Action in Arkansas Teacher Education

The Journal of the Arkansas Association of Teacher Educators

Volume 15, Number 1
Spring 2025

Co-Editors and Peer Reviewers

Articles and Authors

The Impact of Chromebook Integration in K-12 Classrooms on Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes: A Comprehensive Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper conducts a comprehensive literature review to evaluate the effectiveness of Chromebook use in K-12 settings, focusing on whether these devices improve student engagement and academic performance. Against the backdrop of a society gradually emerging from predominantly virtual learning, as necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020), educational institutions continue to prioritize access to online learning resources and leverage digital tools, such as Chromebooks, to optimize learning outcomes. Further, the study explores how contextual factors like infrastructure and teacher readiness influence the success of Chromebook initiatives. The review concludes by recommending comprehensive teacher training, technological support, and equitable access to digital resources.

Key Words: Chromebook integration, K-12, student engagement

Introduction

Over the last two decades, K-12 educational institutions have increasingly integrated Chromebooks into their classrooms. This adoption often involves substantial financial investment, with schools allocating approximately $325 per incoming student toward the acquisition of Chromebooks in one-to-one programs (Saltmarsh, 2021). A 2016 survey of 2,500 school personnel revealed that Chromebook sales had increased by 15%, with over 60% of teachers having access to a Chromebook (Ahlfeld, 2017). Under such initiatives, each student is equipped with an individual Chromebook, facilitating their engagement in classroom activities, and extending learning opportunities beyond traditional school hours. The overarching goal is to promote digital literacy and boost academic performance (Coggins, 2024). Against the backdrop of a society gradually emerging from predominantly virtual learning, as necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020), educational institutions continue to prioritize access to online learning resources and leverage digital tools, such as Chromebooks, to optimize learning outcomes.

Google released the first Chromebook in 2011 (Eimer, 2022). Chromebooks are cost-effective laptops designed to integrate with Google's operating system and allow the user to store all information in the cloud (Quinn, 2016). The focused capability of Chromebooks and cheaper prices than other personal computer laptops make using these digital tools more preferred by most school districts because of the Chromebook's secured and easily monitored accesses and affordability. According to Ahlfeld (2017), "Google is quite frankly, the easiest, cheapest, and most powerful way to offer technology to my students." However, a strong internet network is required to successfully use Chromebooks, which may exclude some students from using the laptops as assistive technology outside of the classroom.

This paper conducts a comprehensive literature review to examine the effectiveness of Chromebook integration in K-12 classrooms, focusing on its impact on student engagement and learning outcomes. Central to this analysis is the question: *Does Chromebook use enhance student engagement and learning outcomes?* Student engagement, a multifaceted construct,

encompasses the degree to which students invest themselves in learning activities. Thus, the ensuing literature review endeavors to explore different types of evidence of student engagement and evaluate students' behavioral dispositions toward learning tasks facilitated by Chromebooks. It is imperative to note that student engagement has been empirically linked to academic performance (Bond et al., 2020), hence underscoring its pivotal role in shaping learning outcomes. For coherence, successful academic performance and achieved learning outcomes are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

While existing literature offers insights into the utility of Chromebooks as conduits for accessing information, a discernible debate persists regarding their positive impact on learning outcomes. Moreover, amidst the proliferation of digital literacy initiatives in educational contexts, concerns loom over the potential erosion of collaborative and cooperative dynamics among primary and secondary students during the learning process.

Conceptualizing Student Engagement in Online Learning

In exploring the potential impacts of Chromebook integration in the classroom, it is essential to delve into the multifaceted concept of student engagement. Student engagement is broadly understood as the level of interest, motivation, and active participation that students exhibit in learning activities (Fredericks, Reschly, & Christenson, 2019). Engagement is the key to keeping students successful (Albataineh, Warren, & Al-Bataineh, 2024). As articulated by Natriello (1984, p.14), engagement manifests when students actively participate in the activities offered as part of the school curriculum.

Scholars have delineated three primary forms of student engagement: affective, cognitive, and behavioral (Bond, et al., 2020). Some scholars have extended this taxonomy to include social engagement as an additional dimension of this intricate construct (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016). Nonetheless, cumulative evidence suggests a positive correlation between heightened student engagement across all dimensions and elevated academic achievement and retention rates (Finn, 2006; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Conversely, student disengagement in the classroom threatens adverse consequences for learning outcomes and increases the likelihood of student attrition (Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2015, p. 26-34). Therefore, this literature review positions student engagement as a key determinant of the success of Chromebook integration in classrooms.

According to a study by Almutairi and White (2018), there are nine indicators of student engagement in classrooms utilizing online learning as a hybrid or main distribution of learning outcomes, including “reflective and integrative learning, higher-order learning, learning strategies, collaborative learning, student–staff interaction, MOOC active learning, MOOC collaborative learning, MOOC social interaction, teaching with MOOC,” where MOOC is defined as massive open online courses. Online learning for these courses requires students to have access to a digital learning tool, such as a laptop, to complete the required curriculum. The nine indicators of online student engagement are measured by the completion of learning activities, online discussion forums, digital presentations, and summative assessments.

Conceptualizing Learning Outcomes in Online Learning

Moreover, this paper regards student learning outcomes as pivotal indicators of successful Chromebook integration in the classroom. Defined by Miyagi and Scovill (2019, p. 93-94), learning outcomes represent statements delineating what learners can demonstrate upon the successful conclusion of a unit of learning, course, or instructional program. These

statements may encompass assessments of skills acquisition, project or portfolio development, or other evaluative measures validating comprehension of the material learned. Assessments of learning outcomes may yield a spectrum of results, ranging from inadequate to exceptional performance, or may manifest as discrete outcomes such as passing or failing grades.

Examples of learning outcomes span various domains, including fundamental cognitive competencies such as literacy and numeracy, discipline-specific proficiencies relevant to distinct fields of study like biology or theater, higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication, and transferable skills encompassing collaboration, creativity, and emotional and social intelligence (Miyagi & Scovill, 2019). The imperative for setting learning outcomes stems from educational programs' or departments' aspirations to cultivate competent and well-adapted contributors to society post-secondary graduation. Consequently, when these learning outcomes are operationalized at the classroom level, they serve as yardsticks for evaluating and prognosticating students' capacity to function effectively in the workforce.

Successful completion of designated learning outcomes is highly dependent on the student's perception and satisfaction with the course. With the linear increase of digital tools in the classroom promoting online learning initiatives over the past two decades, along with the unexpected spike of online learning in response to COVID-19, students' perception of learning outcomes has greatly shifted. Baber (2020) found that motivation and course structure are significant determinants of perceived learning success in digital environments.

Challenges of Chromebook Integration

Google's Chromebook, a small laptop designed to access the internet using the Google Chrome platform, was released in 2011 (Burns, 2011). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, as of 2018 ninety-seven percent of classrooms in the United States use computers; 58% of which employ a version of small, portable laptops such as Chromebooks. Ahlfeld (2017) attributes this continuous increase of the Google Chromebook as the device of choice for the classroom to the following: "Google is quite frankly, the easiest, cheapest, and most powerful way to offer technology to my students."

Even though the Chromebook may be one of the most efficient digital tools to implement in a learning environment, there remain technological difficulties. A study by Sahin et al. (2016) found that teachers' comfort level of teaching with Chromebooks was not positive after a year of teaching with the technology. Teachers reported that in the first year of using the Chromebooks challenges existed, such as restrictions on accounts that blocked information to which students needed access, slow processing speeds, and unsatisfactory battery life. Lack of proper technical support and inefficient planning led to a negative effect on using Chromebooks. The teachers reported proper teacher training and monitoring student training instead of blocking access to programs would lead to a more positive attitude, which is linked to student motivation and therefore would increase student engagement. Quinn (2016) also found that quite often, teachers are given Chromebooks to utilize with little to no instruction on how to operate them, along with the new expectation to digitally convert and/or create lesson plans, activities, and other curricula. Additionally, putting a Chromebook into the hands of every student may concern some administrators, teachers, and parents (Albataineh, Warren, & Al-Bataineh, 2024).

Chromebook Impacts on Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes

With the understanding of the imperative nature of high student engagement, the successful completion of learning outcomes, and the challenges of incorporating technology in the classroom to promote online learning, the following section will attempt to analyze the impact of Chromebook use on all stakeholders in regard to student engagement. These stakeholders include but are not limited to, the students, staff, and families of the school classrooms and/or districts in which Chromebook utilization has been operationalized.

Cox (2014) conducted a study on a Chromebook/Google Applications collaborative learning program. Teachers from the third, fourth, and ninth grades were interviewed and asked the same questions. Parents and teachers observed the positive result of having instant feedback for the students. Teachers noted having instant access to online textbooks and the paperless component. Parents noted that increased access to resources was beneficial. However, Cox (2014) found that the use of Chromebooks did not affect student engagement, specifically stating that the use of Chromebooks did not affect whether students completed assignments or not. In this instance, the behavioral aspect of student engagement did not increase as a result of Chromebook integration.

When researching one-to-one integration of Chromebooks in a seventh-grade classroom, Daniel (2023) found that in one study, “Students not utilizing one-to-one Chromebooks made more statistically significant growth [in academic achievement] compared to those that did use the devices.” Further, Daniel claims that “when the technology was not present, students were more likely to be engaged in content-based conversations rather than off-topic discussions” (2023). Therefore, in this relatively small study, both student engagement and completed learning outcomes decreased with the use of Chromebooks as online learning tools.This suggests that while Chromebooks can support learning, their impact on engagement may vary depending on the educational context.

Best Practices for Chromebook Integration

Teachers must receive adequate training and support not only on the technical aspects of using Chromebooks but also on how to integrate them into their teaching strategies. Professional development should include teaching strategies and implementation of the use of Chromebooks.

Teachers should establish ground rules in the use of classroom Chromebooks. Guidelines for appropriate online behavior, managing device settings, complying with school policies, and internet safety. Apps, such as GoGuardian, should be considered to monitor students' online use in real-time.

Technological tools should be widely used to make lessons more interactive and engaging. Many educational apps align with curriculum standards.

Implement the flipped classroom model by having students watch instructional videos and complete reading assignments at home. Use class time for hands-on activities, discussions, or project-based learning.

Summary of Key Findings

The literature review underscores several key findings regarding the impact of Chromebook integration in K -12 classrooms on student engagement and learning outcomes. Firstly, while Chromebooks offer numerous advantages, including accessibility, affordability, and ease of use, their implementation may not uniformly enhance student engagement. While some studies indicate positive outcomes, such as increased access to resources and instant feedback,

others suggest that Chromebook usage does not necessarily correlate with improved student engagement or completion of assignments. Furthermore, the efficacy of Chromebook integration appears to vary across different educational settings and grade levels. Additionally, concerns persist regarding technical challenges, inadequate teacher training, and the potential for Chromebooks to detract from content-based interactions in the classroom. Overall, the literature highlights the complexity of Chromebook integration and underscores the need for further research to elucidate its nuanced effects on student engagement and learning outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature reviewed in this study provides valuable insights into the impact of Chromebook integration in K-12 classrooms on student engagement and learning outcomes. While Chromebooks offer promising opportunities to enhance digital literacy and facilitate access to online learning resources, their efficacy in promoting student engagement and achieving learning outcomes remains equivocal. Technical challenges, inadequate teacher training, and concerns regarding the displacement of social, content-based interactions in the classroom underscore the need for careful consideration and strategic planning when integrating Chromebooks into educational settings. Moving forward, it is imperative for educators and policymakers to address these challenges proactively and leverage Chromebooks as effective tools to support student learning and academic success.

Limitations of Existing Research

Despite the valuable insights provided by existing research, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, much of the literature focuses on the perceptions and experiences of educators, with relatively limited attention given to students' perspectives on Chromebook integration. Additionally, many studies are based on small sample sizes or employ qualitative methodologies, limiting the generalizability of findings. Moreover, the rapidly evolving nature of technology and education necessitates ongoing research to capture the dynamic interplay between Chromebook integration, student engagement, and learning outcomes. Finally, the contextual factors influencing the effectiveness of Chromebook integration, such as school infrastructure, teacher readiness, and socioeconomic disparities, warrant further investigation to inform evidence-based practices.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this literature review have several implications for policy and practice in K-12 education. Firstly, Chromebook introduction to the classroom, such as in one-to-one programs, requires complete technological infrastructure and comprehensive teacher training programs to support effective digital tools and online learning integration. Additionally, schools and districts must develop clear guidelines and standards for Chromebook usage, ensuring alignment with educational goals and instructional practices. Moreover, efforts to promote equitable access to Chromebooks and digital resources are essential to mitigate disparities in student learning opportunities. Furthermore, ongoing monitoring and evaluation are critical to assess the impact of Chromebook integration and inform iterative improvements in educational practices.

Recommendations for Educators and Policymakers

Based on the findings of this literature review, several recommendations emerge for educators and policymakers seeking to maximize the benefits of Chromebook integration in K-12 classrooms. Firstly, educators should prioritize student engagement and active learning strategies when designing Chromebook-enhanced lessons and activities. Schools and districts should provide comprehensive technological support and training for staff and teachers to effectively utilize Chromebooks in instructional practices, especially during the beginning of the school year and/or start of Chromebook integration. Moreover, policymakers should allocate resources to ensure equitable access to Chromebooks and address technological disparities among student populations outside of the classroom. Finally, ongoing collaboration and communication among stakeholders, including parents and families of the students, are essential to foster a culture of innovation and continuous improvement in Chromebook integration initiatives.

Final Reflections on the Role of Chromebooks in Enhancing Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes

As I conclude this research endeavor on the role of Chromebooks in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes, I am struck by the multifaceted nature of their impact on K-12 education. Throughout this exploration, I have delved into the complexities of Chromebook integration, examining its potential to foster digital literacy, facilitate access to online resources, and transform pedagogical practices. However, my curiosity regarding the future trajectory of Chromebook use remains steadfast. Will we witness a continued integration and use of Chromebooks in educational settings, driven by ongoing technological advancements and pedagogical innovations? Or might we observe a plateau or even a decline in Chromebook adoption, as administrators and educators grapple with the challenges of assessing the effectiveness of one-to-one programs and the evolving landscape of educational technology?

Furthermore, this research on Chromebook utilization has led me to question the societal impacts that may unfold as a result of our heavy reliance on Chromebooks and online learning in the classroom. What implications will this shift toward digital learning have on students' cognitive development, socio-emotional well-being, and long-term educational trajectories? How might Chromebook integration exacerbate or mitigate existing disparities in access to education and digital resources? These questions underscore the need for comprehensive research and thoughtful consideration of the broader societal implications of Chromebook integration in education.

A facet of Chromebook integration research I found to be lacking, yet imperative, is the garnering and evaluating of empirical evidence in informing educational practices and policies. As such, I advocate for large-scale analyses of student test scores before and after Chromebook integration, coupled with rigorous assessments of students' perceptions and experiences with Chromebooks. By systematically examining the impact of Chromebook integration on academic achievement, student engagement, and educational outcomes, we can glean valuable insights into the efficacy of Chromebooks as educational tools and identify areas for improvement and refinement.

In conclusion, the role of Chromebooks in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon that warrants ongoing scrutiny and reflection. As we navigate the complexities of integrating technology into education, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to maximize the benefits of Chromebooks while addressing the challenges

and mitigating the potential risks. By fostering a culture of inquiry, collaboration, and continuous improvement, we can harness the transformative potential of Chromebooks to empower students, enhance learning experiences, and shape the future of education.

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Attempting to Move the Needle on Advanced-Level Online Program Candidate Satisfaction with Feedback

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Abstract

Formative feedback in the learning process is one of the most crucial things that candidates in an advanced-level online graduate course receive from their professors. Despite the pace of five- or seven-week formats, or pressures to meet demands for content, finding increased space for formative feedback is a worthy endeavor every time. Hickey and Pontrello (2016) maintain that the need for formative feedback is strong, that it should be delivered by relevant scaffolding across successive due dates, and that educators should step back and allow learners increased independence as they utilize the feedback they receive. This study, grounded in action research methodology, took a very close look at increasing multiple support structures in multiple advanced-level graduate courses at a major mid-southern university. Focusing on trends revealed in course evaluations across multiple terms in a two-year period, more specifically measuring candidate satisfaction with their feedback and with the course overall, this study hoped to "move the needle" on measured student satisfaction with their feedback in the courses. This action research study ultimately aims to highlight the importance of feedback in an advanced-level online graduate course, while also drawing attention to the challenges that professors may face when seeking to provide meaningful feedback to candidates.

