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Steven P. Jones, Director

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*Our thanks to the cadre of scholars who serve as reviewers without whose services the journal could not exist.

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Volume 14, Issue 3…Whew.

I should probably stop mentioning my surprise that this little journal will soon be 15 years old. The fact of the matter is that via the Academy for Educational Studies and in conjunction with our incredible manuscript reviewers and authors, we have created a venue for sharing important scholarship that is longstanding and one that will last long into the future. We are on track to surpass our previous record for submissions this calendar year and are in a position to publish three issues a year—and potentially four issues a year in the not-so-distant future. And do so while publishing quality manuscripts—this issue is certainly no exception.

Our first manuscript, penned by Vanessa Winn and Jody Googins, reports on a study that investigates the impact that online reading groups might have when the goal is "sociopolitical awareness." This study concludes with suggestions for developing such critically-oriented reading groups. In the second article, Jeff Frenkiewich discusses the difficulties of teaching controversial issues in an era of polarized politics. More specifically, Frenkiewich examines the media treatment seen during coverage of the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US capitol to uncover important lessons learned about how such topics might best be approached.

The third piece reports on a study examining the difference in participation levels between "first-generation college students" and "continuing college students." George de Man and Cynthia Meyersburg report that it boils down to whether or not a student feels comfortable expressing unpopular opinions and especially so for first-generation students. The fourth manuscript in Volume 14, Issue 3 suggests that it is "not impossible to do;" that is, it is not impossible to get community college students to engage and persist in a voluntary financial education program. Zach Taylor and colleagues explain. Finally, this issue concludes on a topic often pondered by educators and educators of educators: the schism between "education theory" and "school realitities." Lama Othman's article suggests that closing that theory/practice gap might positively impact the ongoing national teacher shortage.

Before I leave you to your reading, just a reminder that the academy fall conference will be in the windy city in the coming weeks. Hope to see you in Chicago in November

Happy reading.

PAX,

Eric C. Sheffield, Editor
Critical Questions in Education

Critical Questions in Education

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Manuscripts

Critical Conversations in Online Reading Groups: Narratives of Sociopolitical Awareness

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Abstract

In this study, we share narrative findings that highlight the nuance of what happens when our goals, as teacher educators, are to engage students in sociopolitical consciousness raising (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476) during online reading groups. We focus on the story of two reading groups to illuminate the nuances of group dynamics and sociopolitical consciousness raising in context. The first group was committed to the professionalism of teachers and engaging in a supportive and collegial graduate class experience but understood as largely non-political. The second was critically engaged and critically reflected on their school contexts and complicity in inequitable power relations in schools. Reading group conversations, interpreted as non-political and political, is the focus of our critical analysis and discussion of the implications of our study. Recommendations and implications for teacher educators who seek to foster sociopolitical consciousness raising in collaborative group conversations in online graduate education are shared in the conclusion.

Keywords*: reading groups, narrative inquiry, culturally relevant pedagogy, sociopolitical*

Introduction

In the fall of 2020, the social and political conditions of communities and beyond seeped into the walls of classrooms and schools, creating an environment in which students, teachers, administrators, parents, and communities at large were once again confronted with the reality that education is always socially and politically positioned. The Covid-19 pandemic, the death of George Floyd and the ensuing social and civil unrest, and the push to colonize curriculum all collided as schools and teachers prepared their instruction for the 2020-2021 school year. As teacher educators, our preparation was similarly influenced by the events and conditions that were, and are still, pervasive in society. In the Fall of 2020, Researcher 2 began to, intentionally, through the lens of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), "deconstruct, construct, and reconstruct" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 32) a History and Philosophy of American Education graduate course for pre-service and practicing teachers to engage in much-needed and ongoing critical conversations about race, ethnicity, class, sexual identity, gender, language, nationality, learning differences, religion, and age in education.

Researcher 2's commitment to embedding principles of CRP, that make sociopolitical realities visible (Ladson-Billings, 1995), in combination with the development of collaborative, online learning structures—conceptualized as powerful learning communities around books—are the focus of this study. We find that using these lenses to theorize pedagogical engagement opens up space for conversations about inequity that engages graduate students in conversations about the historic and contemporary sociopolitical contexts of education as well as theory and pedagogy in the practice of teaching. Furthermore, in this study, we share narrative findings that highlight the nuance of what happens when our goals, as teacher educators, are to engage students in sociopolitical consciousness raising (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). What this sounds like and how the narrative arc of a group does the work of discussing inequality in educational contexts helps us understand what happens during these kinds of assignments online.

In this study, we have engaged in a narrative inquiry because as writers and readers we love stories. We find that we understand much more about the power of our pedagogical choices, the experience of educators, and the potential impact of experiences like reading groups in our classes through story. After all, "Narrative research is deeply rooted in who we are as humans because narrative is the most fundamental means by which we human beings understand who we are" (Kim, 2016, p. 297). Furthermore, we argue that our humanity is essential to our teaching and thus to understand who we are and how students experience education is inevitably connected to our teaching practice (Freire, 1998).

Literature Review

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) in Course Design and Teacher Education

In the early 1990s, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 2006) illuminated the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in the lexicon of educational researchers. CRP is a pedagogical framework that centers on three guiding principles that she expanded on in 2006: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006). CRP "primarily seeks to influence attitudes and dispositions, describing a posture a teacher might adopt that, when fully embodied, would determine planning, instruction, and assessment" (Aronson & Laughter, 2016, pp. 166-167).

Rigaud and Googins (2022) address the importance of engaging with pedagogy—even at the graduate level—that is culturally relevant. As research informs our practice, we understand that culturally competent teachers need to be "exposed to the reality of culture and systemic oppression" in the lives of children in the United States (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006 as cited in Rigaud & Googins, 2022). "Unfortunately for many citizens—particularly those marked as poor, Black, Brown, immigrant, queer or trans—State power has only increased their vulnerability, making their lives more rather than less unsafe" (Hill, 2016, p. xix). As arms of the state, schools are not places where all students matter or thrive (Love, 2019). Understanding, recognizing, and addressing inequalities is not done accidentally. "Educational justice is going to take people power" (Love, 2019, p. 9).

As teacher educators, we cannot be "neutral" in our approach to teacher education. The curriculum we design is complicated and human (Pinar, 2019). The democratic ideals that we pursue through the acknowledgement of power and the politicization of curriculum are not neutral; and the exposure to the complicated sociopolitical realities of education are foundational to the development of teachers who can be culturally responsive and relevant. According to Kincheloe

(2008), "the recognition of these political complications of schooling is the first step for critical pedagogy-influenced educators in developing a social activist teacher persona" (p. 2). And in the context of this course as a history class in education, we contribute to this work.

