriers to help-seeking, facilitators to help-seeking

Introduction and Background

It is understood by prospective students of graduate psychology programs that they will be trained in counseling theory and practice. While these programs are focused on developing students' skills in the delivery of therapy to others, they are not necessarily focused on the practice of students receiving therapy for themselves as part of their professional development. Organizations at both the professional and student levels have only recently begun to speak more directly about this subject. In 2023, the American Psychological Association (APA) released the "Guidelines on Equitable and Respectful Treatment of Students in Graduate Psychology Programs" with the intent of promoting the well-being of all graduate students. Specifically, Guideline 1: Support for Graduate Students states that "Equitable and respectful graduate psychology programs aspire to support... the physical, psychological, and financial wellness of graduate students" (APA & APAGS- BEA Work Group, 2023, p. 6). They recommended that programs provide students with "resources and/or referral information for mental health treatment" and "consider sharing any of their own positive self-care and well-being practices," recognizing that faculty often serve as role models for graduate students (APA & APAGS- BEA Work Group, 2023, p. 6). A 2020 article by Ziede and Norcross addresses this topic further. In the article, the authors speak directly about the benefit of seeking personal therapy for graduate psychology trainees, including that this practice promotes effectiveness in one's clinical work (Ziede & Norcross, 2020). They conclude the article by stating that they "endorse beginning personal therapy as part of graduate training" in part because of the personal and professional benefits derived (Ziede & Norcross, 2020, p. 23).

The idea that graduate students may require support while managing the rigors of graduate training is not new. Research has shown that psychology graduate students (PGSs) experience issues including anxiety and depression (Lang & Haugen, 2023; Park et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2020; Victor et al., 2022), exhaustion (Park et al., 2021), and relationship difficulties (Stone et al., 2020) while working toward their degrees. A 2023 review by Lang and Haugen found prevalence rates of depression among PGSs between 20% to 40%, with up to 35% of PGSs reporting moderate depression symptoms. In that same study, prevalence rates of anxiety ranged between 27% to 41%, with up to 61% of PGSs reporting moderate anxiety symptoms (Lang & Haugen, 2023).

Higher levels of personal distress suggest that PGSs are likely to need therapeutic services (Park et al., 2021; Peluso et al., 2011; Stone et al., 2020; Victor et al., 2022). For PGSs, the training opportunities inherent in seeking personal therapy abound, as such treatment allows them to develop increased self-awareness and empathy and to seek counseling for stressors related to graduate training (Dearing et al., 2005; Farber, 2000). PGSs are in a unique position of being better equipped to recognize distress, which should encourage help-seeking behaviors (Farber, 2000). However, research on models of help-seeking has shown that these are not the only factors influencing PGSs' attitudes toward seeking help (Dearing et al., 2005; Farber, 2000).

Various theories and models of help-seeking have been proposed over the years. A 2005 review by Rickwood et al. examined young people's attitudes toward seeking help for mental health concerns and identified four factors: awareness, expression, availability, and willingness. According to the model, individuals must

first recognize their problem on a personal level (awareness) and then must be able to understand and express the problem they are experiencing and feel comfortable doing so (expression). Third, potential help sources must be readily available, accessible, and identifiable to potential help-seekers (availability). Finally, individuals must be both willing and able to share their symptoms and express their need to the help source identified (willingness).

In 2010, Vogel and Armstrong proposed an alternative model, examining factors of self-concealment (one's tendency to hide or conceal information), distress, negative/positive social experiences, and willingness to seek help. According to their model, negative social experiences and distress mediate the relationship between self-concealment and willingness to pursue professional mental health treatment. They found that those high in self-concealment are more likely to have experienced negative social events, with these combined factors contributing to an increased level of psychological distress; moreover, due to their distress, these individuals will be more willing to seek counseling (Vogel & Armstrong, 2010).

Salinas-Oñate et al. proposed a more recent model of help-seeking in their 2024 article, outlining how factors of self-concealment, depressive symptoms, and professional help-seeking are related, while also accounting for the influence of gender. They posited that self-concealment, defined as the tendency to conceal embarrassing or upsetting details about one's personal experiences, would negatively influence help-seeking and have a direct impact on depressive symptoms regardless of gender; furthermore, they posited that self-concealment would have an indirect impact on help-seeking, with depressive symptoms serving as a mediator. The overall findings indicated that females exhibited less

willingness to seek professional help as levels of self-concealment increased, regardless of levels of depression. For males, the authors found an indirect relationship between self-concealment and help-seeking, with depressive symptoms mediating this relationship (Salinas-Oñate et al., 2024).

Certain demographic variables are also associated with more positive attitudes towards help-seeking. Previous studies (Roxo et al., 2021; Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019; Smith & Hebdon, 2023) have shown that females tend to be more open to and more likely to engage in counseling. Studies have also shown that age is an important factor in help-seeking. For PGSSs, typical ages range from age 20 to mid-30s; based on research into age and help-seeking attitudes, one would expect these students to be open to and more likely to be engaged in mental health treatment (Stone et al., 2020; Victor et al., 2022).

Specific barriers to seeking counseling dissuade many PGSSs from getting the support they need (Farber, 2000; Klein et al., 2023; Stone et al., 2020). PGSSs are hesitant to seek help for several reasons, including denial or minimization of their symptoms; difficulty navigating dual relationships at mental health practicums on campus and in the community; and lack of time and finances for therapy (Klein et al., 2023; Stone et al., 2020). Additionally, PGSSs have reported concerns that their credibility or graduate standing will be affected if others found out they were seeking mental health treatment (Farber, 2000; Klein et al., 2023).

Factors that increased college students' openness to seeking help included recognition of the need for mental health treatment and encouragement to seek help from peers (Kosyluk et al., 2021; Lui et al., 2022). A study by Vogel et al. (2007) identified that knowledge of a friend or

family member's history of help-seeking was correlated with more positive attitudes towards and higher rates of mental health treatment utilization among college students. This knowledge exerts an even greater influence on men's help-seeking (Disabato et al., 2018). For PGSs, their closest relationships during training normally include other PGSs in their program as well as their supervisors and professors, the latter of whom wield a great amount of influence on students' success. From what the research has shown on the importance of relationships in help-seeking, it would follow that PGSs would value knowing that their peers and/or their professors have sought their own counseling when contemplating mental health treatment for themselves.

To date, research has not directly assessed the relationship between knowing that a professor or supervisor has sought help and PGSs' thoughts about seeking mental health treatment. Additionally, very few studies have used empirically validated measures to explore the relationship between distress levels and attitudes about seeking treatment in the graduate student population. By better understanding the concerns and barriers PGSs face when considering personal therapy, faculty and supervisors will be better equipped to intervene with students in promoting self-care and help-seeking practices. This study aimed to gain an understanding of what predicts help-seeking attitudes among PGSs and promote positive changes at the institutional level.

Study Design and Hypotheses

This study utilized a quantitative correlational design incorporating simultaneous regression to predict relationships between variables of interest. The six predictor variables (anxiety, gender, years of graduate training, history of help-seeking, knowing a colleague/student, and

knowing a professor/supervisor/advisor) were regressed onto seven criterion variables (help-seeking propensity, psychological openness, indifference to stigma, important for professional growth, concern with professional credibility, concern with confidentiality, and need for self-sufficiency). It was hypothesized that the model would predict general help-seeking attitudes, including psychological openness, help-seeking propensity, and indifference to stigma. It was also hypothesized that the model would predict professional concerns associated with help-seeking, including importance for professional growth/ effectiveness, concern with professional credibility, concerns about confidentiality, and need for self-sufficiency.

Methods

Recruitment Procedure

This study was approved by the university's institutional review board in March 2014. (Editor's Note: Due to the age of the data associated with this study, an additional peer reviewer with expertise in the area of the study was consulted. The consensus among all peer reviewers and the editor was that the data were still very relevant at the time of publication.) To obtain a representative sample, universities across the United States that held APA-accredited counseling, clinical, and combined doctoral psychology programs were targeted for inclusion in the study. A study invitation was sent via email to clinical training directors of the identified APA-accredited doctoral psychology programs to be forwarded to enrolled students. Students provided consent prior to completing the study via an informed consent document included in the study link, and upon consenting, were directed to the online survey hosted on Qualtrics. Web-based self-report questionnaires, taking

approximately 20 minutes to complete, were accessed by students beginning in spring 2014 and continuing through summer 2014 to obtain the necessary number of participants.

Participants

Among a total of 418 respondents, 111 respondents did not complete the full survey and were removed. A final sample of 317 participants who completed all questions was included in this study. Ages of participants ranged from 21 to 68 years ($M = 29$, $SD = 6.82$), with 87.1% female (n

$= 276$); 12.9% male ($n = 41$); 80% White ($n = 255$); 6.3% Hispanic or Latino ($n = 20$); 5.0% Black or African American ($n = 16$); 2.2% biracial or multiracial ($n = 7$); and 5.4% who identified as other ($n = 17$). Most students were enrolled in either a clinical psychology doctoral program (46.4%, $n = 147$) or a counseling psychology doctoral program (26.5%, $n = 84$). Years of graduate training ranged from one year to more than nine years. See Table 1 for additional information on participant characteristics.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Sample Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender				
Female	276	87.1		
Male	41	12.9		
Age (in ranges)			29.02	6.82
18-24	63	19.8		
25-31	187	58.9		
32-38	42	13.2		
39-45	16	5.0		
46+	11	3.5		
Ethnicity				
White	255	80.4		
Black/African American	16	5.0		
Hispanic/Latino	20	6.3		
Multiracial	7	2.2		
Other	17	5.4		
Program Type				
Clinical	147	46.4		
Counseling	84	26.5		
Combined	18	5.7		
Other	68	21.5		
Years in Graduate Training				
5 years or more	81	25.5		
4 years or less	236	74.4		

Sample Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
History of Help-Seeking				
Yes	242	76.3		
No	75	23.7		
Whom Do You Know				
Close Friend/Immediate Family	269	84.9		
Relative	202	63.7		
Acquaintance	181	57.1		
Colleague/Student in Program	231	72.9		
Supervisor/Professor/Advisor	105	33.1		
No One	6	1.9		
Other	8	2.5		
Anxiety Levels (GAD-7 Scores)				
0 to 4: Minimal	153	48.3		
5 to 9: Mild	125	39.4		
10 to 14: Moderate	27	8.5		
15 to 21: Severe	12	3.8		

Note: $N = 317$

Measures

Demographic Survey

The demographic survey collected information on the following: program type, age, gender, race/ethnic group, years of graduate training, history of help-seeking, knowing someone who has sought therapy, and help-seeking behavior during graduate training.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 Scale

The Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 Scale (GAD-7) (Spitzer et al., 2006) is a seven-item self-report survey that measures the symptoms of anxiety in adults. Participants rate their symptoms of anxiety using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from zero (“Not at all”) to three (“Nearly every day”), and total scores range from zero to 21. The total score indicates the level of anxiety severity: mild (zero to five); moderate (six to 10); or severe (scores at and above 15). Test-retest reliability and internal consistency of the GAD-7 are also high,

with an $r = .83$ and Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from .89 to .92 (Spitzer et al., 2006). For the current study, the alpha coefficient was $\alpha = .86$.

Trainees’ Attitudes Toward Seeking Psychotherapy Scale

The Trainees’ Attitudes Toward Seeking Psychotherapy Scale (TATSPS) (Farber, 2000) is a 22-item self-report instrument that measures future psychotherapists’ attitudes toward seeking personal therapy. The TATSPS has four subscales: (1) Important for Personal Growth/Effectiveness, (2) Concern with Professional Credibility, (3) Concerns about Confidentiality, and (4) Need for Self-Sufficiency. For each item, participants are asked to rate how much they agree using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). An example item includes, “If I were to seek psychotherapy for myself, my colleagues would see me as incompetent.” For this current study, the TATSPS total scale had an

internal consistency of $\alpha = .90$. Higher scores on this measure indicate higher levels of concern related to seeking personal therapy among trainees.

Inventory of Attitudes Toward Seeking Mental Health Services

The Inventory of Attitudes Toward Seeking Mental Health Services (IASMHS) (Mackenzie et al., 2004) is a 24-item self-report instrument that measures attitudes toward and barriers related to seeking professional psychological help across three subscales: (1) Psychological Openness, (2) Help-Seeking Propensity, and (3) Indifference to Stigma (eight items). For

each item, participants are asked to rate how much they agree using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from zero (disagree) to four (agree). An example item is “There are certain problems which should not be discussed outside of one's immediate family.” Internal consistency for the IASMHS was reported as .87, and the test-retest reliability for the IASMHS was moderate, at $r = .85$ (Mackenzie et al., 2004). For this study, the alpha coefficient for the IASMHS total scale was $\alpha = .83$. See Table 2 for additional information on measures.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

Scale and Subscales	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
TATSPS				
Important for Professional Growth/ Concern with Professional Credibility	31.66	5.82	-.67	.04
Concerns about Confidentiality	9.68	3.35	1.00	1.16
Need for Self-Sufficiency	9.68	2.25	.41	.13
Total Score	10.40	2.89	.12	-.24
	85.90	10.14	-.49	.28
IASMHS				
Psychological Openness	32.45	4.13	-.60	-.03
Help-Seeking Propensity	32.02	4.33	-.51	.30
Indifference to Stigma	33.08	4.98	-.84	.90
Total Score	97.56	11.66	-.75	.57
GAD-7				
Total Score	12.14	4.06	1.11	1.19

Note: $N = 317$

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Data analyses were completed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0. Preliminary analyses determined that all data met assumptions for multiple regression. No

multicollinearity concerns were noted, with Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values greater than 10 and tolerance levels less than 1.0 (Cohen et al., 2003). Histograms showed a slight positive skew for concern with professional credibility and anxiety; however, kurtosis and skewness values were

between -1 and $+2$, which are acceptable for normal distribution (George & Mallery, 2019).

Multiple simultaneous regression analyses were conducted with six predictor variables. Due to their categorical nature, four of the predictor variables (gender, history of help-seeking, knowing a colleague or student with a history of help-seeking, and knowing a supervisor, professor, or advisor with a history of help-seeking) were coded as dummy variables. As multiple models were analyzed, a Bonferroni correction was used to help control for Type 1 error, reducing the alpha level from .05 to .007.

An a-priori power analysis determined the minimal sample size needed for a linear multiple regression (fixed model, R^2 deviation from zero) with six predictors using the program G*Power (Faul et al., 2007). As this study examined a novel model of help-seeking, a medium predicted effect size ($f^2 = .15$) was deemed acceptable. Using a proposed power of .80 indicated that 143 participants were needed for this study

to reach statistical significance.

Research Question One

The first research question asked, “How well does a six-predictor model predict help-seeking attitudes?” Multiple regression analyses provided support for the model, with a medium effect size, in predicting all three variables: psychological openness ($F(6, 310) = 6.52, R^2 = .11, p < .001$), help-seeking propensity ($F(6, 310) = 6.04, R^2 = .10, p < .001$), and indifference to stigma ($F(6, 310) = 7.91, R^2 = .13, p < .001$). For psychological openness, knowing a colleague/student had a significant, unique contribution when all other variables were controlled for, and the relationship was positive. For indifference to stigma, having a history of help-seeking had a significant, unique contribution when all other variables were controlled for, revealing a positive relationship between these variables. No variables had a unique contribution to help-seeking propensity. See Table 3 for additional results from Research Question One.