Key words: Feedback, Action Research, Evaluation, Satisfaction, Course Evaluations

Introduction

Formative feedback in the learning process is one of the most crucial things that candidates in an advanced-level online graduate course receive from their professors. Despite the pace of five- or seven-week formats, or pressures to meet demands for content, finding increased space for formative feedback is a worthy endeavor every time. Hickey and Pontrello (2016) maintain that the need for formative feedback is strong, that it should be delivered by relevant scaffolding across successive due dates, and that educators should step back and allow learners increased independence as they utilize the feedback they receive. This study, grounded in action research methodology, took a very close look at increasing multiple support structures in multiple advanced-level graduate courses at a major mid-southern university. Focusing on trends revealed in course evaluations across multiple terms in a two-year period, more specifically measuring candidate satisfaction with their feedback and with the course overall, this study hoped to "move the needle" on measured student satisfaction with their feedback in the courses. This action research study ultimately aims to highlight the importance of feedback in an advanced-level online graduate course, while also drawing attention to the challenges that professors may face when seeking to provide meaningful feedback to candidates.

Study Origin

Meaningful feedback on work that guides and shapes student learning—often known as formative feedback—is challenging no matter the educational context. During an online course, especially a fast-paced five- or seven-week course, it is perhaps the single most essential piece of communication between professor and student (referred herein as candidates). The art of

feedback on candidate work is a careful balance in the online platform between efficiency, and sufficiency. There is the hope in the online format (as in any format) that candidates utilize feedback in meaningful ways, with the equal fear that they may miss or neglect examination of feedback in time to utilize it at all. When it comes to fine-tuning an aspect of online teaching like candidate feedback, there is a tremendous amount of perspective to be found in the regular utilization of course evaluations completed by students, especially when such evaluations include specific questions devoted to just such topics.

Specifically, a direct window into candidate satisfaction with feedback exists in the online course evaluation used by the education college of the institution at which this action research study took place. Most directly, Question #10, specifically asks: "Feedback on work that I submitted assisted me in learning course content." When examining trends with this question—both within two courses in the advanced-level online graduate program involved, as well as compared with the aggregated full-college online evaluation results, an interesting trend emerges: this particular question noticeably and consistently tends to score somewhat or slightly lower than others on the evaluation. Actions taken with online course design and communication, if indeed positively impacting the nature of the responses to Question #10, might suggest a potential avenue of exploration for increasing the effectiveness and impact of feedback on candidate work in just such an online course. Furthermore, Question #10 comes into greater perspective when taken into consideration with Question #11 (probing candidate overall satisfaction with the course), as well as the "Mean of Means" on the entire evaluation (encompassing all 12 total questions). Ultimately, using this insight, this action research inquiry seeks to examine the following questions:

a) What positive impact on candidate satisfaction with feedback in both courses can be measured in the fall term of the second year (according to Question #10 of the utilized online course evaluation), with increased effort, presence, and promotion of course feedback? And,

b) What other conclusions can be drawn from this process, which could further inform future online teaching practice in online courses such as this?

Relevant Literature and Action Research Framework

This case study utilizes an action research framework intended to more closely examine classroom practice, specifically with the aim of extracting immediate and useful conclusions with which to improve such practice. While the online teaching format might seem to complicate matters, it does in fact present a particularly useful and consistent platform for doing so. This process can change a system through "participation, self-determination, empowerment through knowledge, and change" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 127) and is "particularly relevant to those who engage in constructivist approaches to pedagogy" (Stringer, 2008, p. 2). Action research offers a mode of inquiry for those "with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment" (Mertler, 2019, p. 135)—and in this case it is highly practical, seeking to target a specific educational problem or question (as opposed to participatory research, which would aim for various social spheres) (p. 138). Ultimately, action research empowers those who practice, perhaps feeling inadequate or ill-informed by academic literature, but can be "tailored to what can be achieved without disrupting practice" and ultimately can—and should—be shared with others facing similar questions or problems (Krathwohl, 2009, pp. 556—557).

Stringer (2008) further notes that while action research initially begins in reflection, it grows into a clearer focus, and comes to fruition in a relevant classroom setting with relevant

participants (pp. 36—37). Topics and questions should be those faced by others in the field, as well as challenges which "inspire, frustrate, embolden, or push" solutions that support learning (Putman & Rock, 2018, p. 27). It can also represent a shift in practice—but one used to an educator's advantage, to leverage meaning out of the action taken in the learning process (p. 4). Action research is also a highly cyclical process, feeding into itself and continued practice (Krathwohl, 2009; Putnam & Rock, 2018; Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2005) and its analysis is often much less complex than other forms of research (Mertler, 2019)—though no less relevant in the immediate lives of the students it can impact, as opposed to extended longitudinal research. Thus, action research is meant to "improve practice *immediately*" (p. 135).

Cook-Sather (2009) advocated for using dialogue as a foundational basis for both giving and receiving feedback. She noted that "in addition to offering an occasion for faculty members to enter into dialogue with students enrolled in a course about what is working and what is not," this approach has the "potential to make the course more of a shared responsibility of faculty and students and to foster the development of a collaborative/collegial relationship between faculty members and student consultants and between faculty members and students in their classes" (p. 232). Multiple studies have recently noted a number of connections between student satisfaction and the maintaining of an active dialogue of an interpersonal nature, often through writing and direct communication with the instructor (Youssef, 2017; Chong, 2019). Another interesting study recently suggested effective practice involved centering the learning conceptually in the feedback process (i.e. basing feedback upon student identify, preferences, ideas, etc.), and also the effectiveness of aligning diverse feedback processes with diverse types of assignments (Zepeda, Ortegren, & Butler, 2021).

Hill and West (2020) recently conducted an interesting study furthering dialogic-based feedback on student work and, among other findings, "stressed the importance of meeting face-to-face with the teacher in preference to receiving written comments, which rule out the ability to question and resolve uncertainties" (p. 91). This intriguing notion seems as personal as it does efficient. While their findings were not nearly strong enough to suggest a breakthrough in student feedback, they did reaffirm a number of profound beliefs about feedback:

> Offering practical advice to support teachers, we suggest relating to students in ways that are welcoming and attuned to them as individuals. Institutional educational developers may offer training in these types of assessment and feedback practices, supporting programme teams to work positively and coherently with feedforward discourse. We might not look to change our practice entirely, but to embed innovation as and where it is appropriate and to develop progressive interventions across programmes, supported by staff development and sharing of good practice (p. 95).

Data Collection

It is in this very spirit that this study hopes to appropriately embed innovation through adjustments to student feedback. Two courses in an advanced-level online graduate program at a major mid-southern university formed the backdrop for this action research inquiry. The first course, focused on literacy topics centered around diverse types of learners, covering a variety of topics from English Language Learners, to various special needs, to gifted learners, with an additional angle of significant personal reflection dedicated to exploring a changing disposition toward these types of learners. The second course was a literacy coaching and leadership course, is also a practicum course in the program and a capstone experience, examining literacy coaching and leadership with themes of program examination, proposed professional

development, and advocacy. During the two-year pre-pandemic period under examination, courses were offered at least three times per year and both courses encompassed approximately 1000 candidates in total. Spring and fall offerings of the course were seven-week terms and summer course offerings were five-week versions.

This action research inquiry also utilizes the standard online course evaluation used by the education college of this university for all courses that are fully online. This online evaluation instrument consists of 12 questions. The first 10 questions report both a mean and median score from respondents on a variety of specific elements of a course, from course structure, to communication, to feedback, to expectations, and content itself; the final two questions report satisfaction with the course overall, and the professor overall. A "mean of means" is also provided on the evaluation report. This evaluation, deployed within the online learning platform, is typically announced in advance via an email to candidates enrolled in the course, with a set window of operation (with reminders). The evaluation closes prior to the end of the course grading period and results are not made available to the professor until after the grading period has appropriately concluded and grades have been submitted.

Table 1 details the number of candidates and responses per course offering, during the two-year period of examination, as well as the combined totals and return rate:

Table 1

Course evaluation return rate for two years of the online graduate Reading courses, including total number of responses by course, and both years combined

Course	**Term**	**Responses**	**of Possible**	**Return Rate**
Literacy course themed around various topics of diverse learners	**Year One Spring (First Section)**	54	55	98.18%
	Year One Spring (Second Section)	47	50	94.0%
	Year One Summer	23	24	95.83%
	Year One Fall	167	193	86.53%
	Year Two Spring	47	52	90.38%
	Year Two Summer	82	92	89.13%
	Year Two Fall 2019	49	54	90.74%
Total Course Responses (Years One and Two)		**469**	**520**	**90.19%**
Literacy course themed around literacy	**Year One Spring (First Section)**	45	48	93.75%
	Year One Spring (Second Section)	50	52	96.15%

coaching and leadership	**Year One Summer (First Section)**	31	34	91.18%
	Year One Summer (Second Section)	32	35	91.43%
	Year One Fall	42	48	87.5%
	Year Two Spring	90	93	96.77%
	Year Two Summer	52	57	91.23%
	Year Two Fall 2019	100	110	90.91%
Total Course Responses (Years One and Two)		**442**	**477**	**92.66%**
Both Courses Total Responses (Years One and Two)		***911***	***997***	***91.37%***

Clearly, all offerings of each course within the two-year period in question had exceptionally high return rates, with over 900 total evaluations offering a great deal of data-driven insight into this action research.

Outcomes and Analysis

Approaches to Feedback

Feedback to candidates in these two particular courses was, essentially, what one would consider typical for an online course: comments tagged in course papers in the online learning platform (an embedded word processor or PDF viewer allowing highlights, the addition of instructor comments, etc.), as well as additional narrative comments in the area where rubric criteria are selected for assessment. Multiple comments per page—especially when explaining candidate struggles, issues with academic format, or deductions in grading as per the rubric—plus an overall summary of comments on the rubric were standard practice. Additional comments of praise and uplift, or perhaps also evaluator engagement with the narrative, were encouraged and common. Both courses under examination in this action research employed the same two Academic Assistants throughout the two-year period under examination (as well as prior to); both were trained by the professor to be fluent and consistent with all forms of feedback in the course, as well as with grading rubrics throughout both courses.

One unique feature of these courses was the opportunity for early draft feedback on final course papers. The early draft feedback process, the same for either course, was governed by a set of rules clarified on an Early Draft Feedback Rules Handout, which was updated every term with relevant dates. This handout specified that early draft feedback would be possible in the two weeks prior to the final week (i.e. in Weeks 5-6 of a seven-week spring/fall course, or Weeks 3-4 of a five-week summer course). Candidates could request feedback only once during the window, and must select either the professor or their academic assistant as the one providing feedback. Typically, about a fourth of candidates in a course took advantage of this feature of early draft feedback.

Two Years, Two Questions

As mentioned previously, Question #10, which probes: “Feedback on work that I submitted assisted me in learning course content,” is perhaps the most specific window into

understanding overall candidate satisfaction with feedback in a course. But this question, taken into consideration with both Question #11, which probes, "My overall rating on this course," and the "Mean of Means" for all 12 evaluation questions, becomes particularly illuminating. Table 2 breaks down the mean response on these two questions, plus the "Mean of Means" for all offerings of each course during the two-year period, prior to the target term under more specific examination:

Table 2

Course evaluation mean responses on Question #10 (feedback), Question #11 (overall course satisfaction), and the "Mean of Means," for two years of the online graduate Reading courses prior to the term under examination

Course	Term	Question 10	Question 11	Mean of Means
Literacy course themed around various topics of diverse learners	**Year One Spring (First Section)**	4.72	4.85	4.89
	Year One Spring (Second Section)	4.49	4.68	4.68
	Year One Summer	4.61	4.65	4.72
	Year One Fall	4.55	4.66	4.73
	Year Two Spring	4.62	4.81	4.82
	Year Two Summer	4.65	4.77	4.80
	Year Two Fall 2019	Target term for improvement; see Table 4		
Literacy course themed around literacy coaching and leadership	**Year One Spring (First Section)**	4.24	4.56	4.59
	Year One Spring (Second Section)	4.14	4.48	4.48
	Year One Summer (First Section)	4.68	4.68	4.74
	Year One Summer (Second Section)	4.41	4.34	4.51
	Year One Fall	4.53	4.71	4.72
	Year Two Spring	4.66	4.76	4.76
	Year Two Summer	4.73	4.75	4.77
	Year Two Fall	Target term for improvement; see Table 4		

With a course evaluation it becomes particularly interesting to isolate and examine one of the typically lowest questions by response rate—in this case the very question about feedback. It is further interesting to consider this alongside the overall satisfaction course. As is evident, Question #10 (feedback) is almost always rated lower than Question #11 (overall course) and noticeably lower than the "Mean of Means."

Short response comments are also a standard element in this particular form of online course evaluation, and they often make reference to course feedback—but only to the extent that they suggest some candidates appreciate its presence. Unfortunately, while random course comments do suggest feedback is important, as they are not required to be completed by

candidates during the evaluation, nor do they yield a strong enough trend to suggest anything further about feedback.

Two Years, College-Level Mean

This examination becomes even more interesting when considering these two questions, as well as the "Mean of Means," on the aggregated college-wide combined responses for the matching terms of online course evaluations. As displayed in Table 3, a similar relationship exists on the larger College-level scale:

Table 3

College-level course evaluation mean responses (for Terms matching the courses under examination) on Question #10 (feedback), Question #11 (overall course satisfaction), and the "Mean of Means," for all online courses in that particular term

Course	Term	Question 10	Question 11	Mean of Means
Aggregated College-Level Online Course Totals	**Year One Spring (First Section)**	4.30	4.35	4.42
	Year One Spring (Second Section)	4.15	4.18	4.28
	Year One Summer (First Section)	4.25	4.30	4.41
	Year One Summer (Second Section)	4.29	4.28	4.40
	Year One Fall	4.30	4.33	4.42
	Year Two Spring	4.22	4.24	4.35
	Year Two Summer (First Section)	4.31	4.33	4.42
	Year Two Summer (Second Section)	4.21	4.20	4.33
	Year Two Fall	4.31	4.35	4.44

It is particularly interesting to note the similarity in the mean responses of these two questions, throughout occurrences of the two courses in question, perhaps suggesting something more at the heart of the role of feedback in online teaching, itself, and its impact on overall candidate satisfaction with it.

Implementation of Change

As the second year progressed, discussions with Academic Assistants about feedback continued on par; doing so is always a relevant and important ongoing conversation in terms of course quality and constant improvement. However, in light of the nature of Question #10 relative to the other two indicators, it seemed not only reasonable, but perhaps an ideal opportunity in light of the emerging data to set the goal of "moving the needle" on the responses to Question #10. With overall satisfaction with these two courses high on the candidate end, and overall confidence and quality in place on the professor end, this seemed in every way to be an

easy pedagogical victory in the making, and of immediate benefit to candidates. In many respects, after over two years of working collaboratively and teaching these courses, it seemed the timing was perfect; it would be a pedagogical "home run" thanks to tangible results in this endeavor.

Doing so would also clearly mean increased feedback, and increased communication on the availability of feedback; this further aimed to raise candidate awareness of feedback, how to utilize it, and promote its general importance. This was done in a number of conscious ways. The first was to simply increase the amount of feedback given on candidate papers (both Mid Term papers, as well as Final papers). The second was to increase the general quality of summary rubric comments. The third was to increase the profile of feedback in all forms of course communication (weekly mass emails, weekly online learning platform announcements, weekly learning module videos, etc.)—including the option of early draft feedback via the Early Draft Feedback Rules Handout. In short, raising the visible profile of feedback in the course and making it a vital part of the course "culture," with the hope of continuing a generally positive tone surrounding it, would hopefully promote greater satisfaction with feedback.