Powerful Learning Communities

A powerful learning community (LC), as described by Lenning, et al. (2013) is "an intentionally developed community that exists to promote and maximize the individual and shared learning of its members. There is ongoing interaction, interplay, and collaboration among the community's members as they strive for specified common learning goals" (Lenning et al., 2013, p. 7). LCs are often utilized in schools and school districts, and in higher education learning environments. Integrating LCs into a graduate level course with intentionality in "group organization, facilitation, tasks/techniques provided by the instructor or facilitator, and timely process orientation and training provided to the group" (Lenning et al., 2013, p. 7) can have positive implications for not only the duration of the course and the course content, but also for the graduate students as they engage in critical work in their schools and classrooms, often in larger learning communities of which they are a part. For this course, we conceptualize book clubs as powerful learning communities.

LCs, PLCs and CRP

Powerful learning communities literature is identified under two frameworks in this review. One framework is Lenning et al.'s (2013) powerful learning community (LC). However, we acknowledge and embrace that more commonly in schools, the PLC acronym refers to the phrase professional learning communities (PLC). Under both acronyms: LCs and PLCs, powerful learning communities have been implemented to meet a wide range of goals and purposes towards CRP in the literature. PLCs have been implemented with teachers in public school settings (Guerrero et al., 2016-2017; Scanlan et al., 2016), higher education (Ball, 2016), and specifically teacher education (Allen & FitzGerald, 2017; Heineke, 2014; Jacobs, 2019; Moore, 2018). The range of emphases for these studies include learning about cultural care (Allen & FitzGerald, 2017), addressing opportunity gaps between K-12 students (Guerrero et al., 2016-2017; Scanlan et al., 2016), supporting teacher candidates' dialogue about culturally relevant literature (Heineke, 2014), student teachers' actualization of CRP in urban settings (Jacobs, 2019), and examining in-service teachers' cultural awareness (Moore, 2018).

Towards these purposes, PLCs have been generative spaces for the intentions of CRP. Findings such as Allen and FitzGerald's (2017) study show that there were changes in teachers' behavior management approaches and student behaviors that improved the learning environment for students in school after teachers engaged in PLCs about cultural care. Preservice teachers who read and discuss culturally relevant literature about English learners [sic] better understand the lived realities of English learners in ways that informed their thinking about diverse students and their life experiences (Heineke, 2014, p. 125). "Critical moments" (Jacobs, 2019, p. 1531) from teaching practice raised in group discourse, also called "authentic conversations" (Moore, 2018, p. 248), open up opportunities for teachers to engage "deeply" in "issues of culture, classroom practice, and expectations" (Jacobs, 2019, p. 1531). Furthermore, as Jacobs (2019) shares, teachers who talk with each other about their school experiences in urban settings encounter ideas that are

"complicated" and negotiate "drawing on and pushing back against the deficit perspective that so frequently surrounds discussions of Urban Education" (p. 1540).

Group conversations not only drew dialogue about teaching practice, they also prompted critical self-reflection about "their family history, and raising families. Educators acknowledged how their experiences [represented] their cultural norms and values" (Moore, 2018, p. 248). And Ball (2016) argues that students in higher education who experience CRP in their classwork are more "motivated and engaged" and "in a position to become strong, successful leaders" after time spent working collaboratively on projects that are responsive to community needs (p. 5).

In aggregate, the benefits of engaging in CRP through powerful learning communities have positive, specific outcomes in the particular context in which they are engaged. This does not, however, exclude the ways in which researchers identify areas for further growth and need for additional education, experiences, and even more PLC-style engagement with CRP. Guerrero et al. (2016-2017) shared in their findings that the social context of the studies sometimes inhibits the effectiveness of PLCs engaged in CRP because important stakeholders frame culturally responsive and relevant pedagogies in deficit thinking—as a way of "'fixing' 'broken students' from particular communities" (p. 6). Other researchers find that while teachers acknowledge or name the importance of CRP in their PLC groups, applying those beliefs to practice are inconsistent, not demonstrated, or still framed as next steps in the process (Guerrero et al., 2016-2017; Jacobs, 2019; Moore, 2018; Shaw, 2020).

The CRP framework is built upon diverse research agendas across multiple content areas and varying implementations of CRP. CRP is both specific and contextualized in practice. Thus, we expect that although there is established research at the intersection of powerful learning communities and CRP, we argue that our study contributes to this literature as uniquely positioned in an online-only program with graduate students across academic disciplines and from across the United States. However, even if we uncover redundancy of site or course delivery method, the need for culturally relevant education is ongoing and intentionally designed to be "replicated in our contexts" (Aronson & Laughter, 2015, p. 200).

The Study

As teacher educators, engaged with the social and political lives of teachers and students and committed to developing culturally responsive educators, we share the findings from our study of a pedagogical practice in an online graduate class: reading group meetings. Over the course of three semesters, we studied group conversations in the History and Philosophy course designed by Researcher 2. As we listened, we wondered. What are the conversational similarities and differences operationalized by groups? How does studying their dialogue indicate to us that we may need to encourage more critical engagement? How might we predict the ways in which a group attempts to remain "neutral" in their engagement? Can patterns that align with larger ideological ideals or known expressions of bias help us anticipate the ways that teachers and teacher candidates acknowledge sociopolitical issues, but avoid connection to them in education?

To better understand our pedagogical responses and responsibilities, we focus here on the story of two reading groups. One is a reading group committed to the professionalism of teachers and engaging in a supportive and collegial graduate class experience. The other is critically engaged and pushing themselves to critically reflect on their school contexts and complicity in inequitable power relations in schools. These group conversations become the focus of our

narrative analysis and discussion of the implications of our study as teacher educators who intentionally foster critical conversation in reading groups.

Methods and Methodology

The Course Context

History and Philosophy of American Education is a graduate course required in all graduate education programs at Researcher 2's mid-sized private institution in the Midwest. The course is classified as a "Foundations" course, and it seeks to broadly discuss both historical and philosophical implications for American education. Researcher 2 began teaching this course in the summer of 2020 and implemented her own pedagogical choices for the structure of the course as informed by CRP and powerful learning communities, described above. The course consisted of three primary elements: week-to-week modules, reading groups, and a final group project.