Table 3*Regression Results for Six Predictor Model and Criterion Variables from IASMHS and TATSPS*

Instrument and Criterion Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
IASMHS							
Psychological Openness							
Gender	1.33	.67	.11	2.00	.047	.02	2.64
Anxiety (GAD-7)	-.14	.06	-.14	-2.51	.013	-.25	-.03
History of seeking counseling	.78	.54	.08	1.45	.147	-.28	1.83
Years of graduate training	.05	.06	.05	.94	.346	-.06	.17
Knowing a colleague/student	1.65	.54	.18	3.05*	.002	.58	2.71
Knowing a supervisor/professor/advisor	1.17	.50	.13	2.35	.020	.19	2.15
Help-Seeking Propensity							
Gender	1.12	.70	.09	1.61	.109	-.25	2.50
Anxiety (GAD-7)	-.11	.06	-.10	-1.83	.067	-.22	.01
History of seeking counseling	1.44	.56	.14	2.56	.011	.33	2.55
Years of graduate training	.08	.06	.07	1.31	.191	-.04	.20
Knowing a colleague/student	1.30	.57	.13	2.30	.022	.19	2.42
Knowing a supervisor/professor/advisor	1.25	.53	.14	2.38	.018	.21	2.28
Indifference to Stigma							
Gender	1.60	.79	.11	2.02	.044	.04	3.16
Anxiety (GAD-7)	-.17	.07	-.14	-2.55	.011	-.30	-.04
History of seeking counseling	2.32	.64	.20	3.65**	.000	1.07	3.58
Years of graduate training	.07	.07	.06	1.04	.299	-.06	.20
Knowing a colleague/student	1.59	.64	.14	2.47	.014	.32	2.85
Knowing a supervisor/professor/advisor	1.31	.59	.12	2.21	.028	.14	2.48

Instrument and Criterion Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
TATSPS							
Important for Professional Growth/Effectiveness							
Gender	.15	.94	.01	.16	.870	-1.69	1.99
Anxiety (GAD-7)	.10	.08	.07	1.28	.202	-.06	.26
History of seeking counseling	2.81	.76	.21	3.722**	.000	1.32	4.30
Years of graduate training	.05	.08	.03	.56	.576	-.11	.21
Knowing a colleague/student	.70	.76	.05	.92	.359	-.79	2.19
Knowing a supervisor/professor/advisor	2.12	.71	.17	3.00*	.003	.73	3.51
Concern with Professional Credibility							
Gender	-.20	.54	-.02	-.36	.522	-1.26	.86
Anxiety (GAD-7)	.06	.05	.07	1.25	.213	-.04	.16
History of seeking counseling	-.81	.46	-.10	-1.86	.085	-1.71	.09
Years of graduate training	-.03	.05	-.03	-.62	.334	-.07	.13
Knowing a colleague/student	-1.28	.44	-.17	-2.92*	.004	-2.14	-.42
Knowing a supervisor/professor/advisor	-1.27	.41	-.18	-3.12*	.002	-2.07	-.47
Concerns about Confidentiality							
Gender	.39	.37	.06	1.04	.300	-.34	1.12
Anxiety (GAD-7)	.08	.03	.15	2.69*	.007	.02	.14
History of seeking counseling	-.55	.30	-.10	-1.82	.070	-1.14	.04
Years of graduate training	-.02	.03	-.04	-.62	.533	-.08	.04
Knowing a colleague/student	.29	.30	.06	.96	.336	-.30	.88
Knowing a supervisor/professor/advisor	-.66	.28	-.14	-2.35	.019	-1.21	-.11

Instrument and Criterion Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Need for Self-Sufficiency							
Gender	-.26	.48	-.03	-.55	.585	-1.20	.68
Anxiety (GAD-7)	-.04	.04	-.05	-.94	.347	-.12	.04
History of seeking counseling	-.60	.38	-.09	-1.57	.117	-1.34	.14
Years of graduate training	.01	.04	-.02	-.26	.791	-.07	.09
Knowing a colleague/student	-.93	.39	-.14	-2.41	.017	-1.69	-.17
Knowing a supervisor/professor/advisor	-.70	.36	-.11	-1.95	.052	-1.41	.01

Note: * $p < .007$; ** $p \leq .001$

Research Question Two

The second research question asked, “How well does a six-predictor model predict professional concerns associated with help-seeking?” The model predicted three out of four variables tested, including important for professional growth/effectiveness ($F(6, 310) = 6.25, R^2 = .11, p < .001$), concern with professional credibility ($F(6, 310) = 6.18, R^2 = .11, p < .001$), and need for self-sufficiency ($F(6, 310) = 3.76, R^2 = .05, p = .001$). Concerns about confidentiality did not reach significance. For important for professional growth/effectiveness, history of help-seeking, and knowing a professor/supervisor/advisor had significant unique contributions when all other variables were controlled for, revealing a positive relationship between these variables. For concern with professional credibility, knowing a colleague/student and knowing a supervisor/professor/advisor had significant unique contributions when all other variables were controlled for in the model, revealing a negative relationship between these variables. No variables made a unique contribution to the need for self-sufficiency. For concerns about confidentiality, anxiety was the only variable that had a significant unique contribution when all other variables were controlled for, and the relationship was positive. Two variables, important for professional growth/effectiveness and concern with professional credibility, had a medium effect size for the overall model. Effect sizes for both concerns about confidentiality and the need for self-sufficiency were small. Additional results from Research Question Two are also available in Table 3.

Discussion

Understanding barriers to help-seeking among PGSs is important for

several reasons. Research has established that PGSs deal with increased stress and pressures associated with graduate training as well as clinically significant mental health symptoms. In this study, we expected that PGSs who have sought therapy in the past and those who know someone who has sought help would have more positive help-seeking attitudes. Knowing a colleague or student who has sought help was associated with increased openness to both admitting a need for help and seeking counseling among PGSs, which indicates that the nature of the relationship plays a substantial role in influencing help-seeking openness. Having a personal history of help-seeking was associated with a decrease in stigma concerns related to seeking help, which is in line with previous research findings (Farber 2000; Mackenzie et al., 2004).

We sought to add to the literature on help-seeking by exploring the impact of professional/advisory relationships on help-seeking. In this study, we found that among PGSs, a history of help-seeking and knowing a professor, supervisor, or advisor who has sought help were both associated with an increase in viewing therapy as important to their professional growth. Knowing a colleague or student who has sought counseling, as well as knowing a supervisor, professor, or advisor who has sought help, was associated with a decrease in concerns about losing credibility. We also found that higher levels of anxiety were associated with an increase in concerns about confidentiality for PGSs. These findings illustrate the importance of knowing respected others who have sought help for themselves, with those holding a position of authority, like professors and advisors, exerting a stronger influence on PGSs views on seeking counseling for themselves and addressing barriers such as fears of losing credibility. Likewise, knowing that another PGS has sought help

improved other PGSs' views on seeking their own counseling. In line with findings on general help-seeking attitudes, PGS's help-seeking was influenced by knowing that students and/or staff in their training programs have sought help, in terms of not only increasing positive views about help-seeking but also decreasing potential barriers to seeking help (Lui et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2007; Disabato et al., 2018).

Unlike previous studies, there was no significant association found between gender and openness to help-seeking or between history of help seeking and openness to help-seeking (Roxo et al, 2021; Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019). This could be due to population characteristics, as this study examined the help-seeking attitudes of the future helper, which represents a specific subset of the general population with its own guiding principles and beliefs about counseling. As many of the studies on help-seeking have focused on college students or graduate students without limiting program type, the odds that males enrolled in psychology programs would have increased mental health literacy could explain this disparity, as could their higher education status, both of which have been linked to increased openness to help seeking (Smith & Hebdon, 2023).

Limitations and Constraints on Generality

This study focused on help-seeking attitudes of PGSs and whether certain variables would facilitate or hinder their openness to help-seeking. There is potential bias in our sample, as those who chose to take this survey may have a greater interest or experience in seeking therapy. While the influence of training program staff and other students was considered, the study did not differentiate by the level of closeness or trust the students had for their training staff. The PGSs were not asked to identify a specific individual from their program when

considering the influence of training program staff on help-seeking attitudes. This study did not inquire whether the training programs of the PGSs were online, hybrid, or in person. These variables could influence the impact of such relationships between PGSs and other students and staff. Also, although we used the directory of APA-Accredited Counseling and Clinical PhD and PsyD programs, we did not collect data about the programs themselves from student respondents. Our sample is also limited in that we only included students from APA-accredited programs in the United States, and therefore, our sample is not representative of programs outside of the U.S., nor programs lacking APA accreditation. Finally, we did not consider age in the model, and we do not have information on how this might have impacted the results.

Future Directions and Recommendations

The findings of this study show just how much influence other students and training program staff have on PGSs. Knowing a colleague or professor who sought help was found to increase PGSs' openness to seeking help for themselves. Future studies might examine more specific characteristics, such as the gender or age of professors or colleagues, to determine if other variables are exerting an influence. Given that higher anxiety predicted concerns about confidentiality, future studies might focus on how concerns such as depression or the absence of coping mechanisms impact one's help-seeking concerns. Longitudinal research might examine how and whether help-seeking attitudes shift as PGSs move into their profession. In addition, exploring potential differences in help-seeking behaviors among PGSs for group differences such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation may provide useful information for those who

seek to support PGSs during their academic work.

Encouraging PGSs to be open to seeking help during training can help set a precedent in promoting continued openness to help-seeking as they enter the professional world. Training programs should address and decrease barriers to PGSs' help-seeking and focus on ways of encouraging help-seeking. Training programs could create an open dialogue around therapy and work to directly address student concerns related to confidentiality, loss of credibility, or other negative repercussions related to seeking help during training. Having staff and faculty disclose their own therapy experiences would likely bolster students' willingness to seek help for themselves.

The results of this study also highlight the need for graduate programs to develop mental health programming and support networks for identifying and intervening on behalf of PGSs who are struggling with emotional distress; working with staff in the department itself and at the college counseling center level would help to ensure the success of such efforts. Recent studies by Klein et al. (2023) and Lang and Haugen (2023) offer support for this approach. Making therapy a requirement of PGSs while in training was proposed by

Stone et al. (2020). This would likely offset some of the stigma associated with seeking help by decreasing concerns about losing credibility since help-seeking would be a requirement (Farber, 2000).

As noted in both this study and the 2023 APA Guidelines on Equitable and Respectful Treatment of Students in Graduate Psychology Programs, faculty and staff serve as role models for PGSs, and their own stories surrounding personal therapy would likely encourage PGSs to seek such services for themselves if needed. The findings of this study offer additional support for the guidance shared by Ziede and Norcross in their 2020 article, positing that PGSs should pursue personal therapy throughout their time in graduate training to enhance both their own well-being and clinical work. Having a better understanding of the factors that encourage and dissuade PGSs from seeking psychological help will enable training programs to better support and retain trainees, thus ensuring the success of their programs while normalizing help-seeking both during and following completion of graduate training. It is up to training programs to make a concerted effort at shifting the dialogue away from help-seeking as part of a remediation plan and towards help-seeking as part of professional training and good practice.

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Building a Culture of Wellness to Retain Female Educators

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Abstract

Teacher burnout remains a critical factor contributing to attrition, diminished well-being, and ongoing shortages in the education workforce. This study examines how fostering a culture of wellness influences burnout and supports teacher retention, with particular attention to female educators. Using the Maslach Burnout Inventory and qualitative survey responses from South Carolina teachers, the research identifies key contributors to burnout, including excessive workload, inadequate support, and emotional strain. Findings indicate a clear relationship between burnout levels and intentions to leave the profession. Effective school-based interventions include duty-free time, mental health resources, supportive peer networks, and increased professional autonomy, while superficial morale boosters show limited impact. The study recommends systemic changes that prioritize holistic wellness, boundary-setting, and meaningful teacher involvement. Strengthening wellness initiatives may enhance educator satisfaction and promote long-term retention.

Keywords: teacher burnout, educator retention, teacher wellness culture, school culture

Introduction

Teacher burnout is a persistent challenge in education, contributing to alarming rates of attrition. According to Dreer (2023), the past decade has seen a significant increase in publications focused on teacher wellness. The high attrition rates and teacher shortages have researchers scrambling to find solutions to enhance job satisfaction, mitigate burnout, and boost teacher retention (Dreer, 2023). Burnout contributes to teacher wellness and can have serious consequences for educators, including diminished mental and physical health, reduced teaching efficacy, and strained relationships with students (Madigan et al., 2023). While many schools implement strategies to improve teacher retention, the effectiveness of wellness-focused interventions remains insufficiently examined and implemented.

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2025) defines burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. For teachers, burnout is complex and driven by a host of systemic and environmental stressors. Teachers are more than instructors. They are mentors, role models, counselors, and often caregivers for their students. The demands on them are increasing as they are expected to master curriculum delivery while addressing behavioral issues, differentiated instruction for students with special needs, diverse learners, and socio-emotional support for students navigating difficult life circumstances. Meanwhile, many teachers feel they lack a voice in the decision-making processes that affect their classrooms. These conditions contribute to emotional and physical exhaustion, which leads to burnout.

Several statistics emphasize the severity of the problem:

- Forty-four percent of U.S. schools reported teaching vacancies in 2022 (U.S. Schools Report, 2022).
- Over 50% of these vacancies were due to resignations.
- Ninety percent of educators stated burnout is a serious issue (Jotkoff, 2022).
- A 2022 Gallup poll found that 52% of teachers report feeling “always” or “very often” burned out (Marken & Agrawal, 2022).

In response, some states are investing millions into teacher recruitment and retention programs. For instance, Illinois proposed a \$70 million grant to support school districts through signing bonuses, housing assistance, and other incentives. Similar initiatives are underway in Pennsylvania and New Jersey (Merod, 2023).

Current Trends in South Carolina

The South Carolina Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA) published its 2024-2025 supply and demand report. This report collected data from 71 of the 75 public school districts in South Carolina. As of November 2024, the following data were reported (Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement, 2025):

- There was a 35% decrease in teacher vacancies across the state.
- Teacher departure has decreased 13% compared to the last school year.
- Thirty-seven percent of teachers had fewer than five years of experience before quitting.

Districts saw a drop in job openings at the start of the 2024–25 school year, with nearly 600 fewer vacancies compared to the previous year. There were also about 1,000 fewer teachers leaving or being newly hired. Even without data from four districts, these lower numbers suggest that efforts to improve teacher retention in South Carolina are showing some progress.

Conceptual Framework

Teachers do not suffer from burnout because of one situation, factor, or behavior problem. Burnout is a combination of many factors within a teacher's life that vary based on each unique individual teacher (Leichtman, 2021). One of the most popular theories is based on Leichtman's concepts. Below are some examples of contributors that may affect teacher burnout. Financial challenges contribute consistently to teacher burnout (Leichtman, 2021):

- Teacher salaries often do not cover the full cost of living.
- Many teachers struggle with paying off student loans.
- Teachers frequently purchase classroom supplies out of pocket.

Mandated testing is another major contributor to burnout (Leichtman, 2021):

- Teachers are held accountable for student performance on standardized tests.
- High-stakes testing creates pressure for both teachers and students.
- Teachers may be unfairly judged based on a student's test-day performance, even if it does not reflect the student's usual abilities.

Inefficient professional development also contributes to burnout (Leichtman, 2021):

- Professional development is a constant in a teacher's career.
- When poorly designed, it can feel mundane, irrelevant, and time-consuming.
- Ineffective sessions take time away from meaningful planning and instructional improvement.

These types of situations can cause high anxiety for teachers and a sense of failure. Also, pervasive contributors to burnout appear out of the blue and can shake a teacher to the core (Leichtman, 2021). Some common examples of a pervasive contributor to teacher burnout would be an intense parent conference, an unpleasant conversation with administration, a student punching a teacher in the stomach, a student having a temper tantrum in the middle of class, a student having a seizure in class, or working with an incompetent colleague. These are just a few pervasive contributors throughout a teacher's day.

A teacher's mental capacity and professionalism can be diminished throughout the day while dealing with these unpredictable situations and trying to educate a classroom full of students. Teachers may be responsible for school duties, including bus and car duty, joining school committees, organizing school functions, organizing student groups, attending after-school functions, and attending after-school meetings. These are just a few of the additional responsibilities that come with the education system. Teachers may become overwhelmed, exhausted, and mentally drained from the additional educator responsibilities. Understanding burnout and the many factors that contribute to teacher burnout is essential in understanding why many teachers live in

constant burnout. Burnout does not happen in one single instance. It occurs as each instance or situation builds upon another and becomes too much for one person to handle. This can be true in many occupations, but teaching has a high attrition rate and a need for new candidates to join the education system.

Problem Statement

The growing mental and emotional burden placed on educators is resulting in burnout and increased attrition. Teachers must navigate demanding workloads, diverse student needs, limited resources, and a lack of administrative and parental support. Chronic workplace stress can escalate into more severe psychological issues such as anxiety and emotional exhaustion. According to Gray et al. (2017), when teacher expectations do not align with their workload or institutional support, burnout intensifies. Without targeted wellness interventions, this cycle of burnout and attrition will continue to deplete the education workforce, undermining student outcomes and community well-being.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines the impact of fostering a culture of wellness on burnout and enhancing teacher retention rates. While extensive research exists on the causes of teacher burnout, such as low salaries and student behavior, less is known about how schools attempt to mitigate it and whether those measures are effective from the perspective of teachers themselves. This study aims to:

- investigate how burnout influences decisions to stay in or leave the profession
- identify strategies schools are implementing to alleviate burnout
- assess the perceived effectiveness of these strategies by the educators who experience them

Research Questions

To guide the study, the following research questions have been developed:

1. What is the suggested relationship, if any, between the level of burnout and the decision to stay in or leave the profession?
2. What strategies, if any, are schools implementing to alleviate teacher burnout?

Literature Review

Understanding the causes and components of teacher burnout is crucial to finding effective interventions and solutions to promote teacher wellness. Research has shown that specific characteristics of burnout are prevalent within the education system (Nygaard, 2019). A renowned researcher, Christina Maslach, has extensively studied burnout in various occupations. Her research has been instrumental in leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to recognize burnout as an occupational phenomenon (Mills, 2021). The WHO defines burnout as a high frequency of the following conditions that have not been managed effectively: exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of professional efficacy (WHO, 2025).

Strategies for Combating Teacher Burnout

Supporting teachers enhances both educator well-being and student outcomes. In addition to engagement prevention measures (strategies to prevent negative outcomes), organizational assessments are a valuable prevention tool to measure the well-being of employees regularly. An organizational assessment is the process of collecting data to measure the factors that affect the performance of an organization. It is essential to administer an organizational assessment regularly and analyze the strengths and weaknesses throughout the

workplace (Maslach, 2011). Organizational assessments include financial data, technology, a program, a product, and policy (Martz, 2008). “When an organization, through its deliberate actions, incorporates the evaluative attitude into its operations as outlined above, returns are maximized, and the organization thrives. In other words, the organization is effective” (Martz, 2008, p. 10).

