CRITICAL QUESTIONS IN EDUCATION

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🏛 *Critical Questions in Education: Volume 16, Issue 3*

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Readers of *CQIE*,

Welcome to the end of our 16th year! Before getting to the overview of this issue, please remember that we are meeting in San Diego in February and all the details can be found on the Academy website.

Once again, I believe we have gathered together some interesting manuscripts for this issue. We start off with Talia Zito's extensive review of attempts to censure the inclusion of LGBT+ literature in school curriculum. She concludes that her findings are a call to "antinormative" approaches to reclaiming education as a site for critical inquiry and social transformation. Zito's piece is followed by Barbara Flores Cabellero's presentation of an Hispanic framework for developing "full-range" social-emotional educational leaders. Her work grows out of the trauma caused in Puerto Rico by the pandemic and two devastating hurricanes as well as Puerto Rican culture. Speaking of the pandemic, its impact lingers…our third article looks back to report on educator burnout both during the pandemic and after. Kramer, Jones, and Broadbent suggest that the chase for normalcy was a crucial aspect of that teacher burnout.

Our fourth article, penned by Janeen Outka and Allan Neville, reports on a study examining teacher agency and empowerment from both a teacher perspective as well as a building principal perspective. Our readers may not be surprised that teachers and principals see teacher agency…differently. Finally, we close where we started with an insightful discussion on inclusive literature. Warsi and Mir advocate for the inclusion of Muslim representation in children's special education literature and provide ideas on implementing their inclusion

And, as always, Happy Reading!

PAX,

Eric C. Sheffield, Editor
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The Politics of Censorship: A Systematic Literature Review of Challenges to LGBTQ+ Inclusive Literature in K-12 Schools

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Abstract

This systematic literature review investigates how school board decisions and public discourses surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusive literature challenges in K–12 public schools reveal and reproduce societal norms and power dynamics related to gender and sexuality. Drawing on 23 empirical studies published primarily after the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges ruling, the review synthesizes findings through the Boote and Beile (2005) framework and is informed by the critical perspectives of Apple, Foucault, and Kumashiro. Results show that contemporary book bans echo historical patterns of moral panic and censorship, intensified by new legislation such as Florida's HB 1557. Parental and community pressures, coupled with ambiguous policy language around "age-appropriateness" and "protection," compel school boards and educators to engage in overt and anticipatory censorship. These dynamics produce self-censorship among teachers, curtail inclusive curricula, and limit students' access to affirming texts. The literature also reveals a lack of robust theoretical grounding in many studies, signaling the need for deeper engagement with critical and queer pedagogies to challenge heteronormative and cisnormative ideologies. By demonstrating how censorship functions as a strategic exercise of power that shapes representation, discourse, and intellectual freedom, this review underscores the urgency of policies and practices that affirm diversity and safeguard students' rights to explore complex identities. The findings call for antinormative approaches that resist exclusionary norms and reimagine education as a site of critical inquiry and social transformation.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ inclusive literature; K–12 education; book bans and censorship; intellectual freedom

Introduction

The rise of book bans in U.S. public schools, specifically targeting LGBTQ+ literature, underscores a growing conflict between societal pressures, institutional policies, and the protection of intellectual freedom. Legislative measures like Florida's HB 1557 have amplified the public discourse surrounding book challenges, often framed under the rhetoric of "parental rights" and "protecting children" (Knox, 2017). These efforts are not isolated; they reflect coordinated campaigns that leverage local community standards to justify censorship around topics like race, gender, and sexuality (PEN America, 2024). As these challenges escalate, schools are increasingly positioned at the crossroads of defending inclusivity and navigating the politics of conformity.

This paper examines the patterns, influences, and broader implications of censorship in K-12 education, with a focus on how these actions shape representation, discourse, and educational practices.

The concerted efforts of coordinated campaigns, institutional compliance, and legislative measures have significantly reshaped the educational landscape by reinforcing censorship and limiting intellectual freedom. Groups like Moms for Liberty have strategically framed their actions around "parental rights" to challenge materials that discuss race, gender, and sexuality, intentionally targeting LGBTQ+ inclusive literature. These campaigns wield considerable influence over school boards, guiding local policies in ways that reflect dominant societal norms while excluding marginalized voices. As these campaigns gain traction, they create a ripple effect, influencing public discourse, fostering environments of self-censorship among educators, and institutionalizing the erasure of LGBTQ+ perspectives in public schools through laws like HB 1557. Together, these forces not only undermine the representation of diverse identities in curricula, but also perpetuate cultural conformity at the expense of critical thinking and inclusivity in K-12 education.

Historical Context

Censorship regarding literature has long been a contentious issue linked to the perceived need to shield children from morally questionable or controversial content. This trend, which has evolved over decades, is deeply embedded in broader societal and cultural movements, often reflecting societal desires to preserve childhood innocence and reinforce prevailing community values.

The landmark Supreme Court Case *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District vs. Pico* (1982) emphasized students' rights to access diverse viewpoints within school libraries, establishing a key precedent for intellectual freedom (Sachdeva, Kimmel, & Chérres, 2023; Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020; Price, 2021). This decision highlighted that the removal of books solely based on ideological disagreement infringes upon students' First Amendment rights, reinforcing the role of schools as environments for inquiry and exploration. This case continues to serve as a foundational reference in legal defenses against book bans, underscoring the notion that educational spaces should offer a wide range of perspectives.

Since 2021, several federal and state policies have increasingly sought to limit school library content, with a particular emphasis on materials related to LGBTQ+ themes. These legislative efforts signify a continued trajectory of state-sanctioned censorship (Becnel & Moeller, 2020; Henderson, 2023; Chaney et al., 2024; Goncalves et al., 2024). Organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA) have consistently advocated for intellectual freedom since the 1930s, countering censorship pressures and promoting access to a broad range of materials. The ALA's longstanding position has substantially influenced public library and school policies, helping to mitigate repeated calls for content removal (Becnel & Moeller, 2020; Sachdeva, Kimmel, & Chérres, 2023; Knox, 2014b; Oltmann et al., 2017).

Historically, public opinion has shaped censorship trends, from the anti-communist sentiment of the late 1940s and early 1950s McCarthy Era to the *Save Our Children campaign* led by Anita Bryant in 1977, which specifically targeted LGBTQ+ rights and literature deemed threatening to traditional family values. This wave of censorship continued into the 1980s with the Moral Majority's advocacy for conservative values, further amplifying calls to restrict materials perceived as morally objectionable. This cyclical pattern persists into the 2020s, with

societal concerns over LGBTQ+ literature sparking new waves of book challenges and bans in schools and public libraries (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020; Knox, 2014a; Price, 2021; Walther, Wickens, and Koss, 2019). These modern challenges reflect historical moral panics, where societal tensions and evolving norms have repeatedly fueled efforts to limit access to certain educational content (Sachdeva, Kimmel, & Chérres, 2023; Crawley, 2020; Henderson, 2023; Tudor, Moore, & Byrne, 2023).

Advocacy groups have long defended intellectual freedom by opposing book bans that seek to impose narrow moral views on public education. These groups argue that censorship restricts democratic values and stifles students' access to diverse perspectives essential for intellectual growth. In public education, where intellectual freedom is regarded as a foundational principle, such restrictions are seen as a detriment to fostering critical thinking and inclusivity (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020; Becnel & Moeller, 2020; Sachdeva, Kimmel, & Chérres, 2023; Price, 2021). This defense is often framed against proponents of censorship, who argue for moral responsibility and child protection, frequently invoking parental rights to justify the exclusion of content deemed inappropriate (Knox, 2019; Pollock et al., 2023; Henderson, 2023; Crawley, 2020; Walther et al., 2019).

The tension between advocates for diverse literature and those supporting bans underscores a deep societal divide over content control and educational freedom. Censorship proponents may view restrictive measures as a way to safeguard children, but educational spaces must instead protect the right to explore and engage with a range of ideas. I would argue that defending intellectual freedom in schools is crucial not only to uphold democratic values, but also to foster critical thinking, inclusivity, and empathy among students. Another reason censorship is problematic is that what is considered "offensive" often changes over time, making it inherently subjective. Because of this subjectivity, it would be dangerous to allow current societal whims to dictate educational content, as these may shift with evolving social norms. Limiting diverse perspectives, therefore, risks undermining students' rights to explore and understand a complex world, ultimately impeding their ability to engage with society in meaningful ways.

Theoretical Framework

In examining the censorship of LGBTQ+ literature in K-12 education, this framework integrates the ideas of Michael Apple, Kevin Kumashiro, and Michel Foucault to reveal how power, ideology, and discourse shape educational practices. Through these lenses, censorship is understood not just as a reaction to controversial content but as a strategic exercise of power that maintains dominant societal norms. Educational institutions, as sites of ideological control, reflect broader social values by reinforcing heteronormative and cisnormative ideals, while discourse serves as a mechanism to define what is considered legitimate knowledge. This framework reveals how these dynamics shape intellectual freedom, limiting the inclusion of marginalized perspectives, particularly those related to LGBTQ+ identities.

Apple's (1979) work on ideological control in education argues that schools are not neutral spaces but are deeply embedded within societal structures, reproducing the values of the dominant culture. Curriculum decisions often reflect these values, censoring content that challenges societal norms to maintain ideological control. LGBTQ+ literature, for instance, is frequently excluded to preserve traditional views on family and identity, illustrating how educational institutions reinforce existing power dynamics. Foucault (1976, 1980) expands on this by exploring how power operates within institutions through control over discourse and knowledge. Policies such as book bans serve

as mechanisms of control, dictating what is considered acceptable content in schools. By regulating discourse, schools not only limit access to LGBTQ+ perspectives but also reinforce boundaries of acceptable knowledge, thus sustaining cultural hegemony and maintaining societal expectations around gender and sexuality.

Building on these foundations, Kevin Kumashiro (2002) provides an antinormative lens, advocating for education to challenge normative structures rather than uphold them. His approach critiques traditional educational practices that marginalize diverse identities, calling for a pedagogy that actively includes perspectives and voices often excluded from mainstream curricula. Kumashiro's framework, aligned with Foucault's concept of resistance within power structures, emphasizes the potential for educators to counteract censorship by fostering intellectual freedom and creating more inclusive spaces within educational settings.

Together, these perspectives reveal how censorship operates as a tool for maintaining cultural norms while also highlighting the role of education as a potential site of resistance. By examining the mechanisms through which power and ideology shape educational content, this framework underscores the importance of challenging restrictive practices that limit intellectual freedom and diversity, advocating instead for a more inclusive and representative curriculum.

Rationale

This literature review critically examines the current body of research on censorship in K-12 education, with particular attention to its impact on curriculum, representation, and intellectual freedom. By analyzing school board decisions and public discourse around LGBTQ+ inclusive literature, the review highlights how these factors reflect societal norms and power dynamics related to gender and sexuality. Using a critical, antinormative perspective, this review synthesizes existing research to assess how censorship practices affect the visibility of LGBTQ+ identities in K-12 settings and identifies areas where further study is needed. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to an understanding of how educational policies reflect prevailing societal attitudes, providing insights to inform future research and policy discussions on fostering inclusivity in educational contexts.

Methodology

Information Sources and Search Strategy

A targeted search was conducted across multiple databases over approximately 40 hours during a two-week period to identify studies specifically addressing book bans in the context of LGBTQ+ literature within K-12 education. Searches concluded on Education Full Text and ERIC (EBSCOHost) on September 3, 2024, SAGE Journals on September 7, 2024, Education Source on September 8, 2024, and FAU Library One Search on September 8, 2024. Google Scholar was used as an additional source, with the final search concluding on September 8, 2024. The process yielded 698 articles, which were stored in Mendeley for efficient organization, citation management, and access throughout the review process.

To capture the complex intersections of book challenges, censorship, and LGBTQ+ literature within K-12 education, Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were used to combine terms such as "LGBTQ+ inclusive literature AND K-12 education AND book bans." Keywords were

adapted to each database as needed, with an asterisk (*) used to capture variations in terminology, such as "LG*," ensuring broad coverage.

The search strategy focused on capturing studies related to participants (e.g., K-12 educators, parents, students), phenomena (e.g. LGBTQ+ literature challenges, censorship, book bans), and context (e.g. public schools, educational policy). Constructs such as power dynamics, societal norms, and censorship were emphasized to align with the review's focus on book bans.

Filters were applied to retrieve only peer-reviewed articles. Titles and abstracts were manually screened to confirm relevance to LGBTQ+ book bans, prioritizing studies focused on book challenges, censorship, and LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Following PRISMA (2021) guidelines, duplicates were removed reducing the collection from 698 to 427 unique articles in Mendeley for further review. Each search was carefully documented, noting parameters, results, and adjustments made to ensure a thorough, systematic organization of relevant literature.

Data Management and Eligibility Criteria

An inductive approach was employed to establish eligibility criteria, beginning with a systematic documentation of each article's characteristics in an Excel sheet. This initial data overview allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the literature, which then informed the development of specific inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The Excel sheet setup facilitated the organized recording of Author(s) Name and Article Title for easy identification and reference tracking, while the Year column helped monitor publication dates relative to emerging societal shifts. The Study Conducted column confirmed whether each article was empirical, with Study Type (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) and Methodology providing insights into each study's research design, data collection, and analysis. To ensure a rigorous selection process, additional columns tracked Peer-Reviewed Status, Focus on LGBTQ+ Literature, and Direct Relevance to Book Bans, aligning articles with the review's central themes. Further contextual details, including Education Level (e.g. K-12, secondary, higher education), Location (e.g. U.S.—Florida, International—Canada), and School Type (public, private, charter), captured the settings and focus areas for each study. The Area of Focus column documented primary themes explored such as parental rights, censorship, or public discourse, while the How are Book Bans Being Discussed? Column noted each study's framing and terminology around book bans.

Following the detailed overview of characteristics, eligibility criteria were inductively developed to ensure that only the most relevant and high-quality studies were included in the analysis. These criteria prioritized empirical research directly addressing the challenges of LGBTQ_literature and book bans in K-12 educational settings. The eligibility criteria were as follows:

1. Empirical Study Requirement: Articles were required to feature original data collection and analysis, ensuring reliable evidence directly related to LGBTQ+ literature challenges in K-12 education. This criterion reduced the pool from 437 unique articles to 212.
2. Peer-Reviewed Publication: Only studies published in peer-reviewed journals were included to confirm academic rigor. After applying this filter, 212 articles met the standard, as non-peer-reviewed articles had been filtered out during initial screening.

3. Focus on LGBTQ+ Literature in K-12 Settings: Articles needed to specifically address LGBTQ+ inclusive literature within K-12 environments (schools or libraries) to ensure relevance to educational contexts. This filter narrowed the selection to 58 articles.
4. Direct Examination of Book Bans/Challenges or Censorship: To highlight the specific challenges related to access to LGBTQ+ literature, only studies directly examining book bans or censorship were retained. This step reduced the pool to 38 articles.
5. Post-2015 Publication Date: Studies published after *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) were prioritized to ensure the review reflected the contemporary societal and legal landscape surrounding LGBTQ+ rights and visibility. The *Obergefell* decision marked a significant milestone in the recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, catalyzing broader public discourse and legislative actions related to family values, child development, and parental rights in educational settings. As these themes have shaped recent debates on book bans and censorship in K-12 education, prioritizing post-2015 studies ensured that the review encompassed research contextualized within these modern developments. This criterion ultimately resulted in a selection of 21 articles that met all prior requirements.
6. Inclusion of Key Pre-2015 Articles via Snowballing: Two additional articles by Emily Knox (2014a, 2014b) were included due to their significant influence and high citation frequency within the literature on censorship and book challenges, directly relevant to this review's focus. Although published before the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling that recognized same sex marriage, Knox's work remains foundational, providing a theoretical and historical framework that continues to shape contemporary discourse on book bans, particularly those targeting LGBTQ+ literature. Her insights into the social dynamics and ideological conflicts driving censorship remain pertinent in understanding the ongoing debates over LGBTQ+ inclusive literature in K-12 settings. The inclusion of her studies thus ensures that this review incorporates essential perspectives and key arguments that underpin current discussions on censorship.

This Excel-based setup, combined with an inductive approach to defining eligibility, ensured that criteria were carefully tailored to the specific characteristics of the reviewed literature. The final dataset, comprising 23 articles, is visualized in the PRISMA Flow Diagram (see Figure 1). This structured approach provided a focused dataset for further analysis, aligning the final selection with the review's purpose and ensuring methodological rigor.

Figure 1: *PRISMA Flow Diagram for Study Identification and Selection of Studies*

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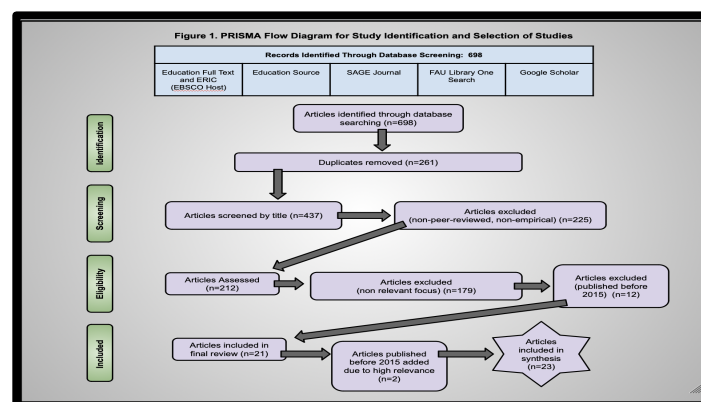
Systematic Coding and Analysis Using the Boote & Beile Framework

The coding process for this systematic literature review used the Boote & Beile framework (2005) to ensure a structured and comprehensive analysis of the literature. This framework provided a set of specific criteria, each represented by a code letter, allowing for a detailed examination of how each study aligned with important scholarly and practical dimensions. The criteria included:

- B - *What Has Been Done vs. What Needs to Be Done*: Documents whether studies identify gaps in the field and suggest areas for further research.
- C - *Broader Scholarly Literature*: Captures references to larger academic domains or fields relevant to the study.
- D - *Historical Context*: Situates the research within the historical evolution of the field.
- E - *Subject Vocabulary*: Identifies domain-specific terminology and definitions crucial to understanding the field's discourse.
- F - *Variables and Phenomena*: Highlights central variables or phenomena within studies, often noted in relation to the methods and focus.
- H - *Methodologies and Techniques*: Describes study design, methodological approach, participants, context, data collection, and analysis methods.
- I - *Theory*: Links theoretical frameworks to methodologies, discussing theories applied within the study or the field.
- J - *Practical Significance*: Evaluates the practical implications and potential applications of the study's findings.
- K - *Scholarly Significance*: Examines the study's contributions to academic knowledge and scholarly value.
- R - *Study Results*: Captures the study's results and research questions, focusing on outcomes and how they address the research objectives.
- N - *Notes*: Provides space for researcher insights and observations, capturing patterns or ideas that emerge across the literature.

Each of these codes was systematically applied using Taguette software, enabling consistent tagging of relevant text segments within each study. This approach resulted in a well-organized dataset that facilitated a detailed examination and comparison of findings across studies, grounded in the Boote & Beile framework. The overall coding process is illustrated in the Diagram of Coding Process (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Diagram of Coding Process*

Analysis Process: From Coding to Theme Extraction

Theme Extraction
5 Themes were extracted from the combined categories, summarizing key insights and patterns found in the literature.

Combine Code Sets
4 Related code sets were combined to streamline the data, revealing connections across categories.

Identify Categories from Codes
3 Each code set was reviewed by grouping similar codes together into categories in order to streamline analysis.

Export and Review
2 Codes were exported from Taguette for further analysis, creating an organized dataset to facilitate deeper review.

Initial Coding
1 Articles were coded using the Boote & Beile framework (2005) in Taguette, identifying relevant text segments and assigning framework-specific codes.

Once the initial coding was completed, the data were exported from Taguette to allow for a more comparative analysis across studies. During this phase, the coded segments were systematically reviewed and analyzed in relation to each other in order to identify patterns and connections within the literature. To further refine the dataset, certain groups of codes were combined based on their complementary focus on the literature's contribution to the field and its identified gaps. For example, codes B (What Has Been Done vs. What Needs to Be Done), C (Broader Scholarly Literature), and K (Scholarly Significance) were merged to provide a holistic view of the studies' positioning within the larger academic landscape. Combining these codes allowed for a deeper analysis of how individual studies not only addressed existing gaps, but also contributed to advancing knowledge of challenges to LGBTQ+ literature. Code B offered insights into areas where the literature identified ongoing challenges or future research needs, while code C contextualized each study within broader academic domains, establishing links to related fields or discourses. Merging these with code K, which assessed the scholarly impact of each study, created a unified category that revealed how each study contributed both practically and theoretically. This combined view was essential for synthesizing findings that not only documented the current state of the literature, but also demonstrated the studies' significance and potential to drive future research in LGBTQ+ educational contexts.

Analyzing these combined categories led to the extraction of key themes that summarized the central insights and patterns in the literature. Each theme was defined to encapsulate the essential findings, constructing a cohesive narrative that captured the range of perspectives and approaches present in the studies. To visually map out this progression from codes to categories and ultimately to synthesized themes, a Diagram of Codes to Categories to Themes was created (see Figure 3). This visual aid clarified the relationships and analytical steps that informed the thematic synthesis and findings.

Figure 3: *Diagram of Codes to Categories to Themes*

Initial Coding (Boote & Beile, 2005)	Identify Categories from Codes	Combination of Related Code Sets	Overarching Findings
B - What Has Been Done vs. What Needs to Be Done	Societal Pressures on Censorship Policies and Institutional Responses LGBTQ+ Representation and Identity Student Perspectives and Well-Being Challenges for Educators and Librarians	Societal Pressures and Institutional Responses Curriculum, Teaching and Representation Student Voices and Intellectual Freedom	Societal Norms and Institutional Responses Impact on Curriculum and Teaching Practices Student Identity, Access, and the Right to Intellectual Freedom
C - Broader Scholarly Literature	Censorship Laws and Institutional Policies Impact on Curriculum and Teaching Perspectives on Intellectual Freedom		
K - Scholarly Significance	Implications of Censorship Societal Norms and Institutional Responses Educational Policy and Representation		

D - Historical Context	Intellectual Freedom and Moral Debates Legal and Institutional Frameworks Societal Attitudes and Censorship Movements	
E - Subject Vocabulary	Censorship Practices and Intellectual Freedom Tensions Definitions and Terminology of Book Challenges and Challengers	Power Dynamics and Political Influence Intellectual Freedom and the Right to Diverse Perspectives Moral Justification for Censorship and Child Protection
F - Variables and Phenomena	Impact on Intellectual Freedom and Democratic Principles Power and Political Influence in Censorship Protecting Child Innocence and Moral Values	
I - Theory	Censorship as a Form of Social Control Intellectual Freedom vs. Protection of 'Innocence' Power and Symbolic Capital in Censorship	
H - Methodology	Qualitative Exploratory Inquiry Content and Discourse Analysis Quantitative and Survey-Based Assessments Mixed-Methods	Quantification and Types of Studies Intersections and Reinforcements of Methodologies

J - Practical Significance	Impact on Students and Inclusive Educational Practices Professional and Community Development Policy Needs and Library Challenges	Parental and Societal Influence on Educational Content Legislative and Institutional Restrictions as Instruments of Control Public Discourse and the Polarization of LGBTQ+ Literature	
R - Study Results	Parental Influence, Moral Panic, and Social Control Legislative and Institutional Restrictions Opposition and Support in Public Discourse Teacher Identity, Resistance, and Navigation		

Each theme was then evaluated in relation to the research questions, with particular emphasis placed on insights that directly addressed the review's objectives regarding LGBTQ+ literature and book bans in K-12 settings. The systematic coding and analysis process enabled the identification of significant findings, which highlighted both converging and diverging perspectives within the literature. The resulting themes offered new insights into the challenges and debates surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusive literature, providing a well-rounded understanding that grounded the review's conclusions.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the systematic literature review, guided by the research question: *"What role do school board decisions and public discourses surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusive literature challenges in K-12 public schools play in reflecting societal norms and power dynamics related to gender and sexuality?"* Synthesizing themes from existing studies, the findings explore the relationship between societal pressures and institutional responses, the impact of censorship on curriculum and representation, and the broader implications for student intellectual freedom and identity development. Additionally, the review identifies theoretical and methodological trends within the literature, revealing how frameworks and approaches influence the understanding of censorship practices. Organized thematically, the review provides a comprehensive view of the interactions between public discourse, policy decisions, and the societal values that shape the presence of LGBTQ+ literature in educational settings.

Theoretical Trends

The literature review reveals that many studies examining censorship in K-12 education lack explicit theoretical grounding, instead prioritizing practical and methodological approaches. While frameworks like Critical Policy Analysis and Discourse Analysis are used, they often serve as tools for analyzing specific findings without fully extending into a broader critique of the ideological forces shaping censorship practices. This trend reflects a tendency within the literature to focus on the immediate impacts of censorship, such as effects on teacher responses and perceptions and curriculum restrictions, rather than interrogating the socio-political structures that perpetuate these practices.

Out of the 23 studies reviewed, only nine explicitly identified a theoretical framework (Henderson, 2023; Walther, Wickens, & Koss, 2019; Becnel & Moeller, 2020; Lammert & Godfrey, 2023; Knox, 2014a, 2019; Crawley, 2020; Price, 2021; O'Loughlin, Schmidt, & Glazier, 2022). However, many of these studies blur the line between methodology and theory, using methodological frameworks in ways that address processes, but not the underlying ideologies. For example, Knox (2014a, 2019) employs Discourse Analysis informed by Social Construction Theory and Symbolic Power to examine how language and power interact in censorship discourse. While effective in revealing patterns, this approach stops short of critically analyzing the socio-political forces driving these patterns. Similarly, Greig and Holloway (2017) use Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to investigate how educational policies reinforce societal norms. Although this framework provided valuable insights into power structures, it lacks a broader critique of how such policies perpetuate systemic inequalities or normative ideologies.

In contrast, a few studies, such as Crawley (2020) and O'Loughlin et al. (2022), stand out as exemplars by explicitly applying Queer Theory to critique censorship practices. These studies analyze how censorship functions as a social mechanism that privileges heteronormative values while marginalizing others, offering a deeper interrogation of societal norms and power dynamics. Their theoretical engagement highlights a notable gap in the broader field: while many studies effectively document censorship practices, few extend their analyses with robust frameworks that challenge the societal and ideological norms underlying these practices.

The reliance on terms like "safety" and "moral integrity" as neutral concepts underscores a missed opportunity in the literature to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of these terms. While studies often explore how these concepts justify censorship, the critical examination of how they are socially constructed and weaponized remains underdeveloped. For example, Chaney, Wilton, & Morgenroth (2024) document parental concerns as a driving force behind censorship, but fail to delve into the cultural narratives that frame these concerns. Similarly, Hartsfield & Kimmel (2020) highlight community perceptions of challenged literature but leave unexplored the ways these perceptions reflect entrenched societal ideologies. Studies that apply frameworks such as Queer Theory, like O'Loughlin et al. (2022), offer an exemplar by critically analyzing how such terms reinforce heteronormative values.

This trend highlights the need for research to move beyond documenting practices and critically examine the ideological systems that sustain censorship. By adopting explicitly theorized frameworks such as Queer Theory or Critical Pedagogy, future studies could reveal how concepts like "safety" and "moral integrity" are constructed to privilege specific ideologies while marginalizing others. This deeper engagement would allow for a more transformative understanding of censorship as a mechanism of social control, ultimately fostering more inclusive educational practices.

Societal Norms and Institutional Responses

Societal values significantly influence how educational institutions respond to LGBTQ+ content in K-12 education. Parental, community, and legislative pressures shape school policies that often prioritize traditional norms over inclusivity, justifying restrictive practices through terms like "protection" and "age-appropriateness." These pressures act as a form of social control, reinforcing heteronormative values and limiting representation, which impacts student development and perpetuates exclusionary educational practices.

Parental and Community Influence

Research consistently demonstrates that parents, religious organizations, conservative advocacy groups, and school board members heavily influence school policies on LGBTQ+ content (Chaney et al., 2024; Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020; Tudor, Moore, & Byrne, 2023; Goncalves et al., 2024; Pollock, 2023). Opposition to such materials is often framed as a protective measure to safeguard children's "innocence" or align with "family values," justifying restrictions that marginalize LGBTQ+ perspectives. Stakeholders use these arguments to pressure school boards into enacting policies that reflect conservative ideologies and maintain exclusionary curricula (Chaney et al., 2024; Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020; Goncalves et al., 2024).

Parental concerns, particularly those rooted in conservative or religious ideologies, often dominate these discussions. For example, Chaney et al. (2024) and Hartsfield & Kimmel (2020) document how parents advocate for banning LGBTQ+ materials under the guise of protecting children's moral development. This advocacy is further reinforced by local community groups and conservative organizations, which lobby school boards to adopt restrictive policies aligning with their values. In many cases, these pressures compel school boards to align curricular decisions with dominant community standards, often at the expense of inclusivity.