Participants

For this study, sections offered in the fall of 2020, the spring of 2021, and the first summer session of 2021 were included. Researcher 2 emailed all members of each section to ask for informed consent to participate in the study. She requested consent to examine one-pager reflections, their final philosophical reflections, the final discussion prompt, and reading group meetings. The total number of students who enrolled in the included sections was 83. Of the 83 pre-service and practicing teachers, 67 consented to participate in the study. In seven out of 17 possible groups, all members consented to participate. Eleven of the participants were male, and 56 were female. The racial make-up of the participants reflects the teaching field in the United States generally, in which 82% of teachers are White, and 18% are Hispanic, Black, or other (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 6). Any additional racial information risks identifying individuals in the study. The participants represented all ten graduate programs offered at the institution, and the practicing teachers had between one year of experience and 20+ years of experience. Sixteen participants were pre-service teachers. Participants currently taught in, or were planning on teaching in, early childhood, elementary, middle, and secondary education levels, or they were planning on pursuing a position in administration. Participants represented several geographical regions in the United States, including the Northeast, the Midwest, the Southeast, and the West. In the narratives analyzed here, 9 participants are represented in two reading groups.

Methodology

The paradigm for this study is an interpretivist inquiry. According to Quantz (2017) interpretivism seeks to provide "a description of a particular, concrete event or culture" (p. 2). Interpretivism does not claim that its observations and conclusions are the rule; instead, interpretivism seeks to illuminate concepts "in the form of ideal types, typifications, understandings, or exemplars that provide a way to talk about social phenomena" (p. 3).

An interpretivist, or constructivist, paradigm aligns with the research methodology selected for the data in this study: narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the instructional design, Researcher 2 chose a group assignment asserting and believing that knowledge is "not only in the mind of the individual, but also [socially constructed]" (Glesne, 2016, p. 9). Furthermore, in

community with one another in reading groups, focusing on sociopolitical consciousness-raising in education, we both assert that "consciously engaging" with texts "is a social act and takes place as we dialogue and negotiate with others" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 15).

The focus of this study are two narratives about two different reading groups. These are not representative of all groups or conversational outcomes. They are examples of sociopolitical consciousness raising in the context of an online graduate assignment that we use to interpret the outcomes of our CRP and powerful learning community course design aimed towards confronting the social and political realities of education historically and in the present.

Reading Groups

The element of the course studied here are the reading groups. In literature, these are also called literature circles and book clubs. This assignment required students to hold five reading group meetings (four meetings for the summer section) and discuss two self-selected readings from a list of sociopolitically oriented history and contemporary educational issues texts (see Appendix 2). The reading group meeting assignment (Figure 1) was the following:

Figure 1: *Reading Group Meeting Assignment*

This is the ___ of five required reading group meetings. Please meet in an online forum and screencast roughly 10 minutes of the meeting. Please note - the meeting will need to be much longer than 10 minutes, but you only need to submit 10 minutes (any longer is difficult for you to submit because the file is often so large).

For this meeting, please select 2 readings (or more) per meeting from the reading bank (Appendix 2). In preparation for each meeting, it is expected that group members will have read the selections carefully. In addition, group members should prepare the following prior to the meeting:

Five takeaways from the reading.

Three specific ideas from the readings that might inform classroom practice and/or interactions with students.

One question about the reading for the group.

While you do not have to go through each of these points systematically, it is good to be prepared. Try to let the conversation build organically, using what you have prepared to spur more conversation.

It is also very important that you all connect the readings to your own practice/pedagogy. The meetings/discussions are an opportunity to do that work prior to the final assignment.

Data Analysis: Arriving at Narrative Inquiry

In the first round of this interpretive inquiry, we engaged in thematic coding. But once the initial findings from "well-codified themes" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 289) were identified, we decided that for this project, in which we seek to understand what culturally relevant conversations sound like and how this assignment played out online with graduate students, that discussing in vivo codes and general themes did not fit the purpose of the analysis. Rather, we identified two groups whose experience we chose to highlight in narrative form.

We chose the narratives of two specific groups identified as Group 5 and Group 7 to illuminate the specific experience of working in a group and engaging in critical conversation. We hope that "the power of their stories… evoke the vividness of lived experience" (Berger & Quinney, 2005, p. 9). Using narrative inquiry and narratology, we offer "renderings" (Eisner, 1998, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of Group 5 and Group 7. The text that follows is one which Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) might call "one of *authenticity*, capturing the essence and resonance of the actors' experience and perspective through the details of action and thought revealed in context" (p. 12).

To construct the narratives of Group 5 and Group 7, the recordings of all reading group meetings for Groups 5 and 7 were watched, annotated, and storied. Group 5 had 5 meetings. Group 7 had 4 meetings. The first round of viewing the recordings of their meetings was for the purpose of restorying and determining a chronology of the group meetings (Creswell, 2013, p. 190). During second round viewing, the stories of the group and individual quotes of narrative were culled to identify both "unique and general features" of the group experience (Creswell, 2013, p. 191). From the memos and in vivo quotes, an analysis of Group 5 and Group 7 focused on the "what" that was spoken; in other words, this is a thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008 as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 192). But in interpretation of the group, we also focus on "how" the groups constructed their conversations and how specific rhetorical strategies influence "what" was addressed in conversation (Riessman, 2008 as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 192).

As narrative researchers, we "try to interpret meanings through an analysis of plotlines, thematic structures, and social and culture referents" (Kim, 2016, p. 190). This action of interpretation is constantly in motion, constantly occurring, as we conceive of our research, listen to our subjects' stories, and compose our research texts. Kim (2016) asserts that "we narrative inquirers do not stand outside in a neutral, objective position, merely presenting or analyzing 'what was said,' says Reissman (2008 as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 190)" (p. 190). Instead, we are constantly at work "finding narrative meaning" (p. 190), constructing a text as "a way of understanding human experience through stories that, in turn, help us better understand the human phenomena and human existence" (p. 190). As we listened to the group meetings of the participants of this study, our desire to trouble the conversations, to provide an interpretation of sorts, of the social phenomena that was occurring within and between groups, became increasingly more complex. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that narrative inquirers ask questions throughout the stages of narrative inquiry about how to position their "work socially and theoretically" (p. 136). In the construction of these narratives, we worked to authentically share the lived experiences of the group members, as the meetings progressed.

Researcher Positionality

Both researchers can be described as white, able bodied, cisgender women. Researcher 1 self identifies as a former early childhood teacher in several locations in the eastern United States, but has spent six years preparing preservice teachers in leadership and social justice education broadly in the Midwest. As a book club regular, primarily professionally, she has been studying the dynamics of book clubs of diverse literature for the last four years. Researcher 2 was a high school teacher in the Midwest for 18 years; she has spent three years preparing preservice teachers. As a former English teacher, Researcher 2 engaged in literature circles and book groups in her pedagogy, and is drawn to storytelling. She identifies as a narrative inquirer in her research. These researchers' personal and professional roles are shared here to contextualize the researchers.

Member Checking

Members of both Groups 5 and 7 were contacted for member checking. One participant from Group 7 confirmed that the narrative reflected her experience in the group and offered no edits or clarification. The researchers received no additional feedback from Group 5. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms of the researchers' choice.