A needs assessment can be the foundation for improved communication in a school environment (Kipps-Vaughan, 2013). A needs assessment can be beneficial for identifying the need for stress management and wellness services. Addressing the input on a needs assessment with open communication and a problem-solving mindset can make teachers aware of their value in their school environment (Kipps-Vaughan, 2013). Data collection on the effectiveness of wellness programs should continue after programs are implemented. Using data to target gaps in the interventions will enable the staff to receive a tailored program to fit their needs (Stratford, 2021).

New Ways of Considering Burnout

Dr. Pooja Lakshmin has recently published several articles and a book on burnout and self-care. Her work covers new territory in intrinsically reducing burnout. Dr. Lakshmin (2023) discourages quick fixes such as meditation, yoga, or bubble baths. Leading a rewarding life by setting boundaries, having self-compassion, aligning values, and exercising internal power are encouraged. Essentially, life decisions control a relationship with burnout. Authentic self-care is making hard decisions to lead a fulfilling and empowering life. Educators may benefit from this new approach to promoting self-wellness with self-care.

New teachers generally enter the profession wanting to please their peers and

administrators. However, pleasing the people in a workplace can often result in an overwhelming number of responsibilities. A new teacher who wants to please is less likely to refuse a request than a veteran teacher with boundaries. Setting boundaries within any profession is one of the steps to achieving self-care and preventing burnout.

Setting boundaries is about making decisions that protect one’s well-being (Lakshmin, 2023). Boundaries are essential limits that portray how we want to be treated and protect us from mistreatment. A lack of solid boundaries can contribute to burnout. Learning how to say no and realizing the responsibility to make those internal decisions is hard work. Overworking is one of the most common boundary-setting problems (Martin, 2022). Teachers are likely to take work home, stay at school late working, and work on classroom-related items during the weekends. Many people do not realize that setting boundaries gives them the option to say no or make a compromise. Internally, it is hard to make tough decisions and possibly disappoint others. Many people may feel ashamed or less productive by setting boundaries, but it is essential to prioritize mental and physical health (Lakshmin, 2023). Typically, people who identify as perfectionists or people pleasers are particularly vulnerable to burnout because they sacrifice their well-being to please others. Examples of boundaries could be not checking work email on weekends or after hours, taking an entire lunch break, asking for help, advocating to protect personal time, leaving work on time, clarifying responsibilities, prioritizing personal mental and physical health, speaking up when ignored, or negotiating less responsibility (Martin, 2022).

Once boundaries are set, Dr. Lakshmin recommends practicing self-compassion. Self-compassion focuses on

positive self-talk and high self-regard (Lakshmin, 2023). Self-compassion can improve self-efficacy, which can be severely lacking in some cases of teacher burnout. We are often our own worst critics. Self-compassion can foster the realization to understand yourself, care for yourself, and act to help yourself (McKee & Wiens, 2017). Permission to be good enough is a thought process that replaces self-judgment with self-kindness. Cultivating self-compassion from within promotes proactive change in a positive direction. A clear understanding of what is needed from within will ensure that boundaries are enforced (Lakshmin, 2023).

Establishing boundaries and self-compassion can help many teachers begin to have fewer symptoms of teacher burnout. Furthermore, identifying values encourages clear life choices, leading to a strong sense of purpose and fulfillment. Values are desired qualities of action that align with essential life aspects (Lakshmin, 2023). Understanding personal values can help align decisions to guide a happier life (Cozma, 2023). Once you align values, productive decision-making will flow through all aspects of life. Values will shift just as boundaries and goals will shift. Remembering that flexibility will occur with each season of life is important. Changing values throughout life shows growth and change (Lakshmin, 2023). Many values and boundaries will last a lifetime and manifest a deeper understanding of self-care.

Establishing values can lead to great self-reflection. Self-reflection can lead to exercising an internal power to sustain your values and boundaries. Genuine self-care is an assertion of power and self-preservation. Asserting power can lead to choices that cause inner conflict. Inner conflict can lead to learning more about the self-care that is needed. Using coping skills to problem solve, regulate emotions, and cope with

inner conflicts is self-care. Investing time and thought into personal self-care can cultivate a connection to inner power. Self-care is a skill that is built over time and looks different based on an individual's needs and season of life (Lakshmin, 2023).

Methodology

Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions, offering rich data to inform solutions for improving the teaching profession in South Carolina (Saldana, 2021). This study utilized a mainly qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of teachers experiencing burnout. Phenomenological research aims to understand the emotions and perceptions of participants regarding a specific phenomenon (Teherani et al., 2015).

Data Collection

This study employed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to identify teachers experiencing high levels of burnout. For the purpose of this study, burnout is defined as high scores in exhaustion and depersonalization and low scores in personal accomplishment. Teachers fitting these criteria were invited to share their experiences through open-ended survey questions. MBI scores were not included in qualitative data analysis but were used solely to identify eligible participants.

The qualitative data for this study were collected via Google Forms. Participants received a Google Form with open-ended questions about their experience with teacher burnout. The Google Form did not collect emails to ensure anonymity. The researcher analyzed the results from each survey. According to Saldana (2021), thematic analysis is suitable for research questions that gather data on people's experiences, perspectives, and factors determined by a specific context. The thematic analysis allowed the responses to

be coded by themes and patterns that were consistent with the results. The researcher discovered how themes are similar and different and what connections may exist. Themes were extracted through a two-step coding process, starting with descriptive categories and culminating in overarching thematic statements that relate directly to the research questions.

Instrumentation

Christina Maslach created the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) in 1981. The MBI has been identified as a leading measure of burnout. The MBI includes three questionnaires: Human Services, General, and Educators Survey. For this study, the Educator's Survey was used. The MBI is the prevalent burnout inventory used in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, European Union countries, Latin America, and Asia. The MBI has been extensively researched and has a verifiable history of validity and reliability in these countries (Coker & Omoluabi, 2009). Gilmonite (2005) conducted a study on the factorial validity of the MBI and found adequate factorial validity and sufficient internal consistency of the scales. Coker and Omoluabi (2009) conducted a study in Nigeria and reported that the MBI has reliable coefficients and valid reliability properties.

The MBI measures burnout's three main characteristics: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). Twenty-two self-report statements are designed to measure the elements of burnout. The inventory has a dual-column response consisting of a six-point Likert scale frequency column and a seven-point intensity column (Coker & Omoluabi, 2009). The results will reveal scores for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. For this study, the following values will qualify an

educator in the burnout category: a value of 30 or greater for occupational exhaustion, a value of 12 or greater for depersonalization, and a value of 33 or less for personal accomplishment.

Data collection also involved survey questions administered through Google Forms. The survey utilized five questions, four open-ended and one Likert scale, aimed at answering the research questions. The first question was a Likert scale and asked, "To what extent is the current level of burnout prompting you to contemplate leaving the teaching profession?" Respondents were given the option of choosing from five responses: Highly Unlikely, Unlikely, Neutral, Likely, and Highly Likely. The remaining four questions were open-ended and focused on gathering insights into teachers' experiences with burnout, school intervention strategies, and perceptions of institutional support:

2. Please provide details for the contributing factors for Question 1.
3. What specific measures, if any, is your current school implementing to support teachers experiencing burnout? Please elaborate on the effectiveness of these initiatives.
4. Among the strategies being implemented at your school, which ones do you perceive as the most effective and least effective in addressing the challenges or issues they are designed to tackle? Please provide details for a comprehensive understanding.
5. What actions can schools take to have the most positive impact on reducing teacher burnout? Please provide details for a comprehensive understanding.

Anonymous responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify

patterns and themes in qualitative data (Saldana, 2021).

Participants

The Palmetto State Teachers Association (PSTA) assisted in distributing the survey to classroom teachers across South Carolina. PSTA comprises educators from various school levels, making it a representative sample for studying burnout in different teaching environments. Participants were selected based on MBI scores, ensuring they met the study's burnout criteria.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	Percentage
Years Teaching	1-5 years	18.75
	6-10 years	25
	11-15 years	31.25
	15-20 years	12.5
	20+ years	12.5
Level	Elementary	31.25
	Middle	25
	High	43.75
Male or Female	Male	0
	Female	100
Classroom Teacher	Yes	93.75
	No (classroom aide)	6.25

This study employed convenience sampling, a method that selects participants based on availability, willingness to participate, and ease of access (Dudovskiy, n.d.). While this method allowed for efficient data collection, it also posed a risk of selection bias and limited generalizability.

Data Analysis

The first phase of data collection determined the participants for the study. The MBI determined that the participants with the operationally defined parameters of

burnout: a high degree of occupational exhaustion, a high degree of depersonalization/loss of empathy, and a low degree of personal accomplishment, would participate in this study. The remaining participants were disqualified from the study.

The second phase of data collection was the open-ended survey questions. Data analysis followed thematic analysis, which involved coding responses to identify key themes and patterns (Saldana, 2021). The process included:

1. First Coding Cycle: Categorizing responses into broad thematic areas.
2. Second Coding Cycle: Refining themes into specific, meaningful statements.
3. Peer Coding: A secondary researcher reviewed the coded data to ensure reliability and reduce researcher bias.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question One

Teacher responses to the first survey question revealed mixed results. While no respondents stated they were 'Highly Unlikely' to leave the field due to their current stress level, only 12.5% stated that they were 'Highly Likely'. The remaining three categories were divided almost equally as follows: Unlikely = 25%, Neutral = 31.3%, and Likely = 31.3% (see Table 2).

Table 2

Likelihood of Leaving the Profession

Likert Scale Response	Response Rate
Highly Likely	12.5%
Likely	31.3%
Neutral	31.3%
Unlikely	25%
Highly Unlikely	0%

A large percentage of the teachers surveyed (43.8%) suggested that current stress levels experienced in schools are impacting their decision to stay in the profession.

Consequently, one could bring forward that there is somewhat of a relationship between the level of burnout and one's decision to leave the profession.

Research Question Two

As stated previously, the Maslach Burnout Inventory was utilized to gauge the extent of burnout among the study participants. It was discerned from the responses that factors such as excessive paperwork, unrealistic expectations, and challenging student behavior contribute significantly to teacher burnout. In response, participants proposed that to promote teacher wellness, effective strategies include:

- **Duty-free time:** Schools that offered designated mental health breaks and reduced administrative responsibilities reported improved staff morale. Duty-free time enables educators to take mental breaks and focus on self-care, which research has shown reduces stress levels (Stratford, 2021).
- **Supportive peer networks:** Positive relationships with colleagues were highlighted as crucial in mitigating stress. Supportive peer environments have been linked to improved job satisfaction and resilience in high-stress occupations like teaching (Hawk, 2020).
- **Mental health initiatives:** Schools that implemented mental health days, counseling services, and "wellness rooms" experienced notable reductions in teacher stress levels. Resources such as counseling services and mental health support are key in fostering a positive

educational environment (Gray et al., 2017).

Conversely, respondents found initiatives such as themed dress-up days and non-academic activities to be less effective in addressing core burnout concerns. Additionally, participants reported that schools that focused on improving communication and offering teachers greater autonomy showed improved staff engagement and satisfaction.

The findings reinforce the importance of holistic wellness strategies in combating teacher burnout. Interventions emphasizing mental health support, relationship-building, and stress reduction strategies were particularly effective. Schools must prioritize practical measures like reducing administrative burdens and enhancing peer support networks rather than relying on superficial morale-boosting tactics. Investing in comprehensive wellness programs that cater to teachers' emotional, psychological, and social well-being is key to sustaining a motivated workforce (Prendergast & French, 2022).

Moreover, building a culture of wellness requires intentional actions that promote self-care, boundary-setting, and work-life balance (Lakshmin, 2023). Programs that integrate wellness strategies into the school environment are more successful in reducing teacher stress and promoting positive outcomes for educators and students.

Recommendations

This study suggests that teacher burnout is a systemic problem, and the system must change to decrease teacher burnout. Research affirms the prevalence of initiative fatigue within schools. Schools may find themselves shuffling through various initiatives with little success and an increased burden on teachers (Greene & Kramer, 2020). As such, schools must

identify areas where burdens can be reduced. Such areas may include:

Establish designated duty-free periods for teachers to recharge:

- Ensure teachers have at least one period per day that is completely free from supervisory duties, meetings, or required tasks.
- Protect this time by clearly communicating expectations to staff and administrators so that it's respected and consistent.

Incorporate accessible mental health resources, including counseling and self-care programs:

- Offer on-site or virtual counseling services through Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) or school-based partnerships.
- Provide professional development workshops focused on stress management, mindfulness, and work-life balance.
- Create self-care spaces on campus—quiet rooms or lounges equipped with calming resources.

Promote collegial support through mentorship programs and collaborative planning time:

- Pair new teachers with experienced mentors for guidance, support, and emotional encouragement throughout the school year.
- Set aside structured, regular time for grade-level or subject-area teams to plan lessons, share strategies, and solve challenges together.

Provide professional autonomy and involve teachers in decision-making processes:

- Allow teachers to choose instructional strategies and materials that best suit their students' needs, rather than mandating scripted curricula.
- Involve teachers on school leadership teams and committees that decide policies, schedules, or curriculum changes.
- Create surveys and feedback opportunities where teachers can voice concerns and help shape initiatives that affect their daily work.

Provide mental health or wellness days:

- Include designated wellness days in the school calendar that teachers can take without penalty to support their mental health.
- Encourage a culture where using these days is normalized and supported, not stigmatized.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of wellness-focused interventions on teacher retention rates and academic outcomes. Expanding the scope of research to include diverse educational environments can offer broader insights into the success of wellness strategies in reducing burnout.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of wellness programs in retaining educators. Administrators can minimize teacher burnout and improve overall job satisfaction by integrating meaningful wellness initiatives into school cultures. Policymakers should prioritize funding and resources to

implement holistic interventions that address the multifaceted stressors faced by educators. Developing strategies incorporating mental health services,

positive peer networks, and practical stress-reducing initiatives can build a healthier educational workforce.

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Translanguaging in the Leadership Classroom: Fostering an Inclusive Community of Sociocultural Discovery

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Abstract

This heuristic case study explored the experiences of multilingual and monolingual students in a translanguaging leadership classroom in a midwestern United States public school. Data were collected by the teacher-researcher using documents, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Employing a theoretical framework of translanguaging pedagogy, sociocultural theory, and theories of belonging, the results of this study demonstrate the utility of translanguaging pedagogy in creating a safe classroom environment in which students are able to develop sociocultural awareness. The study demonstrated the possibilities for translanguaging as a strategy for strengthening cross-cultural connections and multilingual collaboration.

Keywords: translanguaging, multilingual learners, sociocultural awareness, cross-cultural collaboration, belonging

Introduction

Since the 1980s, there has been a surge of linguistic diversity brought about by global migration caused by economic pressures, environmental stress, and advancements in technology (Hofmann et al., 2020). During a span of forty years, the number of United States residents who spoke a language other than English at home grew by 194% from 23.1 million in 1980 to 67.8 million in 2019 (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022). Because of this, schools are more and more likely to be educating classrooms of linguistically diverse students. In 2019, 10.4% of all students enrolled in United States schools were identified as English language learners, and 22.6% students spoke a language other than English at home (NCES, 2022). This rise in linguistic diversity has brought about intense discussion about how to best meet the needs of multilingual students in traditionally monolingual classrooms.

While bilingual schools were prominent in the territory now known as the United States during the 17th and 18th centuries, since the mid-1800s, monolingual ideologies have shaped the landscape of the United States education system and reinforced English hegemony (Cavanaugh, 1996; Gándara & Escamilla, 2017; García Garrido & Fernández Álvarez, 2011). In the 1860s, the United States adopted a policy of assimilation, and by 1923, 34 states had passed English-only education laws (García Garrido & Fernández Álvarez, 2011; Gándara & Escamilla, 2017). English-only policies were predominant until the mid-20th century, when the federal government revised the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to establish funding for schools to provide bilingual education for students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) (De Costa & Qin, 2015; Gándara & Escamilla, 2017; Linton, 2006). The subsequent court cases of *Lau v. Nichols*

(1974) and *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) furthered the requirements for affirmative steps that schools must take to provide English language learner students with access to the same curriculum as English-speaking students, but did not specify what approaches schools might use.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of bilingual education programs (e.g. Collier, 1992; Collier & Thomas, 2004; Lucas & Katz, 1994); however, such programs are still relatively rare (Roberts, 2021). In search of other, more practical strategies for integrating and honoring students' multiple languages, some teachers have turned to translanguaging. The term translanguaging was first used by Cen Williams (1994, 1996) to refer to the practice of teachers encouraging students to alternate between their known languages for receptive or productive use.

Translanguaging pedagogy now refers to the intentional strategies through which teachers encourage students to make meaning of their learning with the entirety of their linguistic repertoire (Williams, 2012, as cited in García & Wei, 2014). Through translanguaging pedagogy (TP) teachers and students convey ideas in multiple languages and encourage cross-linguistic transfer.