Year Two Results, Both Courses

The hope of this attempt was to indeed "move the needle" on the response score for Question #10 of the online course evaluation. The results of this inquiry, however, did not suggest any substantial change to the nature of the response score on this question, nor any substantial change in relation to Question #11, or the "Mean of Means." While it seemed not only possible, but rather confidently plausible that action taken could lead to a noticeably positive increase on candidate satisfaction with feedback (as measured by Question #10), this simply was not the case. As evident in Table 4, Year Two Fall feedback for both courses exhibited the same relationship to Question #11 (slightly lower average mean response than overall satisfaction with the course) and even lower than the "Mean of Means:"

Table 4

Course evaluation mean responses on Question #10 (feedback), Question #11 (overall course satisfaction), and the "Mean of Means," for the Year Two Fall term

Course	Term	Question 10	Question 11	Mean of Means
Literacy course themed around various topics of diverse learners	**Year Two Fall**	4.67	4.76	4.76
Literacy course themed around literacy coaching and leadership	**Year Two Fall**	4.55	4.56	4.65

While the course evaluation numbers are indeed encouraging in any regard, this action research inquiry only raised more questions than it answered regarding the role of feedback, and the measurement of candidate satisfaction with feedback.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Providing feedback in education is unquestionably important. The ease of increasing candidate satisfaction with feedback—especially in an online platform—appears to be a great deal more complicated than meets the eye. Action research requires reflection on expectations, what worked, how goals were accomplished, or problems resolved; sometimes action research even strays from its original goals because the unexpected alters the course of the inquiry (Putman & Rock, 2018). As long as action research is committed to ethical improvement, cyclical reflective practice, collaboration, and publication for others to examine (Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2005), it will continue to be a very useful vehicle for examination and improvement of teaching. Despite a lack of immediate and tangible results in this particular study, professors of online coursework can still take several important cues from this action research.

While the findings of this may not have yielded a major breakthrough, beneficial suggestions do exist in that "sharing of good practice," noted by Hill and West (2020, p. 95). The first, of course, is the general reminder of the importance of feedback. It must be present, it must be prominent, and it must be meaningful. The second is that approaches to feedback should never go stale; they require constant re-examination—and action research is a particularly useful vehicle for doing so. The third, as suggested by this inquiry, is that attempting to "move the needle" on candidate satisfaction with feedback is extremely difficult when conditions are already of general satisfaction. While some might jump to the conclusion that satisfaction with feedback is simply a difficult aspect to approach in any regard, it may actually be more useful to look at the issue from a different direction: when overall satisfaction with a course is under duress. In such an event, increasing the presence, profile, and meaningfulness of feedback might be a key pathway to increasing overall candidate satisfaction with a course. Ultimately, this action research is destined for the very pedagogical act that spawned it in the first place: continued reflection, and renewed implementation of the process of action. And that is, after all, precisely its purpose.

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A Case for Modeling: The Story of a Writer, A Case Study

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of student-teacher relationships on writing pedagogy, emphasizing the role of social interaction in learning. Grounded in social constructivist theory and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, the research highlights how effective teacher-student relationships foster academic growth and self-efficacy, particularly in writing. Through a qualitative, ethnographic case study of an English Language Arts classroom, the study examines how a teacher's modeling, scaffolding, and individualized support influence student engagement and writing development. The findings suggest that a nurturing classroom environment, built on trust and encouragement, enables students—especially those facing academic challenges—to see themselves as capable writers. By analyzing classroom observations, interviews, and student writing samples, the study underscores the significance of relational pedagogy in shaping students' academic identities and learning experiences.

Key Words: Writing pedagogy, student-teacher relationships, modeling, self-efficacy

Introduction

Our educational system is set up in a way that challenges the self-efficacy of our students. A child enters into their respective schools and immediately is faced with assessments, interventions, and testing of all kinds. From that point on they will constantly be told how 'smart' or how 'behind' they are, if they are on the right track or on 'grade level.' It is through the relationship teachers create with their students that gives grounds for real growth.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Paulo Freire (1973) emphasizes that being human involves engaging in relationships and experiencing the world as an objective reality. Learning, for Freire, is a relational process where knowledge emerges through interaction (Irvine, 2010). He argues that knowledge is not static but created through active, collaborative inquiry.

Social constructivist theory supports this view, seeing learning as a joint construction of knowledge between students and teachers, involving negotiation and meaning-making (Goldstein, 1999; Tharp et al., 2000). This theory highlights the importance of teachers supporting students' autonomy and using scaffolding techniques to foster success (Davis, 2003). Lucy Calkins (1996) underscores the significant role educators play in shaping classroom culture, emphasizing that a supportive social climate is crucial for effective teaching, especially in writing. Teacher-student relationships deeply influence students' writing and learning experiences.

Studies have shown that these relationships are essential for children's development and learning outcomes (Baker, 2006; Burchinal et al., 2000). Positive teacher-student interactions enhance student achievement and behavior, while teacher expectations significantly impact students' academic performance (Miller & Turnbull, 1986; Rubie-Davies, 2007).
Research by Endedijk et al. (2022) indicates that student-teacher relationships correlate with peer relationships and are transactional. Educators see maintaining healthy relationships with students

as central to their teaching responsibilities (Chen et al., 2021). However, most research focuses on early childhood, with less attention on adolescent and secondary education relationships (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Roorda et al., 2011).

In summary, effective learning is relational, involving continuous interaction and mutual influence between teachers and students, with significant implications for educational practices and student outcomes.

Pedagogy

Scott and Ytreberg (1990) emphasize the need for meaningful writing experiences and positive teacher expectations to foster writing development. Atwell (1978) and Calkins (1994) highlight the teacher's role in guiding students to bring their experiences into writing, with feedback being crucial for developing writing skills (Raimes, 1983; Ferris, 2002). Harmer (2007) suggests that teachers should create conducive conditions for idea generation and revision.

Scaffolding, especially for diverse backgrounds, aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), allowing learners to grow with assistance (Vygotsky, 1979). Effective scaffolding involves adapting to each child's needs (Clay, 1991, 1998, 2001). Smith (1998) and Haneda and Wells (2000) argue that literacy develops through relationships, forming part of a student's identity.

Addressing the cultural gap in education, understanding students' backgrounds and fostering responsive learning communities is crucial (Bernard & Flint, 2020; Flint, 2020). Damico (2012) stresses the importance of allowing students to use their experiences in learning.

Positive teacher-student relationships, acting as non-parental attachment figures, significantly impact student outcomes (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Engels et al., 2020; Hughes & Cao, 2018; Roorda et al., 2011, 2017). Creating a safe, encouraging environment is key to effective writing instruction (Calkins, 1986, 1996).

Conferencing, as described by Atwell (1987) and Calkins (1986), allows personalized feedback, fostering ownership and improvement in writing. Writing requires cognitive effort and self-regulation, making teacher mentorship crucial (Lienemann et al., 2006; Graham & Harris, 2003). Writing curricula should be responsive and allow time for revising and reflection (Dunn, Niens & McMillan, 2014).

The classroom as a community of practice supports identity development and social action through shared inquiry (Lave & Wenger, 2004; Silvers et al., 2010). The think-aloud model for reading (Olshavsky, 1977; Wilhelm, 2001) and writing instruction helps students understand cognitive processes (Bandura, 1987, 1988; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) is a key practice.

Pedagogical choices, influenced by classroom relationships and cultures, are crucial for student development and effective teaching. Understanding and leveraging these relationships can significantly enhance writing instruction and student outcomes.

Methodology

In order to observe such complex paradigms as relationships, pedagogy, and writing, an approach must be all-inclusive, searching for all elements in a classroom environment. It would be unreasonable and inauthentic to attempt to control any facets of the phenomena in question. Therefore, a qualitative research paradigm has been utilized to establish an understanding of such complex and abstract.

This case study grounded in ethnography attempts to explore how teacher-student relationships affect pedagogy practices. This study is centered around the idea that literacy, more specifically writing, is a social event and learning is created through individually motivated circumstances, which is why a qualitative approach was chosen. Similar to other qualitative methodologies, this method of research rejects ideas of hypothesis proving or disproving and is driven by attempts at discovery. The researcher instead, "seeks to discover whatever emerges as important to understanding the phenomenon under study" (Simmons- 29 Mackie & Damico, 1999). Damico & Simmons-Mackie (2003) go at great lengths describing qualitative methodologies and the rationale behind utilizing it. The overarching question guiding the research of this dissertation is as follows: How are teacher-student relationships and writing pedagogical practices related?

Criteria for Inclusion

The participants of this study encompassed one general education English Language Arts classroom. The teacher as well as the student and parents gave necessary permissions for observation, interview, and artifact collection. The teacher would be recruited as a certified English Language Arts teacher who has taught for more than one year. One student was chosen from teacher recommendation to be observed more closely. The student must be enrolled for the entirety of the school year up to the point of recruitment and must be deemed by the teacher as an average student in their class. The relationship between the specific student and teacher was examined as well as a collection of writing samples, however, the whole class was observed to gather a general sense of relationships made and pedagogical practices, with the teacher being the focal point of observation.

Data Analysis

Video recordings of student-teacher interactions were transcribed and coded utilizing a thematic analysis to identify patterns and recurrent themes in the data. The data analysis was cyclical in nature (Agar, 1986) allowing for data collection and analysis to be conducted simultaneously. The two primary datasets for this study were collected as observational artifacts (participant observation and classroom recordings) and interviews of participants. Video recordings were transcribed for analysis and then reviewed for initial coding to establish initial foci. The field notes from classroom participant observations were expanded into narrative form as well as coded and compared to code findings within transcriptions. All data was then coded for thematic analysis and analyzed across datasets to identify patterns and themes that presented themselves. The data allowed the researcher to determine qualities and interactions that become common within a teacher-student relationship as well as qualities that may inform pedagogical practices.

After themes were identified and refined from the primary datasets, they were examined against writing artifacts collected over time to determine what parts of curriculum and/or teacher-student interactions carried over into student writing. The identified themes were explained using evidence from the data which provided an interpretation of the data and an understanding of teacher-student relationship and how that interaction affected the pedagogical practices while teaching writing.

Results -Jim's Story

Jim, a Honduran immigrant who was classified as needing tier-three reading interventions, sat at the table with me. This bright, witty third grader had grown accustomed to hearing that he needed extra assistance in reading. When I asked him what his favorite subject was, it was no surprise that he said Math. I asked Jim if he was a reader, and with no surprise, he said no. However, what was shocking was when asked if he was a writer, he responded with yes. How could a child who had been told he needed extra intervention in the English Language Arts classroom believe that he was a good writer?

I was observing Jim and his teacher, Jan, to understand the dynamics of student-teacher relationships in the writing classroom. I wanted to understand the pedagogical choices teachers made based on their relationship with their students. Jan provided a classroom setting where I could see Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) in real-time. Her classroom was never a sterile environment where students felt afraid to move, speak, or breathe. If you observed my field notes, narrative writeups, or video recordings, you would see a classroom that looked like chaos was happening at times, but where students felt comfortable. Her classroom is brightly colored with literary elements hanging around the classroom as an invitation to utilize. Her classroom is often encompassed with a slight buzzing sound as the students are constantly engaging in some form of discussion. The classroom was a welcoming environment, and her relationship with Jim as well as other students is quite evident in observation. This basic interpretive qualitative study gave me the opportunity to immerse myself in Jan's classroom and see Jim as the child he was.

The curriculum was a state-mandated scripted curriculum, to which the idea that the same input equates the same output held strong. While I grappled with the difficulties and the chains of the curriculum, I was pleasantly surprised to see how Jan navigated the burdens of the curriculum while still upholding the relationships and friendly environment that made a child like Jim believe that he is a writer. There were instances where the curriculum forced essay writing about such topics as the Louisiana Purchase. It would be difficult for any third-grade student to find background knowledge or any kind of interest in such a topic. I sat and imagined what that large request could look like for Jim, an immigrant who struggled with the language at times. This task seemed daunting for such a child. I observed Jim and his behaviors in the classroom for such a lesson and saw his attempts at being the 'class clown,' his discussions with students around him, and his charming smile that made me believe he was doing anything other than paying attention to Jan and the Louisiana Purchase.

It was not until Jan began modeling the writing process on the board that I saw any interest in the subject for Jim. Jan began modeling her prewriting on the board, which is when Jim and his newfound interest started actively participating. I watched Jim raise his hand to assist in the writing process and watched as he leaned into the modeling of his teacher, his prewriting, mimicking that which was on the board. Jim began to engage in the act of writing through the social means of modeling from his teacher. This scaffolded level of support made Jim feel successful. With the assistance of his teacher, he could take on writing about topics such as the Louisiana Purchase, and it was through writing that Jim would be able to understand and come to know. This picture Jan and Jim painted for me gave the perfect image of Vygotsky's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) in real time. I was able to see Jan, the better meaning-maker, help pull Jim through the zone of proximal development through modeling and writing. Jan would eventually have a very enthusiastic student begging to move to her kidney-shaped table to have more

one-on-one time to negotiate and navigate the bounds of the assignment, to which she would indulge.

Jim, with great enthusiasm, ran to the front of the classroom to meet his teacher. He was actively engaged as she modeled, but he needed reassurance and a little more from Jan. She simply walked him through what was already modeled, allowing him to see that he was correct in his assumptions. In their conversation, Jan simply walked back through the modeling process with Jim and reassured him.

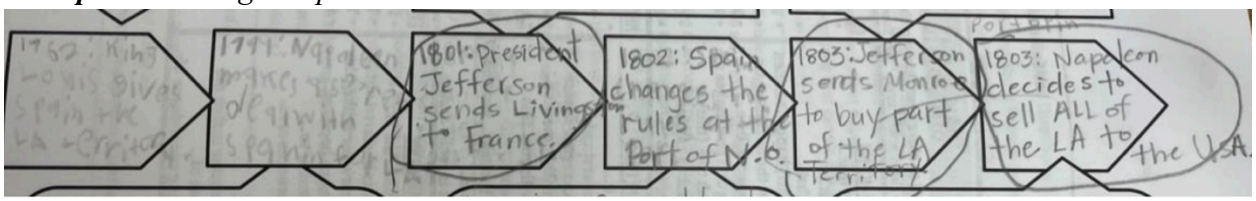
In this excerpt from a classroom observation, the reader views an example of Jan utilizing modeling as an instructional tool to walk students through her expectations for the writing assignment. In this assignment she goes in depth explaining how the students' 47 examples may look differently, however they should take the same approach to constructing their writing. Regarding relationships between student and teacher, Jan is promoting her expectations through way of modeling. She actively utilizes her promethean board in this instance to show her process of taking classroom curriculum and assists the students in taking that information and manipulating it into a written construct. While she understands that there will and should be differences per student and their choices, she does have an underlying expectation of this process and what she expects for student needs by way of scaffolding.

Scaffolding.