Narrative

Group 5

Group 5 consisted of five practicing and pre-service teachers. In this rendering of their meetings, they have been assigned the following pseudonyms: Julie, Sue, Lindsay, Anne, and Jen. Group 5 spent a good deal of time getting to know each other in their early meetings, listening intently to each other's experiences and teacher stories. After reading Sonia Nieto's (2014) *Why We Teach Now*, Julie asked the group, "Why do you all teach?" They each listened intently to each other, often repeating what resonated in another's answer and then adding on with their own thoughts, experiences, and beliefs.

The conversations grew to resemble a group of old friends getting together for a casual book club. Even at the group's very first meeting when they met with each other and Researcher 2 to establish group and meeting norms and goals, there quickly grew an enthusiasm and comfort in the exchanges, despite no previous connection. When discussing both curriculum and professional standardization that was discussed in Brian Schultz's (2017) *Teaching in the Cracks*, for example, the group pushed back on a tendency to being "put in a box" and shared ways they, as teachers, "break out of these boxes."

Through the group's five reading group meetings, their conversations about their teaching lives persisted. When the texts they read for a particular meeting pushed them to wade into uncharted territory, though, perhaps into conversations centered on race, the tone of the conversation tended to shift. In discussing bell hooks (1994), the group grappled with the idea that hooks was "tormented by the classroom reality… that often used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and unjust exercises of power" (p. 5). Sue "was shocked," sharing that in 1994, in her own schooling experiences, she had no sense of this oppression for students of color, much less for entire schooling structures. When one of the members read the quote, "The classroom began to feel more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility" (hooks, 1994, p. 4), the group evaded the racialized experiences of bell hooks; rather they generalized her observations into a conversation around curriculum and standardization, a teaching experience they all shared. Lindsay noted that school often starts fun but "becomes a prison for some." The conversation flowed when they were able to talk about the teaching profession and pedagogy, about their experiences. Beyond sharing their own experiences, awkward silences occurred.

In one conversation, the group was reflecting on the text *Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* (Laura, 2014). The conversation began by examining the term "school-to-prison pipeline." Only one member of the group, Lindsay, had ever heard that term before. At one point, Anne said, "I am left overwhelmed. This is so huge and systemic. What do we do?" Jen said, "I work in an all-White environment." This part of the conversation was tepid, a break from the typically friendly, flowing conversations the group had. There was an

overwhelming condemnation of the conditions and practices that bolster and maintain the school-to-prison pipeline, but there was also a noticeable discomfort with the group's lack of knowledge and experience with populations that are marginalized by zero-tolerance discipline policies and special education labeling practices.

Lindsay met this conversation head-on, stating that many Black students' needs are not met by White teachers, especially in "low-income, inner city" environments. She spoke of the pervasive labeling of students as discipline problems and "bad kids." In Laura's (2014) text, though, she spends time comparing how she and her brother took such different paths in life, an interesting study in family dynamics. Instead of following Lindsay into the critical conversation of race, discipline, and oppressive teaching practices, the rest of the group turned to the question of family dynamics, how siblings often take different paths in life despite similar upbringings. It was a safe detour, a route that could continue to include analysis of the text but that could avoid the elephant in the room, the overwhelming systemic racism that Laura (2014) illuminates in her brother's school experiences.

In Group 5's final meeting of the semester, they discussed Richard Milner's (2016) *Start Where You Are but Don't Stay There.* After weeks of relatively "safe" conversations that had dips into more critical topics examining inequities, Milner's (2016) text prompted the group into a deep dialogue about language and diversity. When discussing the education debt, which Milner (2016) illuminates through an examination of the terms "achievement gap" and "opportunity gap," Anne reflected that the entire examination of this language was "eye opening." She stated that "this is all new" and "I wouldn't know any of this without classes like this." Lindsay highlighted the four questions that Milner (2016) asks in his introduction:

> (1) To what extent is achievement synonymous with learning? (2) What does it mean to learn and achieve in one school community in comparison to another? (3) Who decides what it means to achieve and why? (4) How do (and should) we address the kind of learning that never shows up on achievement measures- including high stakes tests? (p. 4)

Milner (2016) contextualizes those questions through a diversity lens, asking readers to engage in a "paradigm and mind-set shift" (p. 4). Through Lindsay's prompting, Group 5 connected, fully and for the first time in their conversations, how teaching can be a "practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994, p. 4) when teachers are, in Lindsay's words, "culturally responsive and not tied to a certain curriculum [that is oppressive]."

When the Spring 2021 semester ended, Group 5 shared that they had plans to get together and continue their learning community. At this time, we cannot confirm that they followed through on this plan, but we understand that this group enjoyed their time together and found the potential for ongoing professional value in their meetings.

Group 7

Group 7 consisted of four practicing and pre-service teachers. In this rendering of their meetings, they have been assigned the following pseudonyms: Chelsea, Kaitlyn, Sean, and Beth. Group 7, it seemed, did not need significant time to get to know each other in their reading group meetings. In their first meeting, Chelsea, in essence, dove right in and began an important conversation about the language that we use in schools and with children. Specifically, she troubled the concept of "school safety" and the way schools might use this language to control

students. Christopher Emdin (2016), in *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood… And the Rest of Y'All Too*, one of the group's first text selections, references some schools' use of zero-tolerance policies and lockdown procedures as akin to prison-like conditions. He says that schools use "the innocuous term *school safety*" (p. 6) to justify these kinds of procedures and policies. One of his students said school safety is a "nice-sounding code word for treating you like you're in jail or something" (p. 6).

Chelsea immediately connected Emdin's (2016) text to her school's four "rules," one of which is "Be Safe." Chelsea said that she has heard teachers say things like, "Is your body safe?" She asserted that what these teachers really meant is, "Is your body doing what I want it to do right now?" In response to this, Kaitlyn said, "Is it about safety or is it about control?" Chelsea even shared that she took her concerns about School Safety language to a building leadership meeting, asking her colleagues to re-examine their language and its use in their building.

Meeting one went on like this, with each of the group members connecting the reading to their practice in school, their desire to make change in their environments. Kaitlyn connected to Beverly Tatum's (1997) metaphor of cultural racism being like smog. She read this quote:

> Cultural racism—the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color—is like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. None of us would introduce ourselves as "smog-breathers" (and most of us don't want to be described as prejudiced), but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air? (Tatum, 1997, p. 6)

Kaitlyn concluded that if teachers don't examine their own biases, they are basically smog-breathers, reinforcing cultural stereotypes and hegemony.