Studies have illustrated the effectiveness of employing translanguaging in classrooms for both engaging multilingual (ML) students and improving their academic achievement (Aoyama, 2020; Karlsson et al., 2018; Tai & Wei, 2021; Zhang & Jocuns, 2021; Zhang-Wu, 2021). However, prior studies have focused on the academic experiences of ML students in translanguaging classrooms and have not examined the sociocultural implications for both monolingual and multilingual students. Given that the United States education system and its policies uphold English hegemony and that the majority of United States students are monolingual English

speakers, it is crucial to examine how strategies such as translanguaging affect the experiences of both multilingual and monolingual students within United States classroom settings.

Acknowledging the socially, culturally, and politically contextualized nature of students' educational realities, this study employs a heuristic inquiry case study approach to investigate the experiences of students in a translanguaging English Medium Instruction (EMI) Civic Leadership classroom in a Midwestern United States public high school. Two main questions were pursued: 1) How do students feel about the use of translanguaging in an EMI Civic Leadership class? and 2) How do students perceive their experiences in a translanguaging EMI Civic Leadership classroom? In answering these questions, I seek to illuminate the sociocultural and emotional effects of TP on students within traditionally monolingual classrooms.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Translanguaging Pedagogy

According to translanguaging researchers and theorists, García and Wei (2014), translanguaging is a process of critical co-construction of knowledge through the use of multiple languages that encourages multifaceted understanding. Through translanguaging, one is able to articulate and make sense of lived experiences and situate oneself amongst multiple sociocultural worlds by integrating the entirety of one's linguistic funds of knowledge (Kenner & Gregory, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Based on this understanding of multilingualism, the objective of translanguaging pedagogy is for teachers to use students' native language(s) to reinforce the language of instruction and vice versa in order to increase the students' participation

and understanding of content (García & Wei, 2014; Williams, 2002).

In a 2020 article, García demonstrated how content classroom teachers might use TP to enhance ML students' comprehension. The study found that by providing an ML student with texts in her native language as well as English, the student was better able to comprehend and engage with course content (García, 2020). Several other studies have similarly demonstrated that translanguaging may empower students to be creative with their ways of interpreting, conceptualizing, and interacting with their realities through integrating diverse funds of knowledge (Karlsson et al., 2019; Ollerehead, 2019; Pacheco & Miller, 2016; Tai & Wei, 2021; Zhang-Wu, 2022). These studies reported that by calling upon information from various funds of knowledge through translanguaging ML, students improved their learning and academic performance.

Because TP allows ML students to access and call upon funds of knowledge from their multiple languages, not only do students understand academic content better, but they are also advantageously equipped to interact in their social classroom settings (Flynn et al., 2021; Song et al., 2022). Song et al. (2022) found that translanguaging created a space in which ML students felt more confident collaborating with their teacher and peers. Flynn et al. (2021) had similar findings in their investigation of two educators who used translanguaging to encourage a preschooler's development of storytelling over the course of a year. Through translanguaging storytelling, the ML student increased his peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher interactions (Flynn et al., 2021). These findings imply that translanguaging is useful in bolstering ML students' social interactions in addition to enhancing students' understanding of academic content.

Translanguaging pedagogy served as the foundation for this study's design. Based on prior research, this study assumes that TP allows ML students to access their diverse funds of knowledge, which may differ from the dominant culture of United States schools.

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory (SCT), often associated with psychologist Lev Vygotsky, in education is the theory that learning takes place when students are invited to co-construct and negotiate knowledge through social processes (Kozulin, 2003). When students interact with the intent of constructing meaning, they are learning about and through each other and building a shared understanding. According to SCT, learning is a social process and reflects the cultures of those involved in the transmission of ideas (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In a translanguaging context, students use verbal, written, and physical communication to transmit and formulate meaning that has cultural significance. The interactions that take place between students involve the exchange and establishment of novel funds of knowledge from which students can draw.

As a result of negotiation of meaning between members of a given culture, participants attend to the meanings assigned to particular actions, speech, and events through the lens of the culture within which the meaning was constructed (Lantoff, 1994). Within the school context, students' sociocultural backgrounds contribute to students' resources, experiences, and access to opportunities. The United States educational context, built on Anglo-Saxon views and ideals, is overwhelmingly White, Eurocentric, and monolingual, and does not structurally represent or acknowledge the value of non-dominant groups (Howard, 2016; Huber, 2009). This is of concern for students who have a different sociocultural

frame of reference and might not have a sufficient understanding of the context in which the knowledge they are being taught in schools was constructed.

However, research suggests that by engaging in interaction with dominant culture peers, non-dominant culture students might be better able to understand classroom content (Martin-Beltran et al., 2017; Kim & Lee, 2012). Findings suggest that students and teachers used translanguaging to engage one another in co-construction and recognize funds of knowledge (Martin-Beltran et al., 2017). Because the teacher facilitated cultural exchange that capitalized on students' linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge, students felt respected and were willing to engage in classroom communication and activities through which they learned from one another and the teacher (Kim & Lee, 2012). These peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher interactions aided in ML students' negotiation of their learning of their non-native language and culture. Sociocultural theory informed both the design of this study and the analysis of data.

Using SCT as a framework, this study assumed that learning happens through negotiating meaning in social interaction and that these interactions involve cultural transmission. I thus viewed communication in the classroom as a form of cultural transmission that informed the results of this study.

Theories of Belonging

According to Hodgins, "Belonging (noun) is a...dynamic psychological and physiological phenomenon experienced when one's need to belong is satisfied by positive acceptance of and in identities relating to self-concept, social groups, and one's space" (2016, slide 21). Social scientists have long used theories of belonging to interpret how and where self-concept and collective identities meet. The term belonging allows researchers to

formulate understanding about the flexible and constructed nature of identity within social contexts, for it is within spaces of belonging that individual identities are conflicted, affirmed, and negotiated (Delanty et al., 2011).

In order to understand the concept of belonging, it is important to know how relationships of belonging form. According to Delanty et al., connections of belonging emerge from complex interactions contextualized by cultural and historical conditions and progress over time through “processes of problem resolution and search for social compromises” (2011, p. 21). By these terms, belonging is not a set characteristic but rather a process of negotiating and situating oneself in a larger social context. This also implies that there are varying levels of belongingness and that these levels can change over time as historical, social, and environmental contexts evolve (Hodgins, 2016). Examining these contexts and relationships can help in understanding students’ perceptions of belonging within educational spaces. Within this study, theories of belonging served as a framework for understanding communication within the Civic Leadership classroom. Examining students’ interactions from a framework of belonging aided in contextualizing how students’ identities and the classroom’s collective identity interrelated.

Methods

In order to develop a thick description (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of the lived experiences of students within the Civic Leadership EMI translanguaging classroom, this study employed a heuristic inquiry case study design.

Context

The setting for this research was a classroom in a suburban-rural high school just outside a large metropolitan area in the

Midwestern United States. To protect the privacy of participants, I have given a pseudonym, Dearborn, to the school and district. Dearborn High School is the only high school in the Dearborn School District. In 2022, the district served just over 4,200 students, 5.72% of whom were classified by the state as English Language Learners. Of the 1,400 students at Dearborn High School, 64.6% are White, 17.5% are Hispanic, 9.4% are Black, and 7% are mixed race.

The town within which the Dearborn School District is located has seen a great deal of change over the past 30 years. Before 1994, the town was home to an air force base, which provided jobs for many in the area. When the base closed, the demographics and economy of the town shifted. As urban sprawl from the nearby metropolitan city began to reach the town, the number of Black and Hispanic residents increased and began to occupy the manufacturing and retail jobs, which had begun to employ the majority of residents. What was once a relatively racially and politically homogeneous town became a community of budding diversity to which the school district needed to respond.

It is also important to consider the political context of the town as political ideologies shape the way in which community members, including students and teachers, perceive and interact with one another (Adaval & Wyr, 2022). In the 2020 general election, 61.13% of voters in Dearborn voted for the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, and 38.86% voted for the Democratic candidate, Joseph Biden (Election Summary Report, 2020). Although President Trump may have some diverging ideologies from the general Republican Party, historically, the Republican Party has advocated for legislation mandating English-only education. It is also important to mention President Trump’s attitude and disposition towards the use of languages

other than English in the United States. While many of former President Trump’s family members are multilingual, he is not, and during his 2016 campaign, Trump openly criticized another party member for speaking Spanish. Trump said, “he should really set the example by speaking English while in the United States” (Scott, 2015, para. 2). When asked about this remark by a reporter during a presidential debate, Trump responded, “this is a country where we speak English, not Spanish” (CNN, 2015,0.36). As the Dearborn community has seen an increase in its Hispanic and Spanish-speaking population over recent years, this is a crucial fact for understanding this demographic's experience in the town and schools.

Table 1

List of Interview Participants with Linguistic Characteristics

Pseudonym	Linguistic Background	Primary Language	Other Language(s)
Evalynn	Multilingual	English	Spanish
Bella	Monolingual	English	N/A
Alicia	Multilingual	Spanish	English
Justice	Multilingual	English	Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga, & Mambwe
Jane	Multilingual	English	American Sign Language
Ashley	Monolingual	English	N/A

Participants were students enrolled in my Introduction to Civic Leadership course—a one-semester elective course that is required for students enrolled in the school’s Public Service Career Path. Designed to introduce students to the characteristics and skills necessary for a career in civic leadership, the class met for 90 minutes every other day. Upon completion of the course, students were able to enroll in Civic Leadership II, where they applied the skills learned in the introduction course to their local context

Participants

Purposeful sampling is used to “select groups or participants with whom you can establish the most productive relationships, ones that will best enable you to answer your research questions” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 99). The classroom setting, my own classroom, was purposefully selected because of its use of translanguaging pedagogy by me, a multilingual teacher, as well as the linguistic diversity of the students. The six participants who were interviewed were members of the class whose parents gave informed consent for their child to share their classroom stories. See Table 1 for a description of their linguistic characteristics.

through community-integrated projects. Four of the participating students enrolled in Civic Leadership II with me the semester following their completion of Introduction to Civic Leadership.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative researchers reject the positivist view of the researcher’s role as an objective observer “in favor of one that recognizes the influences of the researcher’s own status (e.g., race, gender, etc.) on the shaping of knowledge” (Mertens, 2019, p. 275). By acknowledging factors which have shaped my worldview, I reveal my

ontological and epistemological assumptions I carry as a teacher-researcher. One of the major components of my worldview that influences this research is my own history with multilingualism and education.

I am a White, middle-class female with a native language of English who grew up in a Midwestern United States metropolitan area. When I was in fourth grade, I began formal instruction in French with encouragement from my parents, who both have some proficiency in other languages. I continued to study French throughout public high school and eventually majored in French during my undergraduate studies while taking Spanish classes along the way. Unlike many multilingual students in today's schools, I had a choice in learning another language and did not have to do so to access schooling. I was never ostracized for the language I spoke. My family valued multilingualism and encouraged me to learn foreign languages, which has affected how I view the role of language within the United States society.

For three years, I served as a French teacher in a suburban-rural Midwestern school of predominantly White, English-speaking students before transitioning to teach gifted education and leadership at Dearborn High School. As a teacher who uses translanguaging pedagogy in my own English Medium Instruction classroom, I share a similar experience to that of the study participants. This relatedness of experience not only lent itself to the heuristic tradition but also shaped the goals and design of the study, as the researcher's own background, experiences, and goals play a role in the research design as well as the validity of findings (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

Through the process of reflexivity, I, as the researcher, situated myself within the cultural and social context that shaped the

design of this study as well as data collection and analysis (Darwin Holmes, 2020). While my positionality may shift over time with the course of changing contexts, as Darwin Holmes (2020) indicated, by engaging in critical reflexivity throughout the entire research process, I continually articulated my positionality by keeping a journal.

Data Collection

Three methods of data collection were utilized, including a review of students' personal documents, field notes from observations in the class setting, and semi-structured interviews. As suggested by Ellingson (2009), by "interweaving, blending, or otherwise drawing upon more than one genre of data" (p.11), I created a crystallized, multifaceted understanding of the phenomena. Each data source provided rich, descriptive information that was used to inductively derive codes and themes that aid in understanding the phenomenon.

The preliminary data source was the course evaluation students submitted at the end of their semester-long Civic Leadership course. In their evaluation, students were asked to reflect and give feedback with the goal of informing the teacher about what instructional strategies and activities went well and which may need to be reformed in subsequent semesters. A total of 26 student responses were compiled and analyzed. This document provided me with insight into participants' selective language usage to describe their experiences, which was crucial to this study's emic approach (Patton, 2015). The results from the preliminary analysis of this document were used in the development of the protocol for the semi-structured interviews (See Appendix).

As a teacher-researcher investigating my own classroom, I engaged as a participant-observer in the study setting. Over the course of one week, I recorded

video observations, which I watched back to transcribe interactions and develop detailed field notes. Using video observations aided in bracketing (Moustakas, 1994), my teacher self as I was able to inspect students' peer interactions that I had been unable to observe while teaching. These observations provided crucial data for understanding how social interactions take place between students in the translanguaging EMI Civic Leadership classroom.

The final sources of data were semi-structured interviews and follow-up member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To mitigate unequal teacher-student power dynamics, all interviews occurred the semester following participants' enrollment in Introduction to Civic Leadership after grades had been awarded. Each interview took place in English in a conference room in Dearborn High School. Afterwards, each interview was transcribed, and a Microsoft Word document of the transcription was sent to each participant to review for accuracy. During a follow-up member check, participants were able "to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences" (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1802). At this point, participants provided clarification and further explication of their previous responses, which provided me with a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data collected, I used both enumerative content analysis (Miles et al., 2020) and thematic analysis (Grbich, 2013). I began this process by reading and rereading the documents, interview transcripts, and descriptive and reflexive field notes. As I immersed myself in the data, I noted recurrent and emergent ideas, many of which became descriptive codes.

Next, I embarked on the process of line-by-line coding of the data sources and assigning descriptive codes (Miles et al.,

2020) using the software QualCoder. After the creation of preliminary codes, I used an inductive process to group the descriptive codes by meaning into interpretive codes, also called "pattern codes" (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020). Finally, I grouped interpretive codes into themes that describe the abstract, subtle, or tacit concepts and processes identified through the coding process (Grbich, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). In the following section, I detail the results of my analysis and connect the thematic concepts to relevant literature.

Findings

The data analysis revealed that students generally have a positive regard for the use of TP. In general, translanguaging resulted in perceptions of both safety and discomfort within the Civic Leadership classroom. Additionally, findings indicate that students experienced a growth in awareness of self and diversity as a result of their experiences. More specifically, in answering the research questions, the following themes emerged: 1) Safety and Discomfort and 2) Developing Awareness.

Safety and Discomfort

In addressing the first research question about how students feel about the use of translanguaging in the Civic Leadership classroom, analysis revealed that students perceived the classroom as both safe and uncomfortable at times. The metaphor of a "safe" classroom in this context does not refer to physical safety but rather a classroom "in which students are able to openly express their individuality, even if it differs dramatically from the norms set by the instructor, the profession, or other students" (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 50). For students, a "safe" classroom environment is foundational to their interactions with their teacher and peers as well as academic content (Sayfulloevna, 2023).

In the course evaluations, students expressed their feelings of safety in a variety of ways; one student wrote, “[My favorite part of class is] being able to express myself freely without worry of judgment.” Across data sources, it was apparent that I, as a teacher, played a foundational role in fostering students’ perception of safety. One student’s response to the question “Any last word for the teacher? (not required)”, illuminated this as a factor of students’ perceived safety, stating, “I really appreciate how it seems like you’re really interested in everything that everybody says in your class, and anybody can have a conversation with you about anything and you’ll listen.” In general, students saw the teacher as someone willing to listen, which led the students to be more open in their self-expression.

For ML students, their perception of me as a teacher who is willing to listen, coupled with my own multilingual identity, aided in creating a sense of safety and acceptance. Alicia revealed this in her interview saying:

With you when I didn't know a word in English, you would say, ‘Just say to me in Spanish, I'll try my best,’ and that just made me feel wanted in your classroom, made me feel more respected for who I am. And it just made me feel so much better.

Alicia pointed to a specific action I, as the teacher, took that made her feel welcome to express herself and her identity. Another Spanish-speaking student shared a similar attitude on the course evaluation, saying, “también fue bonito hablar con ella en español porque mi ingles no sirve, y tambien me gusto que se diera el tiempo de traducirme demasiadas cosas acerca de la clase” [“It was also nice to talk to her in Spanish because my English is useless, and I also liked that she took time to translate too many things about the class for me.”] Both

students viewed me as the teacher as being supportive of their multilingual identities, as I encouraged their use of Spanish in meaning-making, making my role of teacher crucial to their feelings of safety.

Because ML students felt included and accepted in the classroom, they felt comfortable sharing more about themselves. In her interview, Bella expressed this idea by stating,

We had [a foreign exchange student] in our class that I feel like I saw him give out so much more of himself in this class than I have seen him anywhere else because he was able to learn English, but like the things he didn't know how to say he was able to say in Italian.

The stories Bella and others told in their evaluation showed that because students felt their linguistic identity was respected by their teacher and peers, they trusted each other enough to share ideas and opinions as well as other aspects of their identities, a finding similar to the results of Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) and Holley and Steiner (2005).

Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) found that classroom environments that students describe as “safe spaces” often center around group activity, as the collaborative environment fosters a sense of safety. Throughout the data sources, it was clear that the structure and organization of the classroom environment were designed to facilitate collaboration. In terms of the physical environment, students sat at tables of two to four, with students facing each other, which facilitated ease of communication and collaboration between students. Furthermore, classroom assignments and activities required students to collaborate. For example, one ML student mentioned in her evaluation that her favorite activity was a project where students worked together to identify their views of leadership

and design a poster that synthesized their beliefs of what a good leader looks like. Activities such as this provided students opportunities to communicate and develop a shared understanding, which led to a sense of safety.

In the majority of evaluations, students named group activities and projects as their favorite class assignments. One student's evaluation specifically drew attention to the fact that collaboration with peers aided in overcoming personal feelings of anxiety, which allowed him to establish connections with others.

Having different activities and assignments that required interacting with my classmates was extremely helpful in getting to know the other people in class and overcoming my anxiety. I've been able to meet a lot of people through the different group projects that I might not have been able to meet otherwise.

As this student noted, collaboration was foundational to initiating connections between students. As students collaborated, they developed relationships with one another, which allowed them to feel safe to participate and take risks (Clapper, 2010). One of the risks that some students took was that of cross-linguistic collaboration.

As a teacher, I used TP to structure opportunities for cross-linguistic collaboration. These actions did not go unnoticed, as Alicia, in her interview stated, I feel like you just put stuff around the classroom to help students talk to each other if they don't know the language, then you encourage them to speak. You also encourage the English speakers to speak to that person to just make them feel included.

Alicia summarized what other ML students had noted in their class evaluations--that by involving students' known languages, they

were better able to participate in class and feel a sense of belonging that fostered connections with others.

In her interview, Jane also drew attention to how a translanguaging resource opened doors for students to engage in multilingual communication, as she told a story about how she developed a connection with a student with limited English proficiency:

I just felt like we all connected on a different level because we just tried to talk to each other. We made an effort... I know [Lexie] and I at one time we just stood and we stared at your poster on the wall with all your Spanish phrases and we figured out, you know, one maybe a week that we could say and that we could communicate in some way. And I know [Marianna] was focusing on learning English, so it was both ways which was really helpful.

Rather than collaborating with other English-speaking students, Jane and her classmates went out of their way to use the translanguaging resources provided to communicate with Marianna. Although students may not have shared the same language, they attempted to cross linguistic barriers to create collaborative projects that reflected multiple positionalities.

While student evaluations and interviews identified feelings of safety as leading to better communication, cross-linguistic communication also resulted in feelings of discomfort for some. When asked about her usage of multiple languages in class, Evalynn said, "I prefer English because spoken English is easier, and I know some words can get lost in translation and you can get confused between the languages." Although she spoke Spanish, Evalynn felt that it was better to use her primary language, English, because of the discomfort that miscommunication creates.

When Justice was asked the same question, she had a similar response, stating, “Most of the time it’s because no one can understand me... that’s kind of what stops me from using my language, you know? But sometimes I don’t stop using the language and everyone’s like, ‘What did you say?’” As Evalynn and Justice expressed, the fear of misunderstanding was present in the Civic Leadership classroom and was one factor in ML students’ decision to use or not use their multiple languages. Although both students explicitly stated a positive view of the use of TP and acknowledged the benefits it provided, their use of translanguaging was limited because they felt they might not be understood.

It is worth noting that a great deal of discomfort identified by both multilingual and monolingual students was related to issues of cultural and linguistic differences. Six students expressed feelings of discomfort and cited communication with the possibility of being misunderstood as the impetus for malaise. For example, one student’s evaluation listed “Having to communicate with different groups of people we don’t really know,” as his least favorite part of class. In several evaluations and interviews, students expressed feeling self-conscious or nervous to collaborate with peers who were different from themselves. While there were occasional references to specific activities that caused discomfort, the majority of these were partner or group partner activities, and only two mentioned individual activities. Because students were frequently asked to collaborate with diverse peers with whom they may not have prior relationships, there was a possibility for miscommunication (Wierzbicka, 2010).

Across the three data sources, the descriptive code “miscommunication” was identified 24 times, demonstrating that students’ anxiety about miscommunication is not unfounded. However, the code

“frustration/miscommunication” was only present on three occasions, implying that although miscommunication occurred, it was also resolved. Several students expressed how they navigated moments of confusion, and an excerpt from Justice’s interview provides a typical example of how students navigated moments of confusion:

I would try and use Google Translate [but sometimes] it just wouldn’t go through or it wouldn’t go in and [Marianna would] want to say something, but she kind of didn’t know how so she kept quiet, [so] I would use a lot of hand gestures and like show her pictures kind of. That’s one thing I would do.

Although Justice and others frequently cited Google Translate as their primary method for cross-linguistic communication, using pictures, gestures, and simplified English were also strategies that were named. In her interview, Ashley also mentioned how she negotiated conversations with her non-native English-speaking peers:

[S]ometimes I would try to use basic English words because you know if I said something that maybe another English speaker might not even know then of course [they are] probably not going to know it. I feel like that happens a lot in other classrooms.

Ashley and other students were cognizant of the possibility of miscommunication because they had seen it happen in other classrooms. However, while there was discomfort surrounding miscommunication, students were able to identify strategies for resolving misunderstandings.

Because the Civic Leadership class was a highly communicative and collaborative space where students felt safe and accepted, students were willing to take social risks. Although these risks occasionally resulted in discomfort from

miscommunication, students were able to identify strategies for overcoming misunderstanding. My modeling of multilingual communication encouraged students to do the same. This led to multilingual students' feelings of support for their linguistic identities. The combination of these factors led to students forming connections with linguistically diverse peers, which opened doors for students to learn more about one another and develop sociocultural awareness.

Developing Sociocultural Awareness

When answering the second research question, analysis showed that students recognized their experiences in the translanguaging Civic Leadership classroom as developing awareness of self and others. Self-awareness in this context refers to students' consciousness of their own frame of reference, including their characteristics, feelings, and experiences, while awareness of others refers to the students' consciousness of how others' frames of reference differ from their own. In this section, I highlight the interviews of Bella and Ashley, as these monolingual students clearly expressed a change in awareness that was implied but not explicitly stated in the interviews with the multilingual students.

One of the ways in which students increase their awareness of self and others is through participating in activities that make their frame of reference detectable (Hakelind et al., 2020), which the Civic Leadership class did by encouraging students to investigate their own cultures and values in group or class discussions. Bella, in her interview, indicated an increase in self-awareness when she acknowledged that her perspective of multilingualism had changed due to the use of translanguaging in the Civic Leadership class.

Up until that point I definitely felt like it was not really a big deal, me only knowing English, but then, like,

seeing and hearing that *pauses* and I guess just wanting to be part of something bigger than just English-- knowing more, having more culture I guess.

Bender and colleagues (2010) in their study of self-awareness in culturally-responsive social work found that when students increased their self-awareness, they also became more aware of their role in the struggles they may face when developing trusting relationships with those who had dissimilar backgrounds from their own. My interview with Bella suggests the same. In answering a follow-up question, Bella recognized her monolingual identity as a limiting factor in her connections to others, saying,

If I knew more languages than just English off the top of my head I wouldn't have to go through the work of using a translator and hoping it's accurate or having someone try to communicate for me when I want to have that conversation with them.

Rather than place blame on a non-English speaker for not speaking English, a common reaction in America, Bella accepts her role in two-way communication with diverse others. As Bella increased her self-awareness, she also became more cognizant of the diversity that existed within our class.

In the class evaluations, comments such as the following also demonstrated students' growth in awareness of diversity:

My favorite part of this class was the conversations, because it gave me a sort of look at the sort of differences in ways we would react to situations we were given. Which truly showed how unique we all were.

While some students merely became aware of differences, Justice expressed how increased awareness of her linguistically diverse peers prompted her to learn about other languages and cultures. After

mentioning the visibility of the Spanish-speaking ML students in the class, Justice stated,

I would go home and research different things so I could come to class and be like, 'Hey, I can speak a little bit of Spanish' ... Like I learned more about different cultures instead of just one culture compared to other classes.

Although Justice may not have become proficient in Spanish, her interactions with linguistically diverse peers within the classroom led to her exploration of their language and culture. This was a notable thread across the data, as there were 26 instances of participants expressing curiosity about the culture of diverse classmates.

In addition to being curious about the diverse backgrounds of their peers, participants demonstrated that they were aware of their classmates' origins and backgrounds because of in-class collaboration. Jane discussed this in our interview, commenting:

[I]n an English-only classroom, you're really going to focus on the people you know, the people that speak the same language as you or that you've communicated with before. But if you have something different, with different languages in a classroom, I would definitely say that you're more motivated to talk to people because you see that example every day, so you're more motivated to talk to different people and see what their aspects are... I've lived in [Dearborn] my whole life, but lots of people haven't, and we had a very mixed culture classroom. [Marianna] was from Mexico... [Lexie] moved from the South and [Justice] moved from Africa and we had, you know, very mixed cultures and different

ideas that collaborated on a pretty good basis.

This statement illustrates how students in the Civic Leadership class were willing to discuss the diversity that existed in the classroom, and across all six interviews, this idea was mentioned 14 times.

As students developed awareness of self and others, they simultaneously developed their sociocultural awareness. Sociocultural awareness refers to students' consciousness of social norms, cultural expectations, and how they relate to the experience of others (Johnson, 2009). This was evident in the data as students described how their experiences differed from those of their peers and what those differences might mean. Perhaps the most apparent realization students had was of the privileged place of English in schools (17 instances). Participants discussed how their interactions with ML students prompted them to consider how the English language shaped the experiences of ML students. When referring to how her perspective of ML students' experiences had changed, Ashley said,

[T]hinking about it, I don't know how hard it is for [Marianna] to like, be in school and not understand anyone around her. Like I wouldn't... I don't even know... I couldn't even imagine it. You want to speak a language that I understand. Like that's honestly probably scary. I'd be scared.

Ashley recognized that having knowledge of the dominant language was a question of access to school as a whole, but especially to social interactions. She also acknowledged that if she did not have proficiency in English, she would experience her world in a different way.

Bella shared a similar thought about the role of the English language in schools. She said,

I mean, like I have a lot of friends who don't know a lot of English. Like they know enough to get their points across, but not enough to where they feel like they can usually get the help and have the opportunities other kids have in your regular English class have, but then you have a class that's more inclusive and it shows. I feel like it makes them feel more safe and vulnerable and just seen.

In this instance, Bella was comparing her English-only classes and the translanguaging Civic Leadership class, and she acknowledges the role English plays in accessing opportunities in school. While Bella herself identifies as monolingual, she views translanguaging as a valuable practice that provides a more equitable environment within which diversity is appreciated. All six interview participants expressed this view, demonstrating their awareness that societal norms such as the lingua franca can greatly affect people's experiences and worldviews.

Discussion & Implications

As described in detail above, the results of this study demonstrate translanguaging to be a beneficial strategy not only for increasing engagement of multilingual learners but also in building a safe classroom environment that promotes cross-cultural collaboration and sociocultural awareness.

Across all three data sources, it was evident that students saw the classroom as having established group norms (Brazill, 2020), being accepting of diverse views (Holley & Steiner, 2005), and inviting students' knowledge contributions (Acosta & Woodard, 2022)--all components of an educational safe space. Students expressed through their words and their behaviors that the classroom environment, the teacher's role, and the linguistic accessibility of class

content all contributed to their perception of safety within the classroom. However, students also conveyed discomfort as they participated in collaborative activities that pushed them outside of their comfort zone. Students demonstrated that although they felt safe, there was still a degree of discomfort that arose from participation in collaboration with peers who were different from themselves due to the possibility of misunderstanding from linguistic differences.

Due in part to the foundational safety of the classroom, students also perceived the leadership class to be an inclusive community. In all three data sources, students displayed their connections with one another, often demonstrating their rapport through narratives about each other and their shared experiences. These connections that students shared were developed through collaboration that took place almost constantly in the Civic Leadership classroom. One of the important aspects to consider here was how translanguaging contributed to the collaboration that was able to happen and the connections that were formed because of it. For example, in the interviews, three students mentioned how they used Spanish-English translation posters to communicate with a student with limited English proficiency, and in my observations, two non-native speakers of English with different primary languages (Spanish and Italian) frequently used their native languages to negotiate meaning. The ability for students to use their diverse linguistic funds of knowledge helped students communicate and understand one another, which in turn fostered peer relationships.

Because students engaged in frequent communication, they were constantly exposed to diverse viewpoints and ideas, which provided opportunities for developing awareness. Across the three data

sources, students exhibited that they grew in their understanding of themselves and others through their Civic Leadership classroom experiences. Students who had been limited in their exposure to cultural and linguistic diversity found the Civic Leadership class to offer a different lens through which they might view society and their interactions within it, something which was particularly salient in the interviews with participants.

In general, both monolingual and multilingual students exhibited a positive regard for the use of translanguaging in their EMI Civic Leadership class. Multilingual students, such as Alicia, felt that translanguaging was a factor in making classroom content and activities accessible. Additionally, ML students saw translanguaging as a factor in making them feel more welcome and accepted (safe) in the classroom community. From the other perspective, monolingual students felt that translanguaging furthered their awareness of their identity/culture and the cultures of others. They expressed that they felt that translanguaging encouraged collaboration and connections with ML students that would not otherwise have been possible. This was evident in the comparisons that students made between the translanguaging Civic Leadership classroom and other EMI classrooms.

However, ML students primarily saw translanguaging as a strategy used by the teacher and primarily preferred to use the privileged language of English in classroom interactions and activities. ML students felt that the lack of other students who share their language and concerns about the time it would take the teacher to translate their assignments were limiting factors on their use of translanguaging. Monolingual students also felt that although translanguaging opened avenues of communication, it also led to some miscommunication. Thus, while students

generally held a positive view of translanguaging, they did not always view it as practical. In future studies, it is worth investigating if the discomfort TP incites is requisite to sociocultural growth or if it might cause unnecessary anxiety, which distracts from the overarching objectives of the class.

It is apparent that there is a need for further research examining the role of translanguaging pedagogy in building an inclusive classroom community of multicultural discovery. This research contributes to the overall theory that translanguaging is a pedagogy that is useful for enhancing the participation of multilingual students in classrooms that use their non-native language as the language of instruction and postulates that translanguaging also enriches the experience of monolingual students. Although this study demonstrated the possibilities for translanguaging as a strategy for strengthening cross-cultural connections and collaboration, there is a need to further develop the interview and observation protocol to more closely investigate students' experiences with translanguaging classrooms.

This research has important implications for educators of linguistically diverse learners. If teachers want to create classrooms that are truly welcoming for all, we must consider the possible position of languages other than English within our classrooms. Additionally, educators should seek to understand how translanguaging can contribute to multilingual students' classroom experiences not only in terms of participation, but also in regard to their relationships with peers. Interactions between linguistically diverse peers affect both monolingual and multilingual students, and translanguaging in highly collaborative classroom spaces may increase these interactions or at least open these avenues.

This interaction can lead to students' bettering their understanding of one another and awareness of their humanity, which promotes feelings of safety within the classroom, thus encouraging increased participation (Brazill, 2020; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Mae et al., 2013). The

dissemination of the information gleaned through the data collection and analysis in this study will surely aid in developing a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

- Suppose I was a new student to the Civic Leadership class, what would you tell me about the experiences in this class and what to expect?
- Monolingual means knowing one language, multilingual means knowing more than one language. I identify as multilingual because I know French, English, and Spanish. Would you consider yourself to be monolingual or multilingual?
- As I mentioned before we began, last fall I began using translanguaging pedagogy in my class. What differences did you see (if any) between your experiences in your traditional English-only classes and your experiences in my class?
- *For multilingual students:* Describe a time when you used/might use translanguaging in class.
- *For monolingual students:* Describe a time when you saw translanguaging taking place in class.
 - Probe: How do you feel about when translanguaging takes place in class?
 - Probe: What benefits and drawbacks do you see to translanguaging?
- Is there anything else that you want to tell me that may be useful for me to better understand your experience?

Is There a Pedagogy for Refugee Background Students? A Review of Literature

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Abstract

The existing literature on refugee education lacks a comprehensive synthesis of pedagogical approaches, leaving teachers unprepared to meet the needs of students from refugee backgrounds (SRBs). This study seeks to address this gap by identifying and analyzing existing literature on refugee education pedagogy. A mapping review of 200 articles identified 50 focusing on pedagogical strategies, which were analyzed using open coding to determine 13 core categories. The findings highlight the urgent need for a systematic, evidence-based refugee pedagogy that incorporates SRBs' cultural and linguistic strengths, supports trauma recovery, and fosters inclusive educational environments. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of targeted professional development (PD) for educators at all career stages, equipping them with the knowledge and resources to address the diverse needs of SRBs. This study calls for further research and PD initiatives to better prepare teachers to effectively support SRBs' needs and success.