The influence of parental and community pressure extends to educators, who frequently navigate curricular decisions with caution. Research shows that educators in conservative regions anticipate potential backlash from vocal parents or groups, leading to self-censorship and limited representation of LGBTQ+ perspectives in classrooms (Tudor et al., 2023; Page 2017). This anticipatory conformity demonstrates the pervasive influence of community norms, which shape educational environments even in the absence of formal policies.

While conservative voices often dominate the discourse, examples of parental advocacy for inclusivity do exist. Crawley (2020) highlights a case where a supportive parent successfully introduced an LGBTQ+ picture book into her child's kindergarten class, illustrating the potential for counter-narratives within conservative contexts. However, such examples remain exceptions rather than the rule, as broader societal norms continue to marginalize diverse identities.

The strong influence of parental and community pressures on school policies regarding LGBTQ+ content underscores the need for educational responses that balance community values with the imperative of fostering intellectual freedom and inclusivity. Schools should engage stakeholders in transparent dialogue to address misconceptions about LGBTQ+ representation, emphasizing its educational importance in supporting diverse perspectives and student development. Clear policy guidelines must empower educators to navigate these pressures while maintaining inclusive curricula, ensuring that decisions are informed by pedagogical principles rather than external influences. Additionally, further research is needed to examine how these pressures shape institutional norms and to develop strategies that counteract exclusionary

tendencies, fostering educational environments that reflect the diversity of society and promote critical engagement with a broad range of identities and ideas.

Legislative Influence

Legislative actions significantly shape school policies on LGBTQ+ content by embedding societal norms into legal mandates. These laws often reflect conservative community values and prioritize traditional ideologies through ambiguous terms like "age-appropriateness". While direct censorship is evident in some cases, the broader influence lies in how these laws prompt cautious interpretations by educators and administrators, fostering a restrictive environment that limits the inclusion of LGBTQ+ perspectives in K-12 education. This legislative landscape reinforces systemic exclusion, shaping not only the policies themselves but also the behaviors and decisions of school boards and educators.

Research underscores that legislation targeting LGBTQ+ content in schools frequently originates from conservative lawmakers responding to local pressures (Goncalves et al., 2024; Pollock, 2023; Walther et. al, 2019). These laws not only codify exclusionary norms but also create a ripple effect, influencing district-level policies and administrative practices. For example, Goncalves et al. (2024) illustrate how conservative legislative efforts establish frameworks that school boards replicate, further entrenching exclusionary practices at local levels. Similarly, Pollock (2023) reveals that the ambiguity of legislative terms such as "age-appropriateness" often leads to preemptive censorship. In addition to shaping institutional behaviors, these laws create climates of uncertainty and fear among educators. Educators and administrators, seeking to avoid potential legal conflicts, may restrict LGBTQ+ materials and discussions even in the absence of explicit prohibitions, reinforcing a culture of cautious exclusion.

Walther, Wickens, and Koss (2019) explore how the influence of restrictive legislative environments extends beyond individual policies, shaping institutional behaviors across districts. Their findings highlight how such environments normalize exclusionary practices, making it increasingly difficult for educators to introduce diverse perspectives. These legislative measures are not isolated but serve as part of a broader system of social control, aligning educational policies with societal norms that prioritize traditional family values over inclusive representation.

To address the restrictive impacts of legislation on LGBTQ+ content in schools, policies should focus on explicitly balancing compliance with inclusive practices. School boards must adopt proactive strategies that prioritize intellectual freedom and diverse representation by interpreting legislative mandates in ways that avoid overly cautious restrictions. Establishing frameworks that support educators in understanding and navigating legislative boundaries without compromising on inclusivity is crucial. Additionally, districts should advocate for legislative reforms that clarify vague terms like "age-appropriateness" to minimize misinterpretation and reduce the chilling effect on LGBTQ+ representation. By addressing these systemic challenges, schools can mitigate the exclusionary impact of legislation while fostering an educational environment that values diversity and critical engagement.

Critical Summary

The findings reveal a troubling alignment between societal norms and institutional policies, with parental, community, and legislative pressures shaping school responses to LGBTQ+ content. These pressures often prioritize traditional values, using terms like "protection" and "age-

appropriateness" to justify exclusionary practices that reinforce heteronormativity. By aligning with these norms, schools act as gatekeepers, limiting the representation of diverse identities and narrowing opportunities for inclusive dialogue in educational settings.

Parental and community influence emerges as a significant driver of censorship, with organized groups and vocal stakeholders framing LGBTQ+ topics as threats to children's moral development. This narrative enables conservative advocacy efforts to dominate discussions around school policy, resulting in restrictive practices that reflect broader societal anxieties. While some parents advocate for inclusive curricula, their efforts are often overshadowed in conservative areas, further marginalizing diverse perspectives within educational materials.

Legislation compounds these issues by codifying societal norms into enforceable mandates, creating environments where school boards and educators interpret policies conservatively to avoid potential violations. Ambiguously worded laws, such as those emphasizing "age-appropriateness," contribute to self-censorship and preemptive restrictions that exacerbate exclusionary practices. These legislative measures, while reflective of community values in some regions, also set powerful precedents that institutionalize heteronormative standards and limit educational inclusivity.

These findings highlight the urgency of examining how policy language and legislative mandates perpetuate societal biases, reinforcing exclusionary norms. Educational institutions must navigate these pressures with care, balancing respect for community values with the imperative to foster intellectual freedom and inclusive representation. This calls for a nuanced understanding of the socio-political dynamics at play, as well as policies and practices that actively challenge, rather than replicate, exclusionary ideologies. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for creating educational environments that support all students, providing them with the diverse perspectives and critical engagement necessary for personal and social growth.

Impact on Curriculum and Teaching Practices

Censorship pressures in education significantly affect curriculum and teaching practices, particularly through the prevalence of self-censorship among educators and the exclusion of LGBTQ+ content from school materials. These patterns not only limit the diversity of perspectives available to students, but also reinforce societal norms that marginalize LGBTQ+ identities and perpetuate exclusionary practices in education.

Educator Self-Censorship

Research reveals that educators often engage in self-censorship when addressing LGBTQ+ topics, a phenomenon driven by vague policy language, societal pressures, and insufficient institutional support. Teachers preemptively exclude LGBTQ+ content to avoid potential conflicts with parents, administrators, or community members, reflecting an indirect but pervasive form of censorship that undermines curricular inclusivity. This cautious approach limits opportunities for students to engage with diverse perspectives and reinforces traditional societal norms within educational settings.

Studies demonstrate that self-censorship among educators stems from ambiguous policy language, societal expectations, and inadequate institutional protection (Pollock, 2023; Walther, Wickens, & Koss, 2019; Tudor, Moore, & Byrne, 2023; McQuillan, Lebovitz, & Harbin 2024). For instance, teachers report avoiding LGBTQ+ topics in response to loosely defined standards of

"age-appropriateness" and "protection," fearing potential repercussions from stakeholders (Slungaard Mumma, 2024; Goncalves et al., 2024). These policies create an environment of uncertainty where educators interpret the absence of explicit guidance as a directive to sideline potentially controversial topics.

Beyond the influence of policies, the lack of institutional protection further amplifies educators' hesitance. Teachers in several studies expressed concern about their administration's willingness to support them if conflicts arose, leading many to self-censor even in the absence of explicit policy mandates (McQuillan et al., 2024; Chaney, Wilton, & Morgenroth, 2024). This lack of support perpetuates a climate of vulnerability, where educators refrain from including LGBTQ+ topics in the curriculum, library recommendations, or classroom discussions.

The impact of self-censorship is particularly evident in regions with strong community opposition to LGBTQ+ materials. Even in districts without explicit mandates, educators adopt anticipatory caution, fearing backlash that could jeopardize their careers (Pollock, 2023; Goncalves et al., 2024; Slungaard Mumma, 2024). For example, Slungaard Mumma (2024) describes how educators in politically conservative areas avoided LGBTQ+ content even when no formal restrictions existed, reflecting the cultural influence of local norms. Similarly, Goncalves et al. (2024) found that teachers often self-regulated their curricular choices, prioritizing community expectations over inclusivity. This demonstrates that self-censorship functions as an unspoken policy, constraining LGBTQ+ representation and narrowing educational opportunities for students.

To address self-censorship, schools and policymakers must establish clear guidelines that empower educators to teach inclusively without fear of backlash. These guidelines should prioritize intellectual freedom and explicitly encourage the inclusion of diverse perspectives, providing educators with the confidence to navigate challenging topics. Professional development initiatives focused on inclusive practices are also essential, equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge to address LGBTQ+ topics thoughtfully and confidently. By addressing the ambiguity in policy language and fostering supportive environments, schools can ensure that educators feel secure in their ability to promote intellectual freedom and representation in the classroom.

Loss of Curricular Inclusivity

The exclusion of LGBTQ+ content due to censorship pressures results in a significant loss of curricular inclusivity, limiting students' exposure to diverse identities and perspectives. As educators preemptively exclude LGBTQ+ materials or avoid these topics altogether, the curriculum reflects a narrower range of social and cultural realities. This exclusion reinforces traditional societal narratives while depriving students of opportunities to engage critically with diverse perspectives essential for comprehensive learning.

Research shows that educators, responding to ambiguous policies or community pressures, frequently omit LGBTQ+ perspectives from their teaching, resulting in a curriculum that disproportionately prioritizes dominant narratives (Pollock, 2023; Tudor, Moore, & Byrne, 2023; McQuillan et al., 2024). For example, Walther et al., (2019) found that LGBTQ+ literature was systematically excluded from classroom reading lists, even when such materials were available, due to fears of controversy or backlash. This selective inclusion reflects a broader pattern of omission that prioritizes traditional, heteronormative content over diverse representation.

The loss of curricular inclusivity extends beyond the classroom to other educational resources, such as school libraries and extracurricular activities. Studies document instances where

LGBTQ+ materials were proactively removed from library collections or were never included due to prevailing community standards (Slungaard Mumma, 2024; Tudor, Moore, & Byrne, 2023). Tudor, Moore, and Byrne (2023) describe how administrators restricted access to books addressing LGBTQ+ topics, limiting opportunities for student-led exploration and identity development. This exclusion reinforces an environment where students are denied access to narratives that reflect their own or others' experiences.

Moreover, this narrowing of curricular inclusivity has far-reaching consequences for students' development. Research demonstrates that students in schools with limited LGBTQ+ representation are less prepared to engage with discussions on identity, social justice, and inclusion (Borsheim-Black, 2024; Goncalves et al., 2024). McQuillan et al. (2024) emphasize that by restricting access to diverse perspectives, schools constrain students' understanding of complex social issues, which hinders the development of empathy and critical thinking skills. The absence of diverse narratives perpetuates a limited worldview, leaving students unprepared for civic engagement in a multicultural society.

To address the loss of curricular inclusivity, schools must move beyond simply adding LGBTQ+ perspectives and adopt policies that challenge the dominance of heteronormative and cisnormative narratives in education. Policies should explicitly affirm the value of disrupting traditional norms by embedding diverse, intersectional perspectives throughout the curriculum, positioning them as central rather than supplementary. This requires rejecting vague language like "age-appropriateness" that reinforces exclusion and instead embracing intellectual freedom as a guiding principle. Schools must also cultivate a culture that actively resists normative assumptions, empowering educators to explore topics of identity, gender, and sexuality without fear of backlash. By centering antinormative practices, such as prioritizing marginalized voices and questioning dominant cultural narratives, education can create transformative spaces where students learn to critique societal norms and imagine more inclusive possibilities.

Critical Summary

The interplay between educator self-censorship and the loss of curricular inclusivity highlights the pervasive influence of external pressures in maintaining exclusionary practices within education. Self-censorship, driven by ambiguous policies and societal norms, acts as a silent enforcer of heteronormativity, narrowing the curriculum and limiting the representation of marginalized identities. This exclusion reinforces dominant cultural narratives, marginalizes LGBTQ+ perspectives, and deprives students of the opportunity to engage critically with diverse social realities.

These findings point to the necessity of examining not only the structural forces that drive self-censorship, but also the broader implications of exclusionary curricula. Future research should explore how antinormative practices that resist and challenge traditional societal norms might serve as a counter to these trends. Investigating how the inclusion of diverse perspectives fosters critical thinking, empathy, and identity development could provide a framework for reimagining educational practices. This is essential for understanding how to disrupt exclusionary patterns and create a more equitable and inclusive educational system.

Student Identity, Access, and Intellectual Freedom

Restrictions on LGBTQ+ content in educational settings profoundly impact student identity development and intellectual freedom. Limiting access to diverse perspectives constrains students' ability to explore and inform their identities, engage critically with social issues, and develop the empathy and self-awareness needed for civic engagements. By examining the effects of restricted access on both identity formation and intellectual exploration, this finding underscores the educational and social costs of exclusionary practices.

Restricted Access and Identity Development

The restriction of LGBTQ+ content in educational settings undermines students' opportunities to explore and affirm their identities. By limiting exposure to diverse narratives on gender, sexuality, and family structures, schools create environments where students are less likely to encounter representations that resonate with their experiences or expand their understanding of others. This narrowing of access significantly impacts identity formation, empathy development, and the ability to navigate diverse social realities.

Research highlights that exclusionary practices around LGBTQ+ literature and related topics reduce students' access to affirming narratives, thereby limiting opportunities for identity exploration (Knox, 2019; Walther et al., 2019; Tudor, Moore, & Byrne, 2023; Henderson, 2023). Henderson (2023) found that decisions to exclude LGBTQ+ content often stem from misperceptions about its relevance or appropriateness. These decisions create environments where diverse identities are systematically erased. Similarly, Knox (2019) emphasizes the role of censorship in perpetuating heteronormative norms by denying students opportunities to engage with literature that challenges dominant narratives.

Walther et al. (2019) provide evidence that restricted access to LGBTQ+ literature disproportionately affects LGBTQ+ students, who often rely on such texts for identity affirmation and emotional support. The absence of affirming narratives can contribute to increased feelings of isolation, erasure, and marginalization among these students. This lack of representation also impedes the broader student body from developing empathy and understanding of diverse lived experiences. Tudor et al. (2023) illustrate this impact by documenting how the removal of books featuring nontraditional family structures limited students' exposure to alternative perspectives and reinforced dominant societal norms. In contrast, studies show that access to inclusive materials positively influences identity development, emotional well-being, and social awareness. Goncalves et al. (2024) report that students in schools with comprehensive LGBTQ+ collections engaged more meaningfully in discussions about equity and built stronger connections with peers from diverse backgrounds. Collectively, these findings underscore the necessity of maintaining access to inclusive literature, not only to support identity formation and belonging among LGBTQ+ youth, but also to promote critical thinking, empathy, and inclusive values across the school community.

Educational institutions must prioritize fostering student agency in advocating for inclusive curricula and resources. By creating platforms for student voices, such as advisory councils or student-led initiatives, schools can ensure that curricula and library collections reflect the diversity of the student body. Encouraging students to engage with inclusive content supports identity exploration while cultivating leadership and civic responsibility. Schools can further reinforce these efforts by implementing peer-led programs and clubs that provide safe spaces for discussions

on diversity and representation. Shifting the focus toward empowering students as agents of change creates opportunities for them to take ownership of their learning environments and build inclusive communities from the ground up.

Intellectual Freedom and Critical Engagement

The restriction of LGBTQ+ content in educational settings significantly limits students' intellectual freedom by narrowing their exposure to diverse perspectives essential for critical engagement with societal issues. When access to various narratives is restricted, students lose valuable opportunities to question societal norms, develop independent viewpoints, and build the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate complex social dynamics.

Research underscores the detrimental effects of restricting access to LGBTQ+ content on students' intellectual growth and critical engagement. Pollock et al. (2023) highlight how removing inclusive content from curricula and libraries limits students' ability to explore diverse perspectives, reinforcing normative ideas that constrain intellectual inquiry. This restriction not only denies students exposure to diverse narratives but also perpetuates narrow worldviews. The impact of these limitations becomes particularly evident when examining the relationship between representation and critical thinking. Tudor, Moore, and Byrne (2023) found that schools excluding LGBTQ+ materials deprive students of opportunities to engage with narratives that challenge traditional societal norms, ultimately hindering their capacity to critically evaluate issues of equity and justice. Similarly, Slungaard Mumma (2024) documented how students in environments where LGBTQ+ materials were inaccessible lacked the tools to question dominant narratives, leaving them unable to fully engage with complex social issues.

Price (2021) offers a contrasting perspective, illustrating the transformative potential of inclusive content. This study revealed that students exposed to LGBTQ+ literature demonstrated a stronger ability to critically analyze societal structures and norms, fostering deeper understandings of identity and justice. These findings emphasize how access to diverse perspectives can significantly enhance students' intellectual engagement. Further supporting these conclusions, McQuillan et al. (2024) observed that the absence of LGBTQ+ perspectives stifled meaningful discussions on diversity and inclusion. Students in restrictive environments missed opportunities to develop open-mindedness and intellectual independence. In contrast, Borsheim-Black (2024) found that inclusive curricula enabled students to thoughtfully engage with peers from different backgrounds, enriching their understanding of social complexities and strengthening their critical thinking skills.

To ensure intellectual freedom and encourage critical engagement, schools must address the systemic barriers that restrict access to diverse perspectives, including LGBTQ+ content. This requires advocating for reforms at the district, state, and national levels to establish educational standards that explicitly protect the inclusion of diverse narratives in curricula and libraries. Schools should also form partnerships with external organizations, such as LGBTQ+ advocacy groups and educational nonprofits, to provide training, resources, and support for both educators and students. Additionally, structural mechanisms like independent review boards can be implemented to assess curricular and library content for inclusivity and intellectual rigor, ensuring that decisions about educational materials reflect a commitment to diversity rather than political or ideological pressures. By focusing on systemic reform and external collaboration, schools can create environments where intellectual freedom is safeguarded and critical engagement flourishes across all levels of education.

Intellectual Freedom and Critical Engagement

The findings emphasize how restrictive educational practices around LGBTQ+ content undermine intellectual freedom by limiting students' exposure to diverse perspectives. This constriction hampers their ability to critically analyze societal norms and engage with complex social issues. Importantly, the evidence reveals that inclusive practices not only support intellectual growth, but also enhance students' empathy and readiness for civic participation, offering a compelling argument for systemic change.

These findings highlight the broader educational and societal implications of intellectual freedom, underscoring its role in fostering independent thought and critical engagement. The research calls for a shift from reactive measures against exclusionary practices to proactive policies and systemic reforms that prioritize inclusivity and intellectual exploration as core values in education. Future research could examine how these reforms impact long-term student outcomes, particularly in terms of civic responsibility and social awareness, to further validate the necessity of such changes.

Methodological Approaches and Insights

Analyzing the diverse methodologies used to examine book challenges and censorship reveals interconnected insights into this complex issue. The studies reviewed utilize qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods frameworks, each contributing uniquely to understanding contested books with LGBTQ+ themes in K-12 education. Together, these methodologies illuminate the layered nature of censorship, capturing its individual, cultural, and systemic dimensions.

Methodological Approaches

A significant proportion of the studies (61%) utilize qualitative approaches, with discourse analysis emerging as a prominent method used in 36% of these studies. This approach enables researchers to dissect the language used in book challenges, uncovering how rhetoric constructs and perpetuates societal fears. Phrases like "protecting children" often function as coded language that frames LGBTQ+ literature as morally hazardous, thus legitimizing censorship actions (Knox, 2019; Knox, 2014a). Although some studies, such as those utilizing queer critical discourse analysis, focus on how language reinforces heteronormative and cisnormative cultural norms, they highlight marginalization strategies without specifically emphasizing the "protecting children" rhetoric (O'Loughlin et al, 2022). Additionally, the framing of LGBTQ+ topics as inherently controversial is analyzed through broader discourse analysis, revealing how such narratives support restrictive practices (Wargo et al., 2024; Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020). By examining these rhetorical strategies, discourse analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how language both reflects and enforces cultural norms around gender and sexuality.

Interviews (36%) are another frequently used qualitative method, offering narrative-driven insights into the experiences of educators and librarians. This approach uncovers the emotional and professional dilemmas faced by those working in educational spaces, highlighting how censorship pressures influence their daily practices. Through in-depth interviews, researchers have documented how self-censorship emerges as a strategy to avoid conflict, even when individuals

are committed to inclusivity. The methodology captures these tensions and provides an nuanced view of the human cost of censorship (Sachdeva, Kimmel, & Cherres, 2023; Crawly, 2020; Borsheim-Black, 2024; Oltmann et al., 2017; Pollack et al., 2023).

Content analysis, comprising 14% of the qualitative studies, systematically identifies patterns in the material most frequently targeted for censorship. This approach is effective in illustrating which themes provoke societal anxieties and how these anxieties manifest in book challenges. By categorizing the types of content that draw scrutiny, content analysis highlights how decisions around literature often reflect broader cultural values, particularly concerning gender and sexual diversity (Knox, 2014b; Price, 2021). This method emphasizes the referring societal mechanisms that frame LGBTQ+ content as controversial.

Policy analysis utilized in 14% of the studies, reveals how legislative and institutional frameworks shape censorship practices, demonstrating that policies are inherently embedded within broader power dynamics rather than being neutral. This research shows that legislative mandates often reinforce societal norms, either by restricting or supporting the availability of LGBTQ+ literature. For example, an examination of trans-affirming policies using traditional and critical policy analysis demonstrates how legislative actions can uphold exclusionary practices, particularly when intersecting with bans on critical race theory (McQuillan et al., 2024). Additionally, a Foucauldian approach to text selection policies in Ontario reveals how institutional discourses marginalize non-normative identities, perpetuating societal control (Greig & Holloway, 2017). Together, these studies underscore the significant role of policy in determining which narratives are accessible in educational settings and highlight the influence of institutional forces in maintaining cultural and educational norms.

Quantitative methods, used in 22% of the studies, added statistical depth to the understanding of book challenges. These methodologies analyze demographic and regional data to identify patterns in censorship, often correlating factors like community conservatism and political affiliation with the frequency of book bans. For instance, research has shown that communities with higher levels of conservatism are significantly more likely to challenge books with LGBTQ+ content, demonstrating how political ideology influences censorship trends (Goncalves et al., 2024). Additionally, quantitative studies provide empirical evidence of how factors such as school district policies and parental attitudes impact book availability, offering insights into how macro-level trends shape micro-level decisions in educational settings. This data-driven approach complements the nuanced findings of qualitative research, helping to create a comprehensive understanding of the societal forces driving book bans (Slungaard Mumma, 2024; Chaney, Wilton, & Morgenroth, 2024; Goncalves, et al., 2024; Page, 2017; Tudor et al., 2023).

Mixed-methods research, comprising 17% of the reviewed studies, bridges qualitative and qualitative approaches to create a more holistic understanding of book challenges. This methodology allows for the triangulation of data, combining personal experiences with broader statistical trends. By using surveys alongside interviews, mixed-methods research reveals how societal norms and institutional policies intersect, providing a comprehensive view of how censorship functions across multiple levels of influence (Henderson, 2023; Benchel & Moeller, 2020; Lammert & Godfrey, 2023; Walther et al., 2019). This integrative approach underscores the complexity of book challenges, demonstrating how they are shaped by both individual and systemic factors.

Addressing the pervasive issues of book challenges and censorship must involve a more critically engaged and theoretically grounded approach. While existing research has made important strides in revealing how language and policy perpetuate societal fears and norms, there

ought to be a stronger emphasis on methodologies that explicitly interrogate the underlying power structures. A queer, critical policy discourse analysis can uniquely illuminate how legislative frameworks and cultural rhetoric intersect to marginalize LGBTQ+ literature. This approach should expose the strategic use of language and policy to uphold heteronormativity and cisnormativity, while also challenging the assumed neutrality of these systems. By pushing beyond traditional methods and adopting a critical lens, future research could more effectively disrupt exclusionary practices and advocate for policies that promote inclusivity and equity in educational settings.

Intersections and Reinforcements of Methodologies

Studies demonstrate how different methodological approaches reveal overlapping themes that connect book challenges to broader societal discourses, public attitudes, and policy influences. The intersection of methodologies–qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods–provides a comprehensive understanding of how censorship functions as both a cultural and political phenomenon, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ literature in K-12 education.

The combination of discourse analysis with qualitative and policy analysis uncovers how book challenges reflect and reinforce societal and policy-driven anxieties surrounding LGBTQ+ literature. By analyzing the coded language of "protecting children" within public debates and policies, studies reveal how such rhetoric legitimizes censorship and aligns individual actions with institutional and cultural values. For instance, Greig and Holloway (2017) use Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine how educational policies influence the selection of LGBTQ+ literature, showing how institutional decisions mirror societal norms and anxieties. Similarly, McQuillan et al. (2024) explore anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, illustrating how terms like "protecting children" are strategically used to justify excluding diverse content from school curricula. Together, these studies offer insight into how policy and discourse reinforce each other, highlighting censorship as both a personal and policy-based response to societal norms, with public opinion and institutional policies shaping access to LGBTQ+ content in schools (Knox, 2014a; Knox, 2019; O'Loughlin et al., 2022; Greig & Holloway, 2017; Wargo et al., 2024; McQuillan et al., 2024).

Mixed-methods studies further enhance this understanding by blending qualitative and quantitative data, connecting individual experiences with broader societal trends and demographic patterns. This approach illustrates how personal narratives around LGBTQ+ literature challenges align with public opinion and policy influences. For example, Henderson (2023) combines survey data with interviews to examine how community attitudes and political climates shape school board decisions on LGBTQ+ content. Such studies underscore the complex interactions between public opinion, institutional responses, and legislative actions, providing a comprehensive view of the forces shaping access to LGBTQ+ literature in schools. Through integrated methodologies, mixed-methods research enhances the field's ability to capture the complex dynamics of censorship (Henderson, 2023; Benchel & Moeller, 2020; Lammert & Godfrey, 2023).

To advance the field, researchers must continue to expand on these methodological intersections, leveraging them to uncover the layered power dynamics underlying censorship. Future research should increasingly combine these methods to reveal how cultural, demographic, and institutional factors intersect to shape censorship practices. This integrated approach may provide the nuanced analysis needed to capture the societal forces sustaining censorship and could

ultimately guide the development of policies that promote intellectual freedom and inclusivity in educational settings.

Critical Summary

The field's reliance on qualitative methods (61%) provides insight into individual perspectives on book challenges, but lacks broader systemic exploration. This focus limits understanding of institutional and sociopolitical dimensions, suggesting a need for more studies that examine these broader influences. Discourse analysis is common, but often isolated from a wider socio political framework, missing critical insights into how societal norms and power structures shape censorship. Additionally, quantitative (22%) and mixed-methods (17%) approaches are underutilized, limiting the field's capacity to connect personal narratives with demographic and policy trends. To address these gaps, expanding the use of quantitative and mixed-methods approaches could offer a more comprehensive view of how broader societal and institutional factors impact censorship practices. Such approaches would enable researchers to connect individual experiences with larger demographic patterns and policy influences, enriching the field's understanding of censorship dynamics in education.

Discussion and Implications

The evolving discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusive literature in K-12 settings underscores the intricate power dynamics and societal ideologies that shape censorship practices. The studies reviewed highlight how parental beliefs, institutional policies, and public rhetoric intersect, particularly in the context of restrictive legislation that appears to be sweeping the country. These forces collectively contribute to the exclusion of diverse perspectives, constraining opportunities for intellectual freedom and inclusivity in education. educators and librarians often bear the brunt of these pressures, navigating contentious environments that frequently lead to self-censorship, further limiting students' access to diverse perspectives. The implications of these practices extend beyond individual classrooms, influencing societal norms and the scope of intellectual freedom in education.

Insights and Limitations of Current Research

The existing body of research offers valuable insights into how censorship practices reflect broader societal anxieties. Studies situate contemporary book challenges within historical and cultural contexts, linking them to longstanding patterns of moral panic and cultural fear. These findings demonstrate how censorship functions as both a response to and reinforcement of traditional societal norms, particularly heteronormativity and cisnormativity. For example, discourse analyses show how terms like "protecting children" operate as coded language to justify exclusionary practices, obscuring their ideological motivations (Knox, 2019; O'Loughlin et al., 2022). Through Foucault's (1980) lens, these practices exemplify how power operates within institutions to regulate knowledge and discourse, shaping what is considered legitimate or acceptable in educational settings.

Despite these strengths, significant gaps remain in the literature. While some studies acknowledge the intersecting impacts of race, gender, and class on censorship, these intersections are often underexplored. This leaves gaps in understanding how censorship practices

disproportionately affect students with multiple marginalized identities. Tudor, Moore, and Byrne (2023) touch on these themes, but more in-depth analyses are needed to fully uncover the compounded effects of marginalization. Expanding the use of queer and critical theoretical frameworks, as advocated by Kumashiro (2002), could provide a richer understanding of how censorship intersects with broader systems of oppression, including whiteness and patriarchy.

Future Directions for Research

Addressing the gaps identified in the literature requires a more expansive methodological and theoretical approach. Mixed-methods studies offer significant potential to bridge individual experiences with broader systemic patterns. Combining qualitative methods with demographic and policy data can reveal how censorship practices vary across regions and sociopolitical contexts. Henderson (2023) exemplifies how integrating quantitative and qualitative data provides a more comprehensive understanding of the forces driving book challenges. Research informed by Apple's (1979) critique of ideological control could further explore how curricula reproduce societal norms, identifying opportunities for intervention to create more equitable educational spaces.