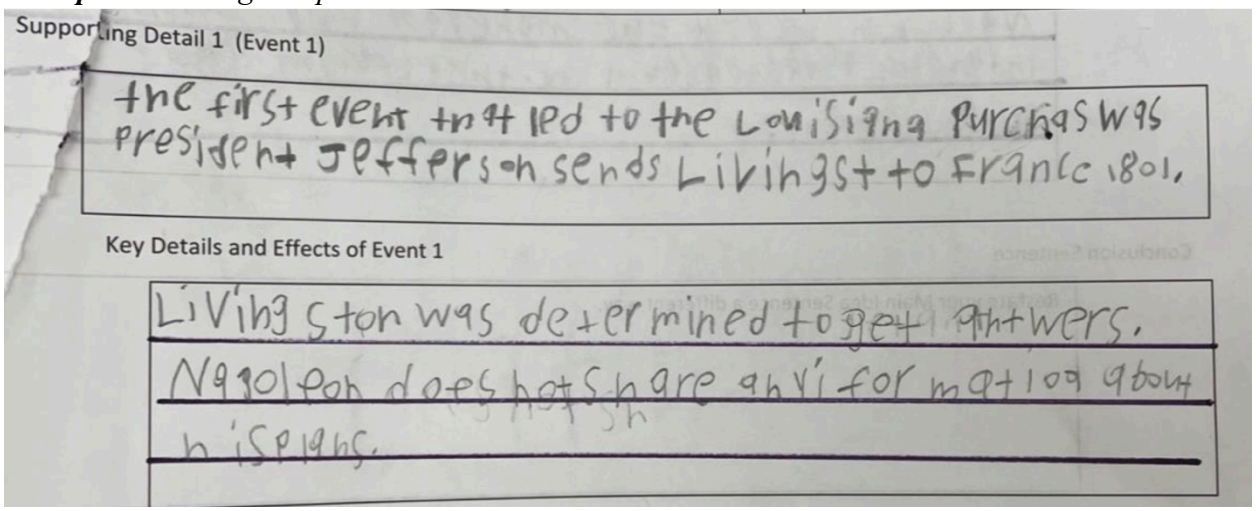
> Jan Classroom Observation (Appendix A.2.1) - Modeling
> Jan (15:39) The first event. I'm going to write my first event. If the first event you circled is not 1799, please do not copy what I am writing after I switch colors. I'm going to switch colors. This is just a single word or a single phrase. I'm going to switch to purple. What I write in purple is my first event. Don't you tell me, "That's not what I circled." I don't [inaudible 00:16:09]. If you circled something else, that's what you're going to write. If it is the same, woohoo, you can copy. Capiche?
> Student (16:25) [crosstalk 00:16:24].
> Jan (16:26) "The first event that led to the Louisiana Purchase was," I circled 1799. So I'm going to write what?
> Students (16:35) [crosstalk 00:16:34]. 1799.
> Jan (16:36) I'm going to write the words on the box, "Was Napoleon..."
> Student (16:44) Napoleon was making.

By examining the previous excerpt, the reader can view the methods and expectations for a process by which Jan models. Because of the trust in the relationship and these expectations, we can view the way Jim utilized the strategies which Jan has modeled.

Excerpt 1.1 *Writing Sample*



Excerpt 1.2 *Writing Sample*



Jim has utilized the modeling experience that Jan has provided and planned for. He makes the efforts to utilize the modeled strategy that Jan has presented in her expectations and has even taken a step further to take initiative in circling and providing his own choice as Jan has instructed. There is a clear reciprocal relationship between student and teacher. Jan has modeled a process to which Jim responds by following the pedagogical method utilized, showing not only that there are expectations set out by modeling, but also that those expectations are observed, utilized, and respected in this relationship.

There is a lot to be said about a teacher's understanding of when students would benefit more from individual instruction, as opposed to full class lecture, group work, partner work, etc. There is an intuitive nature to knowing when to move a student to the confounds of one-on-one instruction. The knowledge and intuition of knowing when a student needs individual attention can be contributed to the relationship created between student and teacher. In the example below, Jan utilizes her intuition and understands that Jim would benefit more from walking him through a process and giving him some individualized attention.

Excerpt 1.3 *Participant Observation*

> As she releases the students to begin writing individually and calls Jim up to her desk. She and Jim seem to engage in conversation about his work. Another student asks for help, but the teacher reassures him that he can do it. As the teacher and Jim conference, students in the back begin laughing and joking around. Another student then brings materials to the front to get assistance as well as Jim stays in a wobbling stool at the teacher's kidney table.

Previously in class, Jim had expressed difficulty organizing thoughts in preparation for writing. She makes it a point to tell him they will work on it together after the class gets started. Jan understood the needs of Jim and that he would benefit more from working individually with her and then with a small group with her as the lead. In her individual instruction, he was able to complete the curricular task, as Jan inserted herself as a bridge between him and the content.

Jan understands the importance of individual attention and a child's need to meet them at this level. This could be viewed as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

(Vygotsky, 1978). Jan meets the child where he or she is and helps guide the student to the writing goals. In this act, Jan is pulling the child from what they are capable of doing on their73 own through their zone of proximal development, which in turn will assist in shaping what they are capable of on their own in the future. Conferencing with these students and giving them these experiences benefits the relationships created between the student and teacher. As this relationship grows, the student feels more confident in their capabilities and the teacher becomes more confident in their pedagogical practices. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy to a degree, creating more successful writers as well as better-attuned teachers.

Of course, Jim's entire backgrounds and cultures would build into this view of self, however, in the context of his situation at the time, their current states could reflect their current situation partially, which will be discussed.

Excerpt 1.4 *Initial Interview*

R: Ah, I like that. I like that a lot that you said that, um, do you, so do you, do you think you're a good writer?
J: a little bit

As discussed previously, Jim is a student who has tier-three interventions for reading; however, he still visualizes himself to be somewhat of a writer. In analysis of his classroom setting, this may have some impact. Jan created a classroom setting that was very open with an expectation for individuality. Many of her themes and patterns centered around emotionally supporting her students and creating a safe environment for failure and experimentation. She utilized the pedagogical practice of modeling constantly and allowed Jim to use these examples in his writing often. There was a good deal of autonomy and flexibility given to the students despite the curricular expectations. Interestingly, Jim seems to utilize writing to help him in his reading as he explains below.

Excerpt 1.5 *Initial Interview*

R: You don't like the reading part. So why do you like the writing part?
J: I don't know. Cause it's like help for my head and it helps me to like read a little bit, but it's not that good at the same time.
R: So you think that when you write it helps you read better?
J: Yea, but177
R: when you have to write about it
J: Yea, cause I already read it. Uh, it doesn't make sense on the outside but on the inside in my brain it makes sense, so I know how to write it.

Jim's connection with writing helps his view of self, which Jan seems to support in her classroom. The classroom environment she created allows Jim to feel successful with his writing, even if he feels that he struggles to read. Despite the large class size, Jan was readily available and spent a great deal of time with Jim when he presented a need. While he is classified as needing tier three interventions, Jan elaborated at the end of the school year that he was ready to exit that intervention and move up to tier two. It would be hard to discredit his experience in Jan's classroom and his high sense of self in relation to these academic gains.

Conclusion

It was through Jan and her pedagogical practices, especially modeling, that allowed Jim to feel as though he was a writer. It was as though Jan took a goldfish from its small bowl and released it into the wild allowing it to grow to infinite sizes. How could an immigrant from Honduras who was constantly being told he needed intervention and was not at 'grade level' possibly think he was a good writer? It was his relationship with Jan and her support through modeling and conferencing that impacted Jim and his levels of self-efficacy. To conclude Jim's story, it should be known that Jim moved out of tier-three intervention and into tier-two by the end of the year. It is no secret that his teacher and her use of modeling created a major impact on his journey as a writer. Let it be known that the writer, Jim, is now swimming out in the wild, writing.

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Voices of Impact: African American Male Students' Perceptions of Mattering and Marginalization in High School

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Abstract

African American males often experience disparities in school, leading to feelings of marginalization and questioning their sense of mattering. This study explores how high school African American males perceive their experiences of mattering and marginality with teachers and administrators. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight 11th and 12th-grade African American males in a southern U.S. school district. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: (1) being acknowledged through verbal praise and actions, (2) being shown respect, (3) feeling targeted by teacher rudeness, and (4) having an optional presence. Findings emphasize the need for inclusive school environments where African American males feel valued and supported.

Keywords: mattering, marginality, high school, African American males

Introduction

> You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.
>
> — James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Some African Americans never experience the richness of truly mattering in society because of their skin color. For years, African Americans have been oppressed and dominated by stereotypes in the U.S., which has influenced prejudice and systemic racism (Taylor et al., 2019). Disparities in education, upward mobility, earnings, labor force, unemployment, housing, and criminal justice have highlighted how African Americans- primarily African American males- are unequal in society (Reeves et al., 2020). Recent findings from Pew Research Center (2024) reveal that over 60% of Black Americans believe institutions such as the criminal justice system, economic structures, and policing are designed to hold them back. More than 8 in 10 Black Americans also believe Black people are incarcerated at higher rates due to profit-driven motives—sentiments shaped by generations of discriminatory policies and practices. These beliefs reflect not paranoia, but lived experiences and generational knowledge that deeply influence how African Americans view their place-and value- within U.S. institutions. While adults manage to master the paradigm of living in a systemic world, the youth are the ones who fall victim to systemic racism, struggling to find their own identity and feelings of mattering in society.

Adolescent African American males must learn to navigate a world that often views them through a lens of suspicion, threat, or deficiency. High school African American males are frequently labeled, targeted, and stereotyped, both inside and outside of school (Taylor et al., 2019). Even if they do not experience this injustice first-hand, they are often traumatized due to

stereotypes they see in the media and in their communities (Busby et al., 2013). These repeated exposures contribute to internalized stress and confusion about their place in society. Carey et al. (2022) found that Black adolescent boys often perceive their sense of mattering in school as conditional, shaped by how they are treated by educators, peers, and the larger institution. This *partial* or *selective* mattering reinforces messages that they are only valued under certain circumstances, which deeply impacts their self-concept, school engagement, and social-emotional development. According to Taylor and Clark (2009), these harmful norms are so deeply ingrained in society that they are often treated as natural or inevitable. But even when these biases are seen as normal, they can distort how African American males see themselves—and whether they feel they truly matter. The way African American males perceive how they are viewed and how they perceive mattering and marginality is especially important during pivotal stages of identity development, such as those experienced in high school.

When society marginalizes certain groups, it becomes increasingly difficult for members of those groups to feel connected or believe they truly matter. Schlossberg (1989) explored this dynamic through interviews with 24 men and women and identified five components of mattering: awareness, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation. She concluded that mattering is tied directly to behavior—individuals who believe they matter are more likely to be motivated, engaged, and confident in their interactions with others. Conversely, when individuals feel they do not matter, it can negatively impact their actions, development, and mental well-being. According to Schlossberg's (1989) definition of mattering, feelings of mattering are linked to outward actions, otherwise known as behaviors. This belief suggests that when African American males feel they do not matter, it affects how they behave, interact with others, and grow as individuals.

Several researchers have explored African American male experiences of mattering: Schieferecke and Card (2013) and Brooms (2019) examined college students; Bell (2015) studied middle school students; Tucker et al. (2010) focused on high school students. Carey et al. (2022) highlighted how Black adolescent boys' experiences of mattering are often *partial*, *conditional*, or *inconsistent*. Their study found that while some boys experienced affirming relationships with educators, many others described feeling excluded, unseen, or valued only when performing well academically or behaviorally. While each study offers valuable insight, few have examined both mattering *and* marginality among African American males at the high school level, a pivotal stage of development where identity formation and social belonging are shaped, just before African American males enter adulthood and society. This study builds on prior research about mattering and examines how African American males experience both mattering and marginality in high school to teachers and administrators.

Marginality and Mattering Effects on Identity in School

Identity plays a critical part in feelings of mattering and marginality. When people know themselves and their worth (when they have a grounded sense of identity), they are more likely to believe in themselves and reach greater heights. However, when people possess a low sense of identity or self-worth, they are more susceptible to external influences, stereotypes, and social pressures.

According to Bandura (2006), "Individuals with high self-efficacy set goals, stay committed to achieving their goals and have agency over events that affect their daily lives" (as cited in Ellis et al., 2018, p. 901). High self-efficacy is vital for the success of African American males, who often face limiting societal stereotypes. Caprara et al. (2008) found that adolescents

with stronger academic self-efficacy not only had higher academic achievement but were also more likely to remain in school (as cited in Ellis et al., 2018, p. 902).

In a phenomenological study by Orrock and Clark (2018), African American males with a grounded sense of identity tended to do well in school because they believed in their potential regardless of societal perceptions. These students viewed themselves positively, and those who did not recognize their worth were seen as misinformed. Orrock and Clark (2018) emphasized that when African American males have a secure identity, it helped them overcome the prophecy society had written for them; they were less likely to conform to negative expectations and more likely to ask for help and engage academically.

Conversely, when African American males do not have a strong sense of identity, external perceptions can shape their self-concept in harmful ways. Mary et al. (2018) found that African American students often felt that others, particularly those outside their racial group, viewed them as inferior. This internalization of inferiority impacted their school experiences. When students started to believe that they were less than others, it affected their experiences in school. Fortunately, many students in the study believed in a "bright future for themselves" (Mary et al., 2018, p. 503) despite those perceptions of inferiority.

Del Toro and Wang (2023) further explored how classroom-level racial stereotypes affect identity and engagement. Their study found that when anti-Black, pro-White stereotypes were endorsed in classroom settings, Black students reported decreased belonging and engagement, particularly in academic spaces such as STEM classrooms. These climates contributed to feelings of marginality and disengagement, which ultimately shaped academic outcomes and identity development. However, Leath et al. (2019) affirmed that strong racial identity beliefs can serve as a protective factor against the negative effects of racial discrimination in schools. When Black boys view their racial identity as central to who they are, they are more likely to remain engaged and academically motivated, even in unsupportive environments.

Unfortunately, historical legacies such as the "brown paper bag test" and ongoing issues like colorism have also contributed to distorted self-perceptions among African Americans (Fisher et al., 2015). These messages can lead individuals to devalue themselves or others based on skin tone, further complicating racial identity development. African American males must feel positively seen and valued in society in order to define their identities independently of harmful societal standards. Woods et al. (2023) further call for a strengths-based, culturally responsive framework to support African American males. Too often, research and policy focus on deficits rather than assets. They argue that promoting cultural affirmation, school belonging, and overall development is essential for fostering academic, social, and emotional success. Without intentional efforts to challenge marginalization and affirm Black male students' identities, schools risk reproducing the very disparities they aim to dismantle.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to conduct one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with eight African American males in the upcoming 11th and 12th grades. Participants were asked to describe instances when they felt valued and appreciated and instances when they felt left out and did not matter in high school to teachers and administrators. They were also asked to reflect on how they believed those individuals perceived them and if those perceptions influenced how they were treated and how they, in turn, felt. Furthermore, they answered questions about how they felt African American males were viewed in society, how positive and negative teacher/administrator perceptions helped and hindered them in the

classroom, and ways teachers/administrators could make them feel as though they matter in the classroom. Since the lived experiences of mattering and marginality from high school African American males were sought, a phenomenological study with in-depth interviews was most appropriate.

The proposed population for this study was high school African American males from a low-income school in a southern school district in the U.S. According to the district's 2023 demographic data, the community consisted of 64% Black/African American residents, 29% Caucasian residents, and 7% identifying as Asian, Native American, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The average household income was $41,860, with a poverty rate of 27%. In 2024, the school district's overall student population was 78.1% African American students, 18.0% Caucasian students, and 3.9% other. The school where the study took place had approximately 78.2% African American students, 19.1% Caucasian students, and 2.7% other. Most teachers are White and hold either a Bachelor's or Master's degree.

According to the Civil Rights Data Collection (2020–2021), 80 African American males received in-school suspension, compared to 29 Caucasian males. Additionally, 53 African American males received out-of-school suspension, compared to just 6 Caucasian males. Although this was during the COVID-19 pandemic school year, when overall numbers were lower, the disproportionality still represented systemic disparities African American males face in education. These disparities are among the factors that can negatively affect students' sense of mattering. Because each participant had completed at least one full year of high school, they were able to reflect meaningfully on their academic and social experiences.

The sample for this study was eight African American males in the upcoming 11th-12th grade, four from each grade level. They were all eligible for free lunch and lived in a low-income community where the African American population's poverty rate was 35.55%. The eight African American males described times they felt they mattered and when they felt marginalized; they also described how perceptions hurt and helped them in school. According to Dukes (1984), studying 3 to 10 participants is recommended (as cited in Creswell and Poth, 2018). For example, Banks (2017) sought lived experiences by interviewing six African American males in his qualitative phenomenological study. He was able to formulate themes and find the common essence of the phenomenon. By asking the eight participants the same questions, enough information was gleaned from obtaining enough information to reach data saturation.