She illustrated this by sharing a story about a teacher who exhibited a micro-aggression when commenting loudly on the smell of a child's lunch, a child who was Indian. Kaitlyn watched the episode and was appalled by the teacher's words, but she acknowledged that it was something that happens often in schools. Sean stressed how much children internalize when events like that happen, stressing the lack of representation of people of color in the faculty of his school. The conversation soon turned to curriculum and the importance of representation in books teachers have in their classroom. In meeting one, the group members were open, honest, attentive, inquisitive, and critical in their conversation. They acknowledged the enormous role that teachers must play in dismantling racism in schools.

Group 7's second meeting continued to explore curriculum and representation through bell hooks' (1994) *Teaching to Transgress* and Mara Sapon-Shevin's (2007) *Widening the Circle*. Kaitlyn immediately acknowledged that while Sapon-Shevin's (2017) text was relatable for her, hooks' (1994) scholarly and passionate narrative struck a chord. The historical perspective that hooks (1994) illustrates caused Kaitlyn to acknowledge the "grief experienced" during desegregation by Black students for whom Black teachers were a "tool for liberation." The entire group acknowledged how viewing desegregation from the lens of a Black person completely changed their perceptions and challenged their previous beliefs and knowledge about what they were taught concerning desegregation.

Chelsea even expressed that if someone had asked her, just a few weeks ago, if desegregation had been positive or negative for Black students, she might have thought about Ruby Bridges being flanked by police, but that she would have certainly concluded that desegregation

was overwhelmingly positive. In this conversation, Chelsea questioned how she could have ever made such casual assumptions and supported assimilation in schools without truly examining what that meant. Sean again connected the text to representation, to including diverse voices in the classroom so that all students could see themselves in the curriculum. Beth, who acknowledged how "eye-opening" all that they were reading and learning for their groups was, connected hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy and the act of "*value*[ing] everyone's presence" (p. 8) to the inclusive practices that Sapon-Shevin (2007) writes about. Meeting two again stressed how they, as teachers, had an important responsibility in the work of anti-racism.

By the time Group 7 held meeting three, their familiar banter was warm and encouraging. They began this meeting with friendly pleasantries, but, as usual, dug into the reading almost immediately. The group continually became more and more comfortable in their conversations of difficult subjects. In meeting three, they were examining Richard Milner's (2016) *Start Where You Are but Don't Stay There* alongside Castagno's (2014) *Educated in Whiteness*. Kaitlyn chose the readings for this meeting and was anxious to talk about Milner's (2016) discussion of the "opportunity gap" versus the term "achievement gap." They found a balance in what they perceived to be "technical" in *Educated in Whiteness*, citing phrases like "Niceness as a mechanism of whiteness in schools" (Castagno, 2014, p. 8), to what they viewed as "conversational" in Milner's (2016) text.

They said Milner (2016) provided a model of sorts for what this work "actually looks like." Chelsea admitted that Castagno's (2014) text made her "almost self-conscious," but that Milner's (2016) text was "encouraging in the sense that wherever you are right now is okay and that progression is unfinished… Five months from now you don't want this to be where you are." Kaitlyn added, "He framed it as progress, which is encouraging." They expressed an ease in Milner's (2016) perceived message. This ease did not last long, though, because Sean brought the group back to Castagno's (2014) text and challenged the group to critically think about Castagno's (2014) notion that:

> We come to learn how popular educational discourses get employed in contradictory ways, how potentially transformative educational agendas get taken up in ways that run counter to the initial intent, and ultimately, how individuals with good intentions can produce structures that harm children. (p. 1)

Sean highlighted "niceness" and "good intentions" as ideas that lead to the labeling of students as "students beyond help," a reference to a story about a principal that was in Castagno's (2014) text.

As the meeting continued, issues like the racial demographics of teachers, the tendency to place Black students into subjective disability categories, and the importance of maintaining high expectations for *all* students were discussed at length. At one point Beth commented, "Even though these conversations are really hard to have, they are really, really important." The group's exchanges were natural and expressed care. They listened intently to each other and expressed value in what each member had to say. At one point, one group member's screen froze for a few seconds. When it came back, Chelsea said, "Can you please repeat what you said because it seems really valuable."

In the fourth and final meeting for Group 7, they acknowledged how much they had each learned in their conversations with each other. Crystal T. Laura's (2014) *Being Bad: My Baby Brother Chris and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* provided the group with a narrative, a story, they could share and engage with. Kaitlyn connected it to the documentary *13th* and recommended that

others watch it. Chelsea expressed how much she appreciated that Laura (2014) wove data into Chris's story. Chelsea said she had begun having conversations with her colleagues and building leaders about their equity efforts, and that Laura (2014) had armed her with data to share "as she argues with others about this."

The group highlighted Laura's (2014) quote that what Chris really needed was "a space of belonging and authenticity where he hoped to achieve some realistic power over the world within which he lived" (p. 27). Chelsea said, "We can do this in schools. We can create this space." The conversation continued by examining William Ayers' (2019) essay, "I Shall Create! Teaching Toward Freedom" that is featured in Lisa Delpit's (2019) *Teaching When the World is on Fire*. Sean highlighted Ayers' (2019) assertion that "Every student who comes through the classroom door is a three-dimensional human being like myself, and a person of infinite and incalculable value, someone to be treated with awe and respect, humility and patience."

This final conversation was almost a review of all they had not known before, of the "vastness and deepness of it all," in Kaitlyn's words. Beth, who most often listened and then validated her peers' points-of-view admitted, "I feel such a naivety about the realities of [all this]." Chelsea said she now knew she had been "beautifully sheltered, horribly sheltered, guiltily sheltered" from the systemic racism that "has oppressed for years." The group, bonded through their mutual condemnation of "sheltered Whites," finished by expressing that they would not be satisfied with just "progress," referring to their earlier conversation around Milner (2016). They would stop at nothing short of a "transformation."

In her end of semester reflection, Chelsea poignantly said, "Frankly, I'm not sure if we'll ever talk again when this course ends. I am, however, sincerely grateful for the conversations and time we had together and the impact they had on me as an educator. Even when it was graded, even when we didn't see eye to eye, I had my tribe[1] and there was no doubt we were #bettertogether."

Discussion

At the beginning of this study, we believed our data analysis would reveal evidence of sociopolitical consciousness raising within our participants. When we began analyzing and coding the data, it was apparent that sociopolitical consciousness raising had occurred for many of the participants, but a different phenomenon of interest began to emerge. Kim (2016) asserts that "we cannot assume that our research phenomenon will be the same one that was explained clearly in the proposal" (p. 206). Instead, "It is highly recommended that we identify our inquiry phenomena as they appear in the data during data analysis" (p. 206). Using Kim's (2016) "Narrative Data Analysis and Interpretation" (p. 185) as a guide, we assert that narrative inquiry is both a phenomenon and method; when we analyzed our data, we sought to both name the phenomenon we were studying as well as engage in narrative coding "to find narrative meanings" (p. 206).