Future research should also prioritize the voices of those directly impacted by censorship, including students and educators. Studies could explore how individuals resist restrictive practices and advocate for intellectual freedom, shedding light on strategies for fostering inclusivity in contentious environments. These investigations would not only contribute to theoretical advancements, but also offer practical tools for navigating censorship disputes. Drawing on Foucault's (1976) concept of resistance and Kumashiro's (2002) call for antinormative pedagogy, researchers can illuminate strategies to disrupt dominant narratives and promote systemic change.

The Broader Implications of Censorship

The exclusion of LGBTQ+ content in educational settings has far-reaching implications beyond the immediate context of book challenges. Limiting students' access to diverse perspectives reinforces societal norms that marginalize non-dominant identities, constraining opportunities for critical thinking, empathy, and civic engagement. These findings align with Apple's (1979) assertion that education often serves as a site for reproducing dominant ideologies rather than challenging them. Similarly, they reflect Foucault's (1976) analysis of how institutional policies regulate access to knowledge, consolidating power by defining the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

The literature also suggests a path forward, guided by Kumashiro's (2002) call for antinormative pedagogy. This approach advocates for curricula that intentionally disrupt normative assumptions and prioritize marginalized perspectives. Empowering educators to implement such frameworks requires institutional support, clear policy protections, and professional development that emphasizes the value of discomfort and critical inquiry in fostering meaningful learning experiences. In addition to addressing legislative and institutional barriers, future efforts should focus on empowering educators and students to actively challenge exclusionary practices. Providing resources, such as advocacy toolkits and professional development programs, can equip stakeholders with the skills and knowledge to promote inclusivity within restrictive environments. By fostering an educational culture that values diverse

perspectives, schools can better prepare students to navigate a complex and interconnected world while resisting the societal forces that perpetuate inequality.

Conclusion

The review of LGBTQ+ inclusive literature challenges in K-12 education reveals the deep entanglement of societal norms, institutional policies, and power dynamics in shaping what narratives are accessible to students. Censorship practices, often justified through public rhetoric and legislative mandates, reflect broader efforts to sustain dominant ideologies that marginalize non-normative identities. These exclusionary practices not only narrow intellectual freedom but also undermine the capacity of education to serve as a transformative space for critical thinking, empathy, and equity.

This synthesis highlights how current censorship practices are rooted in systemic efforts to reproduce societal norms, as theorized by Apple (1979), and reinforced through institutional mechanisms that regulate discourse, as described by Foucault (1980). At the same time, Kumashiro's (2002) call for antinormative pedagogy underscores the potential for education to disrupt these entrenched ideologies, creating space for marginalized voices to be heard and valued. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding the complexities of censorship and imagining alternative approaches to inclusivity in education.

The findings underscore the urgent need for research and action to address these challenges. Future efforts must prioritize policies that safeguard intellectual freedom while promoting inclusive curricula reflecting the diversity of human experience. Research should continue to explore how legislative and institutional decisions shape access to diverse perspectives, providing actionable insights for educators, students, and policymakers. Advocacy for these changes is essential to creating educational environments that equip students to critically engage with the complexities of the world and challenge exclusionary norms. By addressing the societal forces that underpin censorship and fostering a culture of inclusivity, we can uphold education's role as a catalyst for empathy, equity, and intellectual growth. These efforts are not only vital for promoting intellectual diversity but for empowering the next generation to navigate and contribute to an increasingly interconnected and multifaceted world.

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Comunidad, Solidaridad, Esperanza, Compasión, Y Empatía: A Hispanic Framework for Full–Range Social–Emotional Leadership in Education

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Abstract

The research literature demonstrates the value of social emotional learning (SEL) in promoting positive outcomes. For K–12 students, SEL is a key predictor of school readiness and success; it provides protective factors in managing experiences of trauma for children, youth, and adults. The integration of SEL as a part of trauma–sensitive teaching has become increasingly important for public schools, especially moving beyond the COVID–19 pandemic. Pandemic trauma impacts students, teachers, and parents, yet educators have no solid model for trauma–sensitive leadership. In the past seven years, Puerto Rico has endured the global pandemic sandwiched between two devastating hurricanes, Hurricane María (2017) and Hurricane Fiona (2022). Leaders in Puerto Rico are experts in resilience and crisis leadership. The author introduces a trauma–sensitive transformational leadership model, the Hispanic framework for transformational social–emotional leadership in education, grounded in five core cultural values of Hispanic culture: comunidad, solidaridad, esperanza, compasión, and empatía (community, solidarity, hope, compassion, and empathy).

Introduction

Social–emotional learning (SEL) refers to "the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, and related skills, attitudes, behaviors, and values"; these attributes help people "direct their thoughts, feelings, and actions in ways that enable them to succeed in school, work, and life" (Wallace, 2017, p. 14). The research literature is unequivocal in demonstrating the value of SEL in promoting positive outcomes. SEL influences attention, motivation, emotional self–regulation, stress management, and resilience. It allows people to build and maintain healthy relationships at home, in school, and at work. For K–12 public school students, SEL is a key predictor of school readiness and success (Durlak et al., 2022). SEL also provides protective factors in managing experiences of trauma for children and youth (i.e., students) and adults (i.e., teachers, staff, administrators). As the world moves beyond the global pandemic, educators are seeing acute needs for trauma–sensitive SEL, but there is no clear roadmap to guide them.

Today's education leaders must navigate their schools and districts through a complex interdependent web of trauma and stress, while simultaneously managing their own trauma and

stress. Educators must be trauma–sensitive crisis SEL leaders in a research void with an absence of frameworks or models for crisis education leadership. The first part of this paper explores trauma in the context of schools.

The author argues that the lived experiences of education leaders in Puerto Rico provide a tested model for trauma–sensitive crisis SEL leadership. In an earlier paper, she introduced the Hispanic framework for transformational leadership in education rooted in three core cultural values of Hispanic culture: *comunidad*, *solidaridad*, and *esperanza*—community, solidarity, and hope (Flores Caballero, 2025). In this advancement of that model, she introduces a trauma–sensitive transformational leadership model, the Hispanic framework for transformational social–emotional leadership in education; full-range refers to the inclusion of the full spectrum of leadership styles from transactional to transformational (Avolio & Bass, 2002. This model is, grounded in five core cultural values of Hispanic culture: *comunidad*, *solidaridad*, *esperanza, compasión,* and *empatía* (i.e., community, solidarity, hope, compassion, and empathy).

This research topic arose out of a deep concern for the students in public schools in America. This research noticed that despite the deep financial disparities between Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland, students in Puerto Rico fared better on many markers but especially in the area of SEL. Four research questions guided this research, rooted in Puerto Rican culture and identity, influenced by the multiple crises *Puertorriqueños* have endured over the past decade.

1. Research Question 1: What does social-emotional leadership look like in Puerto Rico?
2. Research Question 2: How has social-emotional leadership changed at the intersection of crisis leadership?
3. Research Question 3: What is the role of Hispanic culture and identity in Puerto Rico's trauma-informed SEL leadership?
4. Research Question 4: How can Puerto Rican education leadership provide a roadmap for educators on the U.S. mainland and around the world regarding trauma-informed SEL leadership, especially in the context of leading through crisis?

Trauma and the ACES Study

Before presenting a SEL framework, it is critical to briefly touch on several bodies of literature. There are many ways to look at trauma; the Hispanic framework uses the ACES study, a seminal study in the field of childhood trauma (Felitti et al., 1988). While traumatic events are a part of daily life experienced by most people throughout their lifespan, the incidence of trauma has escalated significantly in the United States attributable to the pandemic, economic instability, and the heightened racial reckoning and social unrest following the 2020 murder of George Floyd (APA, 2023). These events affect students, teachers, administrators, and parents; these events have disproportionate impact on marginalized communities and individuals (Felitti et al., 1988), including the marginalized people living in Puerto Rico (Amnesty International, 2023).

Educators cannot dismiss childhood trauma as a once–and–done event that children recover from because of their innate resilience and brain plasticity. More than two decades ago, groundbreaking work by Felitti et al. (1998) documented the long–term implications for adult health and well–being due to adverse childhood experiences, referred to as ACES (i.e., psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; violence against the mother; or living in a home with adults who are substance abusers, mentally ill, suicidal, or have been incarcerated). While most children experience one or two ACES, those who experienced four or more ACES have exponentially increased risk for poor

health outcomes as adults (i.e., smoking, obesity, heart disease, cancer, alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, depression, suicide attempts).

Moreover, Cénat and Dalexis (2020) warned that the pandemic may have exposed children to complex trauma (i.e., multiple ACES) including food insecurity, fear of family members getting ill or dying, death of loved ones, social isolation, and parental job loss. Multiple ACES manifest in symptoms including but not limited to anxiety; depression; emotional dysregulation; problems with physical, social, and intellectual development; increase in risk-taking, self–harm, and violent behaviors; and alcohol and drug use (Felitti et al., 1988). The children American schools educate today and for years to come, including those in Puerto Rico, will carry the imprint and burden of trauma. Schools must therefore be better prepared to teach America's children.

Additionally, pandemic trauma is not limited to students. Teachers also faced tremendous trauma during the pandemic, and those effects are still felt today. This is especially true for teachers in Puerto Rico. *Puertorriqueños* had not yet recovered emotionally or infrastructure-wise from Hurricane María, which hit in 2017, when the pandemic arrived in 2020; the impacts of the pandemic were exacerbated when Hurricane Fiona arrived mid-pandemic in 2022. Like students, teachers faced economic hardship, fear of family members getting ill or dying, death of loved ones, and social isolation. A third of teachers were subjected to abusive behavior at the hands of parents, principals, and districts (Kamenetz, 2022; Mills, 2022: Will, 2022). Leaders interviewed in this study reported that teachers were often forced to choose between keeping their jobs and personal and/or family well–being. Teachers were required to work in hostile environments where battles over mask–wearing and vaccine mandates raged. Like their students, teachers often struggled to manage the complex emotions that accompanied the social unrest and uncertainty attributable to the 2020 election and the murder of George Floyd (Dreyer et al., 2020; Eichstaedt, 2021; Onwuachi–Willig, 2021).

Teacher trauma has real and meaningful implications for schools and districts. Models for home–school partnerships were strained, at best, as remote learning conducted by traumatized teachers understandably left teachers with little to no capacity to provide additional support for their students. A study of 700 teachers and 300 school leaders in March 2021 revealed that 84.0% of teachers were more stressed compared to before the pandemic (Loewus, 2021). A Rand Corporation study (Steiner & Woo, 2021) reported that 25.0% of teachers were likely to leave teaching at the end of the school 2020–2021 year; Loewus (2021) reported that 54.0% of teachers were "somewhat" or "very likely" to leave their jobs by summer 2022.

Moreover, parents faced the same traumas and stressors as teachers while simultaneously being responsible for supporting their school–aged children. Gawlik and Melnyk (2022) found that 66.0% of parents met the clinical definition of parental burnout, meaning that parents were so exhausted by the pressures of caring for their children that parents surveyed reported they had nothing left to give. Grose (2022) used the word "despair" to characterize the mood and mindset of today's parents in America.

Trauma and Crisis in Puerto Rico, A Brief History

Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States and *Puertorriqueños* were granted full citizenship, backdated to 1899, by the McCarran-Walter Act of 1953 (U.S. Department of State, 2016). In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017 and the global pandemic, which began in March 2020, Puerto Rico has seen a steady decrease in population. Puerto Rico's population dropped 11.8% between 2010 and 2020 (Van Dam, 2022), now totaling approximately 2.6 million people,

roughly the size of Chicago. Puerto Rico has a single school district with about 250,000 students, comparable to Broward County, Florida.

Since 2000, Puerto Rico has been the site of 21 tropical storms and 20 hurricanes (Castro-Rivera & López-Marrero, 2019). In 2017, Hurricane María caused $90 billion in damages in Puerto Rico, second only in devastation to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Harvey in 2017 (Donevan & Zamora, 2022). Unlike states in the continental United States, that were flooded with more than a billion dollars in donations from their fellow Americans, Puerto Rican citizens received just $43 million (Della Cava, 2017). Although FEMA declared the entire island of Puerto Rico a disaster zone, some *Puertorriqueños* lived and taught school without power for as much as a year. Rather than being blessed with the *compasión* that schools and communities in the continental United States received following disasters, President Trump threw paper towels at *Puertorriqueños* at a news conference and told *Puertorriqueños* they should be "very proud" because the loss of life was small, unlike in a "real catastrophe" (Johnson & Parker, 2017). Five years later, Puerto Rico was still largely unrecovered (Hernández, 2022; Pérez Sánchez & Mazzei, 2022).

Like all people around the world, *Puertorriqueños* struggled through the pandemic, hampered by significant infrastructure challenges attributable to María. Then, in September 2022, Puerto Rico was hit by another major hurricane, Fiona. Puerto Rico's fragile infrastructure was disproportionately damaged and, in many ways, Puerto Rico reset its recovery back to 2017. However, unlike when María hit, in 2022 *Puertorriqueños* were dealing with the ramifications of a third chapter of individual, family, and community trauma due to the global pandemic.

Shortly after Fiona devastated Puerto Rico, Hurricane Ian hit the Gulf Coast of Florida and America, once again, forgot about *Puertorriqueños*, despite the fact that *Puertorriqueños* are full and equal U.S. citizens. Murdocca (2019) described these interactions between the dominant culture and marginalized peoples at the intersection of "humanitarian compassion" and "racial governance" rooted in colonialism. Amnesty International (2023) still categorizes the American citizens of Puerto Rico as a marginalized people. This constitutes another form of trauma, the trauma of indifference and exclusion from a country whose motto is *e pluribus unum*, out of many one; but not if you are *Puertorriqueño*.

Following seven years of constant crisis and challenge, students in Puerto Rico are woefully behind academically. Schools in Puerto Rico have students who are as much as three years behind academically. Sixth graders do not have third grade math skills. At eighth grade graduation, almost none of Puerto Rico's students had met the standards to win awards. These data were reported by the interview participants in this study. Attributable to Puerto Rico's marginalization by the U.S. government, including the U.S. Department of Education, statistical data commonly available for schools in the 50 United States are not available for Puerto Rico. While education leaders in Puerto Rico aim to integrate a data-driven culture (Kurilovas. 2020), the lack of resources and infrastructure hinders progress (Dodman et al., 2021).

Methodology

Participants in this qualitative research include nine district–level educators and principals in Puerto Rico who were interviewed by the author. Qualitative research was required given the researcher's desire to deeply explore the participants' lived experiences as educators in Puerto Rico as educators led schools through crises.

Participants in the 2012 (author name, 2012) and 2022 study were identified with purposeful sampling supported by snowball sampling, beginning with the author's personal network (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Six participants were interviewed in 2012 as a part of the author's dissertation research project; three were interviewed in 2022. The initial goal of the follow-up study was to re-interview all six of the original participants in 2022; however, this proved difficult as many had transitioned out of education leadership positions in Puerto Rico. One of the original six 2012 participants, a very senior education leader in Puerto Rico in 2022, participated in both interviews; two of the 2022 participants were new to the study.

Participants were interviewed using a semi–structured interview protocol based on the research literature. Social-emotional learning dimensions were explored using the Wallace Foundation framework (2017), described below. To protect the identities of the participants, as many of them are prohibited from speaking publicly, the participants speak in a collective voice as educators of Puerto Rico, a form of *testimonio*.

This research is grounded in the methodology of *testimonio*, a research practice rooted in Hispanic culture. *Testimonio* is the "verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future" (Huber, 2009, p. 644). As previously stated, Amnesty International (2023) still classifies Puerto Rico and *Puertorriqueños* as marginalized peoples. Using *testimonio* was a necessity in light of the oppression faced by many senior leaders in Puerto Rico who fear of reprisals from the very system that oppresses them. *Testimonio* constitutes a powerful form of trauma repair that begins with deconstructing the veil of invisibility, being fully seen and being deeply listened. *Testimonio* as methodology has the potential to manifest healing, reimagining America's social systems to serve everyone equally. Its power is rooted in anonymity, giving collective voice to the marginalized. English translations of these brave participants' authentic voices, spoken as *testimonios,* are provided for non–Spanish speakers and Spanish language learners.

The conceptual model for this study drew on two models for leadership: full–range leadership (Antonakis et al, 2003; Avolio & Bass, 2002) and the Wallace Foundation's (2013) framework for transformational leadership in education. These two models were used to contextualize the qualitative data collected through two sets of longitudinal data (i.e., 2012 and 2022). The new leadership framework presented in this article has its roots in these two models, applied through the lens of Hispanic culture.

The Role of *Comunidad, Familia,* and *Esperanza* in Hispanic Culture

Before exploring SEL leadership in Puerto Rico, it is important to contextualize this research in Hispanic culture. Unlike dominant White culture, which is rooted in individualism and competition, Hispanic culture is rooted in *comunidad* and *familia* (Guiffrida et al., 2012). An interview participant put this eloquently in 2022:

Además de eso en términos de la comunidad nosotros gracias a Dios mantenemos nuestra comunidad completamente integrada a la escuela. Nosotros verdad somos más que nada un apostolado. Nosotros les servimos a la comunidad todo el tiempo. Estamos aquí para servir. Somos una agencia de servicio. El día que no podamos servir tenemos que cerrar las escuelas. Así que nosotros estamos aquí para ayudar a todo el que viene.

Translation: In terms of the community, thank God we keep our community fully integrated into the school. We really are more than anything an apostolate. We serve the community all the time. We are here to serve. We are a service agency. The day we cannot serve we have to close the schools. So, we are here to help everyone who comes.

In Puerto Rico, hierarchy is replaced by *comunidad* (Rivera Pichardo et al, 2022)*. Puertor-riqueños* center school in *comunidad*, where everyone shares responsibility. This contrasts with most mainland U.S. schools where parents and community leaders set expectations for schools, often meeting resistance or resentment from educators (Stacey et al., 2022). Unlike Puerto Rico's neighbors on the U.S. mainland, Puerto Rican culture and a shared commitment to *comunidad* do not allow *Puertorriqueños* to turn a blind eye and a cold shoulder to the suffering of fellow *Puer-torriqueños*. Furthermore, *Puertorriqueños* see this shared responsibility as a commitment to building a foundation for future generations:

La escuela es de todos. Yo les digo a los padres que la escuela es del Estado, pero ustedes tienen que cuidarla porque sus hijos vienen aquí. Es como si fuera tuyo. Usted es responsable de lo que sucede aquí. Y les digo, somos pájaros de paso, pero la escuela sigue aquí, entonces ustedes tienen una responsabilidad.

Translation: The school belongs to everyone. I tell parents that the school belongs to the State, but you have to take care of it because your children come here. It is as if it were yours. You are responsible for what happens here. And I tell you, we are birds of passage, but the school is still here, so you have a responsibility (2012 interview).

"*Aves de paso.*" Birds of passage. This is *Puertorriqueños'* metaphor for *esperanza*, hope for the future. *Puertorriqueños* are building the foundation for education for future generations. Educators see parents as "transcendental" because teachers "no lo puede todo y si no hay ese apoyo de parte de la familia. . . Y esos valores que nosotros le inculcamos que los padres es la base están en la casa" (translation: cannot do everything and if there is not that support from the family. . . And those values that we instilled in them, that the parents are the base, [they are the ones that] are in the house.).

Full–Range Trauma–Sensitive SEL Leadership in Puerto Rico

Social–emotional leadership in Puerto Rico is grounded in two models for leadership: full–range leadership (Antonakis et al, 2003; Avolio & Bass, 2002) and the Wallace Foundation's (2013) framework for transformational leadership in education. These two models integrate and map onto five core values of leadership deeply rooted in the Hispanic culture and identity:

- *Comunidad* (Community): *Puertorriqueños* live, work, and play in a single interde-pendent network of people who value family and society over individualism, hierarchy, and personal power.
- *Solidaridad* (Solidarity): Community is grounded in a collective sense of responsibility for all members such that *Puertorriqueños* help each other, share resources, and often willingly yield individual rights in service to the good of the whole.
- *Esperanza* (Hope): Life may be hard, but *Puertorriqueños* never yield to despair. A courageous, resilient people, *Puertorriqueños* have overcome centuries of oppression and marginalization. *Puertorriqueños* will continue to fight for a better future for our grandchildren's grandchildren.

- *Compasión* (Compassion): *Puertorriqueños* have concern for the suffering and misfortunes of others, including family, friends, colleagues, members of our community, and people who are strangers but with whom we co–exist in the *comunidad del mundo* (global community). *Puertorriqueños* will take action to help when we see others in need.
- *Empatía* (Empathy): *Puertorriqueños* are able to put ourselves in the shoes of others, even those quite unlike us, to understand and share their feelings.

These values were central to the development of the model presented here. First, these values were mapped onto the frameworks for full–range leadership (Antonakis et al, 2003; Avolio & Bass, 2002) and the Wallace Foundation's (2017) model for transformational leadership in education to create the Hispanic framework for transformational leadership in education (Flores Caballero, 2025). The Hispanic framework for transformational leadership in education was then aligned with the Wallace (2021) Framework for Social–Emotional Competency. This analysis, grounded in the interview data from 2012 and 2022, culminated in the integration of these four frameworks into the Hispanic framework for full–range SEL leadership in education. In the section that follows, the author lays out the evidence from the interviews with education leaders demonstrating this framework in action.

Framework-Building Stage 1: Full–Range Leadership in Puerto Rico

Transformational leadership at the intersection of Hispanic culture has barely been explored (Richardson & Loubier, 2008) and only one widely read work of scholarship explores this important issue in the context of K–12 education using the methodology of *testimonios* (del Monte, 2022). Transactional leadership is defined as leadership that uses structure, control, rewards, and penalties to achieve organizational goals (Bass & Avolio, 2012). Laissez-faire leadership is a lack of leadership, where the leader avoids responsibility and fails to intervene (Bass & Avolio, 2012). Transformational leadership aims to improve follower performance and develop follower potential using motivation and inspiration in service of individual and organizational growth (Bass & Avolio, 2012). Full-range leadership looks at how skillful leaders may shift their leadership styles based on situational needs. For example, transactional leadership often lends itself well to crisis situation; laissez-faire leadership works effectively with highly motivated, skilled teams.

Avolio and Bass (2002) proposed a "full range of leadership" model, a continuum between transactional and transformational leadership; Antonakis et al. (2003) used nine attributes unique to full–range leadership from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (i.e., trust, integrity, motivation, innovation, consideration, rewards, deviations, passivity, involvement). Three core values of Hispanic culture that guide leadership in K–12 education in Puerto Rico align strongly with three of these attributes (see Figure 1).

Additionally, the Wallace Foundation framework (2013) focuses on four key leadership attributes for K–12 leaders, grounded in transformational leadership. This leadership framework supports the interpretation of *testimonios* in speaking to full–range leadership. The three core values in Hispanic culture map onto the model for Hispanic leadership in K–12 education as laid out more fully in the author's earlier paper (Flores Caballero, 2025).

Figure 1: *Alignment of Existing Leadership Models and Hispanic Leadership Attributes in Education*

Hispanic Core Value	Attributes in the Wallace (2013) Framework for Transformational Leadership	Relevant Core Attributes of Full–Range Leaders (Antonakis et al., 2003)
Comunidad	Build a productive school climate	Increasing psychological safety by building trust and acting with integrity
Solidaridad	Facilitate collaboration and professional learning communities	Motivating, coaching, and developing others in a way that strengthens cohesion, commitment, performance, and retention
Esperanza	Manage personnel and resources strategically Engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers	Working with intentionality to build a stronger foundation for the future through innovation

Framework-Building Stage 2: Social–Emotional Leadership in Puerto Rico

The Wallace Foundation framework (2021) uses six areas of SEL competency for K–12 leaders (listed below). The five core values of Hispanic culture map onto this framework as well as the Wallace Foundation (2017) framework for transformational leadership in education and the models for full–range leadership (Antonakis et al, 2003; Avolio & Bass, 2002). This is shown in Figure 2.

1. Cognitive skills: attention control, inhibitory control, memory of work and planning skills, cognitive flexibility, thinking critically
2. Emotional skills: knowledge and emotional expression, emotional regulation of behavior, empathy and perspective taking
3. Social skills: understanding social cues, problem solving conflicts, behavior cooperation, prosocial behavior
4. Values: ethical values, performance values, civic values, values Intellectuals
5. Perspectives: optimism, gratitude, openness, enthusiasm
6. Identity: self–awareness, purpose, self–efficacy, mindset growth, self esteem

Figure 2: *Alignment of Existing SEL Models and Hispanic Leadership Attributes in Education*

Hispanic Core Value	Hispanic Framework for Transformational Social-Emotional Leadership	Wallace (2021) Framework for Social–Emotional Competency
Comunidad	Build a productive school climate: Increase psychological safety by building trust and acting with integrity	Cognitive skills: attention control, inhibitory control
Solidaridad	Facilitate collaboration and professional learning communities: Motivate coach, and develop others in a way that strengthens cohesion, commitment, performance, and retention	Social skills: understanding social cues, problem solving conflicts, behavior cooperation, prosocial behavior Values: ethical values, civic values Perspectives—optimism, enthusiasm
Esperanza	Engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers: Work to intentionality to build a stronger foundation for the future through innovation Manage personnel and resources strategically	Cognitive skills: memory of work and planning skills, cognitive flexibility, thinking critically Values: performance values, values intellectuals Identity: purpose, self–efficacy, mindset growth, self esteem
Compasión	Holding concern for the suffering and misfortunes of others Taking action to help	Perspectives—gratitude, openness Identity: self–awareness
Empatía	Putting oneself in the shoes of others to understand and share their feelings	Emotional skills: knowledge and emotional expression, emotional regulation of behavior, empathy and perspective taking

Trauma–Sensitive Leadership in Puerto Rico

In a review of two decades of research, Thomas et al. (2019) reported that although there is a robust interdisciplinary literature on trauma–sensitive practices in schools, work with educators is "underexamined." The existing research focuses on three areas, none of which directly address trauma–sensitive pedagogy and practice: (a) building knowledge and understanding on the nature and impacts of trauma; (b) shifting perspectives and building emotionally healthy school cultures; and (c) self–care for educators. Researchers concluded that there is not a single dominant framework for trauma–sensitive practices in schools. The researcher argues that this is a gap in the literature that educators in Puerto Rico are well–positioned to address. Not because *Puertor-*

riqueños disproportionately hold advanced degrees in education or counseling but because educators in Puerto Rico have lived with trauma and educated children with trauma for seven continuous years.

Harper et al. (2020) argues that the realities of the pandemic demanded that "educators move swiftly to adopt new ways of teaching, advising, and mentoring" in response to the pandemic by adopting a "trauma–sensitive approach to education and academic administration." Harper et al. (2020) recognized that trauma–sensitive teaching is "dynamic and may be influenced by contextual factors, including "intersectional traumas and stressors that may occur at multiple socioecological levels: pandemic–related trauma and stressors; other forms of individual, group, community, or mass trauma and stressors; historical trauma; and current general life stressors" (p. 17).

Minahan (2019) argued that students can't learn "if they don't feel safe, known, and cared for within their schools." She argued that "small changes in classroom interactions can make a big difference for traumatized students," fostering safety and increasing the readiness to learn. Small changes include but are not limited to:

1. "Expect Unexpected Responses": Contextualize student reactions rather than taking them personally. This helps to relieve the heightened vigilance and ensuing fatigue teachers of traumatized students often experience.
2. "Employ Thoughtful Interactions": Students with trauma need to be treated with kindness, to help them de–escalate their reactions and behaviors.
3. "Be Specific About Relationship Building": Teachers need to work diligently to build trust with students with trauma so that students feel safe and teachers can become partners in relieving trauma, improving behavior, and, ultimately, increasing learning.
4. "Promote Predictability and Consistency": Students with trauma are more sensitive to unexpected change; preparing students for change, where possible, will help them to self–regulate. Traumatized students also crave attention, good or bad; teachers should provide "predictable positive attention."
5. "Teach Strategies to Change the Channel": Students with trauma often focus on the negative, causing them to engage in disruptive behaviors. Teachers should give students the opportunity to take breaks (i.e., switch the channel) to break the negative spiraling.
6. "Give Supportive Feedback to Reduce Negative Thinking": Students with trauma often amplify negative feedback. Teachers should be self–aware of their facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and words; teachers should use affirmations before delivering negative feedback.
7. "Create Islands of Competence": Recognize students for what they do well and create classroom opportunities for them to shine.
8. "Limit Exclusionary Practices": Have empathy. Validate what students are feeling. Be aware of how common classroom management practices may be experienced differently by students with trauma (e.g., ignoring bad behavior, promising a reward for a goal that may not be reached).

Although the literature on trauma–sensitive practices in public schools is limited, there are clear factors that support the education of students with trauma. These factors map onto the Hispanic framework for transformational, trauma–sensitive, social–emotional leadership as shown in Figure 3, below.

The Framework in Action

This section shows how this framework guided education leaders in Puerto Rico as *Puertorriqueños* who had survived two devastating hurricanes (i.e., Maria, Fiona) and the pandemic over the past six years. To be clear, the framework emerged out of the practices of educators in Puerto Rico; the author has now codified these values and mindsets into a framework that she strongly believes is transferable for other education leaders in the United States, and perhaps globally.