Keywords: students from refugee backgrounds; refugee education; refugee pedagogy; newcomer education; classroom diversity

Introduction

Since the Refugee Act was passed in 1980, more than 3.1 million refugees have entered the United States (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Historically, 31% of those refugees are under the age of 14, so even in times of low admission rates, thousands of children from refugee experiences are eligible to enter the public school system. While most refugees settle in gateway cities such as New York City or Los Angeles, a recent trend indicates that refugee families are increasingly relocating in small or mid-size cities and rural areas that need revival and workers but are less prepared for the diversity, under-resourced, and unfamiliar with the distinctive experiences that characterize refugee education (Brown, 2022; Leonard, 2022; Refugee Resettlement in Small Cities, n.d.).

The challenge is compounded by the current context of anti-immigrant discourse and policies that contribute to the perception that refugee education is a burden and to labeling refugee students and their families with limiting terms such as trauma, victim, delinquent, criminal, and unwanted (Akay & Jaffe-Walter, 2021; Cun, 2020). Despite these barriers, educational success is still the greatest aspiration of most young refugees (Boyden et al., 2002; Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). Creating an environment for refugee students to thrive involves a concerted effort by schools, policymakers, social workers, and local businesses, but it is individual teachers who are essential in recognizing the unique challenges and needs of refugee students and offering the support they need (Kovinthan, 2016; MacNevin, 2012; Strekelova & Hoot, 2008).

By nature and training, teachers appear to be ill-prepared to work with refugee students. Numerous studies over time and across the globe show that few schools and teachers are even minimally

prepared to teach refugee background students (Baecher et al., 2019; Ficarra, 2017; Gürel & Büyüksahm, 2020). Moreover, teacher preparation programs seem to have little commitment to addressing refugee education beyond general references to diversity or multicultural education (Häggström et al., 2020; Kovinthan Levi, 2019; Solomona et al., 2005). Problems related to refugee experience are complex, and preparing teachers to successfully integrate young people into utterly foreign classroom settings cannot be accomplished with a few hours of in-service workshops.

The review that follows is based on the assumption that for teachers to provide optimal experiences for refugee students, they must be informed by a strong research base and an understanding of the experiences of teachers and learners. The purpose of this research is to identify and analyze the existing literature on specific pedagogical approaches or teaching strategies relevant to refugee education. The central question guiding this inquiry is: What pedagogical strategies for refugee education have been documented in the academic literature?

The Missing Research Base

In a previous review of literature, we found little that could be considered a contribution to a research-based pedagogy for refugee students. Sixty-five percent of the articles reviewed could be considered research, varying from a brief reference to the use of case vignettes to thoroughly described, conceptually-grounded, and rigorously designed studies. The research was overwhelmingly qualitative in design, with only 27 articles (50%) based on quantitative or mixed methods. We do not consider quantitative results as a gold standard in determining effectiveness, but we acknowledge the contribution of measurable outcomes to a firmly grounded and well-balanced research base and source

of information for external stakeholders. The potential of the research base was also lessened by small sample sizes and the fact that ten of the 17 studies (59%) relied in part or completely on self-reported data, which is notoriously unreliable (Jobe, 2003; Parry et al., 2021; West, 2014).

It was similarly difficult to determine a widely applicable research base from the much larger sample of qualitative studies. The most common focus was on stories of the refugee teaching and learning experience and perceptual and attitudinal research. The complexity of refugee life and the challenges of teaching and learning in those settings warrant a variety of small and larger-scale qualitative designs, and much can be learned from any one of those designs. While large-scale generalizability is not the purpose of qualitative inquiry, even qualitative researchers have an obligation to demonstrate “truth value” and some degree of applicability to be considered worthwhile (Guba, 1981) and naturalistic inquiry.

Faced with challenges such as trauma, cultural differences, and language barriers, educators often feel unprepared to effectively address the diverse needs of students from refugee backgrounds (Ring & West, 2015). Additionally, the growing number of students from refugee backgrounds (SRBs) in the U.S. educational system underscores the urgent need for teachers to seek out and implement special methods and pedagogies (Barlett et al., 2017; Hayes, 2016). In fact, numerous scholars identify school culture and teacher attitudes and behaviors as one of the most significant challenges faced by SRBs. Teachers often lack knowledge or understanding of the unique aspects of the refugee experience, and some might even perpetuate anti-immigrant bias, resist what they see as preferential treatment, find collaboration with parents difficult, and not understand the impact of trauma on student

behaviors (Cummins, 2001; Kovinthan, 2016). When those factors are compounded by a situation that often occurs with little advance notice and amid other high-stakes expectations, there is little chance of meaningful integration of new pedagogies into existing classrooms.

The successful adoption of any new teaching approach relies on prior experience, adequate resources, and ongoing professional development support (DeCoito & Estaiteyeh, 2022; Moser et al., 2021). Even in the absence of the additional pressure and anxiety, the most dedicated and scholarly teachers have little time to find good research and apply it to appropriate teaching strategies (Buckley-Marudas et al., 2021; Tieg et al., 2019).

Beyond the need for research-based, replicable pedagogy, there is also a legal consideration. In *Castañada v Pickard* (1981), Mexican immigrant children and their parents claimed that the Raymondville Independent School District in Texas discriminated against immigrant children because of their ethnicity by placing them in segregated classrooms and special groupings and failing to provide bilingual education programs. As a part of the decision of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in favor of the plaintiffs, the judges established a three-part assessment to determine if a bilingual education program was sufficient to meet the demands of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974. According to those criteria, a bilingual education must be: (1) based on sound educational theory; (2) implemented effectively with adequate resources for personnel, materials, and space; and (3) proven effective in overcoming language barriers after a trial period. Each of those criteria implies the need for the ongoing use and creation of a research/theory-based refugee pedagogy. What a school cannot do is “simply mingle non-English speaking

children with English speaking children and hope in vain that the immigrant children will somehow learn what they need to learn by osmosis” (Weddle, 2018, p. 448).

A comprehensive review and synthesis of literature in the field of refugee education is needed in order to provide a systemic, well-informed, and strongly grounded approach to preparing teachers for the effective teaching of this group of young people. However, as Koyama (2021) noted, the existing literature on refugee education is limited in its contribution to creating a cross-cultural body of research on effective pedagogy and schooling of children from refugee experiences. Even the best policies and commitments to refugees have little impact when it is educational success that is the greatest aspiration of most young refugees (Boyden et al.2002; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). Schools bear the primary responsibility for socialization into American culture, creating a national identity, and providing a safe environment where young refugees can explore their own language and racial and ethnic identities in the context of acculturating into their new home and identity – made more difficult in the context of urgency and multiple new roles (Frater-Mathieson, 2004; Moll & Ruiz, 2002; Moselsson, 2001).

The Review Process

Data for the review were drawn from an earlier mapping review of 200 articles on refugee education in general, encompassing January 2000 – March 2022. (Authors, in press). The delimitations in that study included: (1) only published, peer-reviewed sources, (2) only articles focused on refugee students in grades PK-12 in traditional school settings, (3) research-based and non-research sources would be included, (4) only sources that were accessed directly without cost as a PDF full text or HTML document. Of the 200 sources reviewed for the initial

study, we identified 101 sources that made some reference to refugee pedagogy or practice-based teaching strategies for educators working with refugee background students. The search used six databases: Academic Search Complete, Education Index, Education Research Complete, ERIC, and Professional Development Collection. The parameters within those databases included: peer-reviewed, full-text availability, academic journals, elementary/secondary education, and English language.

One of the coding categories in the original review identified articles that focused on pedagogy or included implications for the effective teaching of refugee background students. There were general suggestions about the importance of a welcoming environment in the classroom, having the right dispositions, and considering social-emotional factors, but there appeared to be less attention to how teachers might accomplish those goals. Numerous authors also referred to the lack of attention to refugee characteristics and needs in teacher education programs. Consequently, this study aimed to initiate the development of a well-informed and systematic search of the body of research.

The first step of the revised review was to further limit the sample for careful analysis to only those sources in which pedagogy was a primary or significant topic of discussion. They were sources that might have been miscoded in the initial study and contained no reference to pedagogy that could contribute to implications for the effective teaching of those students. The result of the culling of sources was a total of 57 articles for final review.

Data Analysis

The close analysis began with pre-determined coding categories based on general topics or terms identified in or informed by the original review. The

process began with each researcher reading a sample of ten articles. We used an eclectic form of coding in which we began with the categories identified in our earlier research and then moved to open or free coding when those initial codes were inadequate or too broad for the purpose of identifying specific teaching activities (Saldaña, 2021). The thirteen categories that resulted from the open coding were more numerous than originally desired but were viewed as necessary to capture the wide variety of teaching strategies and activities presented in the article (see Table 1).

The initial consistency between the researchers' coding was nearly 100%, but since the majority of the articles were reviewed by only one researcher, periodic

mutual reviews were conducted, and weekly meetings provided an opportunity to clarify uncertain areas of discrepancy. Additionally, all 57 articles were reviewed once more by two graduate assistants. Their task was to identify and describe examples of specific teaching activities from each category, but in the process of their review, additional questions were raised regarding the original coding and terminology. Those discrepancies were reconciled during weekly meetings with the researchers. As a result of the final review and discussions, it was agreed that seven additional articles would be removed from the sample because of a lack of an adequate discussion of pedagogy, leaving a final reviewed sample of 50 articles.

Table 1

Types of Instruction

Instructional Characteristic	Definition
Arts-based activity	Using visual, performing, and media arts to teach content or express learning
Collaborative learning	Using various groupings and peer-based learning opportunities
Culture-specific	Taking into consideration distinctive cultural roles and expectations related to schooling and teacher and student roles
Experiential learning	Using physically engaged, real-life experiences and resources
Extracurricular/out-of-class activities	Using outside of class or extracurricular activities
Family/Community	Teaching that integrates refugee families and communities into learning

Instructional Characteristic	Definition
Inclusive education	Teaching methods that take into consideration and are adapted to students' linguistic, cultural, social, and gender diversity
Individualization	Teaching with a one-to-one focus
Literacy focused	Instruction with a focus on the development of literacy in the new language
Play	Using free, imaginative play, as well as organized games
Social-emotional focus	Activities that focus on the holistic growth and needs of SRBs
Storytelling/Narrative	The use of oral, written, or performed personal narratives
Subject-specific learning	Considers the special needs of refugees in learning content area knowledge and skills

Results

The focus in this study was on identifying research-based teaching strategies for teaching refugee background students that teachers with little or no experience with those students can use in their classrooms while moving toward greater knowledge and understanding of SRBs and the ability to design their own research-informed practices. It is important to note that those teaching strategies will not guarantee success if attempted without consideration for the larger context of SRB needs and experiences.

Prerequisite Conditions

Based on the literature in this and our previous study, the context in which SRBs are taught is likely more important than the teaching methods themselves. SRBs have typically witnessed or experienced violence, the death of or separation from family members, and inadequate food and shelter before they even arrive in a country

they do not know and where they are often misunderstood and unwelcome (Akay & Jaffe-Walter, 2021; Arvanitis, 2021; Cun, 2020). The conditions under which refugee students learn are exacerbated by the deficit-oriented storyline in which even well-intentioned educators use labels such as trauma, victimization, and limited or interrupted education. As a result, the rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds, strengths, and skills the children and their families bring to the U.S. are often dismissed (Duran, 2016). Even worse are labels such as delinquent, criminal, and invaders used by anti-immigrant and refugee groups (Gilhooly et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2018).

There is consensus among those who work with SRBs that they require educationally safe, welcoming, open, and supportive environments (Anders, 2012; Kovinthan 2016; Koyama & Ghosh, 2018). Creating an environment in which SRBs can

thrive requires a concerted effort on the part of schools, policymakers, social workers, local businesses, and more but, ultimately, it is individual teachers who create a sense of belonging within the learning community, identifying the unique challenges and needs of SRBs, and providing the necessary support for those students (Kovinthan, 2016; MacNevin, 2012).

Ironically, we decided to exclude articles discussing those important conditions. Our decision was based on two factors. First, while there is extensive writing describing the refugee experiences and the need for a special kind of school environment, there is little written to help teachers know how to nurture those settings. As observed by Koyama and Ghosh (2018), there is only “An emerging, but small, recent body of literature addresses how American schools can create safe learning environments, supportive curriculum, and culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership (p. 97). The second factor relates to the immediate needs of teachers in a setting driven by standardized curriculum and assessment results. Changing personal dispositions and the culture of a classroom is not easily or quickly accomplished, nor is it measured by a test score or even a supervision observation. As important as environmental factors might be, many teachers are going to first feel the need for teaching strategies that will make the instructional time less stressful and more effective.

Toward a Refugee Pedagogy

The review of teaching practices did not reveal any clearly dominant approaches. Additionally, it is important to note that there was no strong or extensive research base supporting any of the 13 pedagogical categories listed in Table 1. Many describe the most commonly used practices based on small-sample, site-specific research, anecdotal evidence, and the personal perceptions of students and teachers. In most cases, they were selected by researchers and teachers to address specific needs of the student group, and no claims were made regarding their effectiveness beyond those particular needs. For example, while the use of arts-based methods was common, it was typically used to address the limited language skills and the emotionally difficult background experiences of students, with no particular claims for direct impact on academic skills. That said, the strategies listed later in Table 2 align with well-supported pedagogical theory and occurred frequently across a wide range of grade levels and international settings. As a result, a convincing argument can be made for their overall effectiveness.

The following sections provide general examples of each strategy as found in the reviewed articles, highlighting a few that offer enough detail for teachers to potentially implement the practices in their own classrooms. The strategies are presented in alphabetical order and do not reflect any preference or indicate the relative strength of the research supporting each approach.

Table 2*Instructional Strategies by Article*

Instructional Strategy	Occurrence by Article
Arts-based activities	Baker & Jones, 2006; Cassity & Gow, 2005; Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2021; Day, 2002; Dwyer & McCloskey, 2012; Gagñe, 2017; Hones, 2007; Hope, 2018; Jang & Kang, 2019; Kevers et al., 2022; Sharif, 2020; Simsar, 2021; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Strekalova-Hughes & Peterman, 2020; Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006; Trimboli, 2017
Collaborative learning	DeBruin-Parecki & Klein, 2003; Dwyer & McCloskie, 2012; Gicheru, 2014; Hope, 2018; Lee, 2016; Mendenhall & Barlett, 2017; McBrien, 2005; Rose & Shevlin, 2004; Sharif, 2020; Solario, 2020; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Townsend & Fu, 2001; Ward, 2022; Weddle, 2018;
Culture-specific	Balaghi, et al., 2017; DeBruin-Parecki & Klein, 2003; Dooly, 2009; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016; Gagné, et al., 2017; Hope, 2018; McBrien, 2005; Petróñ & Ates, 2016; Robbins, 2004; Weddle 2018
Extracurricular/ out-of-class activity	Bajaj et al., 2017; Cassity & Gow, 2005; Dwyer & McCloskey, 2012; Hones, 2007; Jang & Kang, 2019; Kupzyk et al., 2016; Lerner, 2016; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Rose & Shevlin, 2004; Simopoulos & Magos, 2020; Simsar, 2021; Szente, et al. 2006; Trimboli, 2017; Ward, 2022
Experiential learning	Clark, 2001; Hones, 2007; Kostoulas-Makrakis & Makrakis, 2020; Trimboli, 2017; McBrien, 2005; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2017; Simsar, 2021; Weddle, 2018
Family/Community	Debruin-Parecki & Klein, 2003; Kevers, et al., 2022; Kostoulas-Makrkis & Makrkis, 2020; Kupzyk, et al., 2016; McBrien, 2005; Oleson, 2004; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Trimboli, 2017; Weddle, 2018

Instructional Strategy	Occurrence by Article
Comprehensive education	Dooley, 2009; Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016; Gagné, et al., 2017; Gichiru, 2014; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2017; Oleson, 2004; Park, 2000; Petróñ & Ates, 2016; Solario, 2020; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Ward & Warren, 2020; Weddle, 2018; Windle & Miller, 2012
Language literacy focus	Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2021; Edwards, 2017; Hones, 2007; Hope, 2017, McDonald, 2000; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2017; Park 2000; Petróñ & Ates, 2016; Roberts & Locke, 2001; Simopoulos & Magos, 2020; Solario, 2020; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Strekalova Hughes & Peterman, 2020; Szente et al., 2006; Townsend & Fu, 2001; Trimboli, 2017; Ward & Warren, 2020; Windle & Miller, 2012
Play & game learning	Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2021; Ferreira, Kendrick, & Early, 2021; McBrien, 2005; Oleson, 2004; Simsar, 2021; Szente, Hoot, & Taylor 2006; Weddle, 2018
Social-emotional learning	Baker & Jones, 2006; Day, 2002; Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016; Hones, 2007; Kevers, et al., 2022; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2017; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Trimboli, 2017; Ward, 2022
Storytelling/ Narrative	Arvanitis, 2021; Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2021; DeBruin Parecki & Klein, 2003; Edwards, 2017; Fruja Anthor & Roxas, 2016; Gagné et al., 2017; Hope, 2018; Kevers et al., 2022; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2017; Petróñ & Ates, 2016; Sharif, 2020; Simopoulos & Magos, 2020; Strekalova Hughes & Peterman, 2020; Townsend & Fu, 200; Ward & Warren2020
Subject-specific learning	Dooley, 2009; Ferreira et al., 2021; Hones, 2007; Jang & Kang, 2019; Miller et al., 2014; Simsar, 2021; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012

Arts-Based Activities

Arts-based approaches were among the most common strategies (n= 15) used by teachers of SRBs. The arts were considered especially effective in addressing the traumatic experiences and socially tentative positions of those students and helped compensate for language deficiency and nurture empathy, identity formation, multicultural understanding, and critical perspective (Gagne et al., 2017; Hope, 2018, Simsar, 2021). For example, Cassity and Gow (2005), in their work with South Sudanese students in Australia, found that portfolios containing paintings, drawings, and plays helped students address difficult topics more sensitively than direct discussions.