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that this strategy supports the identification of participants with shared experiences relevant to the study's focus. Within that approach, criterion sampling was used to ensure participants met specific criteria: each was an upcoming 11th or 12th grade African American male involved in at least one extracurricular activity (e.g., band, academic clubs, robotics, or sports) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Individual Interview Participant Demographics

Participant	Classification	Age	Extracurricular Activity
Student A	Upcoming 11th grader	16	Football; baseball
Student B	**Upcoming 12th grader**	**17**	**Band in junior high**

Student C	Upcoming 12th grader	18	Band
Student D	Upcoming 11th grader	16	Football
Student E	Upcoming 11th grader	15	Football
Student F	Upcoming 12th grader	17	Track
Student G	**Upcoming 12th grader**	**18**	**Football in junior high**
Student H	Upcoming 11th grader	17	Football; track

Note. Students in bold were not involved in any extracurricular activities in high school or their prior year in high school. However, they were still coded in the system as students involved in extracurricular activities. This information was revealed in the interviews.

This type of sampling was best for this phenomenological study because it allowed the researcher to gather data from students who had schooling experiences outside the traditional classroom setting. The high school's 11th and 12th grade counselors were asked to find students who met the criterion. After retrieving the list of students, eight names were randomly selected with an online spinner.

Since the participants were minors, the parent or guardian was contacted to discuss the expectations and purpose of the study. The nature of the study and the benefits of participating in it were discussed, such as providing information to help future African American males in high school feel they matter and the types of questions that would be asked. Furthermore, compensation was discussed. Each participant who completed the interview received a $25 gift card provided by the researchers. Student confidentiality was also explained in complete detail. If a parent accepted, the parent or guardian would receive an email with consent and assent forms typed in student-friendly vocabulary. If a parent or guardian declined, another name would be randomly selected from the list using an online spinner. A field issue that occurred was finding individuals to interview for the study. Students did not believe the study was worthwhile, and parents wanted their children to refrain from participating. When this did occur, another student was randomly selected. Nevertheless, all participants and their guardians knew participation was voluntary and confidential.

Results

After conducting interviews, the researchers reviewed transcripts and used a concept map to narrow topics to find potential themes. The researchers had to judge whether there was enough data to support each potential theme, see if other potential themes could be collated, and see if the potential themes needed to be broken down further (Braun & Clark, 2006). After an extensive process, four themes and two subthemes emerged (see Table 2). The themes and subthemes were 1) getting acknowledged, with the emergent subthemes of acknowledged through verbal praise and acknowledged through actions; 2) being shown respect, with the emerging subthemes of teachers valuing needs/opinions and teachers understanding; (3) feeling targeted by/rudeness from teachers; and 4) having an optional presence.

Table 2
Emergent Themes and Subthemes That Align with Research Questions

Research Questions	Emerging Themes and Subthemes
RQ1. How do high school African American males describe their experiences of mattering at school to teachers and administrators?	Theme 1: Getting Acknowledged Subtheme: Acknowledged Through Verbal Praise Subtheme: Acknowledged Through Teacher Actions Theme 2: Being Shown Respect Subtheme: Teachers Valuing Needs/Opinions Subtheme: Teachers Understanding
RQ2. How do high school African American males describe their experiences of marginality at school to teachers and administrators?	Theme 3: Feeling Targeted by/Rudeness from Teachers Theme 4: Having an Optional Presence

RQ1. How do high school African American males describe their experiences of mattering at school to teachers and administrators?

Before participants were asked to describe times they felt they mattered to teachers, they were asked to describe their feelings about positive teacher perceptions. This conversation would lead to their experiences of mattering at school. All eight participants described how positive perceptions in school could help them in some way. Each statement illustrated how positive perceptions would help them. Their perceptions all showed how it would help them with their schooling experience in some way (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Significant Statements Regarding Positive Teacher Perceptions

After discussing how positive teacher perceptions could help them in school, the participants described their experiences of mattering in and out of the classroom.

Theme 1: Getting Acknowledged

Participants articulated how they felt about being acknowledged by teachers and administrators. This theme unfolded in two subthemes: *Acknowledged Through Verbal Praise* and *Acknowledged Through Actions.*

Acknowledged Through Verbal Praise. Participants highlighted the importance of verbal praise and recognition from teachers as a fundamental aspect of feeling valued and acknowledged in the classroom. One participant expressed, "When a teacher acknowledges my efforts and achievements verbally, it makes me feel appreciated and respected." This sentiment was echoed by several other participants, emphasizing the significance of verbal affirmation in fostering a sense of mattering. Instances of verbal praise from educators were particularly meaningful to the participants, fostering a sense of validation and self-worth. Student A recounted a moment where his teacher's recognition transcended racial stereotypes, affirming his academic performance in a predominantly white classroom,

> *Um, a white teacher with mostly predom- um, mainly all white kids in the class, and none of them understood, like, how to do the work, and I understood how to do it. And, I mean I never took it that way, but it put- you know- it put a spotlight out on me because I felt like, you know- when people think of white people, they think they are the smartest- geeks- nerds. But sometimes, it's the dark skin in the room that's the brightest… when she bragged on me about understanding the work, that just made me feel good about myself.*

Student H similarly cherished the acknowledgment he received from his football coach, which reinforced his dedication and talent on the field. In addition to teachers and coaches, Student E found solace in the supportive words of his principal, redirecting his focus from disciplinary issues to his potential as an athlete,

> *They'll acknowledge me and tell me how big I am and talk about sports and stuff like that. Tell me how far I can go. Tell me how I ain't supposed to be in the office for real. How I'm supposed to be there on the field. I just get a little pride, for real. When he says that, it makes me go back to class and chill out a little bit and try to just chill and don't do nun for real.*

These anecdotes highlight the profound impact of verbal affirmation on the participants' self-perception and motivation.

Acknowledged Through Actions. In addition to verbal acknowledgment, participants emphasized the importance of actions and supportive behaviors from teachers in affirming their sense of mattering. Actions such as receiving academic awards to having exemplary work showcased in class, students felt a deep sense of validation and encouragement. 5 out of the 8 participants shared experiences that showed how teachers acknowledged them through actions. Student F, for instance, felt a surge of confidence when his essay was highlighted as an exemplar, affirming his writing skills and potential. Moreover, Student H's coach exemplified acknowledgment through a simple act of kindness, celebrating his athletic achievement with a heartfelt gesture. These instances showed the power of educators' actions in fostering a culture of recognition, support, and mattering.

Theme 1 (Getting Acknowledged) Effect on Students. The profound impact of acknowledgment on students' sense of mattering was evident in their perceptions of mattering. From bolstering self-esteem to enhancing motivation, participants articulated the many benefits of being acknowledged by teachers and administrators. As Student B expressed, acknowledgement served as a "stroke to the ego," uplifting spirits and fostering a positive school climate. Other participants mentioned how it made them feel “happy” or “good, like they worked for something.”

Theme 2: Being Shown Respect

In addition to getting acknowledged, participants described feelings of mattering when educators respected them. Their experiences of teachers showing respect were best shown when teachers valued the males' personal and physical needs, when teachers valued their opinions, and when teachers understood their difficult situations by offering solutions, working with them, or not penalizing them. This theme of *Being Shown Respect* unfolded in two distinct subthemes: *Teacher Valuing Needs/Opinions* and *Teachers Understanding*.

Teacher Valuing Needs/Opinions. African American male students expressed that they best felt they mattered when teachers valued their needs and opinions. Participants emphasized the importance of feeling heard and respected in academic settings, as well as the importance of educators acknowledging their individuality and respecting their perspectives. Student F recounted feeling valued by a teacher who prioritized open communication and mutual respect, fostering a supportive classroom environment conducive to learning. Similarly, Student A highlighted the significance of educators attending to students' physical needs, such as providing water for athletes in her classroom, thereby demonstrating an understanding of their physical well-being. These anecdotes showed the transformative potential of educators' empathetic approach in fostering a sense of belonging, respect, and mattering.

Teachers Understanding. Participants also shared the significance of mattering when teachers demonstrated understanding and empathy towards their experiences and challenges. Feeling understood and supported by teachers was identified as a crucial factor in fostering mattering among African American male students. Participants also voiced the importance of educators empathizing with their unique circumstances and demonstrating a willingness to

accommodate their needs. From offering academic support to accommodating personal challenges, participants valued educators who displayed understanding and flexibility. Student E shared examples of teachers who refrained from judgment and instead sought to understand and support him, fostering a sense of trust and mutual respect. The participants' narratives highlighted the pivotal role of educators in validating students' experiences and creating a supportive learning environment.

RQ2. How do high school African American males describe their experiences of marginality at school to teachers and administrators?

After discussing how positive teacher perceptions could help them in school, the participants described their experiences of marginality. Before they recounted their experiences, they were asked to describe how African American males were viewed in society and their feelings about negative teacher perceptions (see Figure 2). This conversation would lead to their experiences of marginalization in high school.

Figure 2

Significant Statements Regarding Negative Perceptions of African American Males

After recounting experiences, participants were asked to describe their experiences of marginalization in high school.

Theme 3: Feeling Targeted by/Rudeness from Teachers

While participants described feeling respected by teachers, instances of teacher targeting and rudeness emerged during discussions of marginality. Examples included experiences of being unfairly singled out, falsely accused, or treated disrespectfully by teachers.

For instance, Student G recounted a situation where he was unjustly yelled at by a teacher for engaging in a conversation with a classmate. Despite feeling shocked and unappreciated initially, he expressed some relief after the teacher apologized, highlighting the impact of teacher-student interactions on perceptions of mattering.

Similarly, Student D articulated feeling targeted in class, particularly emphasizing instances where his questions were dismissed or when he was falsely accused of misconduct. Such experiences left him feeling embarrassed, offended, and marginalized within the classroom environment. He shared that *Black males are the ones targeted in class lots of the time, just for no reason sometimes.* When asked about his experience of feeling marginal, he shared how his teacher cut him off in the middle of his sentence in class,

> *I remember when I had a question in class, and I was asking the question, and the teacher cut me off in the middle of the question. She was like if you don't understand, come to tutoring- and I was really embarrassed… she never did that to anyone else either- it was just me. (Student D)*

Moreover, Student E shared his perception of being deliberately ostracized by a teacher, leading him to feel unwanted, targeted, and unfairly accused. These instances of feeling targeted or rudeness by teachers evoked feelings of marginality among participants.

Theme 4: Having an Optional Presence

The fourth emergent theme, *Having an Optional Presence*, further elucidates the experiences of marginality. Participants described instances where teachers appeared indifferent to their presence in class or failed to provide adequate support when needed.

For example, Student H recounted feeling marginalized after returning to class from an injury, noting how his teacher neglected to assist him and subsequently ignored his presence in class. This lack of support led him to disengage from the class, further exacerbating feelings of marginalization and disrespect.

Similarly, Student F highlighted instances where teachers seemingly overlooked students' absenteeism, leading them to question the value placed on their attendance and participation,

> *Like us being able to skip so much, like some of our teachers were not realizing that we were able to skip that much so like if we were, if we were in the middle of doing our project or something and we were just able to skip throughout the class, the teacher wouldn't realize- made me feel like maybe the teacher don't care that much about how much we come to school actually, but like they made sure we made the 10 days. If we were at the 10 days they made sure but like between those 10 days, they wouldn't make sure.*

The students could skip class without the teacher "checking in" and were quick to be penalized after surpassing the 10-day state-mandated credit loss. Teachers allowing them to skip freely caused them to question if teachers even cared for them; therefore, they felt marginal.

Contrary to the experiences with teachers, Student D expressed feelings of marginality toward the school principal because he felt that he was just another body and that the principal did not value his presence at school.

Despite encounters with marginality, participants generally reported feeling respected by teachers, with six out of eight participants indicating that they did not perceive any instances of overt disrespect from teachers.

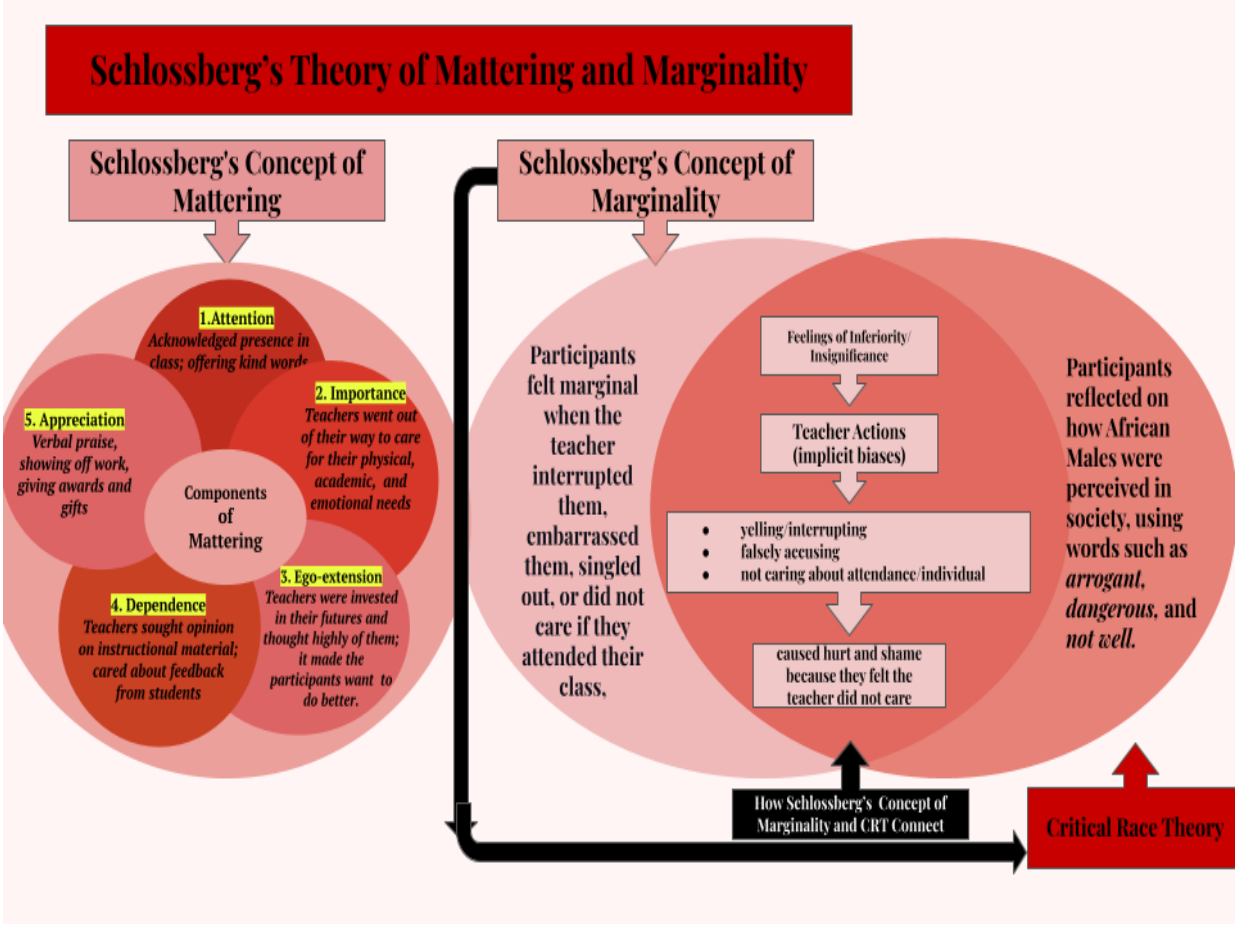
Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of African American male high school students as they navigated feelings of mattering and marginality in school. Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering was used as the primary theoretical framework for this study. A realistic approach to Critical Race Theory (CRT) was also used as a guiding framework for

interpreting the study's findings. The themes from the data analysis process coincided with each theoretical framework (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

How Findings Coincide with Theoretical Frameworks



Research Question 1: How do high school African American males describe their experiences of mattering at school to teachers and administrators?

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is a human need to feel important in the world (Hopper, 2020). When others know they are valued and appreciated, they feel they matter. Participants were asked to reflect on how they felt they mattered in high school to their teachers and administrators. This essential question intertwined with Schlossberg's Theory of Mattering, in which she concluded that there were five components to mattering: attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation (Schlossberg, 1989). When asking the participants questions about their perceptions of mattering, they were asked to describe times they felt Schlossberg's components by their teachers and administrators: importance, appreciation, acknowledgment, and respect.