In essence, the framework's foundation in the five core Hispanic values positions these values as interventions. While the concept of values as interventions is novel, these values, deeply integrated into Hispanic culture and Latino ways of being, manifest in daily practices. Identifying these values, mindsets, and practices makes them accessible for other education leaders to adopt this framework in response to urgent needs for trauma-sensitive, social-emotional leadership.

Figure 3: *The Hispanic Framework for Transformational Social–Emotional Leadership in Education*

Transformational Leadership	Emotional Competencies	Trauma–Sensitive Practices
Comunidad		
Build a productive school climate: Increase psychological safety by building trust and acting with integrity	Cognitive skills: attention control, inhibitory control	• Build solid knowledge about the wide–ranging signs, symptoms, and impacts of trauma • Shifting perspectives to incorporate building emotionally healthy school cultures into programs, policies, and practices
Solidaridad		
Facilitate collaboration and professional learning communities: Motivate coach, and develop others in a way that strengthens cohesion, commitment, performance, and retention	Social skills: understanding social cues, problem solving conflicts, behavior cooperation, prosocial behavior Values: ethical values, civic values Perspectives: optimism, enthusiasm	• Build intentional relationships that promote psychological safety, build trust, provide support, and encourage collaboration • Work to prevent retraumatization
Esperanza		
Manage personnel and resources strategically Engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers: Work to intentionality to build a stronger foundation for the future through innovation	Cognitive skills: memory of work and planning skills, cognitive flexibility, thinking critically Values: performance values, values intellectuals Identity: purpose, self–efficacy, mindset growth, self esteem	• Encourage teacher self–care • Give students empowerment, voice, and choice • Respect cultural, historical, and gender issues • Promote predictability and consistency, providing positive attention • Create islands of competence to build self–efficacy

Compasión		
	Perspectives: gratitude, openness Identity: self–awareness	• Employ thoughtful interactions, treating students with kindness • Give supportive feedback that amplifies the positive and counterbalances the negative
Empatía		
	Emotional skills: knowledge and emotional expression, emotional regulation of behavior, empathy and perspective taking	• Expect the unexpected • Contextualize negative reactions • Help students "change the channel" • Limit exclusionary practices

Again, this challenges the dominant canon of what one can or cannot call an intervention. An intervention is simply the act of intervening. As educational researchers and practitioners have seen from the rise of improvement science in education (Bryk et al., 2015), interventions can be simple, free, and powerful. Grounding education in core values and SEL is, in fact, a valid and validated intervention.

Comunidad (Community)

Puertorriqueños live interdependently with people, prioritizing family and society over individualism, hierarchy, and personal power. This is central to how *Puertorriqueños* build positive climates for learning in Puerto Rico's schools, grounded in honoring our word and building trusting relationships that create a sense of psychological safety. This supports students' cognitive skills such as focus and impulse control; students learn to evaluate their behavior with an eye to how it affects peers, teachers, and the wider school community (Pantiwati & Husamah, 2017). Education leaders in Puerto Rico have worked to expand educator's knowledge around trauma and to prioritize it in programming and policies.

Psychological safety has been a significant issue for education leaders in Puerto Rico over the past six years. Leaders and teachers have noticed emotional changes reflected in education. After Hurricane María, parents in Puerto Rico struggled to manage those changes and it was very difficult; these changes became, as one leader interviewed reported, "very, very radical when we had the pandemic." Many children were living in hostile home environments, influenced by poverty, parental stress, and domestic abuse; this affected their self–esteem. As education leaders, grounded in *comunidad*, *Puertorriqueños* stretched to fill the gaps. Principals and teachers addressed needs that they as educators would not normally be required to fill, needs which peers on the mainland typically decline to address. Teachers made home visits when children were not in school. Teachers and principals worked to find food for families who could not afford to eat. Teachers counseled mothers facing domestic abuse. For *Puertorriqueños*, this is what it means to have *empatía* and to stand in *solidaridad* with your community. Thoughts and prayers must be put into action. One leader expressed this in an interview in 2022:

Y entonces si los nenes se ponían triste por que si el ambiente en el…un nene que esta triste, que siente que nadie lo quiere. No es lo mismo cuando están aquí maestra me abraza, la maestra me da un beso. Ayer me pregunto como estoy, para donde voy. La Señora del comedor quiere saber si yo comí. "Mira nene por que no comiste." Tu sabes todas esas cosas y atenciones que se dan aquí, pero muchas veces en los hogares no se dan por que hay mucha hostilidad.

Translation: If the children were sad because of the environment at home…a child who is sad, who feels that nobody loves him. It's not the same when they're here. The teacher hugs me, the teacher gives me a kiss. Yesterday I wondered how I am, where I am going. The lady in the dining room wants to know if I ate. "Look, child, why didn't you eat?" You know all those things and attentions that are given here, but many times in homes they are not given because there is a lot of hostility.

The media has reported an epidemic of poor behavior in schools on the mainland (Bokat–Lindell, 2022; Mailler & Pallaro, 2022). In contrast, children in Puerto Rico come to school and, as a 2022 interview participant reported, "want to have friends, they want to share with friends, they want to help that one, if one cries. All this really has been a tremendous boom. And principals and teachers have seen fewer behavior situations now than before. Much less." The positive climate and sense of *comunidad* has influenced forgiveness among students. In the isolation of the pandemic, students longed for connection. Even elementary students will work now to solve problems among themselves:

Yo te perdono, no pasó nada. Se acabo yo te perdoné. No Missi ya yo lo perdoné. Ya no hay problema. Pero es porque estuvieron quizás tanto tiempo sin tener ese contacto que entonces ellos se protegen de ese contacto que lo quieren mantener. De esa relacion de amistad con el otro por que antes no la tenían. Por que estaban separados.

Translation: I forgive you, nothing happened. It's over, I forgive you. No Missi, I already forgave him. No problem anymore. But it is because they were perhaps so long without having that contact that they protect…that contact that they want to maintain, that friendly relationship with the other, because they didn't have it before. Because they were separated. (2022 interview)

The school–based interventions educators in Puerto Rico used have clearly had a positive impact.

Solidaridad (Solidarity)

Puertorriqueños live in a community collectively sharing responsibility for the well–being of everyone. Clearly supported in the 2012 and 2022 interviews, *Puertorriqueños* help each other through crisis and share resources, even when these resources are meager. *Puertorriqueños* have a worldview based on personal sacrifice when necessary to ensure the good of the community. This is central to how education leaders facilitate collaboration in schools and why educators are open to professional learning communities. Leadership is based on motivating, coaching, and developing others in a way that strengthens school cohesion, commitment, academic performance, and employee retention.

Solidaridad speaks to ethical and civic values as well as prosocial behaviors and cooperation for the greater good. The education leaders in 2012 and 2022 spoke to the need to work to help students understand social cues, solve problems, and resolve conflicts. Educators spoke to optimism and enthusiasm, a form of supporting collective well–being. Building intentional relationships that promote psychological safety, build trust, provide support, and encourage collaboration were clearly a part of Puerto Rican culture and crisis leadership (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020).

The hurricanes and the pandemic put tremendous financial pressures on students and their families. Teachers, especially in 2022, reported that older students were often frustrated; their attitudes had changed and principals reported bullying, something educators had not seen in 2012. The education leaders interviewed in this research reported tragic situations in 2022 where girls

were pulled into the world of prostitution, sometimes by their own families. This was something *Puertorriqueños* had never experienced, and helping the girls was very critical. As education leaders, *Puertorriqueños* rallied in *solidaridad* on behalf of students. Principals refused to reject students or their families, or to deny help.

Volver a retomar esa confianza en los jóvenes con su familia ha costado. Nos ha costado. Imagínate nosotros viviéndolo acá. Tratando de salvar una vida. Y déjame decirte que logramos salvar esa vida y se graduó. Está terminando ahora para ser enfermera. Es una historia de éxito.

Translation: Regaining that confidence in young people with their families has been difficult. It has cost us. Imagine us living it here. Trying to save a life. And let me tell you, we managed to save that life and she graduated. She is finishing up now to be a nurse. It is a success story (2022 interview).

This was true for *Puertorriqueños*, as a *comunidad* working together in *solidaridad*, but it is not true elsewhere. The Pew Research Center (Dimock & Wike, 2021) argued that the pandemic has widened an already divided America; in the 2020 presidential election, 90.0% of members of both major political parties were "worried" that the election of the opposing party's president would do "lasting harm" to America. Despite all the challenges and traumas *Puertorriqueños* have faced, which could have divided us, we nevertheless work together and *Puertorriqueños* take care of each other. *Puertorriqueños* wonder what would be possible, as one interview participant asked, if "the whole world was committed, fought, if they had faith in the young." Here the interview participant spoke to a true global commitment to children, fighting for needs of children everywhere, and believing in their capacity to achieve their full potential. As education leaders in Puerto Rico, *Puertorriqueños* do not give up on youth like educators on the mainland. Education leaders in Puerto Rico wonder what might be possible if other educators emulated our philosophy.

Education leaders in Puerto Rico also worked to support teachers in the crisis situations they managed, built on deep foundations of trust. Teachers know they can speak freely to principals and other senior administrators, as demonstrated by an interview participant in 2022:

Muchos de ellos…han podido ventilar situaciones que habían sido opacadas por María, que habían sido opacadas por la pandemia y han salido a la luz ahora. Gracias a la confianza que le está dando el personal interdisciplinario, los maestros y la escuela. Y eso es bueno porque hay muchas cosas.

Translation: Many of them…have been able to air situations that had been overshadowed by María, which had been overshadowed by the pandemic, and have now come to light. Thanks to the trust that the interdisciplinary staff, teachers and the school are giving him. And that's good because there are many things.

When things were particularly challenging, principals would act as *Puertorriqueños* first—principals would cook! In White culture, cooking is not considered a part of leadership but for *Puertorriqueños* cooking is essential, tied to Hispanic values of *comunidad* and *solidaridad*.

Aquí cuando es verano, cocino para todos ellos. En verano siempre comen los que vienen a arreglar los pasillos y los demás. Porque siempre me acostumbro a ellos y el personal no docente come todos los días porque yo cocino para todos.

Translation: Here when it's summer, I cook for all of them. In summer always those who come to fix the halls and others eat. Because I always get used to them and the non–teaching staff eat every day because I cook for everyone (2022 interview).

But cooking alone does not solve the problems of education leaders in Puerto Rico. Like many schools, Puerto Rico has problems with retention (Holmes et al., 2019); but challenges were made worse by the lingering influence of Hurricane María. Many *Puertorriqueños* simply left the

island and moved to the mainland after María. But our sense of *solidaridad* caused the remaining *Puertorriqueños* to lean in, despite tremendous pressures. Leaders worked with teachers who were underperforming but had competence; principals extended their contracts and worked to help teachers improve. That was another way *Puertorriqueños* supported each other in the face of adversity.

Esperanza (Hope)

Life may be hard in Puerto Rico, but *Puertorriqueños* never yield to despair. *Puertorriqueños* are courageous, resilient people who have overcome decades and centuries of oppression and marginalization. *Puertorriqueños* will continue to fight for a better future for our grandchildren's grandchildren. This is a mindset that guides Puerto Rican leadership as we manage people and resources as well as how we engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers (Kuo et al., 2020). *Puertorriqueños* work with intentionality to build a strong foundation for the future where we leave no child behind. Especially in times of crisis, this requires flexibility, adaptability, risk–taking and innovation (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023).

For Puerto Rico's students, *esperanza* helps them develop their identity, to find purpose in life, and to embrace a growth mindset (Lee & Jang, 2018). Education leaders want students to feel empowerment, to have a voice, and to make positive choices. *Esperanza* fosters the valuing of learning and academic achievement; it supports them in developing healthy self–esteem and a sense of self–efficacy. *Puertorriqueños* respect our shared heritage and our differences. While the myriad crises *Puertorriqueños* have faced over the past seven years have challenged us, these challenges have also provided ample opportunity to learn to adapt and demonstrate resilience. Students learn to master cognitive flexibility and critical thinking as well as planning skills in our constantly changing lives. *Puertorriqueños* use hardships to create not "a floating island of garbage," as Tony Hinchcliffe quipped to cheering crowds at the Republican rally at Madison Square Gardens in October 2024 (McCausland & Hayes, 2024), but an "island of competence" (2022 interview). Despite continuing marginalization, the education leaders of Puerto Rico find power in *esperanza.*

Even before two devastating hurricanes and the ongoing pandemic, *Puertorriqueños* centered hope for our future on the whole child and the whole person. The philosophy in Puerto Rico, as shared by an interview participant in 2012, is that "we have a lifetime to learn, but to deal with emotional situations it is at the moment they arise;" we have "always worked it that way and we have given it a lot of importance" (2012). Today, we work "so that a whole being is achieved." This educator continued, describing how this mindset makes it possible for students to "manage to do critical thinking when they face a situation, [decide this] is what you are going to do, how you are going to handle it, how they are going to face it."

As crisis leaders with a focus on SEL, *Puertorriqueños* refuse to give up. A decade ago, in the earlier 2012 interviews, a participant recognized that even after a hurricane "all the good that happens in public schools. And this author believes that with a lot of motivation. . . excellence is possible." While peers on the mainland struggle with motivation and behavioral issues (Prothero, 2023), in Puerto Rico, leading through crisis grounded in *esperanza*:

El entusiasmo ha aumentado. . . los nenes están mas contentos. Nosotros tenemos el after school y los nenes se quieren quedar y los nenes no se quieren ir, los nenes lloran cuando les toca irse por la tarde. Por que ellos no se quieren ir.

Translation: Enthusiasm has increased. . . the children are happier. We have the after school [program] and the kids want to stay and the kids don't want to leave. The kids cry when they have to leave in the afternoon. Because they don't want to go (2022 interview).

Furthermore, with a strong foundation of *esperanza* cultivated by education leaders and teachers, these experiences, good or bad, help students grow and get to know each other better. It supports the development of *compasión* and *empatía* (Lee & Jang, 2018). Teachers and principals in Puerto Rico met students where students were; educators were surprised because as educators they thought they knew what students were capable of doing; educators in Puerto Rico admitted "maybe before we didn't have an idea. Perhaps we underestimated them."

Puertorriqueños have also not forgotten the critical role played by teachers. As testing days approached, teachers' stress and anxiety grew out of control; teachers had already been through so much. One principal in 2022 reported that staff just began to scream. This leader took teachers to a free program for aromatherapy; teachers started doing meditation and yoga. This leader reported, "Y poco a poco los fuimos estabilizando, pero fue un buen trabajo, muy duro" (translation: And little by little educators stabilized them, but it was a good job, very hard.). With simple acts, educational leaders were able to provide support and address unhealed trauma (Hough, 2014).

Compasión (Compassion)

Puertorriqueños hold deep concern for the suffering and misfortunes of others, including family, friends, colleagues, members of our community, and people who are strangers but with whom we co–exist in the *comunidad del mundo* (global community). This comes through strongly in both sets of interviews. *Puertorriqueños* are open to helping when we see others in need, and we are grateful for what we have. *Puertorriqueños* focus on kindness and supporting each other. *Puertorriqueños* work to counteract all the negative messages we receive. This focus on others helps students develop self–awareness and constantly position self in the community (Rosser et al., 2023).

During the pandemic, there was a shooting in one of the interview participant's communities that was shared online in real time during a Zoom class. The principal described how the teacher could feel the shots through the screen and the online student was screaming, "They are shooting, they are shooting." And the teacher told the boy calmly that the two of them were connected. The teacher reassured the terrified boy, "It's okay, it's okay. I'm with you, you're not alone. Don't go near the window, don't go out the door. Are you on the floor?" The boy replied, "Yes, I am on the floor." The teacher reminded him, "Stay there, stay there. I'm watching you, you're not alone. Stay there." The principal interviewed admitted that there are situations that you never think that you will experience. The leader acknowledged of the teacher, "I was surprised by her cold blood [calmness]; I will never ever forget it. Her cold blood to tell him it's okay."

This story illustrates the deep sense of *comunidad* and *solidaridad Puertorriqueños* have as Latinos. The ability of this teacher to show such *compasión* and *empatía* in a moment of crisis and peril for a student, and the support from her leader her, is a testament to practicing the values of *Puertorriqueño* culture such that in a moment of danger these values are second nature and inspire appropriate action.

Empatía (Empathy)

Puertorriqueños put ourselves in the shoes of others, even those quite unlike us, to understand and share the feelings of others. This necessitates a wide range of emotional skills, from recognizing emotional expression in self and others to emotional self–regulation of behavior to perspective taking (Rosser et al., 2023).

As education leaders and *Puertorriqueños*, our greatest strength, as one leader described it in 2012, is that we are "very human leaders" who can "handle the human part of the human being." This education leader continued, noting that education leaders recognized that "we all have needs, that we all have situations. . . to the extent that you work with people in such a human way, being empathetic, then that person feels towards you. . . a bond." This longstanding practice of *empatía* has served *Puertorriqueños* well. *Puertorriqueños* try to expect the unexpected, and to help students and staff put bad experiences into perspective. *Puertorriqueños* try to make everyone feel included, listened, and supported.

Even before the hurricanes and the pandemic, *Puertorriqueños* struggled with the impact of poverty and violence in our communities. Educators knew what students were going through, but it was not easy. As education leaders, we try to help teachers find teachable moments.

No es fácil para un niño de primer grado [cuando] llega la policía y rompen todo en tu casa. Y, mañana, vendré [a la escuela] y traeré un policía y les diré [a los estudiantes] "el policía es tu amigo". En otras palabras, eso crea un conflicto en la mente [del estudiante], porque el policía rompió todo en mi casa. Pero a la vez me dicen, mira, el policía es bueno. Y hay cosas que uno tiene que manejar y son más importantes que enseñarles a leer y escribir. Y siempre, siempre hemos cuidado esa parte emocional del alumno por encima de todas las cosas.

Translation It is not easy for a first grader [when] the police arrive and they break everything in your house. And, tomorrow, I will come [to school] and bring a policeman and tell [students] "the policeman is your friend." In other words, that creates a conflict in [the student's] mind, because the policeman broke everything in my house. But at the same time, they tell me, look, the policeman is good. And there are things that one has to manage and are more important than teaching them to read and write. And we have always, always taken care of that emotional part of the student above all things (2012 interview).

Unlike what *Puertorriqueños* hear from the mainland (Baiano, 2022), "empathy has improved after the pandemic; people are more empathetic with each other. People learned to live as a team. People learned that if I don't unite, I won't get ahead" (2022 interview). As *Puertorriqueños* were stretched beyond our limits, our deeply rooted value of *empatía,* combined with a deep commitment to *comunidad*, acted to amplify our ability to cope (Rosser et al., 2023).

Creating the Future Leaders of Puerto Rico

Like many Latinos, *Puertorriqueños* are storytellers. And the stories of our children, like the boy in the middle of a shootout, in many ways illustrate the core values *Puertorriqueños* embrace as education leaders. Stories serve as a demonstration of how *Puertorriqueños* role model and pass down these values to our young people. It is *una cuenta de esperanza* (a story of hope) showing how the Hispanic framework creates "*aves de paso*" (birds of passage).

Even after two hurricanes and a pandemic, *Puertorriqueños* have been able to keep our children tethered to a sense of *esperanza* for the future. One interview participant prepared an ethics project for middle school students, critical to our value of *solidaridad*. She invited the

mayor, who began to tell a story of going to summer camp at the botanical garden. A child, an eighth grade student, interrupted the mayor and asked him, "How are you going to work construction in this city?" Then the boy asked the mayor, "What are you going to do with the roads of this city?" This young teen was showing a deep sense of *comunidad*, taking on personal responsibility to challenge authority of the infrastructure needs he saw in his community.

The devastation, disruption, and trauma of two hurricanes and a pandemic have made Puerto Rican children stronger and more fully self–expressed. Students have a sense of self–efficacy, that they can take control, because students are tired of everything that has happened. Despite it all, students have a strong sense of *esperanza* for their future and the future of their communities. Academically, these students are using critical thought to articulate social commentary:

Yo tengo derecho a saber que pasó en mi país. Yo tengo derecho a saber como este político va a trabajar con los problemas de este país. Que me afectan a mí. Y el despertar de ese pensamiento crítico y de esa conciencia crítica de que yo pertenezco aquí y que tu estas ahí porque nosotros te pusimos. Tu nos tienes que dar cuentas a nosotros. Tu nos tienes que decir que tú vas a hacer con nosotros. No cabe duda de que después de la Pandemia estamos viendo un nuevo liderazgo que se está levantando solo. Solo sin que nadie le tenga que decir lo que tiene que hacer, a retar, a protestar y a decir lo que tiene que decir.

Translation: I have the right to know what happened in my country. I have the right to know how this politician is going to work with the problems of this country. That affects me. And the awakening of that critical thought and critical awareness, that I belong here and that you are there because we put you there. You have to account for us. You have to tell us what you are going to do with us. There is no doubt that after the pandemic we are seeing a new leadership that is rising on its own. Alone without anyone having to tell him what to do, to challenge, to protest and to say what he has to say (2022 Interview).

This child, as a young teenager, "had the courage to stand up and say what he thinks," to speak truth to power.

In this era of social unrest and a renewed intensity in the call for equality and social justice, Puerto Rican educators wondered in 2022 what would happen "if all of our students begin to question themselves?" Another principal in 2022 asserted that "there is no doubt that what happened after María and the pandemic has made us begin to emerge as leaders. Because we want to do something. Because we don't want to live this again."

Lessons from Puerto Rico for Transformational Social–Emotional Leadership

Puertorriqueños, through trial and sheer determination, have worked to keep Puerto Rico's schools open and to shape them as places of safety and learning. Education leaders have done this because *Puertorriqueños* lead, teach, and live rooted in our five core values: *comunidad, solidaridad, esperanza, compasión,* and *empatía.* While these values are particularly strong in Hispanic culture, these values are by no means limited to Hispanic culture. While we differentiate ourselves as *Puertorriqueños* and educators, any educator can embrace these values. It comes down to a matter of commitment.

While many education leaders on the U.S. mainland advocate for social–emotional learning, educators are still unclear how to build a culture and climate that supports it. The Hispanic framework for transformational social–emotional leadership in education provides a proven roadmap for navigating education leadership using a trauma-sensitive approach. This author be-

lieves that the cultural differences between *Puertorriqueños* and our fellow citizens on the mainland can be bridged. This way of being and educating is transferable and the beauty is that this approach requires little to no money. But that is not to say it is an easy road. With funding, (re)building infrastructure is straightforward. Changing hearts and mindsets is a more complex process, and change is incremental and often hard to measure.

What's at stake for the future of America's children, who will be America's future leaders, is enormous. Educators in Puerto Rico hope that peers on the U.S. mainland will join us in rethinking how educators deliver education in the aftermath of the pandemic and in the face of inevitable challenges in the future. Every child will benefit as well as teachers, parents, and communities at large.

Given the significant increase in English language learners, most of whom are Spanish speaking, a shift in paradigms for education leadership becomes both pragmatic and an issue of equity. The National Center for Education Statistics (2024) reported an increase of 700,00 English language learners (+1.2%) from Fall 2011 to Fall 2021, with a range from less than 1.0% in West Virginia to more than 20% in Texas. More than three quarters of the students (76.4%) are Hispanic. Najarro (2023) reported that by the 2025-2026 school year, one in four students in U.S. public schools will be English language learners, with the majority being Spanish-speaking.

Most schools already struggle with how to adequately teach English language learners. Teaching Hispanic English language learners in a way that speaks to the values these students bring from home, and from their home countries in Central and South America, begins to bridge the equity divide. It will predictably increase learning and decrease the achievement gap. This is not the increasingly controversial issue of cultural responsiveness, it is the inclusion of core values that are universal: community, solidarity, hope, compassion, and empathy.

This framework provides a new model for transformational SEL leadership in K–12 education. It directly addresses the behavioral issues and trauma that educators on the U.S. mainland describe in the aftermath of the pandemic. As *Puertorriqueños* and education leaders, we encourage peers to start with a single core value, the easiest to access or the value that addresses the most pressing need. Start simple. Invite parents and community members to coffee or a shared meal. Have classrooms create a motto of solidarity and community posted on the door so that students are reminded daily of what their classroom community aspires to. Reward students for compassion and empathy, not just good grades or perfect attendance. Have students or parents brainstorm what might make your school or district a better place to learn, teach, lead, and live. You will be surprised at the genius of your community.

Perhaps you doubt that it will be worth it, in the face of pressure to meet competing needs. Perhaps you wonder whether you should focus your attention on values. So, in closing, this author leaves you with the words of a senior educational leader in Puerto Rico reflecting on her transformational SEL leadership in a time of intense crisis, and what she has been able to accomplish for her students, despite two hurricanes and a pandemic.

Estoy satisfecha porque ha dado fruto.
(I am satisfied because it has borne fruit.)

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Abstract

This study, part of a larger two-year study, focused on how teachers experienced stress and burnout in relation to the pandemic. A return to normal was sought after during the height of the pandemic, which added to teachers' experiences of stress and burnout. A survey containing the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory and Perceived Stress Scale found teachers experienced a significant amount of stress and burnout when surveyed during the 2021-2022 school year. A qualitative questionnaire was used to gather brief information regarding participants' experiences during the pandemic, while focus group and individual interviews were used to gather more detailed information regarding participants' experiences with stress, mental health, and burnout. Overall, the study found teachers to experience high levels of stress due to modality changes, issues with administrators and other decision makers, and a villainization of teachers in the general public. These findings indicate teachers needed and still need sufficient mental health resources, supportive leadership, and support from the general public and other decision makers. The results of the study may provide reasons why teachers are leaving the field and that this will continue until the lasting aspects of stress and burnout from the pandemic are properly addressed and resolved.

Keywords: COVID-19, normalcy, public schools, teacher, stress, mental health

Introduction

The teaching profession was disrupted in March 2020 as the number of people infected with the COVID-19 virus resulted in mass school closures globally. In the U.S., districts scrambled to create plans to try to educate students in a type of 'crisis education,' but most schools did not reopen their school buildings for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Many districts utilized some type of remote learning, but others had technology and access limitations students and teachers found to be barriers in completing the school year, so they had to rely on printed packets of work for students to complete (Hodges et al., 2020; Kraft et al., 2021). As teachers finished what was likely their most challenging professional time, they were working in ways they had not before. Districts' plans for educating students constantly changed, but teachers were always the primary (sometimes the only) contact between families, students, and the districts.

Teachers put in many more hours than normal in order to keep contact with their students and identify various families' needs (Keown et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2021). At the end of the 2019-2020 school year, teachers were extremely anxious about what the next school year would bring (Castrellón et al., 2021).

The summer of 2020 was not the typical reprieve and relaxation teachers tend to have in the summer, as the apprehension and stress of their districts' back-to-school plans were being created. Teachers nationwide had various models of education to begin the 2020-2021 school year. Schools utilized fully remote or hybrid models, as a few states had students and teachers return full-time in-person to school buildings (Hartney & Finger, 2020). Some teachers refused to return to their classrooms in-person due to safety fears. In some districts this foiled the in-person or hybrid back-to-school plans. The push for students to return to school in-person was so great that some districts and the media communicated that teachers were refusing to return, so the districts had no choice but to force students to be fully online (Kim et al., 2021). Teachers began to leave the profession at a higher rate, while others chose to put in for leave for the entire school year. This fell on the heels of districts reporting record number of teacher retirements over the summer (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021). Teachers were angry, frustrated, and hurt that they felt their concerns had not been heard and they were being sacrificed in order to get the educational system 'back to normal' and satisfy political leaders.

This push to 'return to normal' was toxic and controlled many of the discussions districts were having during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. Even as the world began to relax regulations as vaccines rolled out, more people gained some immunity to the virus, and the virus waned in intensity, schools were changed forever.

Literature Review

The beginning of the 2020-2021 school year held many uncertainties, as districts worldwide began school utilizing many modalities, including in-person, online, and hybrid. Additional stress came as the medical community tried to better understand this new virus, which initially did not infect children in as high numbers as adults (Li et al., 2020; Selden et al., 2020); however, as the virus later continued to mutate, new variants spread quickly in children who were largely spared from the first wave in the pandemic. Teachers, however, were at heightened risk of infection. Between 42% and 51.4% of school employees had increased risk of developing COVID-19, according to the CDC's definition, while 63.2-71.9% of school employees lived with a person identified as high risk for developing severe COVID-19 if infected (Selden et al., 2020). Teachers worried about teaching in classrooms that would inevitably expose them to COVID-19. While at-risk school employees may have been eligible for ADA accommodations, no such accommodations existed in order to protect vulnerable people the school employee lived with (Selden et al., 2020). While teachers had worried about their personal safety because of potential violence in schools, this was the first time most teachers had to worry about the safety of their loved ones because of a threat in their classroom.