In South Korea, Jang and Kang (2019) found that developing an authentic and sustainable identity was a key challenge for North Korean SRBs and that media education was an important tool for “empowering youths situated in disempowering social contexts” (p. 84). They provide a detailed description of how they used a media club to create a “third space” (Bhabha, 1994) “wherein two different cultural groups, which are tied to a broader context, interact and negotiate with each other” (p. 83). In that third space, students used photography, collages, and music videos to “re-picture” themselves in a positive way. Dachyshyn and Kirova (2011) documented a Canadian program in which Somali, Sudanese, and Kurdish preschool children learned about their own and each other’s indigenous cultures by integrating cultural arts and activities into other real-life skills. The children used native music, dance, and fashion to recreate traditional weddings, replaced plastic toys with cultural artifacts, painted traditional henna designs on children’s hands, and reenacted folk tales that communicated the same message in different ways across cultures.

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning activities were suggested in 14 articles, more if we consider passing references in other articles. Collaborative learning includes peer tutoring and mentoring, small group projects, and heterogeneous and ability grouping (Gichiru, 2014; Hope, 2018; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Solorio, 2020; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008). Authors repeatedly referred to communities of learners where different cultures could explore emotions, build respect and trust, and increase understanding of each other’s skills, beliefs, and aspirations (Brown, 1990; DeBruin-Parecki & Klein, 2003; Rogoff, 1990).

Ward (2022) referred to helping SRBs become part of the classroom as, “. . . a relationship thing” (p. 322). This idea was reinforced by Townsend and Fu’s (2001) case study of a young Laotian woman who was placed on a remedial track solely due to her limited English skills in high school without consideration for her unique needs as a refugee. This placement left her surrounded by peers who were often bored, resentful, and angry, and in a curriculum irrelevant to her.

DeBruin-Parecki and Klein (2003) offered a detailed description of the “Making Friends” project that was created to promote the integration of Bosnian refugees into a middle school in Iowa. Refugee background and nonrefugee students collaborated on art activities, story writing, and film discussions; shared in social activities; and hosted a Family Literacy Fest. Another well-outlined activity (Lee, 2016), referred to as Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), integrated whole group, individual, and small group strategy practice, and reading.

Culture-Specific Pedagogy

Despite some shared characteristics, there are important differences between refugee groups and from one family to

another (El Yafouri-Kreuzer, 2017). There are obvious differences in the journeys taken to their destination country, but also differences in cognition, social-emotional factors, and resilience (Høy-Petersen & Woodward, 2018; Keiko et al., 2017; Kwaśniewska et al., 2022). While it is not possible to adapt pedagogy to every difference with which a refugee student enters a classroom, it is important to be aware of at least the larger cultural factors that distinguish Ukrainian, Somali, Haitian, and Afghan students sitting in the same row of a classroom (Kumaravadivelu, 2001).

There is no single refugee experience, and the level of trauma experienced by the SRBs can vary widely (DeBruin-Parecki & Klein, 2003; Dooley, 2009; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011). The perception and type of welcome received by the arriving groups is also determined largely by their background experiences and countries of origin. McBrien (2005) described the range of reactions based on ethnicity and timing. He explained that the earliest Vietnamese refugees were accepted because of their social standing, level of intelligence, and more peaceful, gradual arrival. This was a sharp contrast to the post-war Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, who were from a wide swath of society, more desperate in their leaving and arrival, and more associated with our “enemies” in the just-ended conflict. Similar differences exist in the generally warm and supportive welcome of recent Ukrainian refugees as opposed to the more hostile reception of refugees from Central America and other Islamic countries.

A range of cultural differences related to gender, parental expectations and involvement, social-emotional support systems, and discrimination based on the type of English spoken were also identified, but too numerous to discuss here (Petrón & Ates, 2016; Townsend & Fu, 2001; Weddle,

2018). Two examples provided by Smith-Hefner (1990) suggested that it might be difficult for a teacher to understand that Khmer (an ethnic group and a language primarily associated with Cambodia) parents can be reluctant to push their children who are failing or toward certain careers. Many of those parents believe an individual's identity and personal qualities emerge from within the child, and parents help discover, but do not direct, these qualities. Furthermore, parents who believe in reincarnation often believe that their child's present position was determined by a life lived previously.

Fruja et al. (2016) pointed out teachers' lack of experience with refugees and knowledge of the experiences often lead to stereotypes and poorly-informed expectations. Citing numerous studies, they explain how teachers are likely to overlook complexities in the migration experience and respond to students according to popular rather than well-informed perceptions of specific immigrant groups. For example, Asian refugees are labeled as *model minorities* and admired by teachers, but Latinx students may be seen as disengaged and unruly. These binaries may also result in juxtaposing refugees' desirable behaviors with native minorities who then fall short of the newcomers' positive attitudes, exemplary work ethic, and adaptation.

One of the more thorough treatments of culturally specific considerations was by Robbins (2004), who examined gender differences in adolescent Vietnamese students. Robbins found that men studied harder, missed fewer classes, and used more learning strategies, probably due to the complacency behaviors expected of women. Traditional Vietnamese philosophy emphasizes the social environment over inherent personality characteristics, and individual success is linked to the family unit rather than individual effort. Because

refugee resettlement disrupts the extended family unit, much of the motivation for and support of academic success is missing, and when schools encourage Vietnamese girls to move beyond virtues such as good housework and appearance to greater autonomy and accomplishment, traditional family structures are further disrupted.

In an article focused on Arab refugee youth, Balaghi et al. (2017) looked closely at psychological factors that could impact Arab refugees' mental health and, consequently, school success and cultural adaptation. Here, too, family plays a role different from what might be expected with nonrefugee American students. Family honor is crucial. Parents may be reluctant to consent to special education accommodations for their children, or students might not share negative descriptions of their home life. On the positive side, that same family provides a sense of social and economic support, belongingness, and values, which can protect youth from depression, anxiety, and PTSD. In the school environment, Arab refugee students are particularly susceptible to anti-Muslim bias, anti-Arab bias, mockery of religious attire, and association with terrorism.

Experiential/Authentic Learning

While a small number of articles were coded into this category (n=8), the value of the activities should not be underestimated. This category includes activities that emphasize authentic language use and the importance of a learning environment that promotes exploration and real-life problem-solving (Oleson, 2004). Clark (2001) focused on using the first World Refugee Day to teach nonrefugee students about the refugee experience and the SRBs they might meet in school. The activities she described used original and authentic source material from oral histories, current media coverage, and stories from

childrens' own refugee ancestors. Hone's (2007) article focused on SRBs' learning and the use of observing other refugees at community centers where they were learning vocational skills and the language needed for that training.

Trimboli's (2017) arts-based activities were also coded into this category because of their emphasis on map-making, which used English vocabulary related to a critical pedagogy of place, directions, and practical neighborhood language. Content area teaching can be a good source of authentic language use, especially for young children, because of their natural curiosity and interest in their own bodies, pets, other animals, and natural phenomena offer opportunities to teach relevant vocabulary and descriptive language (Simsar, 2021). Other sources highlighted the importance of real-life practice in communicating questions and problems, community service, and translating documents and forms as the family's translator (McBrien, 2005; Kostoulas-Makrakis & Makrakis, 2020; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2018).

Extracurricular/Out-of-School Activity

SRBs commonly find themselves excluded from the curriculum and extracurricular activities because of a lack of language, marginalization, and other academic and cultural barriers (Rose & Shevlin, 2004). However, it is important that those students experience language and interaction outside of the traditional academic setting. Moving out of the classroom and into after-school or public spaces provides multiple benefits to SRBs. Those settings can provide a hybrid space between the students' in-school and out-of-school lives (Gutiérrez et al., 1995). Spending time in the neighborhood outside of school can nurture a sense of connection to the community and create links between key support centers, such as the church and the school (Kupzyk et al., 2016; Trimboli,

2017). After-school clubs and practice sessions provide a safe, more comfortable environment where students can receive tutoring, build individual relationships, and practice informal language use (Mendenhall et al., 2017; Simopoulos & Magos, 2020).

The articles reviewed in this area (n=14) highlighted successful out-of-school and after-school activities, including tutoring, a variety of cultural and content area clubs, field study trips (Hones, 2007; Simsar, 2021), and a summer sports camp that integrated language acquisition (Dwyer & McCloskey, 2013). Three articles stood out for providing detailed descriptions that could be easily replicated in a variety of similar settings. One program at a newcomer high school in Oakland, California, used a weekly after-school initiative to help refugee and immigrant students explore human rights education (HRE) in the context of their own migration and transnational schooling experiences (Bajaj et al., 2017). The program was offered as an after-school activity due to the school's focus on rapid English proficiency and content mastery during the regular school day. In the club setting, students visited local rights-related exhibits, discussed films and case studies, and used photos that illustrated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They described their approach as "action ethnography" (Erickson, 2006) that effectively provided "spaces for critical thinking and reflection" (Bajaj et al., 2017, p. 137) rather than dictating perspectives.

Dwyer and McCloskey (2012) examined an out-of-school program in Atlanta, Georgia, that combined young male refugees' shared interest in soccer and the need for English language acquisition. It not only offered intensive athletic and literacy training but also provided essential support for parents who worked multiple jobs and could not afford traditional summer camps and supervision for their children.

Moreover, it offered enjoyable and engaging ways for the children to continue their language development, preventing learning loss that occurs during the summer break. The article offers a description of each day's six-hour schedule that includes two soccer workouts, independent reading time, small group classes, journal writing, content learning, an Art or Green (environmental) club, a field trip, and other fun activities. Research on the program showed significant literacy improvements as well as indirect benefits, such as health issues that were noted, the emergence of peer teaching, and discussions of difficulties with neighborhood bullying and theft.

Cassity and Gow (2005) featured a useful description of an in-school, extracurricular program in Australian middle and high schools serving primarily South Sudanese high school students. The focus of this program was on how refugee young people "relationally negotiated new learning in public school contexts and . . . contributed to the cultural dynamics of the schools" (p. 52). The students used drawing, writing, and textiles to reflect on their past experiences, their transitions to new schools, and their expectations and future pathways. As a result, students suggested experiences that could aid their transitions – peer mentoring, community consultations and partnerships, and presentations of a larger variety of tertiary study options for achieving their goals.

Family and Community

Eleven articles made references to the importance of engaging the family and/or community in classroom instruction. Extensive research concludes that programs that provide a safe, encouraging environment for refugee students promote intercultural friendships among students and encourage participation of the students' families (Nieto, 1992). Parents of refugee children often do not feel they are welcomed

in local schools (Kostoulas et al., 2020). However, when invited, they do work with teachers and share their stories and experiences (DeBruin-Parecki & Klein, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Oleson, 2004). It is especially important that school leaders not only advocate for refugee students but also create schools that promote positive images of refugees, extending their efforts beyond the school environment to the local community (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Reakes & Powell, 2004; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

While communication can be difficult given the numerous languages and lack of interpreters, the reviewed sources repeatedly stated the importance of two-way communication between schools and teachers, preferably without relying on school children to translate. As important as communication to parents might be, listening to communication *from* them might be even more important. Establishing trust and rapport is foundational (Kupzyk et al., 2016), and it is more easily achieved when parents are not just given instructions and expectations but are also invited to share their own insights, suggestions, and expectations.

As noted when discussing culture-specific factors, the level of support and involvement parents assume in the parent-teacher relationship can differ significantly from one culture to another. Some parents will want to share their stories; others will not. Some will share information about their children, while others might feel it is inappropriate or a source of shame. Some might view schooling as the teacher's responsibility rather than a shared role with parents, and so on (Kevers et al., 2022; McBrien, 2005; Strelakova & Hoot, 2008). Our study found that when the school respected parents' input and experiences of parents and actively involved them in school activities, worked toward understanding how the refugee and resettlement process

had disrupted family structure, and collaboratively found a role that respected and encouraged the home culture and language, parents became willing and supportive partners (Kevers et al., 2022; McBrien, 2005; Weddle, 2018).

Ongoing projects, described by Debruin-Parecki and Klein (2003) and Trimboli (2017), use writing, reading, storytelling, the arts, and community involvement to learn the language while gaining cultural knowledge and forging relationships among refugees from different groups, nonrefugees, and family and community members from refugee and nonrefugee groups. Taylor and Sidhu (2012) discussed the educational challenges facing refugee youth and used a case study of four Australian schools that were trying to address those challenges. Based on those studies, six features appear to be important in any attempt to help refugees adapt to resettlement and transition to citizenship: a school ethos of caring and hope, celebration of diversity and inclusion, a commitment to social justice, targeted policies and system support related to refugee education, a holistic approach to education including involvement of parents and community, and working with community agencies.

The programs described by Kupzyk et al. (2016) and Oleson (2004) emphasized the crucial role of parent involvement. Kupzyk et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of family literacy, with particular attention to supporting family literacy in the midst of a disrupted family structure. Among the challenges discussed were creating trust and rapport, providing transportation, considering scheduling and accessibility, providing adequate translators, and developing collaborative practices that meet both the needs of home and school. Oleson's (2004) work described a Burmese project for Karen refugees (an ethnic minority from Myanmar who have fled

persecution and violence), in which parents played a foundational role in planning new village schools that featured Parent Play groups for the youngest children, all the way to traditional academic classes for secondary-level students.

While the project is probably not directly relevant to the long-established schools that receive refugees in countries like the U.S., the extensive involvement of parents and respect for what they have to offer could be applied in ways more relevant to the schools. It was especially encouraging to see how teachers went from not valuing parents as shareholders until they heard their insights and contributions, at which point, the relationship was strengthened among all parties.

Comprehensive Education

The category we labeled as “Comprehensive” (n=13) encompassed teaching strategies and considerations that either were not mentioned specifically enough to warrant a separate category or were already coded into another category but implied a significance beyond its original category. This category tried to capture the need to attend to holistic needs by addressing social-emotional and cognitive dimensions of learning and individualizing and differentiating instruction. While it is true that all students benefit from that type of teaching, more deliberate attention might need to be given to do so for refugees.

The label, *refugee*, is often weighted with negative, deficit assumptions and lumped with immigrants, asylum-seekers, and “diversity” overall (Bonet, 2018; Gilhooley & Lee, 2017; McBrien, 2005). Worse is the evidence that finds that “they are expected to function like most other students, yet are often categorized as lesser, as victims, foreign, different” (Lerner, 2012, p. 12). Teachers are often overwhelmed by them or misinterpret either their

misbehaviors or reserved nature (Miller et al., 2014; Vang, 2005). It is understandable that teachers who are under excessive pressure in the best of situations might respond to the complex needs of students with refugee backgrounds through the improvisation of quick-fix solutions without considering the long-term effects of the problems or the solutions (Hatton, 1989).

Differentiation is especially important for refugee learners in terms of linguistic, cultural, and social-emotional factors. Translanguaging was suggested in numerous articles as a highly effective adaptation for second language learners (Bartlett, 2017; Park, 2000; Petròn & Ates, 2016; Solario, 2020). This approach is a strategy for differentiating and is very natural in that it reflects how multilingual people actually think and communicate, and it encourages students to use each other and speakers of both languages as a resource for learning. According to Ealjournal (2016), translanguaging pedagogy:

sees languages as a property of the community: the language resources that are relevant to the classroom are those shared by the students and the teacher. We can use our classroom repertoire to learn, share and communicate, coming to focus on the language of the curriculum (highly formal and accurate English, for example) as necessary (Beginnings section).

Culturally relevant pedagogy, characterized by the conceptions of self and others, the structuring of social relationships, and the understanding of knowledge held by culturally relevant teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995), was directly mentioned in nine of the reviewed articles and implicitly referenced in many others (Dooley, 2009; Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016; Gagné et al., 2017; Oleson, 2004; Park, 2000).

Literacy and Language Focus

As important as it is to address the cultural, social, and emotional challenges, facilitating the acquisition of the new language (L2) is a top priority. Doing so in a way that respects the particular situation of the refugee family makes that process all the more difficult:

... second language (L2) and literacy development are the gateway to successful educational outcomes, which affects the life course and opportunities that children and youth are offered. It also affects how well they will perform in the labor market and a whole series of social, cultural, and economic outcomes. At the same time, maintenance of the heritage first language (L1) is essential for family well-being and cohesion (Paradis et al., 2020, p. 1251).