Schieferecke and Card's (2013) findings and Schlossberg's Theory of Mattering's first and fifth component, attention and appreciation, coincide with the current study's findings because the participants felt they mattered most when their teachers acknowledged their presence in a class by offering kind words to them, whether by verbal praise or action, showing their work

to the class, or giving them awards and gifts. Participants expressed that these small affirmations made them feel special, recognized, and emotionally uplifted. This is a significant implication for this study because African American males felt they mattered through simple gestures and kindness. Small, intentional gestures made a significant difference in how participants perceived their teachers' care and commitment. These findings also align with Del Toro and Wang's (2023) research, which found that Black students are more likely to engage in class when they feel seen, respected, and not reduced to stereotypes. When educators offer affirmation, it counters the effects of stereotype-based disengagement that often begins as early as middle school and continues into high school.

The participant's responses also included evidence of the second and fourth components of Schlossberg's Theory of Mattering: importance and dependence. People want to know if someone notices them or cares about them because it makes them want to achieve higher and do better because they know someone cares (Schlossberg, 1989). The participants felt important when their teachers went out of their way to care for their physical and emotional needs by showing they understood the participants and their circumstances. Some students felt important when teachers would store water for them before athletic events, understood their personal situations, and would not penalize them for missing assignments or school. When the teachers cared for their students' overall well-being and understood their situations, the participants felt they were essential to their teachers and administrators, making them feel they mattered. Dependence, the fourth component, was also revealed in the study in data analysis. One of the participants felt he mattered when the teacher sought his opinion on instructional material. Knowing that his teacher cared about his opinion made him feel like he mattered to his teacher.

Schlossberg's third component, ego-extension, was also addressed in the study. The teachers viewed the participants positively, and as a result, it made the participants feel good about themselves. In Ellemers' et al. (2013) study, researchers examined participants' feelings of inclusion and value based on how others treated them at work. This study was based on the social identity theory, which focuses on how people develop their own feelings and beliefs about themselves based on how social groups view them (Ellemers et al., 2013). For example, if the group views the person positively, the individual may feel valued. This study's overall concept correlates with this study's findings because when the participants knew teachers were invested in their future and thought highly of them, the participants described it by saying that it would make them stay out of trouble, want to study harder, keep them focused, and help them get through the day. This highlights how schools can play a critical role in promoting positive racial identity development. As Leath et al. (2019) suggest, such validation supports not only academic motivation but the development of positive racial identity. When participants felt that their teachers believed in them, it directly contributed to their academic behaviors.

Research Question 2: How do high school African American males describe their experiences of marginality at school to teachers and administrators?

Participants were also asked to reflect on their experiences of marginalization at high school to their teachers and administrators. Schlossberg (1989) reported that all people would feel marginal from time to time. Her concept of marginality interconnects because CRT elucidates how systemic racism plagues America; and how, according to Leonardo (2013), any person who is not a Caucasian male or female is subject to feelings of inferiority. In the current study, participants described times that they felt inferior in the classroom. One participant felt inferior or insignificant when his teacher interrupted him in class. When the teacher interrupted

him, it made him feel embarrassed and insignificant. Another participant felt inferior when a teacher wrongly screamed at him. These moments created feelings of hurt and shame, which caused both participants to feel marginal. Both teachers in these instances were Caucasian teachers.

According to the principles of CRT, these are normative behaviors that make the participants feel targeted since they are deeply ingrained in society's beliefs (Taylor & Clark, 2009). Nevertheless, although these behaviors may be considered normal in society, they affect how African American males view themselves as people who matter. The instances the participants described created feelings of hurt and shame, which caused both participants to feel marginal. CRT also highlights how African Americans have been oppressed and dominated by stereotypes in the U.S. for years, which has influenced prejudice and systemic racism (Taylor et al., 2019).

During interviews, participants reflected on how African American males are treated in society. They used words such as *kinda dangerous, arrogant,* and *not well* to describe how the group is perceived. However, they also discussed how African American males are viewed positively in the media as athletes, which ties in with Carey et al.'s (2022) concept of partial mattering when people only matter for what they can do in society. Most participants were athletes; one participant described how an administrator would talk to him about how good he was at football whenever the participant got in trouble. These instances would make him feel he mattered; however, one has to wonder if he would have received this treatment if he was not as good of an athlete or even an athlete.

Students also felt marginal or insignificant when their teachers did not care about their absenteeism. Participants described missing a month of class or freely skipping classes without being penalized. This reflects Schieferecke and Card's (2013) theme of "feeling unseen," and connects directly to Woods et al. (2023), who call for culturally affirming and relationship-centered school environments. When teachers failed to acknowledge students' absences or disengagement, it reinforced the sense that they were invisible or unimportant. The students could skip class without the teacher "checking in." Teachers allowing them to skip freely caused them to question if teachers even cared for them; therefore, they felt marginal. This is significant because the students wanted someone to show they cared for them by acknowledging their absence. When teachers did not make comments or try to phone home about skipping or absenteeism, the participants felt like they did not matter. Data even emerged about the administrator. One of the participants felt that the principal did not truly care because he never had an actual presence in the school; the participant stated that the principals would show up sometimes to look in a classroom.

Because of societal stereotypes, the participants were asked if they had ever felt disrespected, unappreciated, or marginal by their teacher. Although two participants felt like they were targeted in class, none of the participants felt blatantly disrespected by a teacher or administrator. They felt their teachers and administrators respected them overall as individuals.

Implications and Future Research

Given the findings of this study, educators should strive to cultivate a culture where all students feel respected, valued, and included. Del Toro and Wang (2023) emphasized the importance of combating stereotype-based disengagement with positive, affirming interactions. The findings showed that there is a correlation between being kind and feelings of mattering, for students felt they mattered when teachers went out of their way for them, cared for their overall

well-being, and understood their situations. These moments of connection- storing water before games, offering grace when life interrupted schoolwork, or simply checking in- made students feel seen and important. Another implication would be for educators to invest in their students by offering praise, answering questions, and rewarding students for their hard work. When teachers are invested in their students, it makes the students want to work harder. In the data, when participants knew teachers were invested in their futures, it made them want to stay out of trouble, want to study harder, keep them focused, and help them get through the day.

As Schieferecke and Card (2013) found, acknowledgment alone can shape a student's sense of belonging. Goings and Bianco (2016) affirm this, stating that educators' interactions with Black males carry long-lasting weight. Words, tone, and posture matter. Even brief encounters can influence how students feel about school, themselves, and their futures. Teacher impact on students is vital for them to feel loved, respected, and needed. Even if educators start with greeting each student with a smile and saying their name; passing post-it notes with kind words or affirmations; or remembering significant details about their lives such as sporting events, birthdays, or major positive or adverse incidents. Leath et al. (2019) further emphasized that when educators affirm students' racial identities and value their cultural backgrounds, it fosters resilience and higher levels of motivation. When teachers intentionally make their African American students feel welcomed and valued each day, African American males' experiences will become more positive.

Another implication would be for educators to examine any implicit biases they may carry into the classroom. The findings revealed that normative behaviors transferred in the classroom made students feel they did not matter. It led to them feeling targeted, which led to hurt and shame, causing participants to feel marginal. It is essential for teachers and administrators to reflect on their own biases and stereotypes and actively work to mitigate their impact on student interactions. By engaging in ongoing cultural competency training and self-reflection, educators can better understand the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their students and avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes or discriminatory behavior. This includes challenging assumptions about student behavior and capabilities and adopting an inclusive approach to teaching and classroom management.

In conclusion, teachers and administrators play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences of mattering and marginality within the school context. By prioritizing respect, meaningful connections, and examining oneself, educators can create a positive and affirming learning environment where every student feels valued, respected, and empowered to thrive.

Future studies should further investigate the relationship between mattering and outcomes such as academic motivation, mental health, and long-term educational attainment—particularly among African American males navigating identity development in different school and community contexts. Researchers might explore how mattering is shaped across transitional periods, such as from middle to high school or high school to college, and whether mattering is perceived differently based on intersections of race, gender, and geography. Finally, there is a need for targeted, evidence-based interventions designed to increase mattering and reduce marginality by exploring the effectiveness of mentorship programs, culturally responsive teaching models, or community partnerships in promoting student well-being.

Strengths and Limitations

The findings of this study represent a significant advancement in our comprehension of mattering experiences among African American male adolescents and how they arrive feeling

like they matter as a developmental process. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations stemming from this study. The participants for this study were limited to only one high school; therefore, the perceived mattering experiences from the males in this particular community may differ from the perceived mattering experiences of African American males elsewhere. Furthermore, due to time constraints, this study limited the number of high school African American male participants- including the perspectives of mattering. Only eight males were interviewed about their experiences of mattering compared to the many high school African American male experiences of mattering in the world. However, the experiences of high school African American males produced enough information for the researchers to create considerations and recommendations for teachers and administrators. Also, this study is based on perceptions, which are based on how people feel and think at any moment in time, which could not be reliable. However, since this is a phenomenological study and participants' experiences are sought, perceptions are essential for finding the essence of the phenomenon. Despite these limitations, the experiences shared by high school African American males have provided information for the development of practical considerations and recommendations tailored for educators and administrators.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into adolescents' perceptions of mattering in high school to teachers and administrators. By applying Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering, the study elucidated the key components that contribute to students' sense of importance, belonging, and self-worth within the school environment. The findings emphasize the importance of positive reinforcement, individualized support, and positive teacher-student relationships in fostering a sense of mattering among students, with implications for promoting student well-being and academic success. With this data, educators will be able to focus on what makes these students feel they matter most and provide their African American males an education in which they truly feel they matter in school. Educators will also understand how to create an environment where African American high school males can feel important, dependable, and appreciated. Hopefully, African American males will continuously be studied and asked about their experiences of mattering and marginality, and other populations will be able to share their experiences of mattering and marginality so that educators will know how to make all students feel as though they matter in and out of the classroom.

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The Efficacy of Using Comprehensive Exams in a Large-Scale Online Ed.D. Program

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Abstract

As online doctoral education continues to expand, traditional assessment models like comprehensive exams warrant reassessment. This mixed-methods study investigates their efficacy in evaluating learning outcomes and retention within a large-scale online Ed.D. program. Document analysis and performance evaluation reveal that while comprehensive exams offer structural rigor, they may not fully address the applied learning needs of online doctoral students in practitioner-based programs. Alternative assessments, including experiential learning projects, show promise in enhancing engagement and skill development, especially among adult learners. The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) and Kolb's experiential learning theory, both of which illustrate the value of experiential learning particularly in practitioner-based programs such as the education doctorate, provide a framework for interpreting this research (Kolb, 2015; CPED, 2023). This study addresses the critical question of whether comprehensive exams effectively assess student learning and professional competency in large-scale online Ed.D. programs. By examining student performance data from the comprehensive exam and key institutional documents, the research aims to provide actionable insights for enhancing student success and program outcomes in large-scale online Ed.D. programs.

Keywords: doctoral education, Ed.D. education, the education doctorate, practitioner's degree, comprehensive exams, online learning, assessment models, experiential learning, Carnegie Framework for the Education Doctorate

Introduction

Doctoral programs have historically relied on comprehensive exams as a gatekeeping mechanism to assess students' mastery of knowledge before advancing to dissertation research. These exams ensure that candidates possess the necessary theoretical and methodological foundations to contribute to their fields. However, with the rise of online doctoral programs, the effectiveness of this assessment model has been increasingly questioned. The growing demand for flexible, practitioner-oriented education necessitates a reassessment of student evaluation practices. While comprehensive exams provide a structured, standardized measure of knowledge acquisition, they may not align with the applied and practice-based nature of many online Ed.D. programs.

This study explores whether comprehensive exams adequately measure student learning and professional competency in large-scale online Ed.D. programs. Given the increasing number of working professionals pursuing the education doctorate, it is imperative to consider alternative assessment strategies that align with real-world applications. An examination of existing research provides essential context for evaluating the effectiveness of comprehensive exams and exploring innovative assessment methods.

Literature Review

The use of comprehensive exams in doctoral education dates to the 13th century when oral defenses served as a public demonstration of a student's ability to synthesize and argue

theoretical concepts (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). By the 20th century, these assessments evolved into written examinations aimed at evaluating doctoral students' mastery of content and research methodologies (Poth & Shannon-Baker, 2022). Despite their historical significance, recent studies have questioned their applicability, particularly in online education and practitioner-based programs, such as the education doctorate (Ed.D.). The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate recently redefined the degree: "The professional doctorate in education prepares educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and for the stewardship of the profession" (CPED, 2023). Carnegie illuminates the need for preparation to apply skills in practice; therefore, practitioner programs should be preparing students to apply and demonstrate mastery of what they have learned in the program within their profession settings.

A major component utilized to assess a graduate student's readiness for program progression is a comprehensive exam. A comprehensive exam, often called "comps," is a test in higher education, particularly at the graduate level, that assesses a student's overall knowledge and preparedness in their field of study, often serving as a gatekeeper to the dissertation or thesis phase. In many institutions the comprehensive exam consists of several questions gleaned from the student's program of study. Students typically choose a certain number of comprehensive exam questions to answer based upon the department's policy, and there is an allotted amount of time for completion. Then students return the questions, answered in full. These exams are graded by program faculty utilizing a grading rubric. Research has shown that comprehensive exams serve various functions, including assessing critical thinking, ensuring content mastery, and reinforcing research methodologies (CPED 2023). However, scholars argue that this model may not effectively measure students' ability to apply knowledge in real-world contexts, even when students are enrolled in a "practitioner's degree" such as the Ed.D. A growing body of literature advocates for alternative assessment strategies, including competency-based evaluations, portfolio assessments, and experiential learning projects (Kolb, 2015; Poth & Baker, 2018; CPED, 2023).

Furthermore, studies on student experiences suggest that comprehensive exams often induce stress and anxiety, potentially hindering student performance and retention rates (Lovitts, 2001). Given the increasing number of non-traditional doctoral students enrolled in the program, particularly working professionals enrolled in online programs, assessment models must adapt to accommodate their learning styles and professional applications (Kelly, 2013). In the context of higher education, non-traditional students are typically defined as individuals who do not enter postsecondary institutions directly after high school, or who do not follow a full-time, continuous enrollment model. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), non-traditional students often meet one or more of the following criteria: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, part-time attendance, financial independence, full-time employment while enrolled, having dependents, being a single parent, or possessing a GED or other non-traditional high school credential (NCES, 2022).

Moreover, Barua and Lockee (2025) highlight that online learning environments require flexible assessment strategies that accommodate the evolving needs of students in digital spaces. The integration of technology in doctoral education continues to provide opportunities for more holistic evaluations, yet many programs still underutilize its full potential (Lee, Zawacki-Richter, & Sari, 2024). Innovative approaches such as digital portfolios and project-based assessments align with the practical demands of online learners and support continuous reflection and skill development (Yang & Wong, 2024). By exploring the efficacy of using comprehensive exams in

a large-scale online Ed.D. program, this research aims to provide insights into how education doctoral programs can better assess student readiness to progress and professional growth, particularly by measuring students' mastery of programmatic outcomes through practical, hands-on learning experiences, rather than the traditional comprehensive exam (CPED, 2023).

Research Design and Methodology

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative analyses to offer a holistic understanding of comprehensive exam outcomes. This dual approach ensures that both student performance data and subjective experiences are thoroughly examined. Given the increasing shift toward online education, it is crucial to understand how traditional assessment models impact student learning, retention, and overall program success. The study was conducted at a southern, mid-size university, with a Carnegie classification of Research 2. The sample included 102 student exams from students who were enrolled in cohorts one-three of a large-scale online Ed.D. program in Education Administration between Spring 2021 to Fall 2022.