At the start of the 2021-2022 school year, there was a large shift in many districts in order to begin getting back to "normal." Baum & Jacob (2024) found in their study that almost every school district utilized in-person instruction, and 42% of these districts did not have a mask requirement. This was also the year that the highly contagious Omicron variant ripped through the nation during the winter months, possibly because of the lack of masking that existed in schools now (Cohodes et al., 2022; Cowger et al., 2022). During this school year, many studies provided

data indicating children in all grade levels were impacted by delays in their learning (Cohodes et al., 2022; Kogan, 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; North Carolina State Board of Education, 2022), which was to be expected based on the triaged forms of education many students experienced during the previous eighteen months of the pandemic. Many of these alleged delays were tied to the time students spent out of school, chronically absent, or in remote instruction (Cohodes et al., 2022). Student absentee rates continued to increase post-COVID, despite infection rates or other factors like mental health (Dee, 2023). These factors were beyond teachers' control, yet teachers endured the continued attacks on their curriculum, student engagement, and their profession. By the end of the 2021-2022 school year, teachers were still reporting low levels of morale and mental health (Pressley et al., 2023).

In the time since our present study was conducted (2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years), teachers have consistently reported higher rates of job-related stress, symptoms of depression, burnout, and lack of resilience. While the gaps in these rates Doan et al. (2023) tracked in 2021, 2022, and 2023 have moved closer to the rates of working adults in general, the levels of job related stress remained higher than the average working adult (p. 3). The primary reasons teachers wanted to leave the profession in 2023 was because of stress, followed by salary and workload (Doan et al., 2023). By 2024, job related stress, symptoms of depression, burnout, and lack of resilience in teachers had all crept back to much higher levels than working adults in general (Doan et al., 2024). Another compounding reason for stress was the politicization of book bans and curriculum policies and passing of anti-Critical Race Theory and anti-DEI bills (Woo et al., 2022). Several other pandemic issues have been carried over into the years after the height of COVID-19. Schools have kept technology and 1:1 devices in the classrooms (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2024). Schools also have increased efforts to teach 'soft skills' in the classroom, like socio-emotional learning, Multi Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and other academic supports (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2024). However, teachers are still reporting high rates of stress within their jobs and higher rates of depression (Doan, Steiner, & Woo, 2023). They are also still struggling with administrators providing autonomy or trusting in the work they do (Doan, Steiner, & Woo, 2023). Staff shortages have also created a higher level of stress for teachers coming out of the pandemic (Doan, Steiner, & Woo, 2023). Although many believe that we are supposed to be "back to normal," these studies show that K-12 education is far from what it was prior to the pandemic and will probably never return to that precedent.

Teacher Mental Health and Well Being

Teachers had more negative mental health outcomes than workers in other professions like healthcare and office workers who had no choice but to work during the pandemic (Camp et al., 2024; Kush et al., 2022). A longitudinal study of Mexican teachers' psychological states prior to and during the pandemic revealed teachers' mental health deteriorated, and they reported higher levels of burnout, anxiety, and depression (Cortés-Álvarez et al., 2022). Similar studies in the U.S. found teachers struggling with anxiety and depression at higher rates during and post-pandemic (Hirshberg et al., 2023; Huseth-Zosel et al., 2024; Kotowski et al., 2022). Teachers also reported higher rates of health impacts, including physical, mental, emotional, and social challenges (Blaydes et al., 2024; Devers et al., 2024; Giboney Wall, 2024). Teachers who taught remote classes had higher rates of distress or anxiety than in-person teachers, primarily due to the forced isolation of this new type of teaching (Kush et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021). Early childhood teachers experienced significant workload and staffing concerns and reported experiencing higher

rates of moderate depression compared to the rest of the population at the time (Farewell et al., 2022). Archer (2024) found elementary teachers to have higher rates of anxiety surrounding the pandemic when compared to their peers teaching at the middle school or high school levels, while middle school teachers had higher levels of burnout during this time. Bradshaw et al. (2024) found elementary teachers believed the pandemic had the largest negative impact on their professional lives because of the stress of teaching and the effects the pandemic had on their students.

A large part of teachers' wellbeing and positive mental health relies on their agency or autonomy in the classroom, which was compromised during the pandemic (Collie, 2021; Weiner et al., 2021). Our first wave study found that during the school shutdowns in the 2019-2020 school year, many teachers' autonomy was constricted by their administrators and the public opinion surrounding the next school year (Kramer et al., 2023). Sometimes, despite having very clear regulations for teachers' responsibilities during online learning, administrators continued to overstep and undermine teachers' autonomy (Kramer et al., 2023). Devers et al. (2024) found the teachers in their study felt they were not trusted by administrators and could not act like a human (p. 12). Teachers were forced to teach online from empty classrooms and make unsupported decisions on their own employment with no regard for their own health, personal responsibilities, or professional behavior (Deavers et al., 2024). Haines et al. (2022) found a predictor of stress to be schools that utilized collaboration between families and students to assist with school-wide decision making. This could have caused teachers' voices and concerns to be minimized during the pandemic, as the ideas and feelings of students and families were oftentimes weighed more heavily than those of teachers.

Teacher Stress and Burnout

Teacher stress has been a topic in the literature for years, largely because of both day-to-day stresses and cumulative stress of the job (Burke & Greenglass, 1996; Evers et al., 2004; Harmsen et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2005; Kyriacou, 2001; Wiley, 2000). Blase (1982) found teachers experienced lower satisfaction when they believed themselves to be ineffective with students, which led to lower investment with students. Teachers have been experiencing these stresses prior to the pandemic, but it shifted throughout the two years of uncertainty teachers were thrust into. Grayson and Alvarez (2008) utilized the Maslach Burnout Inventory– Educator Survey and found school climate factors, such as low parent and community support and increased student stressors, lead to how teachers perceived burnout in the profession. Teachers who scored higher in Emotional Exhaustion had higher rates of burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).

During the pandemic, new stressors emerged, and even seasoned teachers found themselves pushed to the limit with daily tasks that had changed. In general, teachers' work hours greatly increased during the pandemic (Blaydes et al., 2024; Gicheva, 2021). Teachers found lesson planning and carrying out lessons took much more time in the new online and hybrid environments (Blaydes et al., 2024; Burgin et al., 2022; Deaton et al., 2023; Marshall, 2022; Pressley et al., 2021). Part of this was because of distractions that existed in both students' and teachers' homes and the amount of student absences during the school year. Teachers felt defeated trying to learn how to put their curriculum in the various online platforms their districts were using and the lack of quality professional development districts provided surrounding these new tools (Burgin et al., 2022; Cortés-Álvarez et al., 2022; Schroeder, 2023). This was particularly stressful for teachers with more years of experience who may have been farther out from learning about the newer technology their younger colleagues were utilizing (Gicheva, 2021). Additionally, teachers

had to add new protocols and tasks into their daily routines because of COVID-19 mitigation strategies (Schroeder, 2023). Because of these new routines like well-checks, increased cleaning protocols, and heightened vigilance in physical classrooms, teachers felt more pressure added to their everyday responsibilities (Kim et al., 2021; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021).

Many of the day-to-day responsibilities and schedules that existed prior to the pandemic changed in a variety of ways once teachers returned in the 2020-2021 school year. During this time, many teachers relied on their colleagues for teaching and emotional support (Burgin et al., 2022), as much as they could with the minimal interactions some teachers reported during this time because of workload and time constraints (Schiller et al., 2023). Teachers generally work in a collaborative environment, and with many of the interactions between faculty and staff limited, it was an unsettling change. Many educators reported feelings of isolation because of remote or hybrid work, less flexibility in their schedules, and COVID-19 mitigation efforts inside school buildings (Schiller et al., 2023; Schroeder, 2023). While administrators and parents worried about the lack of socialization and the effects it had on students, they did not seem to consider the effects it had on teachers.

Another stressor experienced during this time was a general unsupportive atmosphere that pointed blame for some districts' decisions towards teachers. Never before had teachers experienced the same type of vitriol than they did during the pandemic from administrators, students, parents, and community members. Teachers reported unsupportive administration who provided orders and then blamed teachers when they could not accomplish these arbitrary tasks or goals (Burgin et al., 2022; Blaydes et al., 2024; Pressley, 2021; Schroeder, 2023). Teachers also felt failure for not being able to assist students with all of their technology needs while traversing waning student engagement in the classroom and an overall lack of parental support (Blaydes et al., 2024; Burgin et al., 2022; Cortés-Álvarez et al., 2022). Much of the time, these technology issues and student engagement issues were blamed squarely on the teachers. While they were traversing these additional responsibilities, teachers were also facing attacks in the media and in their own communities by people who believed teachers were "lazy" and "uncaring" (Devers et al., 2024; Nerlino, 2023, p. 12). Instead of being categorized as heroes for the additional workload they were taking on, like healthcare workers were during this time, teachers were instead scapegoated for district decisions that went against what some factions of parents and community members wanted (Nerlino, 2023). Many of these attacks led to teachers feeling as if they could never let their guards down, even in their own homes.

Some of these stressors remained after the pandemic because of the ways in which educational institutions were required to change. Marshall (2022) found teachers believed their districts would continue to utilize 1:1 technology, learning management systems, and online learning days for inclement weather. Additionally, many districts chose to continue offering completely online schooling for families who desired that modality after the primary threat of the pandemic was over (Marshall, 2022). The pandemic also may have impacted teachers' retention in the profession. Camp et al.'s (2024) study found that three years after the start of the pandemic, Arkansas teachers left the profession, switched schools, or switched to non-instructional school roles at record high rates. Other studies conducted with teachers in North Carolina and Washington also found teacher turnover at higher rates during the 2022-2023 school year (Bastian & Fuller, 2023; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2023). Teachers have also reported higher rates of physical violence, verbal assaults, and threats since the pandemic, causing many to consider transfers to other schools or leave the profession altogether (McMahon et al., 2024). Many of these issues continue to be experienced at some level today.

Purpose of Study

The changes brought on by the global spread of COVID-19 led to an increase in stress and anxiety for United States teachers. Teachers who previously questioned the intent of decision-makers in education felt they were being "sacrificed for the economy" during the pandemic, cementing their beliefs that no one really cared about teachers. Teachers experienced demoralizing conditions during the pandemic that resulted in additional stress and feelings of burnout. This second-wave study on the effects of the pandemic on the teaching profession revealed the hurtful rhetoric teachers experienced while districts tried to move schools closer to normal by returning to buildings in many states during the 2020-2021 school year and to push to full normalcy in the 2021-2022 school year. Our research found teachers' voices were not truly listened to in many situations, even when they were asked for their input. These experiences, among others, have led to increased stress for educators. The purpose of this study was to learn about teachers' experiences during the pandemic by answering the question: How did teachers experience stress and burnout related to the pandemic?

Method

Participants

We surveyed 3,982 participants between December 6th 2021 and January 6th 2022. Participants represented all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, with an average age of 46.14 and average years of experience of 18.45. A complete breakdown of gender, ethnicity, education, grade level taught, subject taught, population area, and type of school are provided in Table 1.

Variable	*n*	*%*
Gender		
Female	3494	91.4
Male	302	7.9
Non-binary/third gender	26	0.7
Ethnicity		
White	3322	86.8
Latinx/Hispanic	207	5.4
Black/African American	150	3.9
Asian-American Pacific Islander	35	0.9
Native American/Indigenous	18	0.5
Biracial	58	1.5

Other	39	1
Education		
Bachelor's degree	987	29.3
Master's degree	2230	66.1
Ph.D, Ed.D, or Specialists degree	155	4.6
Grades Level Taught		
Preschool	170	5
Elementary school	1342	39.4
Middle school	689	20.2
High school	863	25.3
Other	346	10.2
Subjects Taught		
Math	253	7.4
Social Studies	228	6.7
Physical Education	17	0.5
Career Technical Education	71	2.1
SPED	375	11
Art	70	2.1
English/Language Arts	546	16.1
Music	115	3.4
Instructional Support	50	1.5
Elementary/General	976	28.7
Science	41	1.2
Other	658	19.3
Area Taught		
City	1283	37.7
Suburbs	1296	38
Town	408	12
Rural	417	12.3
Types of School		
Public	3056	89.6

Private-religious	78	2.3
Private- secular	104	3
Charter	99	2.9
Magnet	58	1.7
Virtual	17	0.5
Average age = 46.14		
Average years of experience = 18.45		

Procedures

Oldenburg Burnout Inventory

The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) is a 16-item questionnaire assessing burnout in individuals. Items are scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1- Strongly Agree to 4- Strongly Disagree. The OLBI comprises two subscales, disengagement and exhaustion, that can be summed separately or computed together for an overall burnout score with higher totals, indicating higher levels of burnout. The OLBI has been validated in multiple countries across different occupations (Demerouti et al., 2003). The internal consistency of the measure is considered good (α=.873).

Perceived Stress Scale

The Perceived stress scale (PSS) measures the perceived stress levels of the participant. It consists of 10 items ranging from unpredictability, uncontrollability, and feelings of being overwhelmed. Responses are measured on a 5point Likert scale (0=Never to 4=Very Often) with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived stress. The PSS has been validated across different measures and across different cultures and languages (Cohen, 1988). The internal consistency for this study is great (α=.902).

Qualitative Questionnaire

Survey participants who were interested in sharing additional information that might lead to a focus group or individual interview were provided the option to complete a short written questionnaire linked separately from the survey. This questionnaire asked participants to answer questions based on their last two years' experience of teaching during the pandemic. There were four overall questions to the questionnaire:

1. Demographic information such as years' experience, state/district in which they taught, race/ethnicity, sex, level of education, and grade level/subject area
2. Likert scale question: I am experiencing stress in my position as a teacher. (Strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree). Extended response portion: Please give a description that illustrates your experiences of stress while teaching during a pandemic.

3. Likert scale question: I am experiencing burnout in my position as a teacher. (Strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree). Extended response portion: Do you feel you are experiencing burnout? Why/why not? How do you experience burnout? To what extent is it connected to your work as a teacher?

4. Likert scale questions: Rank your mental health: I am in a good mental health state. (Strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree.) My work as a teacher impacts my mental health state. (Strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree).Extended response: Please provide an example of your experiences with mental health and teaching.

The end of this questionnaire gave participants the opportunity to state if they were interested in sitting for a focus group or individual interview and a place to provide their email address for further participation. We collected 195 qualitative survey responses with participants from Washington D.C. and all states except Arkansas, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and Wyoming provided information in the qualitative questionnaire. The participants' experience teaching was 7.4% 0-5 years, 16.1% 6-10 years, 17.3% 11-15 years, 18.1% 16-20 years, 19.1% 21-25 years, 12% 26-30 years, and 10% 31 or more years teaching.

Focus Groups and Interviews

195 participants indicated interest in participating in the focus groups or interviews. The focus groups and individual interviews utilized the same standard set of questions. The focus group participants could contribute additional information to others' answers or offer specific examples or explanations to the questions based on the responses of the other participants in the group. During the interviews, participants were occasionally asked to clarify or broaden their answers based on their initial responses to the questions. Follow-up questions were occasionally utilized in both the focus groups and interviews.

Each focus group and interview were completed using Zoom, recorded in the platform, and transcribed using Otter AI. Each participant provided a signed consent form prior to the focus group or interview. After a brief script was read to focus group or interview participants, the participants were asked to briefly describe their experience of teaching during the pandemic. After the participants responded, the following questions were asked:

1. Comparing 21-22 with 20-21, which year was more stressful? What do you believe were the potential causes of the stress? Were there things that made it better or worse?
2. How were your family relationships affected by working during the pandemic? Did certain aspects of your family life affect coping with stresses in the job positively or negatively?
3. What impacts do you believe the pandemic has had/will have on teaching?
4. What can be done in the upcoming school year to relieve the stress and burnout teachers are experiencing?

Focus Groups. Participants interested in sitting for the focus group were divided into ten different groups, according to the participants' schedules and availability. Initially, the research team attempted to keep teachers with similarities like grade-level teaching together, but the differences in schedules made this impossible. The focus groups ranged from three to six participants,

depending on the session, and they were all heterogeneous groups. Overall, the focus group participants' race/ethnicity were 88% White, 2% Asian, 2% Biracial, 2% Black, 4% Hispanic, and 2% identified as "Other, unspecified." Female teachers were 76% of focus group participants, while male teachers were 10%, non-binary teachers were 2%, and 12% of participants declined to answer. Nine participants taught in Utah, six in Florida, three in Minnesota, two in California, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York. One participant came from Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. Participants had varying years of experience, with 6% teaching for 0-5 years, 16% teaching for 6-10 years, 16% teaching for 11-15 years, 10% teaching for 16-20 years, 16% teaching for 21-25 years, 12% teaching for 26-30 years, 10% teaching for 31 or more years, and 14% did not answer. Participants also taught at various grade levels, with 6% teaching Preschool, 16% teaching elementary school (grades K-5), 26% teaching middle school/junior high (grades 6-8), 34% teaching high school (grades 9-12), 6% teaching "other" grades, and 12% did not specify a grade level.

Interviews. Participants for the interviews were interviewed by two members of the research team based on their time zone location. One researcher interviewed those in the Eastern and Central time zones, while the other interviewed participants in Mountain, Pacific, and Hawaii time zones. Interview participants identified racially/ethnically as 11% Black/African American, 6% Hispanic, 77% White, and 6% did not respond. 83% of the participants were female, with 11% being male, and 6% not providing an answer. Interview participants came from the following states: Alabama, California, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, Washington, and West Virginia. Participants had a variety of years experience with 17% 0-5 years, 20% 6-10 years, 20% 11-15 years, 14% 16-20 years, 14% 21-25 years, 9% 26-30 years, 31 or more years 3%, and 3% of participants did not answer. 3% of participants taught preschool, 43% taught elementary (K-5), 14% taught middle school/junior high (6-8), 34% taught high school, and 6% did not answer.

Themes

The two researchers who conducted the interviews created a list of a priori codes for this analysis, including stress, mental health, and burnout. One member of the research team coded the interviews in Atlas.ti, and completed the coding with frequency counts. They combined similar codes into themes and identified excerpts from the interviews to support the data. The themes surrounding issues of stress teachers faced were the reopening of schools in fall 2020, issues with administrators, increased mental health challenges, and challenges from parents and community members.

Results

Quantitative Results

Perceived Stress

The overall multiple regression model for perceived stress explained a significant but modest amount of variance in the model ($F_{(37, 2377)}$ = 4.946, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .071$). Regarding gender differences, males (M=21.63, SD=7.46) reported lower levels of stress compared to females (M=23.97, SD=6.50). While controlling for demographic variables, types of schools also had a significant difference, with private schools reporting significantly lower levels of stress than their public school counterparts (β=-1.682, t=2.012, $p < .05$). There were no significant differences between different races, education attainment, or experience levels.

Burnout

The overall multiple regression model on burnout explained a significant but modest amount of variance in the model ($F_{(37, 2294)}$ = 3.931, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .06$). There was also a significant difference between men (M=45.58, SD=8.22) and women (M=47.34, SD=6.67). Private school teachers again showed significantly lower burnout scores than public school teachers (β=-3.725, t=4.195, p<.001). Interestingly, special education (β=1.269, t=2.642, p<.01), English/language arts (β=1.249, t=2.946, p<.01), and science teachers (β=3.023, t=2.380, p<.05) reported significantly higher levels of burnout compared to elementary/general teachers.

The mean and median were similar, suggesting a symmetric data distribution. This is reinforced by the skewness and kurtosis, which are close to zero. According to Mertler and Vannatta (2005), kurtosis and skewness values are close to zero in a normal distribution. Therefore, the distribution was accepted as normal. However, the range of scores was restricted, as indicated by the first and third quartiles of the distribution, 3.125 and 4.125, respectively. This meant the middle 50% of responses were separated by only a single point on the Grit S five-point scale.

In addition, the Grit-S Scale reliability coefficient was computed using Cronbach's alpha for the sample. The reliability coefficient tests the internal consistency of a measurement instrument; the closer the Cronbach Alpha is to 1.00, the higher the reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The reliability coefficient for the study was 0.761. This is slightly lower than the developers of the instruments reported but is greater than the generally accepted criterion of alpha ≥ 0.7. It was concluded that the Grit-S Scale was reliable for the study's sample (see Table 2). The majority of participants in the study were between the ages of 22 and 40, with 44.8% falling within the 22-30 age group and 35.9% in the 31-40 age group, while only 2.8% were over 50. Regarding gender distribution, 88.3% of participants identified as female, 11% as male, and 0.7% did not report their gender (Table 1).

Qualitative Results

Teachers experienced several sources of stress while teaching during the first year of the pandemic. After experiencing new challenges during Spring 2020, when schools moved online, many teachers looked to the new 2020-2021 school year to be better organized, but they found that there were increased stressors that created poor mental health outcomes and feelings of burnout.

The themes discussed in this section that provide answers for how teachers experienced stress and burnout are modality changes, issues with administrators/other decision makers, and teachers as villains.

Not feeling safe in their classrooms led many participants to experience issues with their mental health. In the interviews and focus groups, participants were extremely vulnerable in sharing how their mental health had been affected by pandemic teaching and an increasing population of people who lacked support for teachers. Most of the participants who spoke to the research team detailed poor mental health, including new diagnoses of anxiety disorders, PTSD, and depression. Other participants who were not as forthcoming about what they were experiencing with their mental health indicated beginning medication for anxiety or depression for the first time or getting back on these medications after years of not needing to take them. Participants detailed physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, body aches, and fatigue that manifested from their poor mental health. Participant 76 stated:

> I am currently suffering from Generalized Anxiety Disorder and have to use Xanax to manage my stress before panic attacks happen. I may need surgery on my jaw to correct damage that has been done by grinding my teeth. I was not having these issues prior to the pandemic and have not needed anxiety medication since 1994.

About a dozen participants stated they cried on their way to work or in their car after arriving at work each morning, despite trying to control their emotions. Regardless of these increased mental health needs, participants felt they could not take days off work to address their symptoms because of the shortages of support staff and not wanting to miss the time with students.

Modality Changes

After their experiences in Spring 2020, teachers started speaking out and asking pointed questions to their district administrators in order to get answers for what the return to school in Fall 2020 would be like. Many districts pushed to return to 'normal' in order to appease parents and help local economic needs. The consistent changes in teaching modalities most participants reported added to the increased responsibilities teachers had. Most participants' districts began the 2020-2021 school year online or in hybrid classrooms of some sort. A hybrid schedule created new challenges for teachers because they needed to create multiple lesson-types to account for their in-person and online students. Many school districts put students on A/B day schedules to limit the number of students in the classrooms and building at one time, and there would also be a fully online group. Many districts also implemented 4-day school weeks with one asynchronous online day so teachers could prepare lessons and grade. Participant 45 was exasperated with the schedule she was required to keep up:

> We started back virtual for a couple of weeks. Then we did hybrid, which was incredibly difficult because half my first period was with me, half of my first period was at home. Then the next day they would flip. So I needed five lesson plans a day, which was an overwhelming and crushing amount of work. I didn't eat lunch most days. I was just racing around frantic, getting to work an hour and a half early, staying two hours late. It was just a crushing amount of work, and then we went virtual again. Then they brought us

back to hybrid. Then we met full in-person by the end of the year. So it was a constant ping-pong, back and forth.

While districts tried to mitigate the spread of the virus through hybrid models, this was unsustainable for teachers to keep up with, planning multiple lessons for different student cohorts. This model also meant that online students may not have received the same instruction as their in-person peers. One participant admitted their online students ended up being ignored and learned on their own because the teacher could not keep up with the demands of planning four unique lesson plans for the same lesson multiple times per week.

Participants reported the schedules they were required to keep in an online or hybrid model led to the teachers feeling as if they were failing students. Participant 1 admitted to making choices that benefitted themselves in order to save time or personal resources, as they slid closer to a personal mental crisis. Many participants stated the pressure they felt during this time made them short-tempered with students or they experienced compassion fatigue. One participant indicated they just could not give any energy to caring about students anymore because she was struggling so much herself. It was all she could do to simply show up for work each day. In each instance, teachers discussed knowing their feelings were wrong, but they did not have the capacity to help students in the ways they needed, which added to the disconnect and harm teachers themselves felt.

Issues With Administrators and Decision-Makers

Teachers need to feel safe and supported in their day-to-day jobs, but participants overwhelmingly cited issues with administration and other decision-makers during the 2020-2021 school year. Teachers felt those in charge only paid lip service to the idea of safety in classrooms. Participant 14 shared:

> The school board here doesn't believe in science. They don't even wear masks at the board meetings. You can't even go to a meeting because half of the board members don't wear masks. It's that bad. Yet, our school superintendent doesn't have the guts to say 'the state says you need to wear your mask and you have to wear your mask. You're an elected official, and you need to follow the state guidelines.' She doesn't have the guts to do that. She sends us these cute letters every Friday that says 'oh, we're doing great. There's been no school transmission since school started.' I'm not sure what kind of magical thinking that she comes up with this. She hasn't visited our schools because she would see that the masks are off as much as they're on.

Many participants reported feeling defeated based on the actions of those in charge not following state mandates. Participants in many Republican-led states shared there was a lax following of mandates and best health practices or outright refusal of students and parents to adhere to the mandates. Participant 15 stated: "My husband has a life-threatening condition, and I live in a state that doesn't believe in science and made it impossible for any teacher to require the students to wear a mask." Several other participants shared similar experiences of constant fights to keep students masked up properly in order to preserve the health of those in the classroom and the teachers' own family. Despite strict mandates in some participants' school districts, administrators did not always back up teachers when students did not adhere to them, leaving teachers in a very

precarious and exhausting position. Participant 4 directly connected lack of administrative support with their feelings of burnout: "Not being supported by superiors, working in a chaotic environment where there is not a lot of structure, all of this leads to burnout." Other participants echoed that school was a 'chaotic environment' because of lack of communication, unrealistic expectations, and lack of support from administrators. The few participants who had excellent administrators discussed feeling supported and autonomous while navigating the changes during the pandemic.

Teachers believed they were being sacrificed to keep schools open. Participant 9 said: "Safety is not top of the priority list, if it's on the list at all. Yeah, the number one priority is keep the school open at all costs." Although testing and reporting protocols were required, many schools were not following what was communicated out to the community. Participant 3 stated: "I've been disappointed from the start that none of this has been made with education in mind. It is very clear– it was political." Most participants felt the pandemic and mandates were politicized in some form, particularly from right-wing and parents' rights groups. Participant 49, who taught online during the 2020-2021 school year in Texas, stated: "I'm extremely glad that I wasn't in that petri dish this school year, with teachers being treated like political footballs and totally insufficient Covid protocols that are due at least in part to our homicidal governor." Even districts who followed mandates had issues implementing various protocols throughout the year. Participant 105 commented: "Our school district or state or county will make a plan that will last for a few days, then another entity will vote it down. Our plans change constantly and I feel like I have no control over my environment or my classroom." Especially as the pandemic continued and vaccines were made available in early 2021, teachers became more frustrated as decision-makers pulled down mandates early or modified them to appease certain groups. Teachers felt this shared the message that they were not valued at all.

Teachers as Villains

Teachers also experienced added stress and feeling unsafe as they were villainized by a small group of parents and community members, which occurred in many school districts nationwide. Several participants described feeling valued by parents and the public when schools closed in March 2020; however, by the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, teachers were being blamed for wanting to preserve their own health and the health of their students by starting the year online or for supporting pandemic mandates like masking. Participant 148 from Montana said: "Parents are pushing back against everything from mask mandates to what is being taught in our classrooms." During the middle of the school year, as some mandates changed in a handful of states, attacks on teachers turned into book bans, anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) rhetoric/bans, and other imposed controls on curriculum. Legislators were quick to use the pandemic as a wedge issue in order to garner favor with anti-masking 'parents' rights' groups, which quickly led to many pieces of legislation introduced in most states to control curriculum or limit what teachers could teach. Participant 89 shared what was happening in his state: "New Hampshire parents are pushing back against everything from mask mandates to what is being taught in our classrooms." Meanwhile, Participant 15 indicated how these attacks were affecting teachers in her state: "The stress that politics have brought to the schools is beyond belief. Florida has introduced bills for cameras, mics, Don't Say Gay, and penalties. I probably missed some. What teacher wouldn't be stressed? We aren't trusted to be professionals." These attacks on the profession ramped up in 2021 and have continued to the present day.

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, teacher stress and burnout have long been studied by researchers as important factors in maintaining a functioning public school system (Burke & Greenglass, 1996; Evers et al., 2004; Harmsen et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2005; Kyriacou, 2001; Wiley, 2000). Though an initial study found teachers to report less stress during the spring 2020 semester than the previous year (Herman et al., 2021), our ongoing research study indicates that teacher stress increased during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. The initial school closures and switch to online or remote teaching caused some stress related to academic instruction, as teachers had to adapt to these new modalities (Hartney & Finger, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Kraft et al., 2021). Teachers understood the unprecedented situation the world was now in, so they could quickly adapt to close out the 2019-2020 school year and support their students in this increasingly scary time (Castrellón et al., 2021). However, the uncertainty around school reopenings, raising COVID-19 cases, and anticipation of a vaccine shifted the stress from curriculum and instruction issues to concerns for safety, health, and well-being in the 2020-2021 school year.