Translanguaging is suggested as a more appropriate language learning approach than the more common rigid separation of the home language (L1) and L2 because SRBs are often learning L2 while maintaining home stability, learning content knowledge, and may not even be fully literate in L1 (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Lin, 2020). Translanguaging, however, requires a disposition toward critical language awareness, general openness toward language difference and humility, and “willingness to negotiate language difference on an equal footing” (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019, p. 352).

Six articles referred to translanguaging approaches (see Table 2) but none provided enough details for a teacher unfamiliar with the approach to feel comfortable with translanguaging pedagogy. Other articles suggested techniques that fit with the translanguage approach, especially putting an emphasis on opportunities for informal conversation where students of both languages communicate without

anxiety and use their natural linguistic tools to talk about topics meaningful to them (Edwards, 2017; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Simopoulos & Magos, 2020; Szente et al., 2006).

Critical literacy, or the ability to analyze and question texts in relation to power structures (Freire, 1970), and the use of high-quality children’s literature are two other emphases found in the review. Developing critical literacy in the process of applying new language skills was viewed as especially important for adolescent and young adult refugees who must “build resources for conceptually deep and critical tasks while still acquiring basic reading and writing skills” (Dooley, 2008, p. 5). Of the authors who advocated for critical literacy, Dooley (2008) and Dooly and Thangaperumal (2011) laid out a strong conceptual argument for a critical literacy approach while also providing specific pedagogical tasks for teachers. They argued that the aim of a critical literacy approach is to “valorise and interrogate student voice and knowledge about race, gender, and other power relations in North American societies, so they are simultaneously acculturated and empowered for their new lives” (Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011, p. 388).

Children’s literature about the refugee experience that does not further stereotypes or poorly represent the experience can be a useful tool in developing critical literacy, as well as building empathy and understanding in nonrefugee students and stimulating the sharing of students’ own stories (Hope, 2018; Stekalova-Hughes & Peterman, 2020; Trimboli, 2017; Ward & Warren, 2020). Finding children’s books that portray the many dimensions of the refugee experience is not easy. Stekalova-Hughes and Peterman (2020) suggest that many of those texts “reinforce colorblind narratives . . . reduce human complexity to one

essentialized experience, erase the significance of cultural identities and nurture colonialist stereotypes” (p. 325). Ward and Warren (2020) found too much emphasis on escape and suffering and not enough on personality and resettlement. Fortunately, several articles provide thorough, well-supported criteria for selecting children’s books to use with both refugee background and nonrefugee students. Ward and Warren (2020) offer this compact list of six criteria relevant to any book on the refugee experience.

- Who is telling the story of seeking refuge? How? For what purpose?
- Where does the story take place?
- How visible are the characters’ linguistic practices in the text?
- Will the text inform students’ thinking and global awareness or perpetuate stereotypes?
- How are the country of resettlement and the interactions of the main character with the new environment portrayed?
- How complex or unidimensional are the characters?

For teachers interested in finding a series of activities for one book that can be generalized to a number of other refugee experience books, Hope (2017) describes teaching activities and accompanying research on the outcomes for a book titled *The Colour of Home* by Mary Hoffman.

Play and Game-Based Learning

A refugee background makes it unlikely that a young child will experience whatever innocence and playfulness other children might experience during the first few years of life (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011; Samara et al., 2020). Moreover, the trauma of that experience does not end with resettlement, even in the most welcoming countries (Anders, 2012; Balaghi et al., 2017; Hos, 2020). That situation makes it all

the more important to ensure that refugee children have opportunities to play and imagine during whatever is left of their childhood.

Play is often preferred by young refugee children because they are sensitive and vulnerable (Güven et al., 2018). Involvement in games, sports, and play eases some of that sensitivity and vulnerability by providing enjoyable, non-verbal settings where children can build confidence and form social connections (Weddle, 2018). Moreover, child-centered play therapy (CCPT) can be particularly effective in addressing adverse childhood experiences by redirecting attention from deficits to fostering resilience, self-regulation, and self-concept through encouragement (Ray, et al., 2022). Simsar (2021) found that hands-on content, such as science, was embraced more quickly when Syrian refugee children used their science-related process skills during structured play. Teachers in that study even viewed the use of play as one of the more important things to be taught to preservice or in-service teachers.

Social-Emotional Learning

The degree and type of trauma experienced by SRBs vary widely, but it is rare for a child refugee to have had no direct trauma-inducing experience (Rutter, 2003). It is typical for young refugees to have experienced persecution, violence, or war, and the loss or even murder of family members. However, Hart (2009) emphasizes that potential sources of trauma are not limited to pre-migration events; post-migration challenges, including displacement, family and community separation, and discrimination and racism, can also be significant contributors to trauma (Kevers et al., 2022; Reed et al., 2012). In fact, recent studies have found that anywhere from 35% to 50% of refugee and asylum-seeking children suffer from PTSD,

anxiety, or depression disorders (Yektaş et al., 2021). Many nonrefugee students share similar stressors, but refugee children’s “life histories of collective violence” (p. 600) and coping with trauma in a context of exile and cultural change warrant sensitivity to their specific mental health needs (Kevers et al., 2022).

The challenge for the classroom teacher is to know how to address the social and emotional needs of SRBs within the scope of their abilities and training without overstepping into the role of a therapist for which they are not equipped. To support SRBs effectively, teachers can use tools that allow students to express themselves, such as story-writing and arts-based reflections (Dachyshin & Kirova, 2021; Hope, 2018; Kevers et al., 2022). Petron and Ates (2016) caution that teachers should avoid following the narrative portrayed in popular films, which suggests that students work through their trauma simply by writing or drawing about it. Few teachers have training as therapists and should not attempt to take on that role (Carello & Butler, 2014). In the following section are recommendations for using those tools appropriately and effectively.

Storytelling/Narrative

Sharing personal stories orally or in writing, as well as reading the refugee stories of others, emerged as a key theme across different countries and age groups. Fourteen sources made direct references to or provided specific teaching strategies for using narrative to address social and emotional issues, work through trauma, practice oral language skills, nurture empathy for and among SRBs, and foster community ties. At least 11 more made brief references to narrative-implicit activities. Three points in particular are worth noting. As mentioned in previous sections, the content of oral or written stories should be the choice of the students. No SRBs should

be required or pressured to recount possibly traumatic stories without the presence of trained therapists (Carello & Butler, 2014; Petron & Ates, 2016). As many teachers want to be seen as their students’ counselors or confidants, few are trained for that role and should not attempt to take it on. Moreover, students should not feel as though they must share their refugee experiences, especially if their families consider it culturally inappropriate or unacceptable to tell those stories (Kovinthan, 2016).

Some articles caution against an uninformed approach to selecting refugee stories for students. Many children’s books based on refugee experience oversimplify the challenges, focusing on happy endings while minimizing the complexities of migration and resettlement. These studies recommend specific guidelines for selecting books that are sensitive to the realities faced by SRBs (Strekalova-Hughes & Peterman, 2020; Ward & Warren, 2020)

Subject-Specific Learning

The final category, while not representing a significant portion of the review, underscores a notable gap in the literature. Only five articles in the sample focused on teaching content classes to SRBs with limited L2 ability. Given that content instruction makes up a significant portion of the school day, particularly at the middle and high school levels, the lack of attention is concerning. The secondary education years are especially challenging for SRBs, making this an area in need of further research and development. By the time they reach early adolescence, only 37 percent are enrolled in high school (UNHCR, 2024). Moreover, content teachers are typically highly resistant to devoting class time to content area literacy – even with native speakers – and fewer than 20% of all teachers feel prepared to teach English

language learners (Nutta et al., 2012; Pule, 2020; Smith & Robinson, 2020).

Four of the seven articles had a high school focus (Dooley, 2009; Hones, 2007; Jang & Kang, 2019; Miller et al., 2014). Dooley (2009) emphasized the need for stand-alone language classes to help with content learning and did not offer specific teaching ideas for content area teachers. Jang and Kang (2019) described a high school media literacy class that utilized the arts and narrative to foster cross-cultural understanding and coexistence among students. On the other hand, Miller et al. (2014) did not focus on content-specific teaching but emphasized how inadequate or poor planning complicates the integration of literacy development into academic content-specific instruction for SRBs. Their findings highlight the ongoing tensions between meeting standards-driven content requirements and the equally necessary language needs of growing numbers of SRBs. Similarly, Taylor and Sidhu (2012) offer some specific recommendations but primarily focus on what is missing in current approaches. Due to the limited language expertise among content teachers, they emphasize the need for a more comprehensive integration of ESL teachers throughout the entire curriculum, extending beyond just literacy learning. This integration is critical for addressing the language development needs of SRBs while also supporting content instruction across all subject areas.

Hones (2007) also addressed the tension between content instruction and language development, focusing on research that shows how content-based instruction can support second language learners in mastering the language. However, that opportunity is often lost because these learners are frequently separated from rigorous academic courses throughout much of their high school education. In his

description of teaching in an Australian newcomer high school, Hones described how language and content learning are integrated through the use of the arts, multiple intelligence theory, and critical pedagogy of place. The latter is intended to help both refugee and nonrefugee students they meet in high school “understand the roots of refugee situations . . . or we resign ourselves to a world where refugee crises are accepted as normal byproducts of doing business in the world” (p. 14).

The remaining articles describe teaching science to SRBs in prekindergarten and elementary school, respectively. Both articles focus on the value of the content areas, science in particular, in helping refugee learners “develop interest and early learning skills by improving their basic science process skills, such as observing, classifying, communicating, measuring, and predicting” (Simsar, 2021, p. 220) and create spaces “where learners can share their lifeworld experiences” with “strengths-based pedagogies” (p. 453) to nurture a sense of belonging in their new country (Ferreira et al., 2021). In both settings, there was an emphasis on play, exploration, and the process of learning that did not require high levels of language ability. Both articles provide a helpful amount of detail and specific learning activities for readers who want to replicate the programs.

Conclusions & Implications

The growing number of students from refugee backgrounds (SRBs) presents a significant need that requires immediate attention and informed action to meet their diverse and complex needs (Bartlett et al., 2017; Taylor & Sidhu, 2011; Vostanis, 2016). Schools are often the first social institutions that SRBs encounter in their newly resettled host countries, playing a critical role in ensuring their integration and educational success. Consequently, the

necessity of timely knowledge and practical guidance for educators is critical. Ideally, that need would be addressed by well-trained teachers who are committed to teaching SRBs and are equipped with a repertoire of research-supported pedagogy. What exists at present is a largely unprepared body of teachers who are generally uncomfortable teaching SRBs and often make poorly planned decisions based on instinct and speculation (Miller et al., 2014; Townsend & Fu, 2001).

Our review supported previous research on refugee education that found a lack of large-scale reviews of literature and pedagogical research based mostly on small-scale, localized studies focusing on one refugee group. More importantly, preservice and in-service training for teachers of refugees remains inadequate or even non-existent in some cases (Levi, 2019; Solomona et al., 2005). The problem is exasperated by the fact that relatively little has been written about how adequate preparation should take place, especially in preservice preparation. The pedagogy of refugee education requires a specialized approach that considers the unique challenges and experiences of SRBs. As such, there is a critical need for targeted professional development (PD) for educators at all stages of their careers, from preservice to in-service, to effectively support SRBs. This need underscores the importance of equipping teachers with the skills, knowledge, and strategies necessary to meet SRBs' diverse needs. Schools and educational institutions should implement regular PD programs that provide educators with up-to-date research, pedagogical strategies, and resources tailored to the special needs of SRBs. The commitment of teacher preparation programs to strengthening refugee education pedagogy and aligning theory with practice is crucial for the success of students' educational

pathways. What follows is a discussion of several key implications that emerged from our findings.

A Stopgap Approach

To recruit and prepare teachers who are motivated to work with SRBs, understand their needs, and know how to create impactful learning experiences for them, there is a need for a more systematic and synthesized body of research that provides a classroom-refined, evidence-based foundation of knowledge. The knowledge and experiences that could inform that synthesis come from across the globe. Some of that work is setting-specific, but much of it can be reinterpreted for a variety of settings and translated into globally relevant practices. The review presented here could be the next step in moving in that direction. We acknowledge, however, that the review offers only a stopgap solution to the problem.

Our work addresses the immediate needs of teachers by offering insights for short-term practices and informing future research. We identified gaps in refugee education pedagogy, observed current practice trends, and suggested future directions. While this research provides guidance based on existing evidence, it is primarily a short-term resource for teachers needing practical strategies. It is not a substitute for comprehensive professional preparation but a starting point for deeper exploration into refugee education pedagogy.

One Size Does Not Fit All

One key finding underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse needs and contexts of SRBs, as there is no refugee monoculture. Overgeneralizing certain effective practices to all refugee groups, and even members within groups, runs the risk of being ineffective or counterproductive. A number of authors pointed out the fact that refugee groups have unique languages,

cultures, educational histories, and trauma experiences, but most studies still described the results of an activity on a specific group or referred to activities that seemed to address all the refugee groups in a given setting.

It is helpful to know practices that will be effective in settings that include a variety of SRBs. However, if we acknowledge important differences between refugee groups, then we need to better understand where generalized practices provide an adequate experience and where distinctive, differentiated pedagogy is needed for an optimal experience. By adopting flexible, context-specific, and culturally sensitive approaches, educators and policymakers can better support the educational success and well-being of SRBs, ultimately facilitating their integration and empowerment within their new communities. Moreover, since differentiating instruction is difficult in the best of situations, it would be helpful to have more specific, enacted examples of group-specific practices on which to model future practices.

Some Promising Directions

We were not able to identify what could be considered a strong research base, either qualitative or quantitative, for any specific teaching practice, as most claims of effectiveness were based on anecdotal descriptions of teacher practices and preferences or small, localized studies focused on specific refugee groups. That said, there are practices that appeared often enough with sufficient supporting evidence to suggest that additional, wider-scale research is warranted. While individual strategies for supporting refugee learners are well-documented, the literature lacks a comprehensive synthesis to offer an overview of the field of refugee education pedagogy.

One factor that permeates every decision related to the teaching of SRBs is the fact that the impact of the refugee experience is inherently traumatic and does not simply end with resettlement in even the best of settings (Anders, 2012; Hos, 2020). As first responders to the needs of SRBs, teachers must be equipped to address their holistic needs. This includes using teaching methods that acknowledge both the challenges and strengths of SRBs, integrating expressive arts and play, and personal experiences to support social, emotional, and academic growth. Twenty-one articles featured the use of visual or performing arts, creative play, or storytelling. More than 20 articles referred to the necessity of culturally responsive pedagogy that would make constructive use of the students' backgrounds, experiences, and languages – seeing those characteristics as positive sources of learning in the new culture rather than deficits or barriers to learning. Arts-based or informed teaching and culturally responsive teaching are not unfamiliar to educators, but the distinctive ways they can be used for SRBs and the adaptations that might be needed when using them in a classroom with a wide range of students – refugee and otherwise – need more study.

Additionally, we suggest the need for research in the following specific areas of refugee pedagogy:

- More examination of how trauma-informed pedagogy can be applied to the unique experiences of refugee and other newcomer students is needed.
- Numerous studies have shown the importance of connecting the school experiences of SRBs to their family and community lives. More examples of how those connections can be developed into teaching

activities that provide reciprocal support for both refugee families and the teachers of their children are needed.

- Most of what we found in our review reflected short-term activities with relatively small groups of teachers, researchers, and students. Research is needed into the long-term sustainability and broader expansion of those activities. Longitudinal research is also needed to determine their long-term impact.
- The development of comprehensive theories of refugee education pedagogy, translated into research-tested practices, is crucial. This supports that practitioners base their teaching decisions on a conceptual understanding of SRBs, rather than relying on isolated tools from a toolkit to address an immediate problem.

Toward an SRB Pedagogy

While this study indicated a lack of research-supported pedagogical guidance for teaching SRBs, it's crucial to acknowledge the dedicated and effective work being done globally. Excellent resources exist in books (Bajaj et al., 2022; Wolsey & Karkouti, 2023) and credible websites (e.g., Edutopia, International Rescue Committee, U.S. D.O.E.), which were not reviewed here. Additionally, valuable research is published in languages other than English, such as

German and Turkish. Many effective strategies are likely being developed in refugee camps and resettlement sites by teachers who lack the time and resources to document their work.

We must not overlook the urgent need for a growing knowledge base on the educational needs of refugees, asylum-seekers, and immigrants, as well as the need for teachers prepared to serve them. The "new normal" in education will likely involve a significant shift in the student population, especially in the Global North. Countries like the U.S., Europe, and others are seeing declining birth rates (The World Bank, 2022) and increasing global migration. By 2040, one-third of U.S. students could be from immigrant households (Gangone, n.d.), underscoring the critical need for informed and adaptable teaching strategies.

To effectively teach students from refugee backgrounds, we must go beyond limited preservice teacher preparation and reactive in-service training. There is an urgent need for ongoing, systematic identification of research-based teaching approaches that can be adapted to various refugee populations. Refugee-responsive pedagogy demands a holistic, systemic, and transformative approach grounded in human rights (Kostoulas-Makrakis & Makrakis, 2020). Most importantly, it requires educators who understand and are deeply committed to the unique needs of newcomer students, driven by compassion and belief in their potential.

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