In this process, we first asked, "What is my narrative inquiry about? What experience am I studying?" (Kim, 2016, p. 206). In the stories of the two groups, as they progressed from meeting to meeting, we were able to identify ideologies of individualism, of niceness, and of whiteness, as well as anti-racism and shared responsibilities for curriculum and schools. The groups' discourses often straddled the borders of non-political vs. political engagement. In the context of this study, "political" can be defined as a dynamic of power. Educators' decisions about school and

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1. This is a direct quote from the participant. However, we understand that the term "tribe" is used outside of an indigenous people's context and marginalizes indigenous sovereignty (Reese, 2017).

curriculum "all hold profound political implications" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 8) because they impact "power and how it is distributed and engaged in the world of education and life in schools" (p. 9). We called non-political conversation, in other words moments when teachers did not identify themselves as teachers involved in the power dynamics of race, class, gender and other aspects of social power in schools as "safe," while political conversation could be seen as sociopolitical engagement, or sociopolitical consciousness.

So while our data analysis certainly revealed sociopolitical consciousness raising, our analysis also illuminated the conversations themselves, the ways in which the participants navigated difficult (or political) issues and dialogue. Our phenomenon became the conversations themselves, the choices the participants made in their engagement level, in their willingness to concede that they would or would not remain stagnant in their work as teachers to create equitable spaces for all their students.

After establishing our phenomenon as the conversations themselves, the complex stories of the groups' words and actions, we worked through a process of narrative coding, "to find narrative meanings" (Kim, 2016, p. 206). Using Connelly and Cladinin's (1990) three analytical tools for narrative inquiry, *broadening, burrowing,* and *storying and restorying*, we paid attention to "storylines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). As we moved from field texts to research texts, the stories that are shared in this paper, we used the analytical tools to "seam together" (Kim, 2016, p. 207) the stories.

As we *broadened* the lens around the groups' stories, we returned to both the political and social climate surrounding the participants and the class itself, and the intentions of the class instructor, Researcher 2, as she chose the pedagogical method of reading groups, a powerful learning community, that engaged in the principles of CRP with the use of sociopolitical texts. Using the tool of *burrowing*, we can "focus on more specific details of the data" (Kim, 2016, p. 207). Group 5 and Group 7 both engaged in collegial, productive conversations about their lives as teachers, and the challenges and rewards of their jobs. Both groups' conversations discussed critical issues that emerged from the texts. When we listened closely, though, we found nuanced differences in how Group 5 and Group 7 engaged in their conversations. Group 5 warmly discussed their classrooms, the challenges of teaching, and issues around curriculum. But they were reluctant to leave those "safe," shared spaces. When one member of Group 5, Lindsay, attempted to begin a discussion about discipline policies that disproportionately affect students of color, as illuminated by Crystal T. Laura (2014) in her narrative about her brother Chris, the group instead began to discuss sibling dynamics, highlighting how Chris and Crystal T. Laura's paths were divergent. Conversely, when Group 7 discussed the same text, Chelsea shared that she had begun having conversations in her building about their discipline policies and how they might be inequitable. They conceded that the issues they were exploring had a daunting "vastness and deepness" that presented great challenges, but that they were determined to enact a "transformation" in their environments.

It is in the burrowing that we began to recognize the slight differences in the directions and tones of the meetings. Group 5 was often "shocked" or "saddened" when reading about inequitable classrooms. Group 7 was action-oriented and determined in their responses. Group 5 avoided discomfort; Group 7 welcomed it. As teacher-researchers, we knew the story was in how these meetings unfolded and we could learn how sociopolitical consciousness raising could occur in this type of pedagogical structure if we *listened* to these slight nuances.

Using the tool of *storying and restorying*, we created "renderings" (Eisner, 1998, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of the two groups' meetings "so that the significance of the lived experiences of the participant[s] comes to the fore" (Kim, 2016, p. 207). We created the two separate narratives to highlight the nuanced, different ways in which the groups approached their conversations and the texts. Group 5, all committed and seemingly excellent teachers, were all very *nice* in their conversations (Castagno, 2014). They dug into shared issues they all experienced as teachers and women. They expressed a desire to continue to learn about the issues that were illuminated through the texts. They seemed to be genuinely invested in the activity of reading groups. If one were to read about Group 5 in isolation, not alongside the narrative of Group 7, one might believe the goals of the course had been met; the students engaged in conversations as a group around sociopolitical issues. It is the introduction of the story of Group 7 that disrupts that notion. Group 7 was committed to moving beyond "niceness" and "whiteness" (Castagno, 2014), to acknowledge, in Kaitlyn's words, "that wherever you are right now is okay and that progression is unfinished… Five months from now you don't want this to be where you are." Group 7 was action-oriented, moving beyond simple conversations to apply what they were learning to their classroom environments.

The stories of the two groups highlight how using CRP in course design, specifically constructing powerful learning communities that engage in sociopolitical texts, can garner diverse outcomes. While both Group 5 and Group 7 expressed great satisfaction in the reading group experience, as did all the reading groups we studied, it was Group 7 that fully embodied the goals of the course and the aspirations of the instructor. In a narrative inquiry, Kim (2016) prompts researchers to answer the question of "So What?" (p. 230). The sharing of the stories of Group 5 and Group 7 can be justified on many levels, answering the question of "So What?" Kim (2016) suggests that "narrative inquirers need to attend to three kinds of justification: *the personal, the practical,* and *the social*" (p. 231). She adds "another justification, *the scholarly*" (p. 231). We contend that this narrative inquiry matters on all these levels.

On a *personal* level, as teachers, teacher educators, and mothers, we are drawn to creating, and then studying, pedagogical structures and activities that engage pre- and practicing- teachers in critical conversations that can be emancipatory. It is at the heart of our work. On a *practical* level, studying a course that uses CRP as its lens, one that also implements powerful learning communities as a strategy for students to construct knowledge, is valuable to our own practice and to others' practice. The *social* justification for this study emphasizes that classrooms and schools are inherently socially and politically positioned, and it is imperative that we prepare teachers to flourish in this environment, to recognize the power structures that are at play in our classrooms, and to learn to dismantle structures that oppress students. Finally, the *scholarly* justification for our study re-emphasizes the need to research how we can prepare teachers for environments that are becoming increasingly volatile and burdensome. Researching pedagogical strategies that incorporate CRP and engage teachers in critical conversations can contribute to a larger body of work to support teachers as they enter into political spaces.