Our data demonstrates despite the effort teachers put forth to adapt to the changing conditions brought on by a global pandemic, they lacked sufficient resources to reduce the stress of returning to in-person teaching. Teaching modalities were changed to assist with some of these mandates; however, the additional workload this created for teachers resulted in more stress as teachers worked to meet students' needs in each cohort (Hartney & Finger, 2020; Keown et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2021). This unsustainable model led teachers to feel they were committing educational malpractice because they could not provide for students' immediate needs or muster up enough emotion to get through a full school day (Kim et al., 2021).

Teachers need supportive leadership who create autonomous faculty, but many of our participants did not receive this during the pandemic. An administrator can set the tone, positively or negatively, in the school, so when they paid little attention to teachers' requests when planning for the 2020-2021 school year, teachers felt as though they were not truly valued, especially when they were risking their health daily (Collie, 2021; Weiner, et al., 2021). In ignoring mandates or supporting students and parents who wanted to break the rules, they consistently communicated to the teachers that they had little authority in their classrooms. This resulted in increased teacher stress and burnout, as teachers had little recourse in these situations. Sometimes, teachers were directly blamed for the mandates or operating modalities once students returned to school (Kim et al., 2021). The lack of communication from administration that many participants experienced that resulted in a "chaotic environment" could be perceived as a type of control. By not communicating changes to teachers, administrators continuously had the upper hand.

The political nature of education is nothing new, but the attacks on education and educators that began with mask mandates during the pandemic and morphed into book bans, CRT bans, and curricular control quickly spread nationwide as teachers largely could not push back. The pandemic as a wedge issue was intentionally crafted to take advantage of parents' rights' groups and others who were dissatisfied with education during the pandemic. As teachers worked harder than ever to plan lessons in a variety of modalities, attend to students' mental and physical health needs, and oversee new mandates and policies, they had very little time or energy to combat these attacks on their profession (Kim et al., 2021; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). Teachers felt like they were intentionally targeted at one of the lowest points in their careers. Sometimes, teachers' personal safety or school safety was threatened because of the constant barrage of menacing messaging (Nerlino, 2023). These prolonged attacks have not only added to teachers' stress, but

will probably increase the rates that teachers burnout in their profession (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). The villainization of teachers has caused irreparable damage to current teachers and the profession.

These stressful aspects of teaching during a pandemic led to teachers' increased mental health needs. That the majority of participants reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, or PTSD is a warning regarding the entire profession. While it is good that many participants recognized their mental health needs and began psychopharmaceuticals and/or therapy, there are many more educators who may experience similar needs who have not sought treatment. We believe this may be the beginning of a mental health crisis in the profession, which undoubtedly will lead to educators leaving (Córtes-Álvarez et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2021; Hirshberg et al., 2023; Kotowski, et al., 2022; Kush et al., 2022; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). Those who do not leave may become very disengaged from their jobs, which harms both the teacher and their students.

Because many participants did not feel their safety was important to those in charge, they were not treated as professionals, and their jobs were being politicized, they left the profession or retired earlier than they initially expected. 5.3% of our participants left the profession during the 2020-2021 or 2021-2022 school year. Of the participants who stayed in the profession, many were planning to leave in the next few years. Some were currently attending college to get another Bachelor's or Master's degree to change careers out of education completely, while others were looking for other non-teaching opportunities in education, like instructional design. Other participants were only a year or two away from retirement and had no plans to stay longer in order to increase their retirement payouts (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021). Of the teachers who are staying in the profession, many confessed that these experiences have made them reconsider a profession they once loved. Participant 145 stated:

> I will be eligible for early retirement after next school year (Spring 2023), and I will absolutely be taking advantage of this. To be frank, some days, the knowledge that I have less than two years left in this profession is all that keeps me going.

Another participant stated:

> By the end of the school year, I have to be honest, I did my evaluation and told my administrator my soul is tired, and I've never felt like that in my life. Teaching 30 years to me was no big deal. I used to want to teach into my 90s because I'm only 54, but the bottom line is I called on our last day of school on the 27th that I want to retire. So later this month, I'm gonna go sign retirement papers.

Participant 6 provided some context for the mass exodus of teachers: "The number of people who left the profession, they would have stayed longer if it hadn't happened. Some people left because of health issues. Some people left because they don't want to deal with it. There was too much." The stress teachers experienced has had a large effect on teachers choosing to leave teaching or retire (Bailey & Schurz, 2020; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2022). Many participants cautioned that we have only begun to see how many educators will ultimately leave the field. Prior to the pandemic, many teachers who left the profession cited accountability measures ushered in with No Child Left Behind, school violence, and financial reasons, but now coupled with the added stressors of the pandemic, it should not come as a surprise that more teachers are choosing to leave.

As one participant stated: "When I tell other teachers that I left the profession, they don't ask me *why*. They ask me *how*."

Implications

As teacher educators, educational justice advocates, and researchers, we believe the findings from our study have important implications for recruiting and retaining educators and improving student learning in schools. Advocates for improving teacher stress and burnout have emphasized the connection between teacher working conditions and student learning conditions. Given the high levels of stress, personal attacks, and challenges to mental health that many teachers experienced for two years during the pandemic, we recognize that these poor conditions undoubtedly negatively impacted student's learning. Thus, we conclude with implications for improving teacher and student mental wellbeing and embracing a new normal.

Though we did not examine student mental health, many of our participants discussed how the pandemic affected student well-being. The prolonged time spent in virtual learning environments made it difficult for many students to return to an in-person environment, because as Participant 54 stated, "students forgot how to student". Additionally, the lack of social connection for young students led to a host of behavior and communication problems, which required teachers to spend additional time re-norming students. This was time they didn't have as they were bombarded with accusations of "learning loss" and the need to return to normal. Nonetheless, given the additional stress and burnout teachers experienced, we believe that student mental health also suffered and both must be addressed. If we are to replace the teachers who left the profession in the past two years, we must ensure they have the resources to mitigate job stressors and access the rewards of being a teacher. Recruiting new teachers and placing them in classrooms with students who have poor mental health is a recipe for disaster. Thus, we recommend school districts address both student and teacher well-being through collaboration with community based mental health professionals.

The unprecedented nature of COVID-19 left many people with a deep desire to return to the way things were. The desire for a sense of normalcy made sense given the vast changes to our everyday lives. However, for many, a return to normal was not desirable, and instead some hoped for a new, improved normal. Given the many challenges schools faced before the pandemic, was returning to normal the best we could hope for? Given the devastating loss of life and global impact on the economy, is it possible to return to normal?

Gallup has tracked Americans' reports of a return to normalcy since June 2021. A new high of 43% today [May 2023], up from 34% in February, say their normal lives have resumed. Still, about as many, 41%, do not expect their lives to ever go back to pre-pandemic normalcy. The remaining 15% say their lives are not yet back to normal but will eventually be (Brenan, 2023).

Evidence from this Gallup poll shows that for many, a return to normal is not possible. Our findings demonstrate how the push to return to normal compounded teacher stress and burnout. Instead of forcing everyone back to a system that was not working well for all, we recommend schools take this opportunity to embrace a new normal that centers on student and teacher wellbeing but also addresses many pre-pandemic and post-pandemic issues. How can schools use the 1:1 technology to improve student learning? How can increases in teacher autonomy improve their ability to mitigate stress and burnout? What types of community/family partnerships can emerge to address the social and emotional deficits incurred from the pandemic? We offer these questions as a starting point for schools to begin the work of creating a new path forward that builds on the lessons learned from the pandemic.

Future Research

More research is needed to fully comprehend how the three years of the pandemic truly compounded teachers' stress. This part of our study only focused on the return to school during the 2020-2021 school year. Multi-year studies may be able to provide information regarding stressors that remained the same or changed throughout that period. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide key insight into trends of teachers leaving the profession or retiring early. Such a study could also more closely define the reasons teachers chose to leave teaching.

Conclusion

Given the documented growth in teacher attrition, it is likely that the increase in stress caused by the pandemic will cause more teachers to leave the profession. If education is essential to a functioning democracy, then supporting teachers must be a top priority. As school district officials and policy makers work to get the country back on track, focus needs to be put upon the educators who are still suffering from the effects of stress and burnout increased by the pandemic. In addition, more effort needs to be made to assist educators who are experiencing poor mental health in order to regain their health and retain them in the profession. If we continue to lose quality teachers, the fate of education in the United States will be in jeopardy.

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Teachers and Building Principals' Perceptions on the Role of Teacher Agency and Empowerment

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Abstract

This study examined teachers and building principals' views on teacher agency. Participants shared their perceptions on teachers' awareness and roles in the decision-making process, how teachers are currently involved in the decision-making process, and places where schools are succeeding in promoting teacher agency as well as perceived challenges in including teachers. There were significant differences in teachers' perceptions as compared to the building principals' perceptions regarding teacher involvement in building level decision-making.

Keywords: *teacher agency, decision-making, teacher and building principal perceptions*

The teacher shortage is real. "Eighty-six percent of U.S. K-12 public schools reported challenges hiring teachers for the 2023-24 school year" (National Center for Educational Statistics, (2023, para 1). Unfilled teaching positions increase stress and workloads for existing staff, and jeopardize the overall education offered in U.S. schools. While stress and workload are certainly key factors, lack of job satisfaction also impacts teachers' decision to leave and deters young people from choosing education as a profession at all. "Over half of U.S. workers consider themselves very satisfied with their jobs, compared with only a third of teachers" (Staake, 2024, para 19). Yet despite the current educational climate, there are strategies that can promote teacher empowerment and retention. Feasible solutions to address the teacher shortage and retain existing teaching staff are strong leadership and promotion of teacher agency. Teachers who have felt supported by school administration want to stay, and teachers are also staying if they feel they have a voice and are being heard in the decision-making process (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023). This study examined teachers' and building principals' perceptions of teacher agency. Using a mixed methods approach that included collection of quantitative and qualitative survey data, as well as qualitative responses from focus group interviews, teachers' and building principals' responses regarding teachers' roles and awareness of decision-making processes were compared and analyzed. The researchers also conducted a thematic analysis to provide insight into the similarities and differences in teachers' and building principals' perceptions about the teachers' roles in decision-making.

Literature Review

The research on teacher agency is limited. Even defining the term *teacher agency* proves confusing (Emirbayer, 1998) and not clearly defined (Sherman, 2022) due to the lack of consensus among educators and researchers. This lack of consensus is evident in other research articles related to teacher agency. For example, Priestley et al. (2015) highlighted the lack of consensus in defining teacher agency as inexact and poorly conceptualized.   Similarly, Bellibas et al. (2019) underscored the difficulty in defining agency, "the term itself is associated with many other terms" (p. 204). Finally, Sherman and Teemant (2022) further reinforced this lack of clarity in defining agency, stating "the definitions employed across the literature have been kaleidoscopic, and sometimes in particular instances not clearly defined at all" (p. 1464).

This confusion has researchers defining and interpreting the scope of teacher agency differently.   While some definitions of teacher agency primarily focus on professional development (O'Brien, 2016), others take a more holistic view of agency by including different aspects of teacher leadership and autonomy (Thomas-EL, 2024 & Chung, 2023), such as curriculum, committee assignments, professional growth, and others. A sampling of some of the different definitions of teacher agency include Calvert (2016), who defined teacher agency as, "the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues" (p. 52). Thomas-EL (2024) defined teacher agency as, "the capacity of teachers to own and direct their learning and professional growth" (p. 66). In their study of agency, identity, and power, Sherman and Teemant (2022) adopted (as developed by Bandura, 2002), their definition of "teacher agency in terms of moral agency, action that coheres with a teacher's ethical or moral beliefs, values, and assumptions" (p. 1468). Imants and Van der Wal (2020) highlighted Biesta et al.'s (2015) discussion of teacher agency as "a specific form of professional agency-their active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions is assumed to be an indispensable element of good and meaningful education" (p. 3). France (2022) conceptualized teacher agency in terms of a learning atmosphere where, "confident teachers who know they have freedom and trust to set learning in motion" (para. 8). Finally, Varpanen (2022) framed the term and concept of agency as being, "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments-the temporal relational contexts of action-which reproduces and transforms those structures" (p. 4). It is evident that teacher agency can include many different facets of the educational program from simple membership on a committee, such as the curriculum committee, to various aspects of teacher empowerment, including shared governance. For this study, the authors define teacher agency as supporting the capacity of teachers to act as purposeful and constructive members in school decision-making processes. While disagreement exists on exactly what teacher agency entails, many believe a lack of teacher agency is detrimental to teacher efficacy and student achievement. France (2022) reflected on his time as a teacher and his decision to leave the profession due to the lack of teacher agency. He concluded that, "this lack of agency …contributes to school culture where teachers feel voiceless and makes many schools unsustainable places to teach and work. Lack of agency is part of what causes many to consider leaving the profession entirely" (para. 6). Thomas-EL (2024) believed agency is directly tied to teacher retention and that teachers need to feel like they have a voice. Finally, in their study of burnout and perceived agency among Texas choir teachers, Napoles et al. (2023) found that a lack of agency "may have a substantial influence on the phenomenon of music teacher burnout" (p. 285).

A lack of teacher agency is perhaps most apparent in the area of professional development. In fact, much of the literature specifically connected teacher agency to professional development initiatives.   O'Brien (2016) believed that "educators are frustrated with the professional development opportunities offered by their school and district…teachers view these opportunities as disconnected from their daily work and believe that they don't often help them improve their practice" (para. 3).   Calvert (2016) echoed these frustrations pointing out that professional development is "an empty exercise in compliance, one that falls short of its objectives and rarely improves professional practice" (p. 52). Wang and Zhang (2021) suggested a possible reason why administrators do not implement teacher agency initiatives. They believe it is because of the busy schedules and multiple responsibilities of building principals. Thomas-EL (2024) emphasized the importance of teacher agency in professional development activities, "In my 24 years as a school leader, I have found that teachers value the learning opportunities in PLCs and more personalized professional development because they can turn around and use what they learn immediately in their classrooms" (p. 66).   However, in many schools, professional development may often be viewed as a top-down initiative in which teachers have little say in discussion or implementation.

Calvert (2016) offered specific suggestions to school leaders on what they can do to advance teacher agency in relation to professional learning. First, she suggested that school leaders "tap into teacher leadership" (p. 54). Second, school leaders should support teacher engagement, drawing upon teacher passions for their own professional learning. Third, to "balance loose and tight control with support" (p. 54). This balance factors in teacher needs. Fourth, to simply hire administrators who support and believe in teacher professional learning. Finally, "start small and go deep" (p. 55). In other words, start small as many teachers have likely not been given decision-making responsibility in the past and many likely have been individual minded rather than collaborative. France (2022) echoed this challenge stating that collective decision-making can be tricky.   The *Teacher Voice Report 2010-2014*, found that only 53% of teachers agreed with the statement, "I have a voice in decision making at school" and offered suggestions to school leaders:

Schools must tap into the valuable resource that is the professional and practical wisdom of their staff. Administrators and other decision-makers at the school, district, state, and federal levels must see Teacher Voice as integral to successful decision-making. It is critical that leaders value the expertise of the staff that work closely with students every day. For their part, staff must take the initiative to become actively involved in decisions that affect them and students in the teaching and learning environment (p. 17).

Thomas-EL (2024) offered his suggestions on increasing teacher agency. These suggestions include administration giving up some of their own control to teachers, allowing educators more autonomy, involving teachers in the decision-making processes at their schools, developing leadership qualities among teachers, utilizing a team for decision-making, and engaging educators in authentic conversations regarding teaching and learning. What seems evident is that administrative support to enact efforts at teacher agency are paramount to the success of any level of teacher agency and empowerment.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher agency through the perceptions of practicing teachers and building principals and to identify similarities and differences in their perceptions. Additionally, the researchers aimed to identify any successes and challenges in the

promotion of teacher agency and teacher empowerment in the decision-making processes as evidenced in the participants' responses. The authors developed the following research questions:

RQ1: Are there differences in the perceived level of teacher awareness of school level decision-making processes between teachers and building principals?

RQ2: Are there differences in the perceived role of teachers in the decision-making process between teachers and building principals?

RQ3. In what areas are teachers currently involved in the decision-making process?

RQ4: Where are teachers and building principals succeeding in including teachers in the decision-making process?

RQ5: What do teachers and building principals identify as challenges in including teachers in the decision-making process?

Methods

Participants

The selection of participants for this study was determined by participation in a statewide teacher mentor program in a rural, Midwestern state. Teachers in this study had a minimum of five years of teaching experience, were currently employed as full-time teachers in their respective schools while also mentoring a first- or second-year teacher, and had a valid teaching license. The researchers purposely sought teachers with some teaching experience, as these teachers may have had better working knowledge of general school operations and the opportunities to participate in or observe teachers' roles in the decision-making process.

The building principals of the teachers included in this study were also invited to participate because the researchers were interested in comparing teachers' and building principals' perceptions regarding teacher agency in their respective schools. Moreover, building principals would have more direct influence and involvement in the promotion of teacher agency in their individual schools, as compared to district level administrators like superintendents or even building level assistant principals. Although building principals can be considered middle management charged with implementing district level initiatives in their own buildings, building principals would likely have more direct influence and involvement in the promotion of teacher agency in their individual schools.

The researchers developed an anonymous survey instrument (see Figures 4-5 found at the end of the paper), which included seven questions. Questions for both the teachers and building principals were identical. Likert-type scale rating questions were used to gather participants' perceptions of awareness of teacher agency and teachers' roles in the decision-making process. Open-ended questions were used for participants to identify specific instances where their schools were succeeding in promoting teacher agency and to identify challenges they were facing in teacher involvement. Self-selection questions were used for participants to identify specific instances at their respective schools where teachers were involved in decision-making processes. Additionally, participants were asked to indicate on the survey whether they would be willing to participate in a follow up focus group interview.

Procedure

The survey was distributed electronically in fall 2023 to teachers participating as mentors in a statewide mentoring program and building principals of participating schools. Participants who agreed to participate in the follow-up focus group interview participated electronically using Zoom meeting software. The 30-minute focus group interview session consisted of an open-ended forum, with each participant given the opportunity to respond. The researchers used the original survey questions to facilitate the discussion, and participants expanded on their responses with additional comments and examples.

Data Analysis

Sixty total surveys were collected, 30 from teachers and 30 from building principals. One teacher and nine building principals participated in the focus group interviews that were held two weeks after the surveys were collected. Two separate focus groups were conducted, one for teacher and one for building principals. Researchers analyzed responses from teachers and building principals to determine the similarities and differences between their perceptions on teacher agency and teachers' role in the decision-making processes at their schools.

For research questions 1 and 2, the researchers were looking to compare the responses from the two groups of participants, i.e., teachers and building principals. The parametric analysis used to compare the means for two groups was the Independent Samples T-Test. The p-Value was calculated at the .05 significance level.

For research question 3, the researchers were looking for both teachers and building principals to select from a given list and self-report areas where teachers were currently involved in the decision-making process at their respective schools. The researchers tallied the results for both groups and the information is presented in Table 3.

For research questions 4 and 5, and the focus group interviews, the researchers analyzed the written responses from the open-ended questions from the teacher and building principal focus group interviews using Creswell's (2012) six-step process, an effective methodology for use with qualitative data. The researchers read the participants' responses to highlight key words and phrases and reviewed the responses again to gain a general understanding of the data. Once the researchers determined adequate themes from the open-ended responses, codes were identified and used to analyze the data for redundancies and ultimately to narrow the data to relevant themes for both teachers and building principals for each question. The researchers used Excel spreadsheets to track codes and tally the numbers for each theme and interpreted the findings to determine meanings.

Findings

Teachers' Perceptions About Awareness of School-Level Decision-Making Processes

Teachers were asked to rate the level of teacher awareness in the decision-making process at their schools on a scale from 1-5, with a 1 meaning teachers have no awareness of the decision-making process at their schools, and a 5 meaning even teachers who are not serving in any decision-making capacity are aware of the process and its outcomes. Teachers rated teacher awareness as follows: 3.3% of teachers rated awareness at a level 5; 26.7% of teachers rated
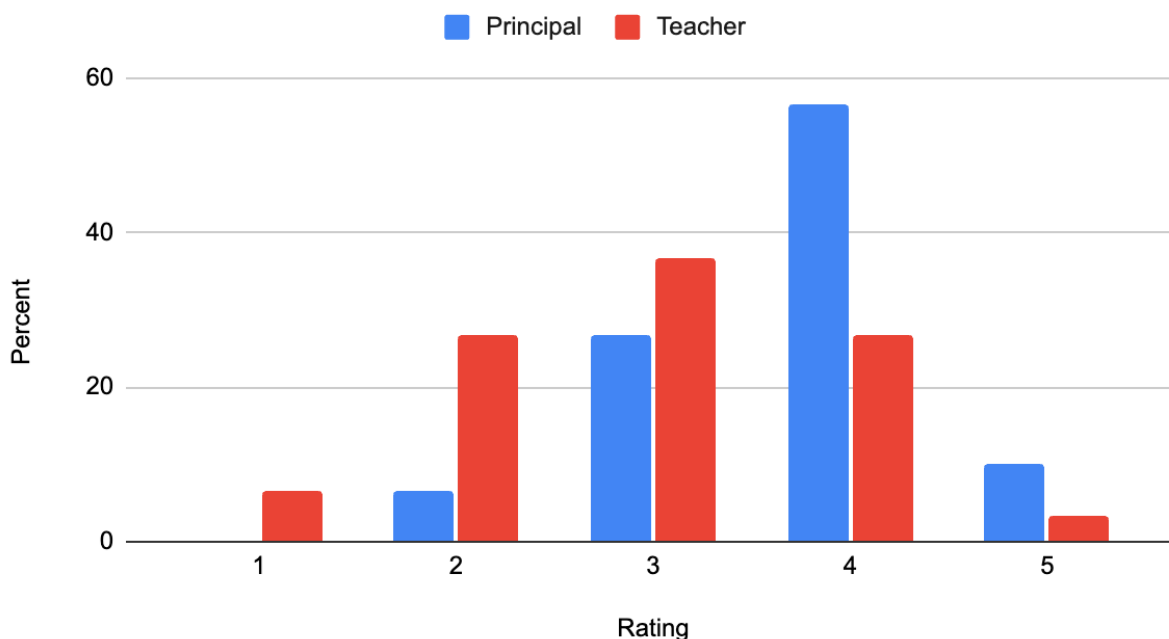
awareness at a level 4; 36.7% of teachers rated awareness at a level 3; 26.7% of teachers rated awareness at a level 2; and 6.7% rated awareness at a level 1.

Building Principals' Perceptions About Teacher Awareness of School Level Decision-Making Processes

Building principals were asked to rate the level of teacher awareness in the decision-making process at their schools on a scale from 1-5, with a 1 meaning teachers have no awareness of the decision-making process at their schools, and a 5 meaning even teachers who are not serving in any decision-making capacity are aware of the process and its outcomes. As shown in both Table 1 and Figure 1, building principals rated teacher awareness as follows: 5 full awareness was 10%; a 4 rating was 56.7%; a 3 rating was 26.7%; a 2 rating was 6.7%; and no building principals rated the teacher awareness at a 1.

Table 1

Rating Level of Teacher Awareness in the Decision-Making Process at your School	Percentage of Building Principals' who indicated the rating	Percentage of Teachers who indicated the rating
5	10%	3.3%
4	56.7%	26.7%
3	26.7%	36.7%
2	6.7%	26.7%
1	0%	6.7%

Figure 1

Teacher Awareness of the Decision-Making Process

Teachers (M =2.86) and building principals' (M = 3.69) reported significant differences (p = .000213939) in their perceptions regarding the level of teacher awareness in the decision-making process at their school. The building principals rated teacher awareness of the decision-making process higher than did the teachers themselves.

Teachers Perceptions About the Teacher Role in School Level Decision-Making Processes

Teachers were asked to rate the teachers' role in the decision-making process at their schools on a scale from 1-5, with a 1 meaning teachers have no role in the decision-making process at their schools, and a 5 meaning the decision-making process is driven equally by principals and teachers and teachers' input is sought out, included, and communicated. Teachers rated the teachers' role as follows: 5 equal role as principal was 3.3%; a 4 rating was 20%; a 3 rating was 53.3%; a 2 rating was 20%; and 3.3% of teachers rated the teacher role in decision-making at a 1.

Building Principals' Perceptions about the Teacher Role in School Level Decision-Making Processes
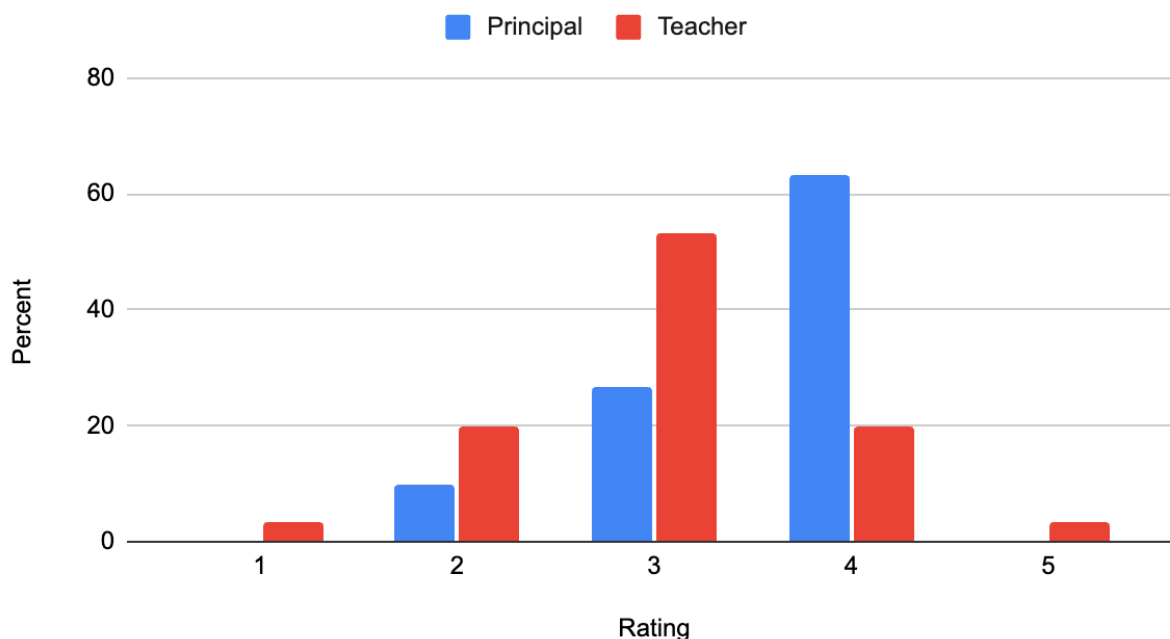
Building principals were asked to rate the teachers' role in the decision-making process at their schools on a scale from 1-5, with a 1 meaning teachers have no role of the decision-making process at their schools, and a 5 meaning the decision-making process is driven equally by principals and teachers and teachers' input is sought out, included, and communicated. As shown in both Table 2 and Figure 2, building principals rated teachers' role as follows: 5 equal role as principal was 0%; a 4 rating was 63.3%; a 3 rating was 26.7%; a 2 rating was 10%; and 0% of principals rated the teacher awareness at a 1.

Table 2

Rating Level of Teacher Role in the Decision-Making Process at your School	Percentage of Building Principals' who indicated the rating	Percentage of Teachers who indicated the rating
5	0%	3.3%
4	63.3%	20%
3	26.7%	53.3%
2	10%	20%
1	0%	3.3%

Figure 2

Teacher Role the Decision-Making Process

Teachers (M =2.97) and building principals' (M = 3.52) reported significant differences (p = .003792362) in their self-perceptions regarding the level of teacher role in the decision-making process at their school.

Teachers' Perceptions About Their Current Involvement in School Level Decision-Making

Teachers were asked to select from a list of building level practices in which teachers were currently involved in the decision-making process at their schools. The results were that 40% of teachers indicated that teachers were involved in creating daily schedules; 86.7% indicated that

teachers were involved in the selection of instructional materials; 76.7% indicated that teachers were involved in determining which instructional strategies to utilize; 66.7% indicated that teachers were involved in selecting assessments; 40% indicated that teachers were involved in planning professional development; 56.7% indicated that teachers were involved in making decisions regarding grading practices; 53.3% indicated that teachers were involved in family outreach and parent involvement activities; 26.7% indicated that teachers were involved in the decision-making process as it related to school safety; 30% of teachers indicated they assisted in determining practices for student management; 26% indicated that teachers had a decision-making role in the teacher evaluation process; 73.3% indicated that teachers played a part in decision-making through various committee appointments; and 3.3% of teachers indicated that teachers were not involved in any decision-making capacity as it pertained to the above building level practices.

Building Principals' Perceptions About Teachers' Current Involvement in School Level Decision-Making

Building principals were asked to select from a list of building level practices where teachers were currently involved in the decision-making process at their schools. As shown in both Table 3 and Figure 3, the results were that 80% of principals indicated that teachers were involved in creating daily schedules; 93.3% indicated that teachers were involved in selection of instructional materials; 93.3% indicated that teachers were involved in determining which instructional strategies to utilize; 86.7% indicated that teachers were involved in selecting assessments; 73.3% indicated that teachers were involved in planning professional development; 76.7% indicated that teachers were involved in making decisions regarding grading practices; 73.3% indicated that teachers were involved in family outreach and parent involvement activities; 56.7% indicated that teachers were involved in decision-making as it pertained to school safety; 76.7% indicated teachers assisted in determining practices for student management; 33.3% indicated that teachers had a decision-making role in the teacher evaluation process; 76.7% indicated that teachers played a part in decision-making through various committee appointments; and 6.7% of principals indicated that teachers were not involved in any decision-making capacity as it pertained to the above building level practices.