Phase 1: Document Analysis-Key Institutional and Departmental Documents

The first phase of the study involved document analysis of key institutional and departmental materials to understand how comprehensive exams are designed, implemented, and evaluated in large-scale online Ed.D. programs. The analysis included the 2021-2022 Graduate School Handbook, 2021-2022 doctoral program handbooks, comprehensive exam rubric, and departmental meeting minutes dated Spring 2021-Fall 2022 to identify prevailing trends in comprehensive exam administration. The researchers utilized thematic analysis to identify comprehensive exam assessment themes seen within the program. Through qualitative coding, themes were identified regarding how the institution structures comprehensive exams and whether there are emerging shifts toward alternative assessment models.

By using a two-phase research approach, this study first analyzes institutional and departmental policies and practices found within key documents:

- Ed.D. Program Student Handbook 2021-2022
- The Graduate Catalog 2021-2022
- Departmental meeting minutes-Spring 2021-Fall 2022
- Program learning outcomes for AY 2021-2022
- Comprehensive exam rubric

Phase 2: Data Analysis-Student Performance and Retention Analysis

The second phase of the study involved an analysis of the assessment data collected from the first three cohorts admitted into the program (Fall 2021, Spring 2022, Summer 2022) to assess the impact of comprehensive exams on student success and program retention. The assessment data in the annual departmental assessment report from October 2022 were reviewed to determine the percentage of students who successfully passed their comprehensive exams on the first attempt versus those who required multiple attempts or failed. Data on doctoral program completion rates were examined to determine whether students who pass comprehensive exams are more likely to complete their degrees. Attrition rates among students who struggled with comprehensive exams were analyzed to understand whether the exam serves as a barrier to program persistence. A quantitative analysis of the assessment data reported in the annual assessment report from October 2022 was also conducted to explore correlations between

comprehensive exam performance and overall doctoral program completion. Meetings notes from department meetings from Spring 21 through Fall 2022 were analyzed to capture faculty and staff perceptions of comprehensive exams and the administration of the exams. This date range was chosen as it encompasses the time period where the department faculty and staff revised the process for administering comprehensive exams for the program. The results highlight both the benefits and limitations of comprehensive exams, revealing key trends in student performance, retention rates, and faculty and staff perspectives. These results provide valuable insights into how assessment influences academic success and program completion.

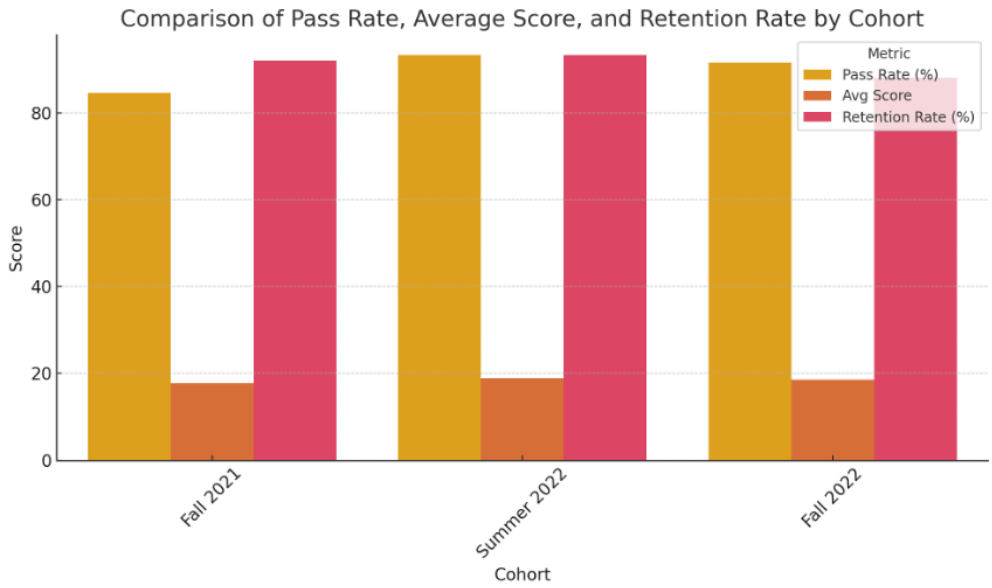
Results

Comparison of Pass Rate, Average Score, and Retention Rate by Cohort

Graph 1 provides a comparison of the pass rate, average score, and retention rate by cohort. The Summer 2022 cohort leads slightly in all three metrics, with a pass rate of 93.33%, an average score of 18.94, and a retention rate of 93.33%. The Fall 2022 cohort also demonstrated strong performance, achieving a pass rate of 91.53% and an average score of 18.54, though its retention rate was lower at 88.14%. The Fall 2021 cohort recorded the lowest pass rate of 84.61% and the lowest average score of 17.76, although it had a relatively high retention rate of 92%.

Figure 1

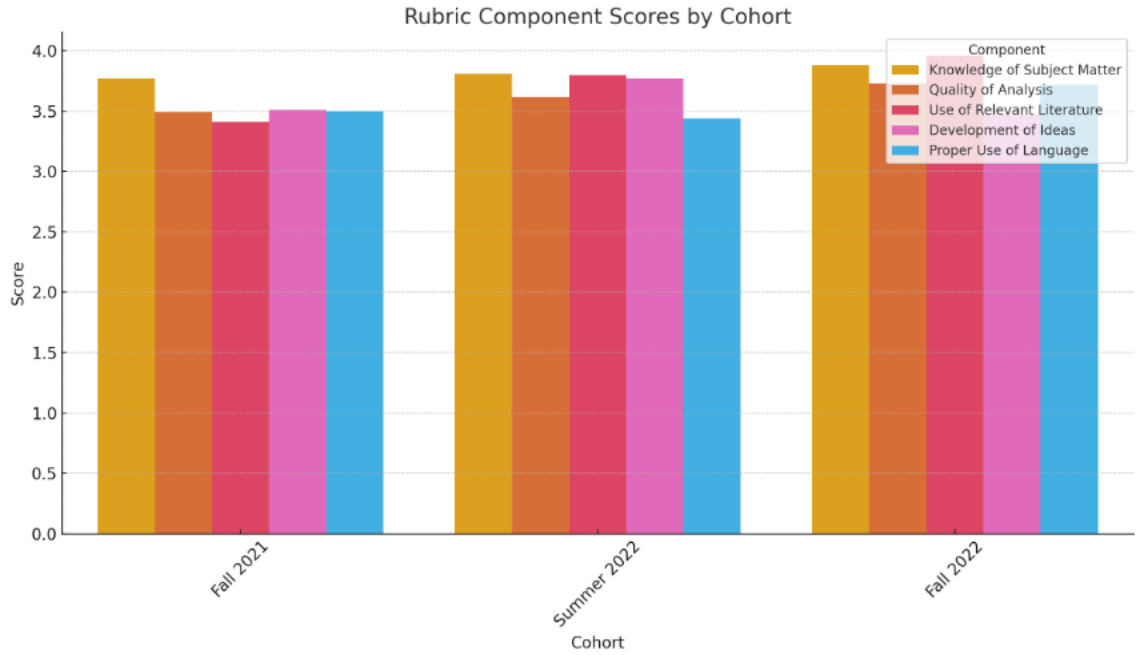
Comparison of Pass Rate, Average Score, and Retention by Cohort



Rubric Component Scores by Cohort

Graph 2 highlights the rubric component scores for each cohort. The Fall 2022 cohort scored the highest in both Knowledge of Subject Matter (3.88) and Use of Relevant Literature (3.96). The Summer 2022 cohort demonstrated the most balanced performance across all rubric areas, with scores ranging between 3.44 and 3.81. In contrast, the Fall 2021 cohort had the lowest scores across all rubric components, particularly in Use of Relevant Literature, which was rated at 3.41.

Figure 2
Rubric Component Scores by Cohort



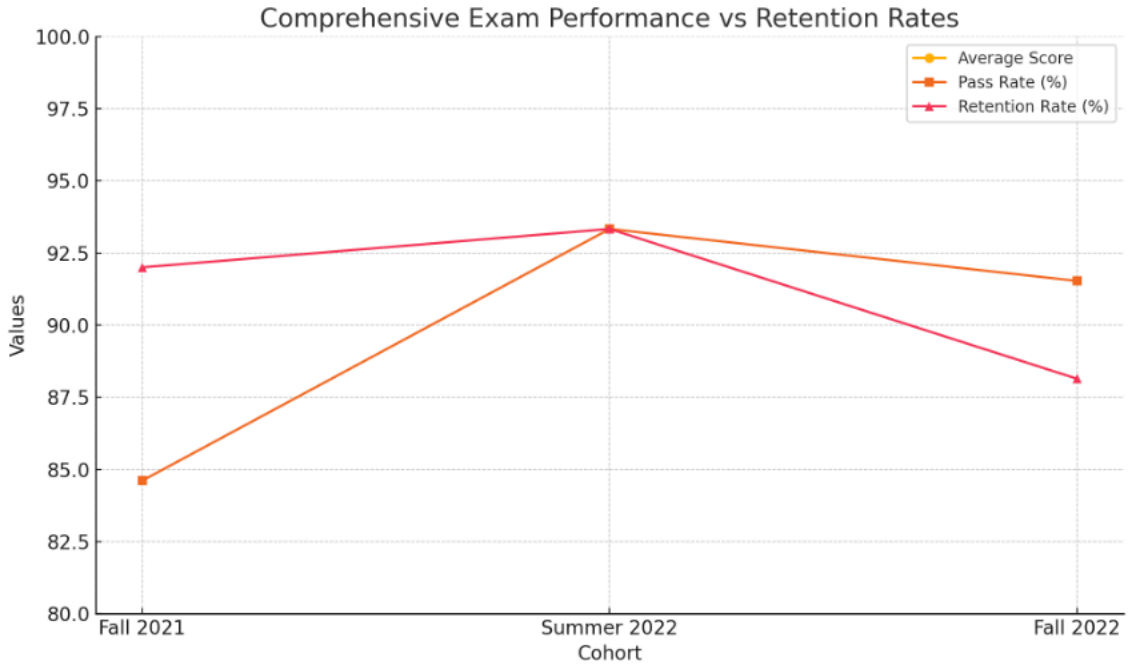
Trends and Strengths

There is a consistent upward trend in average exam scores and most rubric component scores from Fall 2021 through Fall 2022. This indicates a positive trajectory in student performance over time. Notably, the rubric component 'Use of Relevant Literature' showed significant improvement, increasing from 3.41 in Fall 2021 to 3.96 in Fall 2022. Across all cohorts, 'Knowledge of Subject Matter' remained the strongest area, with consistently high scores. These patterns suggest enhancements in both teaching strategies and student preparedness for the comprehensive exams.

Areas of Concern

Despite the observed improvements in academic performance, the Fall 2022 cohort experienced a drop-in retention rate to 88.14%. This decline indicates that higher exam scores do not necessarily correspond with higher program completion rates. Additionally, the rubric category 'Development of Ideas' slightly decreased in Fall 2022 (3.47), pointing to a potential area where additional instructional support may be beneficial.

Figure 3
Comprehensive Exam Performance vs Retention Rates



Using assessment data reported in the October 2022 annual report, this study examined whether higher academic performance correlates with higher retention rates among doctoral students. Data were analyzed from the first three cohorts enrolled in the program: Fall 2021, Summer 2022, and Fall 2022.

From the data, key figures relevant to exam performance and program retention are as follows:

Table 1
Exam Performance Key Figures

Cohort	Average Score	Pass Rate (%)	Retention Rate (%)
Fall 2021	17.76	92.31	92.00
Summer 2022	18.94	93.33	93.33
Fall 2022	18.54	91.53	88.14

To examine the relationship between exam performance and retention, Pearson correlation coefficients (r) were calculated for two comparisons:

- Average Score ↔ Retention Rate
- Pass Rate ↔ Retention Rate

The Pearson correlation formula is:
$r = \Sigma(xi - \bar{x})(yi - \bar{y}) / \sqrt{[\Sigma(xi - \bar{x})^2 * \Sigma(yi - \bar{y})^2]}$

a) Correlation: Average Score vs Retention Rate
$r \approx -0.29 \rightarrow$ Weak negative correlation

b) Correlation: Pass Rate vs Retention Rate
$r \approx -0.18 \rightarrow$ Very weak negative correlation

Themes from Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis

Student Performance Trends

Analysis of student data showed that those who passed comprehensive exams often had higher retention and completion rates. However, higher exam scores and pass rates do not necessarily lead to higher retention. For example, fall 2022 had better average scores (18.54) and a higher pass rate (91.53%) than Fall 2021, but a lower retention rate (88.14% vs. 92%). This suggests that program completion is influenced by other factors such as financial constraints, life balance issues, academic support, and institutional engagement.

Rubric analysis further supports this: Fall 2022 achieved the highest score for 'Use of Relevant Literature' (3.96), yet had the lowest retention. This implies that strong academic performance does not necessarily lead to retention.

- Average Scores increased from 17.76 (Fall 2021) to 18.94 (Summer 2022), before slightly decreasing to 18.54 (Fall 2022).
- Pass Rates mirrored this trend, peaking at 93.33% in Summer 2022.
- Retention Rates did not follow this pattern. Fall 2022 had the lowest retention rate (88.14%) despite high performance.

However, many students who struggled with these exams still excelled in research and applied skills, raising questions about the exam's effectiveness in measuring overall competency. According to the assessment report from October 2022, non-traditional students (student with adult responsibilities), particularly those with full-time jobs, found it harder to prepare for and pass the exams. This suggests that traditional comprehensive examinations may not accurately reflect a student's capabilities or potential for success in their field, which is the main purpose of an Ed.D., to prepare practitioner's (CPED, 2023). As demonstrated in the assessment report, while some students excel in exam settings, others who perform poorly on exams exhibit exceptional research and practical skills, indicating that comprehensive exams might not be the most reliable indicator of overall competence.

Pearson correlation findings indicate that academic performance is not a reliable predictor of program completion.

- Average Score vs Retention Rate: $r \approx -0.29$
- Pass Rate vs Retention Rate: $r \approx -0.18$

Faculty Perspectives

Department meetings from spring 2021 to fall 2022 with a total of 4-6 full time faculty members along with the chair of the department and the department's program coordinator reflect divided opinions on comprehensive exams. During this time period, the department was engaged in revising the comprehensive exam process due to growth of the program. After first researching the options for comprehensive assessment listed in the 2021-22 Graduate Catalog

and 2021-2022 Ed.D. Program Handbooks, all faculty agreed that the program needed some form of a comprehensive experience. The handbooks were very vague in their descriptions of the comprehensive exam requirements for doctoral programs. Comments from faculty reflected that faculty see comprehensive exams as a standard measure of knowledge and rigor, while others question their relevance in applied doctoral programs such as the Ed.D. Faculty raised concerns about the traditional comprehensive examination process, positing that these exams do not adequately assess a student's practical skills or preparedness for real-world challenges.

Program Retention Impacts

A significant observation was that elevated stress levels related to comprehensive exams led to student attrition. Per the assessment data, 100% of students who did not succeed on their initial attempts opted to retake the exam. This resulted in the majority of students passing on the second attempt (93%); however, as noted in the assessment data, all students do not pass comprehensive exams and go on to be dismissed from the program as a result (n=2). Others still may withdraw after passing comprehensive exams, as the data shows (2%). Faculty and staff comments from departmental meetings allude to the difficulty of completing comprehensive exams successfully while also completing other course and dissertation work at the same time, with the department's staff receiving this feedback most often from students via phone or email.

Portfolio-Based Assessments and Experiential Learning

Portfolio-based assessments allow students to demonstrate their growth over time through research projects, reflective writings, and applied case studies. Furthermore, experiential learning provides students with the opportunity to engage in hands-on activities, thereby enhancing their ability to translate theoretical knowledge into professional practice. These findings suggest that integrating such assessments could enhance student engagement and more effectively prepare graduates for their future careers, which is the goal for the CPED and the education doctorate (Temple, 2020; CPED, 2023). Hiltz and Turoff (2005) found that students participating in experiential learning projects showed higher levels of satisfaction and perceived their learning to be more relevant to their professional goals.