We understand that reeducating teachers about the history of education, raising sociopolitical consciousness, and aligning teacher education pedagogy with CRP cannot be done or holistically accomplished in one semester (Aronson, et al., 2020). The sociopolitical realities that continue to persist both within our school walls and in larger society, as described in the introduction to this paper, challenge us to create and recreate teacher education programs that engage in culturally relevant and culturally responsive practices and simultaneously prompt educators to see their sociopolitical landscape clearly and participate in equitable education.

Conclusion

Even with intentional course design and pedagogical structures in place, we are reminded by this study that we cannot simply fill students with the "attitudes and dispositions" (Aronson & Laughter, 2016, p. 166) to influence culturally responsive school spaces. We are also reminded that there are "first steps" in developing culturally responsive teachers. According to Kincheloe (2008), "the recognition" of sociopolitical issues in education is that first step (p. 2). And Group 5 was taking that first step. Yet, the "people power" (Love, 2019, p. 9) we need in schools may be located in the action-oriented Group 7. We wondered: are there patterns that align with larger ideological ideals or known expressions of bias that might help us anticipate the ways that teachers and teacher candidates acknowledge sociopolitical issues, but avoid connection to them in education? We learned from studying two groups, who might have otherwise been lost in a sea of thematic-coding, that reading groups that we previously described vaguely as "safe" and "not there" are re-organized in this analysis as either politically engaged and even responsible for school systems, or acting non-politically and as individuals.

One of the ways we plan to move forward in our pedagogy with reading groups is with specific prompts at points of potential intervention. When reviewing and giving feedback about reading group meetings, we might say something like, "I notice that you all spent significant time talking about the dynamics of siblings in families. While interesting, I wonder if this is what Laura (2014) would want to be your key takeaway from this text?" Or, "You are so effective at sharing personal experiences, do you have any personal experiences that might help further illustrate how the dynamics of racism play out in your school experience?" Pointing graduate students back towards the political, while still engaging on a personal level might have made a difference in the learning that Group 5 had in this class. Group 7 was stopping at nothing short of "transformation." Yet, how might we think about follow up support for a powerful learning community like this? Is it collaboration with colleagues in our teacher education and teacher leadership departments that carry on this work? Or does it end with a sense of responsibility and that's enough for a first step? We believe that this kind of deep research findings in our own pedagogy challenge us to keep asking critical questions about what we do to create learning environments that are potentially transformative, even when students enjoy assignments and express satisfaction with our coursework.

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Appendix A: *Reading Groups Reading List*

This is the Complete list of the History and Philosophy of American Education Excerpt Reading Bank, which includes all text excerpts used in semesters since summer 2020. The reading bank was comprised of excerpts, namely the introduction and/or the first chapter of the following texts:

Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison Pipeline - Crystal T. Laura (2014)
Democracy and Education - John Dewey (1916/2011)
Educated in Whiteness: Good Intentions and Diversity in Schools - Angelina E. Castagno (2014)
Experience and Education - John Dewey (1938/2015)
For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood… and the Rest of Y'all Too - Christopher Emdin (2016)
"I Shall Create! Teaching Toward Freedom" - William Ayers (2019) in Delpit, L. (ed.) *Teaching When the World is on Fire*
Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education (2nd ed.) - Ozlem Sensoy & Robin DiAngelo (2017)
Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom - Lisa Delpit (2006) *For this text, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children" was used.
Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage - Paulo Freire (1998)
Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap (2nd ed.) - Paul Gorski (2018)
Start Where You Are but Don't Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classrooms - H. Richard Milner IV (2016)
Teaching in the Cracks: Openings and Opportunities for Student-Centered, Action-Focused Curriculum - Brian D. Schultz (2017)
Teaching to Transgress; Education as the Practice of Freedom - bell hooks (1994)
Teaching With Vision: Culturally Responsive Teaching in Standards-Based Classrooms - Christine E. Sleeter and Catherine Cornbleth (eds.) (2011)
To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher (2nd ed.) - William Ayers (2001)
We Want to do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom - Bettina L. Love (2019)
"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race - Beverly Tatum (1997)
Why We Teach Now - Sonia Nieto (ed.) (2014)
Widening the Circle: The Power of Inclusive Classrooms - Mara Sapon-Shevin (2007)

Appendix B: *Assigned Books Referenced in Data Findings*

Ayers, W. (2020). I shall create! In L. Delpit (Ed.), *Teaching when the world is on fire* (pp. 3-15). The New Press.

Castagno, A. E. (2014). *Educated in whiteness: Good intentions and diversity in schools*. University of Minnesota Press.

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Emdin, C. (2017). *For white folks who teach in the hood… and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education.* Beacon Press.

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Laura, C. T. (2014). *Being bad: My baby brother and the school-to-prison pipeline*. Teachers College Press.

Milner, H. R. IV. (2016). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms.* Harvard Education Press.

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Sapon-Shevin, M. (2007). *Widening the circle: The power of inclusive classrooms*. Beacon Press.

Schultz, B. D. (2017). *Teaching in the cracks: Openings and opportunities for student-centered, action-focused curriculum.* Teachers College Press.

Tatum, B. D. (1997). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria: And other conversations about race*. Basic Books.

Teaching Public Issues in Politically Divided Times: Lessons Learned from the Media Coverage of January 6, 2021

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Abstract

> *To understand how educators can better teach contentious public issues in a politically divided society, the author turns to media coverage of the insurrection of January 6, 2021, perhaps the best documented instance of educators teaching a politically contentious issue. These articles provide valuable data on what lessons were taught in classrooms in the days following January 6, and they reveal a road map for how educators can balance the political demands of their communities while also helping students prepare for citizenship by understanding and working through politically contentious issues. The media was clear in communicating preferred methods for addressing these concerns, revealing a pragmatic pedagogy in which educators (a) pause the curriculum to address divisive issues; (b) model the building and maintenance of caring relationships; and (c) teach non-partisan democratic knowledge and values such as critical thinking, media literacy, and civil discourse. The author argues that the lesson strategies revealed in the media coverage of teaching the January 6 insurrection should be a model for how educators proceed with teaching politically contentious public issues in the future.*

Keywords: *civics, citizenship education, January 6, current events, media discourse analysis, curriculum & instruction, education policy*

Introduction

On Wednesday, January 6, 2021, a mob supporting Donald Trump's false claims of election fraud attempted a coup d'état against a Congress mandated with certifying the free and fair election of an American president (Feuer, 2022). The next day, teachers across the country were charged with helping students understand the events of the previous day. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, commented on Twitter, "Students across America are watching…You don't have to be a civics teacher to know that this moment is going to be very difficult for so many educators across the country" (Meckler, et al., 2021). America *was* watching to see how educators would handle this historic event.