Table 3

Perceived Teacher Involvement in Current Building Practices	Percentage of Principals who Indicated Teachers are Involved	Percentage of Teachers who Indicated Teachers are Involved
Schedule	80%	40%
Materials	93.3%	86.7%
Instructional Strategies	93.3%	76.7%
Assessments	86.7%	66.7%

Professional Development	73.3%	40%
Grading	76.7%	56.7%
Family Outreach	73.3%	56.7%
School Safety	56.7%	26.7%
Student Management	76.7%	30%
Teacher Evaluation	33.3%	30%
Committees	76.7%	73.3%
No Involvement	6.7%	3.3%

Figure 3

Teachers' Current Involvement in Decision-Making
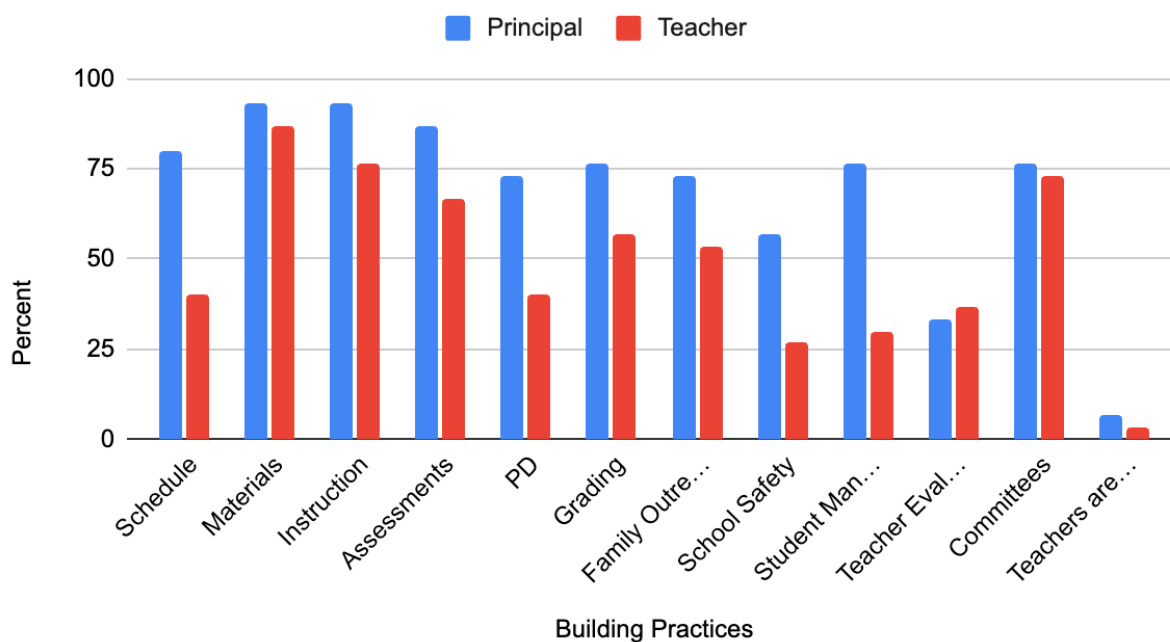
Perceived Successes in Promoting Teacher Agency

The analysis of the written response survey data revealed perceived successes in promoting teacher agency from both teachers and building principals. The researchers identified one dominant theme from the teacher responses: successes in teacher agency occurred when formal processes or procedures were in place that necessitated collaborative teams or steering committees like Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), school-level committee appointments, a Response to Intervention (RTI) or Positive Behavior Support initiative (PBIS). Teacher 6 noted, "The administrators of my district encourage teachers to join various committees and share ideas

among each other regarding materials and classroom management." A similar response identified the structure of Professional Learning Communities and School Improvement teams: "Teachers are part of PLC teams and School Improvement teams, so they know data and where we are standing" (Teacher 2).

The researchers then identified two themes that emerged from the building principal responses: building principals identified successes as allowing teachers to provide input on decisions that impact the teachers, and supporting teachers who want to seek leadership opportunities. Principal 28 noted, "We include our teachers in almost all decisions. Teachers are important as they are the ones that will have to follow through with what is decided in the end." Additionally, Principal 19 stated that, "Our teachers are encouraged to be leaders in their fields and seek professional connections to enhance their teaching." An additional response indicated successful initial steps and the ripple effect of teacher leaders on other staff members. "I think we are on the right track to promote teacher agency. Sometimes more so from the teacher leadership team but they also reach out to teachers who are not on the leadership team," (Principal 5).

Perceived Challenges in Promoting Teacher Agency

The analysis of the written response survey data revealed multiple perceived challenges in promoting teacher agency from both teachers and building principals. The researchers identified the following themes from the teacher responses: staff turnover among both teachers and principals, difficulty in teachers reaching consensus on decisions lead to lack of teacher buy-in, and limited communication and time for teachers to be involved in the decision-making process. These responses provide examples of current challenges in promoting teacher agency.

> It seems the same teachers are advocates for their profession and do a fantastic job and being proactive in voicing their concerns. Those who do not only voice their concerns in opposition but have not taken any initiative to join groups or committees. (Teacher 1)

Teacher 2 shared,

> The administration that is placed in our school. We have a high turnover rate and so every year or two we have a new superintendent or principal who all have different goals and missions for the students and staff. Many of these take and dump all things that have been in place to create something new. Many staff feel as though we are continually reinventing the wheel or our voices as the long-standing staff is not heard.

Finally, Teacher 26 described how time impacts promotion of teacher agency.

> Time. The expectations placed upon teachers as well as the various extracurriculars, committees, organizations, groups, etc…there is not enough time, and the demand is greater than ever before. It's just assumed that the teacher will do it, they can handle it. Truth is many of us are struggling to juggle the expectations of being a great teacher/coach/advisor/role model/everything.

The researchers then identified themes that emerged from the building principal responses: principals identified challenges of time needed to devote to promoting teacher agency, difficulty

in ensuring all voices are heard, teachers' negativity and destructive rather than constructive input, and lack of trust between teachers and principals. Principal 8 describes how lack of time can impede promotion of teacher agency. "It takes more time to involve a number of people in a process, and it can be tempting to choose efficient over inclusive" (Principal 8). Principal 12 added, "A challenge we regularly face is enabling teachers to think beyond the direct impact on their classroom and themselves as individuals." Finally, Principal 11 shared the role of trust in promoting teacher agency: "As the new administration comes in, it is hard to know who to trust and what teachers can be trusted with. Once that is built, many of those challenges dissipate."

Focus Group Interview

The analysis of the 30-minute focus-group interview transcribed responses from both teacher and building principals revealed a major theme of veteran staff versus new teachers as a barrier to promoting teacher agency and participation in school level decision-making. Six of nine building principals noted that fewer veteran staff and increasing numbers of new teachers was an impediment to promoting teacher agency in their schools. Building principal 3 indicated the expectation for veteran teachers to participate in various decision-making activities, and with fewer veteran staff, there was concern about burnout and eventually causing negativity among staff. Building principal 1 expressed concern about how to include new teachers in decision-making, as they lacked background knowledge about general operating procedures of the school.

Another theme identified was the fear of burdening teachers with additional work by including them in decision-making activities. Building principal 2 said meetings and activities where teachers would be included in the decision-making process were held after school hours and therefore was worried about asking teachers to lengthen their workday. All building principals indicated that teachers should be paid for work outside the regular contract day, but also noted that additional pay was not always an incentive for participation and the extra work. Additionally, all building principals expressed concern about funding availability to pay teachers outside contract time.

The final themes identified as barriers to promoting teacher agency were the principals' uncertainty about how to do it and their perceived level of difficulty in implementing teacher agency. For example, building principal 4 responded that they can provide the opportunity for teachers to participate and collaborate in this process, but the principal did not know how to facilitate this work. Building principal 5 expressed concern that including teachers would require difficult conversations the principal was not willing to have. This building principal also indicated reluctance to ask for input and the possible repercussions if decisions made were not in line with all the solicited input. Additionally, building principal 3 noted difficulty in how to involve a wider variety of teachers in various decision-making roles rather than using the same people repeatedly.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teachers and building principals regarding teacher agency and teachers' roles in the decision-making processes at their respective schools. Additionally, the researchers wanted to gather examples of where teachers and building principals perceived they were successful in promoting teacher agency, as well perceived challenges and opportunities for growth.

The researchers'-identified themes from quantitative and qualitative survey data, as well as focus group interview responses, show that most building principals do not want to or know how to promote teacher agency because their responses included phrases like "allowing" or supporting teachers who "seek out leadership opportunities," while the teachers said the successes are only in instances where the school programs and initiatives are "forced" to allow leadership roles for teachers. Perhaps the building principals were unaware of the benefits of increasing agency, or they lacked the initiative and desire to do so. The literature review revealed many suggestions for building principals on ways to increase teacher agency among their teaching staff. For educators who were empowered in the decision-making at their school, especially regarding the professional development initiatives, higher rates of job satisfaction and retention were evident (Thomas-EL, 2024).

While it is easy to get bogged down in the semantics of determining the exact meaning and scope of teacher agency, this study determined that the biggest impediment to enacting any type of teacher-decision making in a school lies with the building principal themself. For those building principals who see value in increasing teacher agency in their school, the first step is to involve teachers in collaborative efforts to not only define agency, but to determine what teacher agency will look like in their school. It is expected that teacher agency will likely differ from school to school. In their *Teacher Voice Report 2010-2014,* the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations and Teacher Voice and Aspirations International Center (2014) suggested that administrators "Actively involve staff in professional development decisions" (p.10).

The building principal focus group comments highlighted the importance of building relationships of mutual respect between building principal and staff. It takes time to build this relationship of trust especially considering both school administration and teacher turnover. Once the teachers' role in the decision-making process has been determined, the next step is to communicate it clearly to teachers. Teachers and administrators must clearly understand their expectations in the shared decision-making. Just as some teachers may be unwilling to relinquish control of their classrooms and view students as partners in their learning, principals may be unwilling to share different aspects of leadership as they perceive that, by doing so, they have given up some of their own power. But principals who assess their own comfort levels with teacher agency and clearly define teacher roles in agency will increase the likelihood of success. Ideally, building principals should collaborate with teachers to identify meaningful ways for teachers to be involved in decision-making in their school all the while not allowing teachers to get burned out or by adding too much to their already full plate of duties and responsibilities. These suggestions reinforce the conclusions of Priestley et al., (2015) in their discussion of why teacher agency matters, stating,

> A key implication is that, if agency is achieved rather than being solely about the capacity of actors, then the importance of context should be taken more seriously by public policymakers and leaders in public organizations, as such contexts may serve to disable individuals with otherwise high agentic capacity. A key point here is that, while teachers may come to a situation equipped with substantial capacity (e.g., skills and knowledge) and strong educational aspirations, innovation may simply prove to be too difficult, or too risky to enact. This also shows why the language of "capacity building" is misleading as it seems to suggest that they key to teachers' agency lies with their capacity, rather than with the interplay of what teachers "bring" to the situation and what the situation "brings" to the teacher, that is, inhibits or promotes. (pp. 7-8)

Limitations

As the authors stated in the section above related to procedures, only veteran teachers (those with five or more years of experience and who participated in statewide mentoring program), were invited to participate in the study. If the survey were to be replicated, it may be useful to survey all teachers. Additionally, only building principals of the schools where the teacher participants who participated in the survey were employed, were invited to participate in the survey. Administrators in other school districts could be included, such as school superintendents, assistant principals, and special education directors. Another limitation is that, while building principals of the same schools as the mentor teacher respondents were invited to participate in the survey, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between respondent teachers and building principals in the same building. It may be interesting to compare teachers and administrators in the same school district and their perceptions of the decision-making process because the researchers discovered that building principals varied on their own knowledge and willingness to involve teachers in decision-making processes. Finally, only one teacher responded to the request for participation in a focus group. If replicated, a diverse and larger sample size would be desirable to triangulate and expand upon the written survey data.

Implications and Conclusion

The authors sought to investigate teachers and building principals' views on teacher agency. Results of the data analysis determined a statistically significant difference between teachers' and building principals' perceptions of the awareness and role in the decision-making process at their school. The researchers recommend the following strategies to address the need to increase teacher agency. First, the concept of teacher agency and its implications surrounding teacher retention, efficacy, and overall student success need to become a more significant part in school principal preparation programs. Prospective principals should review research on teacher agency and observe and document examples of teacher agency in action as part of their internships or practicums. Additionally, prospective principals should interview and survey teachers to gather data on the impact of teacher agency or its lack and generate strategic plans to promote teacher agency at their future schools. Next, local, state, and national school administrator organizations should promote awareness of teacher agency and its impact through their professional seminars and publications. These organizations can also support field research and provide guidance on best practices of teacher agency. Not only will this effort impact principals, but school superintendents as well. Superintendents' own knowledge of teacher agency and best practices for implementation will directly impact the effectiveness of all building principals within a school district, so increasing all administrator awareness of teacher agency is key. Finally, more research is needed on teacher agency. Increasing teacher shortages and growing state and national political pressures on K-12 education, should drive research on teacher agency and its impact on teacher retention and overall efficacy of K-12 educational systems and student outcomes.

Reasons abound why building principals may not involve teachers in the decision-making process, from the building principals' personal leadership styles to their unfamiliarity with teacher agency and how to implement it, and their reluctance or inability to share leadership. Whatever the reason for the reluctance of the building principal to include teacher agency in their school, teacher agency can be an effective method to increase staff involvement, buy-in, and morale. Critical in any efforts at implementing teacher agency is a clear understanding of exactly what teacher agency

will include and establishing a climate of trust and mutual respect. As France (2022) stated, "giving teachers more agency could change the narrative of low teacher morale and the uptick in teachers quitting the profession" (para. 7).

Implications from the results of the *Teacher Voice Report 2010-2014* study essentially echoed the results of this study. That study concluded:

It is nearly impossible for individuals to reach and sustain their aspirations in a school system in which staff believe they have the ability to be leaders and a desire to participate in decision-making, yet feel their opinions are either not sought or when given go unheeded. Administrators-at all levels-operating in such a system run the risk of confusing conformity with commitment as educators go along to get along and continue to teach as they always have taught (p. 17).

Just as France (2022) asserted, teachers may leave the profession because they believe their voice does not matter in their school. School leaders must acknowledge the value of teacher agency and seek out ways to empower teachers in the decision-making process.

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Appendix: Additional Figures

Figure 4: *Teacher's Role in Decision-Making Survey fall 2023*

This anonymous 8 question survey is intended to gather experienced educators' perceptions of TEACHER AGENCY, which can be defined as supporting the capacity of teachers to act as purposeful and constructive members in school decision making processes. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. Results will be used as part of research study and scholarly article.
This survey is not sponsored by the Department of Education or affiliated with any state programs. Thank you!

-Alan and Janeen

1. In which of the following instances are teachers included in the decision-making process at your school building? Please check all that apply.
   o Daily schedule
   o Materials and resources for classroom use
   o Instructional strategies
   o Assessments
   o Professional development or professional learning opportunities (individual or staff)
   o Grading practices
   o Family/community outreach, involvement, or programming
   o School safety policy and procedures
   o Student management policy and procedures
   o Certified teacher evaluation/observation
   o Various committee assignments
   o Teachers at my school are not involved in any decision-making for the above.
   o Other…

2. Please rate the level of teacher ROLE in the decision-making process at your school from 1-5, with a 1 meaning teachers have NO ROLE in the decision-making process at your school; and a 5 meaning the process is driven equally by teachers, administrators, or others who are involved and teachers' input is sought out, included, and communicated.

   o 1 No Role
   o 2
   o 3
   o 4
   o 5 Full role, equal to administrators and other stakeholder

3. Please rate the level of teacher AWARENESS in the decision-making process at your school from 1-5, with a 1 meaning teachers have no awareness of the decision-making process at your school; and a 5 meaning even teachers who are not serving in any decision-making capacity are aware of the process and outcomes.

- o   1 No awareness
- o   2
- o   3
- o   4
- o   5 Full awareness

4. Please rate the level of FIDELITY in the decision-making process at your school from 1-5, with a 1 meaning there is significant ambiguity in identifying HOW decisions are made or if there is a specific process followed each time; and a 5 meaning there is strong confidence among teachers that decision-making at your school follows a specific process each time.

- o   1 Lowest level of fidelity
- o   2
- o   3
- o   4
- o   5 Highest level of fidelity

5. Where is your school SUCCEEDING in promoting TEACHER AGENCY (supporting the capacity of teachers to act as purposeful and constructive members in school decision making processes)? Please do not include specific names in your response.

6. What CHALLENGES face your school and/or school staff in promoting TEACHER AGENCY (supporting the capacity of teachers to act as purposeful and constructive members in school decision making processes)? Please do not include specific names in your responses.

7. What should be the NEXT STEPS taken at your school to promote TEACHER AGENCY (supporting the capacity of teachers to act as purposeful and constructive members in school decision making processes)? Please do not include names in your response.

8. If you are willing to be part of a focus group interview about teacher agency, please respond with your email address below.

Figure 5: *Teacher's Role in Decision-Making Building Principal Survey Fall 2023*

This anonymous 8 question survey is intended to gather experienced educators' perceptions of TEACHER AGENCY, which can be defined as supporting the capacity of teachers to act as purposeful and constructive members in school decision making processes. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. Results will be used as part of research study and scholarly article.
This survey is not sponsored by the SD Department of Education or affiliated with any SDDOE programs. Thank you!

-Alan and Janeen

1. In which of the following instances are teachers included in the decision-making process at your school building? Please check all that apply.

- o Daily schedule
- o Materials and resources for classroom use
- o Instructional strategies
- o Assessments
- o Professional development or professional learning opportunities (individual or staff)
- o Grading practices
- o Family/community outreach, involvement, or programming
- o School safety policy and procedures
- o Student management policy and procedures
- o Certified teacher evaluation/observation
- o Various committee assignments
- o Teachers at my school are not involved in any decision-making for the above.
- o Other…

2. Please rate the level of teacher ROLE in the decision-making process at your school from 1-5, with a 1 meaning teachers have NO ROLE in the decision-making process at your school; and a 5 meaning the process is driven equally by teachers, administrators, or others who are involved and teachers' input is sought out, included, and communicated.

- o 1 No Role
- o 2
- o 3
- o 4
- o 5 Full role equal to administrators and other stakeholder

3. Please rate the level of teacher AWARENESS in the decision-making process at your school from 1-5, with a 1 meaning teachers have no awareness of the decision-making process at your school; and a 5 meaning even teachers who are not serving in any decision-making capacity are aware of the process and outcomes.

- o 1 No awareness
- o 2
- o 3
- o 4
- o 5 Full awareness

4. Please rate the level of FIDELITY in the decision-making process at your school from 1-5, with a 1 meaning there is significant ambiguity in identifying HOW decisions are made or if there is a specific process followed each time; and a 5 meaning there is strong confidence among teachers that decision-making at your school follows a specific process each time.

- o 1 Lowest level of fidelity
- o 2
- o 3
- o 4

    o   5 Highest level of fidelity

5. Where is your school SUCCEEDING in promoting TEACHER AGENCY (supporting the capacity of teachers to act as purposeful and constructive members in school decision making processes)? Please do not include specific names in your response.

6. What CHALLENGES face your school and/or school staff in promoting TEACHER AGENCY (supporting the capacity of teachers to act as purposeful and constructive members in school decision making processes)? Please do not include specific names in your responses.

7. What should be the NEXT STEPS taken at your school to promote TEACHER AGENCY (supporting the capacity of teachers to act as purposeful and constructive members in school decision making processes)? Please do not include names in your response.

8. If you are willing to be part of a focus group interview about teacher agency, please respond with your email address below.

Integrating Muslim Representation in Children's Literature for Special Education: A Critical Literacy Approach

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of Muslim representation in children's literature and special education through a critical literacy lens. Drawing on contemporary research in culturally responsive teaching, disability studies, and Islamic cultural studies, I explore how educators can create more inclusive learning environments that honor both religious identity and diverse learning needs. Through systematic analysis of current literature, teaching methodologies, and instructional case studies, this paper provides a comprehensive theoretical and practical framework for implementing critical literacy approaches that support Muslim students with disabilities while enriching the educational experience for all learners. The findings suggest that intentional integration of diverse literature, combined with critical literacy approaches, can significantly enhance educational outcomes for Muslim students with disabilities while fostering greater cultural understanding among all students. This article addresses a critical gap in educational research by connecting three traditionally separate domains: Islamic cultural representation, special education pedagogy, and critical literacy theory to create an integrated framework for inclusive practice that respects the multiplicity of student identities and learning needs while promoting educational equity and social justice.

Keywords: *Muslim representation; children's literature; special education; critical literacy; cultural responsiveness; inclusive pedagogy; intersectionality*

Introduction

American classrooms today look dramatically different than they did twenty years ago. Walk into any public school in a major metropolitan area and you'll encounter students speaking dozens of languages, practicing various faiths, and bringing rich cultural traditions from around the world. This transformation has been particularly pronounced in our growing Muslim student population, which now includes families from Somalia, Syria, Bangladesh, Morocco, and countless other nations, alongside American-born Muslim families whose roots stretch back generations (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Yet despite this beautiful diversity, something troubling persists in our educational materials. Muslim students, especially those with disabilities, rarely see themselves reflected

in the books that fill classroom libraries and guide reading instruction. When they do appear, Muslim characters often serve as cultural ambassadors rather than fully realized individuals with complex personalities, dreams, and challenges (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008).

This disconnect appears consistently in special education settings where diverse student populations navigate educational spaces that seem designed for someone else entirely. Their prayer times conflict with testing schedules. Their cultural communication styles get misinterpreted as behavioral problems. Their rich linguistic backgrounds become viewed as deficits rather than assets (García & Wei, 2022). The legendary scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) gave us the metaphor of books as "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors," arguing that all children need to see themselves reflected in literature while also gaining windows into other experiences. For Muslim students with disabilities, however, both mirrors and windows remain frustratingly scarce. They experience what might be called a "double invisibility" where neither their religious identity nor their disability status receives authentic representation in classroom literature (Connor et al., 2016).

This invisibility carries real consequences for both academic achievement and identity development (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). When students never see their experiences validated in the books they read, they begin to question their place in the broader narrative of childhood and learning. When teachers lack access to literature that authentically represents their students' experiences, they struggle to create meaningful connections between home and school cultures (Gay, 2018). But what if we could transform this landscape? What if children's literature became a powerful tool for building bridges rather than reinforcing barriers? This article explores how educators can integrate Muslim-themed children's literature into special education settings through a critical literacy approach that honors the full complexity of student identities.

This exploration begins by examining the unique experiences of Muslim students with disabilities, considering how cultural, religious, and disability identities intersect in often challenging ways. Then it explores how critical literacy frameworks can revolutionize the way we select and use Muslim-themed literature in special education contexts. Finally, it provides concrete guidance for choosing, evaluating, and implementing such literature while offering a framework for developing truly inclusive literacy practices.

The Intersection of Special Education and Muslim Student Experiences in Children's Literature

Muslim students with disabilities navigate complex intersections of identity that create unique challenges within educational systems (Crenshaw, 1991; Annamma et al., 2013). These challenges are rarely reflected in children's literature, creating significant gaps in representation for students managing both religious and disability identities. Research on intersectionality in special education demonstrates that students from marginalized communities face compounded discrimination when disability status intersects with other identity markers including race, ethnicity, language, and religion (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013; Connor et al., 2016). For Muslim students, this intersection manifests in multiple ways that children's literature could address but rarely does.

A student with autism may thrive on routine while simultaneously needing to accommodate prayer times and religious observances that disrupt typical schedules. A student with dyslexia from an immigrant family may excel in mathematical reasoning while struggling with English text, yet teachers may misinterpret brief prayer pauses as attention deficits rather than religious devotion. Research by Blanchett et al. (2009) demonstrates how cultural misunderstandings frequently lead to inappropriate special education referrals, particularly for students whose home cultures differ

from dominant school expectations. For Muslim students, these misunderstandings might involve interpreting religious practices as behavioral problems, viewing multilingualism as language delays, or misreading cultural communication styles as social deficits (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Ferri & Connor, 2006).

Religious observances often create the first layer of complexity that requires culturally sensitive understanding (Abu El-Haj, 2015). The five daily prayers, while flexible in timing, can coincide with crucial instructional moments or assessment periods. Ramadan brings changes in energy levels, eating schedules, and family routines that inevitably affect classroom participation. Eid celebrations might conflict with school calendars, creating difficult choices between religious observance and academic requirements. For students with disabilities, these religious practices can interact with their learning needs in unexpected ways that require nuanced understanding rather than deficit-based interpretations (Zehr, 2012).

Language adds another layer of complexity that children's literature could address more effectively through authentic multilingual representation (García & Wei, 2022). Many Muslim students grow up in multilingual households where Arabic phrases pepper everyday conversation, even when the family's primary language might be Urdu, Somali, or French. These linguistic riches can be misinterpreted as language delays or communication disorders when viewed through a monolingual lens (Artiles et al., 2010). Research demonstrates that cultural-linguistic diversity is often pathologized in special education contexts, leading to overrepresentation of multilingual students in disability categories (Skiba et al., 2008).

Cultural communication patterns present yet another area where misunderstanding frequently occurs and where authentic literature representation could support teacher understanding (Gay, 2018). In many Muslim cultures, children learn to show respect through downcast eyes and quiet voices, particularly when interacting with authority figures. Teachers unfamiliar with these cultural norms might interpret such behavior as withdrawal, depression, or defiance rather than respect (Zehr, 2012). Similarly, the communal nature of many Muslim cultures might influence how children approach individual versus group work, how they seek help, and how they express disagreement or confusion.

The research of Harry and Klingner (2014) has powerfully demonstrated how cultural misunderstandings can lead to inappropriate special education referrals and placements. Building on work by Artiles et al. (2010) on the cultural construction of learning disabilities, we see that for Muslim students, these misunderstandings might involve interpreting religious practices as behavioral problems, viewing multilingualism as language delays, or misreading cultural communication styles as social deficits. The intersection of Muslim identity and disability status receives virtually no attention in children's literature, creating what Annamma et al. (2013) term "multiply marginalized" student experiences that remain invisible in educational materials.

Perhaps most significantly, this representational gap has real consequences for educational practice that aligns with research on culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). Teachers lack models for understanding how Islamic values around community, perseverance, and divine will might influence how Muslim families understand and respond to disability. They miss opportunities to connect with Islamic concepts of diversity as divine blessing or to understand how religious practices might support students with different learning needs.

Critical Literacy: A Framework for Integrating Muslim Representation in Special Education Literature

Critical literacy provides a transformative framework for addressing representational gaps while simultaneously supporting the academic and social development of students with disabilities (Freire, 1970; Luke & Freebody, 1999). When students encounter critical literacy concepts, the approach reveals how texts shape understanding of ourselves and others, how they reflect and construct power relationships, and how they can either reinforce existing inequalities or challenge them. Paulo Freire's (1970) groundbreaking work on critical pedagogy laid the foundation for this approach, arguing that education should never be neutral but should actively work toward justice and liberation. When we apply this lens to children's literature in special education settings, particularly literature featuring Muslim characters and themes, we unlock tremendous potential for transformation while supporting evidence-based special education practices.

Connecting Critical Literacy to Special Education Evidence-Based Practices

Critical literacy approaches align powerfully with established special education principles while offering unique benefits for students with disabilities (Souto-Manning, 2010; Rogers et al., 2016). The multimodal nature of critical literacy supports Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles by providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (CAST, 2018). Students with reading difficulties can access texts through audiobooks while still participating fully in critical discussions about representation and power. Students with intellectual disabilities can use visual supports to analyze character portrayal and identify patterns of inclusion or exclusion. Students with autism might excel at detecting inconsistencies or gaps in cultural representation that others miss, turning their detail-oriented thinking into an analytical strength.

Research demonstrates that critical literacy approaches enhance engagement and comprehension for students with disabilities by positioning them as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of predetermined messages (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). This positioning proves particularly powerful for Muslim students with disabilities, who often experience marginalization in multiple contexts. Rather than viewing these students through deficit lenses, critical literacy invites them to become analytical thinkers capable of challenging dominant narratives and creating new ones that better reflect their experiences and perspectives.

The evidence base for critical literacy in special education contexts continues to grow, with studies showing improved reading comprehension, increased engagement, and enhanced critical thinking skills when students analyze texts for bias, representation, and perspective (Beach et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2016). These outcomes align with individualized education program (IEP) goals around reading comprehension, social skills development, and communication enhancement while providing meaningful content that validates student identities.

Critical literacy asks fundamentally different questions than traditional literacy instruction while supporting skill development across multiple domains. Instead of simply asking "What happened in this story?" we might ask "Whose perspective is centered in this narrative?" Rather than focusing solely on character motivation, we explore "What assumptions does this text make about its readers?" Instead of accepting representations at face value, we investigate "How might this story be different if told by someone else?" For Muslim students with disabilities, these critical questions become particularly powerful because they shift the focus from what these students might be lacking to what perspectives and insights they bring to their reading (Muhammad, 2020).

Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model in Special Education

Luke and Freebody's (1999) four resources model provides a practical framework for implementing critical literacy with Muslim-themed literature in special education settings that aligns with evidence-based reading instruction. This model identifies four roles that effective readers assume: code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst. Each role can be systematically supported through special education accommodations and modifications while maintaining high expectations for critical engagement.

As code breakers, students work to understand the basic mechanics of texts, including unfamiliar vocabulary, sentence structures, and visual elements. When reading Muslim-themed literature, this might involve learning Islamic terminology, understanding Arabic phrases, or recognizing cultural symbols and practices. For students with disabilities, this code-breaking work can be extensively supported through visual aids, word banks, picture communication symbols, or assistive technology while maintaining high expectations for critical engagement. Research demonstrates that explicit vocabulary instruction combined with cultural context enhances comprehension for all students, particularly those with language-based learning disabilities (Beck et al., 2013).

As text participants, students make meaning by connecting texts to their personal experiences, emotions, and prior knowledge. Muslim students might connect deeply with characters navigating similar cultural experiences, while students from other backgrounds develop empathy and understanding. Students with disabilities often bring unique perspectives to this meaning-making process, drawing connections that others might miss (Connor et al., 2016). The personal connection aspect of text participation proves particularly beneficial for students with autism, who may struggle with abstract concepts but excel when connecting literature to their own experiences and interests.

The text user role involves understanding how texts function in social contexts, recognizing their purposes and intended audiences. When analyzing Muslim-themed literature, students explore questions like: Who is this book written for? How might Muslim readers respond differently than non-Muslim readers? What social purposes might this text serve in different communities? This analytical work supports social skills development goals commonly found in IEPs while engaging students in meaningful cultural analysis.

Finally, as text analysts, students examine how texts position readers and construct particular views of the world. This critical stance becomes particularly important when analyzing how Muslim characters and communities are represented. Students might investigate whose voices are privileged, what perspectives are marginalized, and how these representational choices affect readers' understanding of Muslim experiences. For students with disabilities, each of these roles can be supported through appropriate accommodations while maintaining rigorous expectations for critical thinking.

Selecting and Evaluating Muslim-Themed Children's Literature for Special Education

Walking into the children's section of most bookstores or libraries, you'll find thousands of books lining the shelves. Yet finding high-quality literature that authentically represents Muslim experiences while also being accessible to students with disabilities requires systematic evaluation that considers multiple factors simultaneously. Cultural sensitivity, defined by Sue and Sue (2019) as "the ability to be aware of, understand, and interact effectively with people from cultures or belief

systems different from one's own," becomes crucial in this selection process, particularly when combined with accessibility considerations for students with disabilities.

Authenticity and Cultural Sensitivity

Authenticity stands as the cornerstone of effective selection, requiring evaluation beyond surface-level accuracy to encompass deeper questions of whether Muslim characters are portrayed as fully realized human beings rather than cultural ambassadors or educational tools (Bishop, 1990; Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008). Books written by Muslim authors often provide the most authentic representations, drawing from lived experience and cultural understanding that non-Muslim authors might struggle to achieve. However, cultural sensitivity extends beyond authorship to encompass respectful portrayal that acknowledges the diversity within Muslim communities while avoiding essentialist representations (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Research on multicultural literature evaluation emphasizes the importance of #OwnVoices narratives—stories written by authors who share the same marginalized identity as their characters (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2020). For Muslim-themed literature, this means prioritizing books written by Muslim authors who can draw from authentic cultural knowledge and lived experience. However, non-Muslim authors who demonstrate substantial cultural competence through extensive research and community consultation can also produce valuable literature when they approach the task with humility and respect.

Cultural sensitivity requires understanding that Islam is practiced by over 1.8 billion people across every continent, representing countless ethnicities, languages, and cultural traditions (Esposito, 2016). Effective literature acknowledges this diversity rather than presenting monolithic representations of Muslim identity. Books should represent the breadth of Muslim experiences, including different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic levels, family structures, and levels of religious observance.

Literary Quality and Accessibility

Literary quality cannot be sacrificed for cultural representation, requiring attention to strong narrative structure, well-developed characters, and engaging storytelling that creates the foundation for meaningful reader engagement (Bishop, 1990). Age-appropriate content ensures accessibility while challenging students to grow in their understanding and critical thinking skills. However, special education contexts require additional considerations that extend beyond traditional literary evaluation.

Physical aspects of books including font size, line spacing, page layout, and binding can significantly impact accessibility for students with visual processing challenges, fine motor difficulties, or sensory sensitivities (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Digital formats offer expanded accessibility options through features like adjustable text size, background color modification, text-to-speech compatibility, and interactive elements that support comprehension. For students with dyslexia, books available in formats compatible with reading software can provide crucial support without compromising content quality.

Linguistic accessibility deserves particular attention when selecting Muslim-themed literature for diverse learners. Sentence complexity, vocabulary demands, and text organization all affect comprehension for students with language-based learning disabilities or those developing

English proficiency (August & Shanahan, 2006). However, this doesn't mean selecting only simple texts, but rather ensuring that challenging content is appropriately supported through visual aids, glossaries, or digital enhancements.

Evaluation Framework Application

To demonstrate how these evaluation criteria work in practice, consider the application to specific texts. "The Proudest Blue" by Muhammad and Ali (2019) exemplifies authentic representation through Muslim co-authorship and culturally specific details that ring true to community members. The book's focus on hijab represents one form of religious expression without suggesting universality, acknowledging diversity within Muslim practice. The narrative structure supports emerging readers while addressing complex themes of identity and belonging. Visual elements accurately represent contemporary Muslim family life while the emotional themes resonate across cultural boundaries.

In contrast, books that present Islam primarily as exotic difference or focus exclusively on explaining religious practices to outsider audiences often fail authenticity tests despite surface-level accuracy. These texts position Muslim readers as cultural ambassadors rather than complex individuals navigating universal childhood experiences. The evaluation framework helps educators distinguish between authentic representation that honors Muslim experiences and tokenistic inclusion that merely checks diversity boxes.

Similarly, "Planet Omar" by Mian (2019) demonstrates effective integration of Islamic elements within universal themes of belonging and adjustment. The protagonist's Muslim identity appears naturally throughout the narrative without dominating the story, allowing readers to connect with Omar's experiences of starting a new school while learning about Islamic cultural elements. The book's accessibility features, including clear illustrations and straightforward language, support students with various learning needs while maintaining literary quality.

Building Comprehensive Collections

Building effective collections requires systematic attention to thematic diversity within Muslim representation, ensuring that collections include books portraying Muslims experiencing joy, achievement, creativity, and everyday adventures alongside stories that address social challenges (Bishop, 1990). This thematic balance ensures that Muslim students encounter positive reflections of their identities while all students develop nuanced understanding of Muslim experiences.

The selection process should also consider how individual titles work together to create comprehensive representation. A single book cannot represent the full diversity of Muslim experiences, but a carefully curated collection can offer multiple perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and narrative approaches that collectively provide rich representation. This systematic approach requires ongoing evaluation and expansion as new titles become available and as student populations evolve.

**Implementing Muslim-Themed Children's Literature with Critical
Literacy Approaches in Special Education**

Effective implementation of Muslim-themed literature through critical literacy approaches requires thoughtful pedagogical planning that addresses the diverse learning needs of students in special education settings while maintaining focus on critical analysis of representation and power (Souto-Manning, 2010; Beach et al., 2016). This integration creates opportunities for authentic learning that validates student identities while developing analytical skills essential for democratic participation.

Strategic Implementation Framework

Strategic text selection and sequencing create the foundation for meaningful engagement that builds both cultural knowledge and critical literacy skills (Muhammad, 2020). Beginning with books that introduce basic concepts about Islamic culture and practices before progressing to more complex narratives exploring identity, social justice, or challenging experiences proves effective for students with disabilities who benefit from scaffolded instruction and gradual release of responsibility (Gradual Release of Responsibility model; Fisher & Frey, 2013).

This scaffolded approach aligns with evidence-based special education practices while supporting critical literacy development. Teachers might begin with "Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns" by Khan (2012), which introduces Islamic cultural elements through accessible color descriptions and beautiful illustrations. Students with various learning needs can engage with the book's repetitive structure and visual supports while developing familiarity with Islamic terminology and concepts. The predictable format particularly supports students with autism who often thrive on routine and pattern recognition.

From this foundation, teachers might progress to "Lailah's Lunchbox" by Faruqi (2016), which explores a Muslim girl's experience observing Ramadan at school. The personal narrative format allows students to make connections between their own experiences of feeling different and Lailah's navigation of religious practices in a school setting. For students with social communication challenges, this book provides concrete examples of how to navigate cultural differences while maintaining personal identity.

Critical Questioning Strategies

Explicit instruction in critical questioning strategies helps students develop independent analytical skills they can apply across diverse texts while supporting language development goals commonly found in IEPs (Janks, 2010; Rogers et al., 2016). For students with disabilities, these questioning strategies benefit from visual supports, sentence starters, and guided practice that scaffold critical thinking while maintaining high expectations.

Effective critical questions might include: "Whose story is being told here, and whose perspectives might be missing?" "How does this author want us to feel about this character, and what techniques create those feelings?" "What assumptions does this text make about its readers' backgrounds and beliefs?" "How might this story be different if told by someone else?" These questions can be adapted for different learning needs and developmental levels while maintaining analytical rigor.

Students with intellectual disabilities might focus on concrete elements of representation, identifying how characters look, act, and interact with others. Visual support charts can help these students organize their observations while developing analytical thinking skills. Students with autism might excel at detecting patterns in how Muslim characters are portrayed across multiple texts, turning their preference for systematic analysis into an academic strength. Students with language processing challenges might benefit from visual supports that help them organize their critical observations before expressing them verbally or in writing.

Collaborative Learning Formats

Literature circles provide powerful formats for collaborative critical analysis that can be adapted to support diverse learning needs while fostering peer interaction and communication skills (Daniels, 2002; Beach et al., 2016). Different students might take on various roles analyzing cultural representation, examining character development, or investigating author assumptions. Role assignments can be differentiated to match student strengths while ensuring meaningful participation in critical discussions.

For instance, in a literature circle discussing "Planet Omar" by Mian (2019), one student might serve as the cultural connector, identifying Islamic elements and their significance with support from visual aids or cultural reference materials. Another might focus on character development, tracking how Omar changes throughout the story using graphic organizers that support executive functioning needs. A third might analyze the school setting, considering how the environment supports or challenges Omar's adjustment.

Students with communication challenges might contribute through alternative formats like drawings, digital presentations, or collaborative writing tools. Assistive technology can provide voice output for students with speech difficulties, while visual communication systems support those with significant language impairments. The key lies in maintaining rigorous expectations for critical thinking while providing multiple ways for students to express their insights.

Technology Integration

Technology integration expands possibilities for engagement and expression in meaningful ways that align with assistive technology goals in special education (Rose & Meyer, 2002; CAST, 2018). Digital storytelling tools enable students to create their own narratives exploring Muslim experiences or responding to the literature they've read. These creative projects position students as cultural producers rather than passive consumers while supporting communication and literacy goals.

Multimedia presentations can showcase student analysis of representation patterns across multiple texts, allowing students with diverse learning needs to demonstrate their understanding through various modalities. For students with significant communication challenges, assistive technology can provide crucial access to both consuming and creating literature-based content. Text-to-speech software, communication devices, and adaptive keyboards ensure that disability status doesn't limit participation in critical literacy activities.

Assessment and Documentation

Assessment of critical literacy development requires creative approaches that accommodate diverse learning styles and communication methods while documenting growth in analytical thinking (Beach et al., 2016). Traditional written responses might not capture the full range of student understanding, particularly for students with disabilities who might excel at verbal analysis, visual representation, or hands-on demonstration of their insights.

Portfolio assessments can document growth in critical thinking through diverse artifacts including written responses, artistic interpretations, multimedia presentations, and collaborative projects. These portfolios should capture not only what students understand about specific texts but how their critical literacy skills develop over time across multiple reading experiences. This approach aligns with IEP goals around communication, social skills, and academic achievement while honoring diverse learning styles.

The most meaningful assessment occurs through ongoing observation and documentation of student participation in critical discussions, collaborative activities, and creative responses to literature. This formative assessment approach provides ongoing feedback that informs instructional decisions while honoring the diverse ways students demonstrate their learning.

Resources and Notable Books: Applying Bishop's Framework in Practice

Bishop's (1990) framework of "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" provides invaluable guidance for implementing Muslim-themed literature in special education settings. This framework conceptualizes literature as serving three essential functions: mirrors that reflect readers' own experiences and identities, windows that provide insights into others' experiences, and sliding glass doors that invite readers to step into new worlds and perspectives. However, applying this framework effectively requires understanding how different books function for different students and how pedagogical approaches can maximize their impact while supporting diverse learning needs.

Understanding Bishop's Framework

Rudine Sims Bishop's seminal work emerged from her analysis of African American representation in children's literature, but the framework has proven applicable across diverse cultural contexts (Bishop, 1990). Mirrors help children see themselves and their experiences reflected in literature, supporting identity development and validating their place in the literary world. Windows allow children to see beyond their immediate experiences, developing empathy and understanding for others. Sliding glass doors invite children to enter new worlds, transforming their perspectives and expanding their sense of possibility.

For Muslim students with disabilities, this framework becomes particularly significant because they rarely encounter literature that serves any of these functions authentically. They need mirrors that reflect both their religious identity and their disability experiences, windows into how others navigate similar intersections, and sliding glass doors that invite them into worlds where their complex identities are valued and celebrated.

Mirrors: Reflecting Muslim Students' Experiences

Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns by Khan (2012)

For Muslim students with visual processing challenges or intellectual disabilities, this book offers clear, concrete representations of Islamic cultural elements through an accessible color-based structure. The repetitive format "Something blue, something gold" provides predictable patterns that support students with autism while introducing Islamic cultural concepts. Teachers can enhance its mirror function by creating tactile versions using fabric swatches that correspond to different colors mentioned in the text, supporting students with visual impairments or those who benefit from multisensory learning.

Students with motor planning challenges might benefit from adaptive activities where they sort classroom objects by colors mentioned in the book, connecting each color to its Islamic significance. For students using communication devices, picture symbols can be paired with each color concept, ensuring access for non-verbal learners or those with significant language impairments. The book's structure particularly supports students who benefit from repetition and visual organization while building cultural vocabulary.

Amina's Voice by Khan (2017)

For older Muslim students with learning disabilities who may struggle with complex text, this novel provides powerful mirrors reflecting experiences of identity development, family expectations, and finding one's place in diverse communities. The protagonist's navigation of Pakistani-American Muslim identity while dealing with friendship challenges and mosque vandalism offers authentic representation of contemporary Muslim adolescent experiences.

Teachers can support comprehension by breaking the narrative into manageable chapters with graphic organizers that track character development and plot progression. Students with social cognition challenges might benefit from character relationship maps that visually represent the complex social dynamics portrayed in the book. These visual supports help students track interactions and understand motivations that might otherwise remain unclear.

Windows: Providing Insights into Diverse Experiences

Four Feet, Two Sandals by Williams and Mohammed (2006)

This powerful story of friendship between two refugee girls provides windows into refugee experiences while highlighting resilience and human connection. For students without refugee backgrounds, the book offers insights into displacement and adaptation. For non-Muslim students, it provides perspectives on Islamic faith within challenging circumstances without exoticizing or othering the characters' experiences.

Teachers can support comprehension for students with autism by using visual supports that help them understand the emotional components of leaving one's home. Abstract concepts like displacement and loss become more accessible through concrete visual references and graphic organizers that sequence the journey described in the text. Role-play activities with modified scripts accommodate students with language processing difficulties while allowing them to physically experience and internalize the emotions and experiences described in the story.

The Librarian of Basra by Winter (2005)

This true story of courage and cultural preservation provides windows into experiences of protecting knowledge and heritage during conflict. The narrative focuses on intellectual courage rather than victimhood, offering important perspectives on Muslim communities during wartime while emphasizing universal values of education and cultural preservation.

Teachers can create simplified versions with pictorial supports for students with more significant cognitive disabilities, ensuring that the core message of cultural preservation remains accessible despite text complexity. Hands-on activities about preserving important items make abstract concepts of cultural heritage tangible and meaningful for concrete learners. Video supplements about libraries around the world enrich understanding for students who benefit from multimedia approaches.

Sliding Glass Doors: Inviting Entry into New Worlds

The Proudest Blue by Muhammad and Ali (2019)

This picture book invites all readers into the experience of wearing hijab for the first time, creating sliding glass doors that help non-Muslim readers understand this important Islamic practice while providing mirrors for Muslim girls who wear or will wear hijab. The book's focus on sisterhood and family support creates universal themes that all children can connect with while learning about Islamic traditions.

For students with social communication challenges, the book provides concrete examples of how to respond to teasing or questions about cultural differences. Social scripts based on the book's dialogue can support students in developing appropriate responses to similar situations they might encounter. The book's positive portrayal of difference supports self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities who also experience othering or exclusion.

Planet Omar series by Mian (2019)

This series invites readers into Omar's world as he navigates starting a new school in a new country, providing sliding glass doors into immigrant and Muslim experiences while addressing universal themes of belonging and friendship. The protagonist's creativity and resilience offer positive role models for all students, particularly those who feel different or excluded.

The series' focus on making friends despite differences provides valuable social learning opportunities for students with autism or social communication challenges. Teachers might use Omar's strategies for connection as models for developing social skills, creating visual supports that help students apply similar approaches in their own social situations.

Implementation Considerations

Successful application of Bishop's framework requires understanding that the same book might serve different functions for different students. "The Proudest Blue" serves as a mirror for Muslim girls while functioning as a window or sliding glass door for non-Muslim students. Teachers must be intentional about helping students identify how texts function for them personally while also exploring how the same text might affect others differently.

This awareness becomes particularly important in diverse special education classrooms where students bring varied cultural backgrounds and learning needs. Discussions about how books serve different functions for different readers support perspective-taking skills while validating diverse responses to literature. Students learn that their personal connections to texts are valid while they also develop empathy for how others might experience the same stories differently.

Professional development support helps teachers implement Bishop's framework effectively while accommodating diverse learning needs. Teachers need cultural knowledge about Islamic traditions and practices to facilitate meaningful discussions about representation and authenticity. They also need pedagogical skills for adapting critical literacy approaches to support students with various disabilities while maintaining high expectations for analytical thinking.

Professional Development and Community Engagement

Effective implementation of Muslim-themed literature through critical literacy approaches requires comprehensive professional development that addresses both cultural competence and special education pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Harry & Klingner, 2014). Teachers need opportunities to examine their own cultural assumptions while developing practical skills for facilitating critical discussions about representation and power in literature.

Cultural Competence Development

Professional development must begin with cultural self-awareness, helping educators examine their own beliefs, assumptions, and potential biases regarding Muslim communities and disability (Sue & Sue, 2019). This examination proves particularly crucial given research demonstrating how unconscious bias affects special education referrals and placement decisions for students from marginalized communities (Skiba et al., 2008; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

Cultural competence extends beyond superficial knowledge of Islamic practices to encompass deeper understanding of how religion intersects with family life, educational values, and responses to disability (Zehr, 2012). Teachers need opportunities to learn about Islamic perspectives on diversity, community support, and perseverance that might influence how Muslim families understand and respond to their children's educational needs.

Collaboration with Muslim community organizations provides authentic learning opportunities while building sustainable partnerships that benefit students and families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Guest speakers from local mosques, Islamic cultural centers, or Muslim professional organizations can share insights about contemporary Muslim experiences while helping educators develop more nuanced understanding of community diversity.

Pedagogical Skill Development

Beyond cultural knowledge, teachers need explicit instruction in adapting critical literacy approaches for students with disabilities while maintaining rigorous academic expectations (Beach et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2016). This pedagogical support includes learning to scaffold critical questioning, facilitate inclusive discussions, and assess analytical thinking through diverse modalities that accommodate various learning needs.

Coaching and mentoring programs provide ongoing support as teachers implement new approaches in their classrooms (Knight, 2007). Experienced practitioners can model effective techniques while providing feedback and problem-solving support as teachers navigate challenges. This sustained support proves essential for deep implementation rather than superficial adoption of new practices.

Learning communities focused on inclusive literacy practices create opportunities for collaborative reflection and shared problem-solving (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Teachers benefit from sharing successes and challenges while collectively developing solutions that honor both cultural authenticity and special education best practices.

Family and Community Partnerships

Muslim families bring valuable insights about their children's cultural and religious needs while often possessing deep knowledge about effective support strategies (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2014). However, engaging these families requires cultural sensitivity and recognition that past experiences with schools might influence their comfort level with educational partnerships.

Family engagement approaches must account for diverse comfort levels with various texts or topics while respecting religious and cultural preferences (Zehr, 2012). Some families might prefer books that focus on universal themes rather than explicit religious content, while others might seek out literature that strongly affirms Islamic identity. Respectful dialogue and flexible approaches honor these diverse preferences while maintaining educational goals.

Community cultural wealth perspectives recognize that Muslim families and communities possess valuable knowledge and resources that can enhance educational programming (Yosso, 2005). Rather than positioning families as recipients of school expertise, effective partnerships recognize parents as educational collaborators who contribute essential cultural knowledge and advocacy skills.

Conclusion

This exploration of integrating Muslim representation in children's literature for special education through critical literacy approaches reveals both the urgent need for such work and its transformative potential. As our analysis demonstrates, Muslim students with disabilities face "double invisibility" in educational materials. Muslim students rarely see authentic representations of their intersectional identities in classroom literature. The absence of representation has real consequences for academic achievement, identity development, and a sense of belonging in educational communities.

The framework presented here offers a systematic approach that addresses representational gaps while supporting evidence-based special education practices. By combining authentic Muslim-themed literature with critical literacy approaches adapted for diverse learners, educators can validate student identities in inclusive learning environments while developing essential analytical skills. The evaluation criteria and implementation strategies included in this approach provide practical guidance for selecting and using literature effectively while the professional development recommendations ensure sustainable change.

In this approach, critical literacy is particularly powerful for students with disabilities because it positions them as analytical thinkers rather than passive recipients of predetermined messages. When students examine how Muslims and people with disabilities are represented in literature, they develop critical consciousness while building skills transferable across academic domains. This approach aligns with special education principles of strength-based instruction while fostering the critical thinking essential for democratic participation.

The implications extend far beyond Muslim students with disabilities to encompass broader questions of educational equity and inclusion. The integrated framework demonstrates how attention to intersectional identities can enhance educational programming for all students while challenging systems that perpetuate marginalization. As demographic shifts continue reshaping American classrooms, approaches that honor complex identities while supporting diverse learning needs become increasingly essential.

Several areas demand our continued attention. We need children's literature that authentically portrays Muslim characters with disabilities, representing the full spectrum of learning differences and physical abilities. Current gaps in representation limit educators' ability to provide meaningful mirrors for students navigating these intersectional identities. Publishers and authors are responsible for expanding representation and maintaining high standards for literary quality and cultural authenticity.

Educators need more professional development opportunities than are currently afforded them to develop both cultural competence regarding Muslim communities and expertise in inclusive special education practices. Since teacher preparation programs rarely address these intersections systematically, educators are often unprepared to serve increasingly diverse student populations effectively. Universities, professional organizations, and school districts must collaborate to create comprehensive preparation programs that address the needs of students and teachers.

Research investigating how these approaches affect student outcomes, family engagement, and school climate remains limited but is badly needed for demonstrating impact to stakeholders who influence educational policy and resource allocation. While the theoretical framework is strong, ongoing investigation will help refine practices and build the evidence base necessary for widespread adoption. Studies examining academic achievement, social-emotional development, and identity formation among students experiencing these interventions would provide valuable insights for continued refinement.

The challenges are real and significant. Limited representation in current literature, insufficient professional development resources, and systemic barriers to inclusive education all impede progress. However, growing recognition of these problems and increasing commitment to educational equity provide reason for optimism. Individual educators can begin implementing these approaches immediately, starting with careful selection of available literature and thoughtful application of critical literacy principles.

School districts can support these efforts through resource allocation, inclusion-focused policy development, and systematic professional development programming. Publishers must recognize their responsibility for expanding authentic representation while authors from Muslim communities should receive support and resources. At the same time, professional organizations must advocate inclusive practices and providing support during implementation.

The work of creating truly inclusive educational environments requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders. It demands ongoing reflection, collaboration, and willingness to challenge existing practices that may inadvertently marginalize certain students or communities. Yet the potential rewards are immense. When we succeed in creating educational spaces that honor the

full complexity of human experience, we prepare students for meaningful participation in our diverse democracy while fostering understanding and empathy that extend far beyond classroom walls.

This article represents one contribution to an ongoing conversation about educational equity and inclusion. The framework proposed here should be viewed not as a final solution but as a starting point for continued development and refinement. Our approaches must remain dynamic and responsive to emerging needs and insights.

The children in our classrooms today inherit complex challenges that require collaborative solutions. By providing them with educational experiences that honor diversity, develop critical thinking skills, and foster empathy for others, we prepare them to be thoughtful leaders and engaged citizens. The Muslim students with disabilities who inspired this work deserve educational experiences that affirm their identities, challenge their thinking, and prepare them for futures full of possibility.

Through collective efforts to implement the approaches outlined here, we can ensure that all students including Muslim students with disabilities receive the inclusive, empowering education they deserve. The work continues, and the stakes are high. But with sustained commitment to justice, equity, and inclusion, we can transform educational practice in ways that honor the beautiful complexity of human experience as well as prepare all students for meaningful participation in our shared future.

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APPENDIX

Checklist for Evaluating Muslim-Themed Children's Literature in Special Education

Authorship and Creation

□ Author is Muslim or demonstrates substantial knowledge of Islamic traditions
□ Illustrator shows cultural knowledge in visual representations
□ Recent publication date (preferably within last 5-10 years)
□ Publisher has established track record with culturally diverse books

Muslim Character Representation

□ Characters are fully developed with complex personalities
□ Characters demonstrate agency in their narratives
□ Multiple Muslim characters represent diversity within Islamic communities
□ Contemporary settings and modern Muslim life included
□ Characters display full range of emotions and experiences
□ Different ages, genders, abilities, and appearances represented
□ Characters' lives portrayed as normal rather than exotic

Islamic Cultural and Religious Authenticity

□ Religious practices accurately portrayed (prayer, wudu, Ramadan, Eid)
□ Five pillars of Islam represented correctly when included
□ Islamic terminology integrated naturally with appropriate context
□ Diverse Islamic cultural expressions acknowledged (South Asian, Middle Eastern, African, etc.)
□ Cultural dress depicted accurately and respectfully
□ Diversity within Islamic practice represented

Story Elements for Diverse Muslim Narratives

□ Plot is engaging and relatable while integrating Islamic elements
□ Story includes universal themes beyond teaching about Islam
□ Reading level appropriate with consideration for Islamic terminology
□ Cultural/religious elements integrated naturally, not forced
□ Resolutions positive yet realistic
□ Balance between culturally specific and universal experiences

Visual Elements in Islamic Representation

□ Illustrations free from stereotypical portrayals
□ Accurate representation of diversity in appearance
□ Settings include accurate depictions of mosques, homes, community spaces
□ Contemporary Muslim life visually represented

□ Diverse body types and appearances included
□ Islamic symbols and objects depicted accurately

Language and Terminology

□ Text free from biased language and stereotypes
□ Islamic terms explained naturally within context
□ Age-appropriate vocabulary with Islamic concepts
□ Arabic/Urdu terms spelled correctly with diacritical marks when possible
□ Respectful and authentic tone throughout
□ Natural dialogue reflecting authentic Muslim experiences

Content Warning Signs (Items to Avoid)

□ NO savior narratives where non-Muslims rescue/enlighten Muslims
□ NO stereotypical character traits (oppressed women, authoritarian men)
□ NO outdated terminology ("Mohammedan," "Moslem")
□ NO oversimplification of complex issues
□ NO cultural/religious misrepresentation
□ NO exclusive focus on struggle/hardship
□ NO portrayal of Islam as monolithic

Additional Quality Indicators

□ Positive reviews from Muslim readers/organizations
□ Recognition from Muslim literary organizations
□ Recommended by Muslim educators/librarians
□ Includes authentic cultural details
□ Shows contemporary life
□ Fosters cultural pride
□ Promotes cross-cultural understanding

Special Education Context and Use

□ Age-appropriate themes with consideration for developmental levels
□ Clear educational and social-emotional value
□ Addresses curriculum needs related to diversity/inclusion
□ Complements existing diverse books
□ Format suitable for intended use (read-aloud, independent reading)
□ Provides discussion opportunities
□ Includes author's notes or context when needed

Accessibility Considerations

□ Physical format accommodates diverse learning needs
□ Digital formats with text-to-speech compatibility available

□ Visual supports reinforce key concepts
□ Reading level flexibility accommodates diverse abilities
□ Linguistic accessibility considers sentence complexity
□ Provides multisensory engagement opportunities
□ Clear narrative structure supports executive functioning
□ Balances authentic representation with accessibility features