Addressing Barriers to Implementation

Per department meeting minutes from Spring 2021-Fall 2022, challenges such as human capital, faculty training, and resource allocation were identified as potential obstacles to adopting alternative assessment methods. Faculty noted the increased workload associated with evaluating portfolios and experiential projects. Faculty and staff both noted the workload associated with revamping the comprehensive exam process itself. The department revised the rubric for comprehensive exams and employed dissertation mentors to assist with grading demands of comprehensive exams. Moreover, the administrative staff discussed the process as "onerous" since they are responsible for disseminating, tracking, and assigning exams for grading. Given the electronic nature of the environment students are in, this process becomes very tedious. During this process, there is often much confusion among students, as reported by departmental staff.

Implications

This study underscores the need for evolving doctoral assessments to better evaluate both theoretical knowledge and practical competencies. Traditional comprehensive exams, while

measuring foundational knowledge, may fall short in assessing applied skills essential for professional success (Kolb, 2015; CPED, 2023). Portfolio-based assessments and experiential learning projects offer holistic evaluations, fostering engagement and real-world application. Implementing these alternatives requires strategic faculty development and institutional support, ensuring alignment with evolving educational demands.

The study highlights that traditional comprehensive exams may not fully assess the breadth of doctoral students' competencies, particularly in online large-scale Ed.D. programs where practical application is crucial. While these exams test theoretical knowledge, they often fall short in evaluating practical skills, critical thinking, and real-world application (CPED, 2023). This misalignment poses challenges, especially for non-traditional students who may face greater difficulties due to test anxiety and professional obligations.

Alternative assessment models, as suggested by experiential learning theory, such as portfolio-based assessments and experiential learning projects, offer a more holistic evaluation of student capabilities. These methods allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through real-world applications and reflective practice, providing flexibility to accommodate diverse needs and backgrounds. Integrating alternative assessments can enhance student engagement and program outcomes, making doctoral education more inclusive and effective (Kolb 2015; CPED, 2023).

However, implementing these alternative assessment methods requires careful planning, resource allocation, and faculty development. Institutions must invest in training faculty, developing standardized evaluation criteria, and allocating sufficient funding and time to support the transition. Employing additional staff or graduate assistants can help manage increased workloads associated with these methods. Means et al. (2013) highlighted the need for robust institutional support and clear guidelines to ensure the effectiveness of alternative assessments.

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of diverse assessment models on student outcomes and career readiness, paving the way for more inclusive and effective doctoral education (CPED, 2023). Additionally, examining faculty perspectives on alternative assessments can provide valuable insights for best practices. By integrating diverse assessment methodologies, doctoral education can evolve to better support student learning and success in an increasingly digital and practice-oriented academic landscape. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) suggest that continuous feedback loops and iterative improvement processes are crucial for refining assessment strategies and enhancing their alignment with program goals.

Conclusively, adapting assessment frameworks to align more closely with the evolving needs of students and the demands of professional practice is essential. While this study supports the efficacy of comprehensive exams in measuring student knowledge, it also highlights the importance of incorporating diverse assessment methodologies to provide a more holistic and accurate evaluation of student competencies. Such an approach can ultimately enhance students' preparedness for professional practice. Additionally, the comprehensive exam process appears to positively impact student learning and performance outcomes, as demonstrated by the upward trend in scores. However, the relationship between exam performance and program retention remains complex. Further qualitative research is warranted to explore the external factors influencing student persistence. Moving forward, institutions should focus on strengthening support systems that foster idea development and address non-academic barriers that may hinder retention, even in the face of academic success.

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Unveiling the Origins and Reality of School Violence: Debunking Myths and Exploring Causes

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Abstract

School violence remains a pressing concern, often fueled by media amplification and societal misconceptions. This paper examines the origins of school violence, exploring socioeconomic disparities, mental health challenges, bullying, cultural influences, and school climate. It critiques the role of media in shaping public perceptions and dispels myths by presenting empirical evidence on school safety trends. Additionally, the paper highlights targeted interventions, including social-emotional learning, restorative practices, and community partnerships, to address root causes. Schools can mitigate violence and promote student well-being by fostering a supportive educational environment and implementing data-driven prevention strategies. This comprehensive analysis emphasizes the necessity of collaborative efforts among educators, policymakers, and communities to ensure safer, more inclusive learning environments for all students.

Key Words: School Violence, Socioeconomic Disparities, Mental Health Challenges, Bullying, Peer Conflicts

Introduction

In recent years, concerns about violence in schools have escalated, prompting widespread debate and scrutiny. As communities wrestle with the unsettling reality of violence impacting educational environments, two fundamental questions emerge: How did this alarming trend come to be, and is there truly a surge in violence within our schools, or is it merely amplified by media coverage?

Understanding the Origins of School Violence

The origins of school violence are complex and elaborately woven in a combination of societal, familial, and individual factors. Societal shifts, such as changes in family structures, economic disparities, and cultural influences, have contributed significantly to a sense of instability among the young. Although the concept of school violence isn't new, it has been impacted greatly by the departure of the nuclear family and its value system. Studies have shown that the shift in family structures aligns with inconsistency in supervision, control, and engagement with children as the parents themselves try to navigate the crucial developmental phases of the child's life (Adolesc, 2019). Furthermore, the prevalence of social media and digital platforms has altered the landscape of interpersonal interactions, introducing new challenges and avenues for conflict. While violence and aggression have long been challenges in schools, Heubeck (2024) argues that the perceived rise in these issues is largely a result of heightened awareness driven by social media. This increased visibility is further evidenced by the nearly daily verbal and physical threats that school personnel have been facing since 2008 (Heubeck, 2024).

Examining the Influence of Media Coverage

In the age of instant communication and 24-hour news cycles, media outlets play a significant role in shaping public perception and discourse surrounding school violence. Sensationalized reporting and heightened attention to isolated incidents can create the impression of a widespread epidemic, fueling fear and anxiety among parents, educators, and communities. This continuous coverage can also unintentionally contribute to the glorification of perpetrators, fostering a copycat effect where individuals seeking notoriety are inspired by extensive media attention. Dramatized reporting on isolated violent incidents distorts public perceptions by overstating the threat of school violence. This skewed coverage creates a disconnect between actual statistics and public opinion, echoing the conclusions drawn in Lerenman's (2015) analysis and corroborated by Gaudette et al. (2023).

Still, the media's focus on violence may desensitize impressionable audiences, particularly young viewers, by reducing their emotional response to real-life violence. Docudramatic reporting may also normalize aggressive behaviors by strengthening the perception that violence is an appropriate means of conflict resolution. Amplification of violence through repeated exposure can deepen fear and heighten anxiety among students and educators. This action has a ripple effect of further polarizing communities, fueling negative stereotypes and exaggerating calls for extreme security measures rather than addressing the root cause. To mitigate these effects, it is essential to evaluate the accuracy and context of media coverage critically. Journalists should prioritize responsible reporting practices and emphasize solutions and prevention efforts over sensationalism. It is crucial to avoid perpetuating misconceptions and stereotypes about school violence, ensuring that coverage informs rather than incites fear or misinformation.

Dispelling Myths and Misconceptions

Despite widespread public concern, empirical evidence suggests that the prevalence of school violence has remained relatively stable or even declined in recent years (Frederique, 2020). While high-profile incidents such as school shootings receive significant media attention, they represent a small fraction of overall violence (Schildkraut, 2017). This disproportionate focus can create an illusion that schools are becoming increasingly unsafe despite statistical evidence to the contrary (Gaudette et al., 2023).

Research consistently indicates that schools are still among the safest places for children, with rates of violent incidents occurring at significantly lower rates compared to other community venues (Kleinsmith, 2019). According to a report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024), during the 2021-22 school year, 67% of public schools reported at least one violent incident. While this may seem alarming, it actually reflects a 71% decrease from the 2017-18 school year, indicating a significant decline in reported violence. Further reinforcing this trend, studies show that students ages 12 to 18 now report experiencing victimization at schools at a rate that is lowest in the last ten years (Keierleber, 2024). These findings challenge the often sensationalized portrayal of school violence in the media, highlighting the need for evidence-based discussions and policy responses rather than fear-driven narratives. Misrepresentations can lead to unnecessary panic, excessive security measures, and misplaced policy priorities that divert needed resources away from preventative strategies, such as mental health support and restorative disciplinary practices.

By understanding the realities of school violence, educators, policymakers, and media professionals can develop a more precise perception of school safety and ensure that responses to school violence are guided by realistic data rather than deceptive or misrepresented narratives.

Identifying Contributing Factors

Effectively addressing school violence requires a deep understanding of the underlying factors contributing to its occurrence (Sawchuk, 2021). Research consistently shows that school violence is rarely driven by a single cause but is instead shaped by a mix of complex, interrelated elements (Green, 2023; Jackson, 2023). Key contributors include socioeconomic inequalities, lack of sufficient mental health services, ongoing bullying, cultural and societal perceptions fueled by media coverage, and the overall climate within schools. To tackle violence effectively, it is vital to analyze how each of these factors fosters an environment where aggression can thrive. By pinpointing these causes, educators, policymakers, and community leaders can collaborate to identify and implement targeted solutions that address both individual behaviors and broader systemic challenges, fostering safer and more inclusive educational environments.

Socioeconomic Disparities

Socioeconomic disparities and inequities establish a clear link between economic hardship and the risk factors that contribute to school violence. To realistically address school violence, schools must adopt a multifaceted approach that combines targeted support programs, equitable resource allocation, family and community engagement, policy advocacy, culturally responsive teaching, and ongoing professional development (Reynolds & Astor, 2023). Several targeted support programs would include increased access to school counselors, psychologists, and social workers to help provide early intervention strategies for students with emotional distress, whether the emotional distress is short-term or long-term. Increased training for teachers to enable them to recognize and respond to trauma-related behaviors with de-escalation techniques rather than punitive measures. Another targeted support would be to implement conflict resolution programs, peer mediation, and restorative circles to help students constructively address peer disputes. By implementing these strategies, schools can create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment, ultimately reducing the risk of school violence and promoting positive academic and social outcomes for all students.

Mental Health Challenges

Mental health challenges and lack of access to resources addressing mental health challenges and improving access to resources through a comprehensive and collaborative approach, schools can create a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes the well-being of all students and reduces the risk of school violence (Mongelli et al., 2020). A comprehensive and collaborative approach to addressing mental health challenges in schools involves coordinated efforts between school personnel, mental health professionals, families, and community organizations (DePaoli & Darling-Hammond, 2020). Key components include providing on-site mental health services, implementing a multi-tiered support system, conducting regular mental health screenings, offering professional development for school staff, engaging families and communities, collaborating with external partners, promoting a positive school climate, and using data to inform decision-making (Huddleston, 2025). By prioritizing mental health and well-being and fostering supportive environments, schools can ensure that all students receive the necessary support to thrive academically and emotionally.

Bullying and Peer Conflicts

Addressing bullying and peer conflicts in schools necessitates an inclusive approach that involves clear policies, proactive prevention efforts, and targeted interventions (O'Brien et al., 2024). Schools should establish comprehensive policies and procedures outlining expectations for behavior and consequences for bullying incidents. For example, the California Department of Education provides a sample policy emphasizing the role of staff trained in conflict resolution and peer mediation to intervene in disputes likely to result in violence. Creating a positive school climate through social-emotional learning programs, which have been shown to improve students' social skills, reduce conduct problems, and enhance academic performance. Peer mediation initiatives and bystander empowerment are crucial in curbing the number of bullying incidents (Daunic & Smith, 2010). Providing support services for both victims and perpetrators, engaging families and community partners, and monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of prevention efforts are essential components of a successful anti-bullying strategy. Schools can create safer environments where all students feel valued and supported by fostering a culture of respect, empathy, and inclusion.

Cultural and Societal Norms

Cultural and societal norms surrounding violence - addressing cultural and societal norms surrounding violence in schools requires a multifaceted approach focused on promoting positive cultural shifts and fostering environments that reject violence while promoting empathy and understanding (Hayes & Foote, 2011). This entails providing cultural competency training for educators to increase awareness of biases and perceptions, integrating diverse perspectives into the curriculum to celebrate cultural diversity, and implementing culturally responsive teaching practices that affirm students' identities. Community engagement efforts involving families, leaders, and cultural organizations can also help develop relevant prevention programs. Schools should also challenge traditional gender norms, promote restorative justice practices, address structural inequities, and highlight positive role models from diverse backgrounds to create inclusive and safe environments (Caliman, 2022). By adopting these strategies, schools can effectively challenge and transform cultural and societal norms surrounding violence, promoting respect and empathy among students (Olabarria et al., 2023).

School Climate and Organizational Culture

School climate and organizational culture - addressing school climate and organizational culture requires creating a supportive and positive environment where students, staff, and stakeholders feel valued, safe, and engaged (DePaoli & Darling-Hammond, 2020). This involves fostering positive relationships, establishing clear expectations, providing supportive leadership, offering ongoing professional development, implementing restorative practices, engaging students in decision-making, promoting equity and inclusion, and monitoring school climate regularly (National Center for School Safety, 2024). By prioritizing these strategies, schools can cultivate a culture of respect, collaboration, and empowerment, ultimately enhancing student achievement, well-being, and overall school success.

Prevention and Intervention Strategies

By examining these factors through a comprehensive and nuanced lens, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions and preventive measures to mitigate the risk of violence and promote safety within schools (Mayer et al., 2021). Implementing strategies involves several

steps and the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders. Conduct a comprehensive assessment of the current school climate, including surveys, data analysis, and stakeholder input, to identify areas of concern and prioritize intervention needs (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2024). Develop a detailed action plan that outlines specific goals, objectives, and timelines for implementing prevention and intervention strategies based on assessment findings and providing ongoing professional development for staff on topics such as social-emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, bullying prevention, and crisis intervention. Ensure that educators are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to effectively implement prevention and intervention initiatives in the classroom and throughout the school. Another strategy is the integration of social-emotional learning components into the curriculum across all grade levels and subject areas to promote the development of essential skills for emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and relationship building. Embed bullying prevention education into existing health or character education programs and incorporate age-appropriate materials and activities into daily lessons.

Establish partnerships with local mental health agencies, law enforcement, community organizations, and parents to coordinate efforts and leverage resources for violence prevention. Involve families and community members in school activities, workshops, and events that promote positive parenting practices, communication skills, and conflict-resolution strategies. Develop and implement clear and consistent policies and procedures for addressing bullying, harassment, and other forms of violence, ensuring that all stakeholders know the expectations and consequences (Frederique, 2020).

Cultivating a positive school climate includes the promotion of respect, empathy, and inclusivity, which is supported by school-wide initiatives, positive reinforcement strategies, and the recognition of student achievements (Green, 2023). Empower students to become active participants in creating a safe and supportive school environment by encouraging peer support, leadership opportunities, and involvement in decision-making processes (Heubeck, 2024).

Conclusion

School violence is a complex and complicated phenomenon that requires a holistic approach to effectively address the issue (National Center for School Safety, 2024). By understanding the origins of school violence, dispelling myths and misconceptions, and implementing targeted prevention and intervention strategies, communities can work together to create safer and more supportive learning environments for all students (NASP, 2024).

To effectively limit school violence, schools can implement various intervention strategies. Integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) programs into the curriculum of K-12 schools helps students develop essential skills for emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and relationship building. Restorative practices, such as restorative circles and peer mediation, address conflicts and repair harm by promoting accountability, empathy, and student understanding. Providing on-site mental health services and implementing a multi-tiered support system creates a supportive and inclusive environment. Establishing comprehensive policies and procedures for addressing bullying incidents, creating a positive school culture and providing support services for both victims and perpetrators are crucial components of a successful anti-bullying strategy. Cultural competency training for educators, integrating diverse perspectives into the curriculum, and implementing culturally responsive teaching practices help create inclusive and safe environments. Community engagement efforts involving families, leaders, and cultural organizations can develop relevant prevention programs. Clear and

consistent policies and procedures for addressing bullying, harassment, and other forms of violence ensure that all stakeholders know the expectations and consequences. School-wide initiatives, positive reinforcement strategies, and the recognition of student achievements support cultivating a positive school climate that promotes respect, empathy, and inclusivity. Implementing these strategies can ensure a future where schools are havens of safety, inclusivity, and opportunity through school collaboration and collective action.

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