Teaching the events of January 6 was "very difficult," in part, because the insurrection was the latest battle in America's "war over knowledge," an epistemological conflict in which Americans are fighting over what counts as truth, and what values should be at the core of what it means to be an American, including concepts central to our democracy such as religious freedom, equal

opportunity, and individual rights (Rauch, 2021). The insurrection was the capstone of the previous four years filled with lies, misinformation, and political turmoil, and teachers were now responsible for helping their students understand the meaning of the event, while themselves avoiding a land-mine in the "war over knowledge" - the charge of indoctrination (see Gordon, 2021).

The political discourse surrounding civics education in the days and weeks following the January 6 attack exemplifies America's "war over knowledge." It manifested in debates about how to "revive" civics instruction after two decades of neglect (Gabor, 2021; see also Barton, 2021; Groves, 2021; Vasilogambros, 2021; Walsh, 2021), related disagreements about states requiring a civics test for high school graduation (Napolitano, 2021; Vasilogambros, 2021), and the battle over so-called "divisive concepts" laws that were based on the concocted threat of Critical Race Theory in K-12 schools (McCausland, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021).

With the political divide little changed since January 6, 2021, and these "divisive concepts" laws leaving many educators "scared, confused, and self-censoring" on what to teach (Meckler & Natanson, 2022; see also Greene, 2022; LaCasse, 2021; Villarreal, 2021), it should be no surprise that many educators today carry uncertainty about how to talk with their students about politically contentious issues and events. When the next political crisis happens, many educators will just abstain from engaging students in these important conversations altogether (Hollingsworth, 2022; Wermus, 2022).

However, American educators are mandated with the responsibility of teaching our children the values, skills, and knowledge of democratic citizenship (Dewey, 1916; Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021), and we cannot retreat from our responsibility to teach tomorrow's citizens how to participate effectively in our democratic way of life (Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson, 2021). Therefore, teachers must be able to "articulate why practicing democracy within a classroom is so important" (Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021, p.24), and they must enter the classroom equipped with the tools necessary for helping their students understand politically contentious events (Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson, 2021; Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021).

But what are the best practices for teaching this curriculum in an era where, as one North Carolina high school teacher stated in a January 8, 2021 *Fayetteville Observer* article, "it's hard to present the truth without making it seem like you're biased?" (Gordon, 2021). How can teachers successfully navigate the politics of this "war over knowledge" while at the same time providing their students with the values, skills, and knowledge necessary for understanding highly contentious public issues?

To understand how educators can successfully navigate these demands, I turn to what is the best-documented instance of educators teaching about a politically contentious event – media coverage of the insurrection of January 6, 2021. As happens whenever there is a crisis in domestic or global politics (Frenkiewich, 2012), the days and weeks following January 6 saw the nation's gaze turn to the American education system with unprecedented media coverage of teachers' lessons, opinion essays on how educators should proceed with their lessons, prepared lessons (e.g., Ascione, 2021; Kamenetz, 2021; The Learning Network, 2021), and state and local guidance on how educators should teach about the attack (e.g., Gomez, 2021; Herron, 2021). These articles are a source of valuable data on what lessons were taught in classrooms in the days following January 6, and they provide a case study for how educators proceeded with teaching a politically contentious public issue in a society anxious about indoctrination.

The media was clear in articulating preferred methods for addressing contentious public issues in the classroom, revealing a pragmatic pedagogy in which educators (a) pause the curriculum to address divisive issues; (b) model the building and maintenance of caring relationships; and

(c) teach non-partisan democratic knowledge and values such as critical thinking, media literacy, and civil discourse. The foundation for this pedagogy is grounded in long-established principles that call for teaching children democratic citizenship with lessons attuned to students' lived experiences (Dewey, 1916; 1938) and our need to build and maintain caring relationships (Noddings, 1984; 2005); when the next political crisis happens, educators would be wise to turn to these lessons as an example of how they can balance the political demands of their communities while also meeting the necessity of preparing children for citizenship.

Pragmatic Citizenship Education as a Guide for Teaching Contentious Public Issues

America's founders recognized the centrality of public schooling in promoting and maintaining a strong civil society able to deal with contentious issues (Carpenter, 2013), but it was John Dewey (1916), who perhaps best articulated why America's public schools needed to play an integral role in preparing children for the challenges of citizenship. In *Democracy and Education,* Dewey (1916) argues for a pragmatic citizenship education, one in which children are taught that "knowledge is not just something which we are now conscious of, but consists of the dispositions we consciously use in understanding what now happens" (p. 400); an education aimed at preparing citizens to understand events with critical thinking and thoughtful action.

Dewey's vision for pragmatic citizenship education has influenced modern thinking on this curriculum, as many guides published in the last decade draw from and build upon this philosophy of teaching children the dispositions necessary for understanding public issues (e.g., Evans, 2021; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Schmidt & Pinkney, 2022; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Nel Noddings (2005, 2013), specifically, draws from Dewey's work to argue that educators must teach students the knowledge of how to build and maintain caring relationships; knowledge necessary for sustaining a pluralistic democracy. In short, if we are to prepare children for democratic citizenship in a politically divided society, we must provide them with the dispositions necessary for critically engaging contentious issues and events as they happen. This curriculum is especially suited for a society anxious about political indoctrination as educators' priority is focused not on teaching students what to think, but rather teaching them how to think.

However, there is little empirical research examining how teachers employ this pedagogy while simultaneously balancing the political demands of their communities (Pace, 2021), especially communities embroiled in the current "war over knowledge." This research therefore moves the literature forward by providing a case study in how America's educators employed a pragmatic pedagogy to teach about a politically contentious public issue during a very politically divided moment in history.

Methodology

The sample for this analysis consists of 54 articles published within the first three weeks of the insurrection; that is, between January 6, 2021 and January 27, 2021. These articles report on (a) teachers' lessons pertaining to the January 6 insurrection, (b) opinion articles, policy documents, and curriculum materials guiding teachers on what they should do in regards to teaching the January 6 insurrection, or (c) stories about teachers' direct involvement in the January 6 coup (Graph 1).[1] The articles come from traditional print journalism such as the *New York Times* and

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1. Due to news sharing services such as the Associated Press and Reuters, or independent reporting on the same event by different news agencies, multiple news outlets may publish or broadcast articles pertaining to the same story

Los Angeles Times, broadcast journalism such as National Public Radio, national television networks and their local broadcast affiliates, cable news stations such as Fox News and CNN, periodicals such as *Education Week* and *People Magazine,* and online publications such as blogposts and social media activity on platforms such as Twitter. The articles were gathered through repeated internet and periodical database searches throughout the month of January, 2021 using the search engines of Google, Google News, Yahoo News, and Ebsco. The search terms "January 6" and "teacher" or the date and "lesson" were used to find media reports.

Graph 1: *Articles published in January, 2021 Focused on Teachers and Teaching relevant to the January 6 Insurrection*
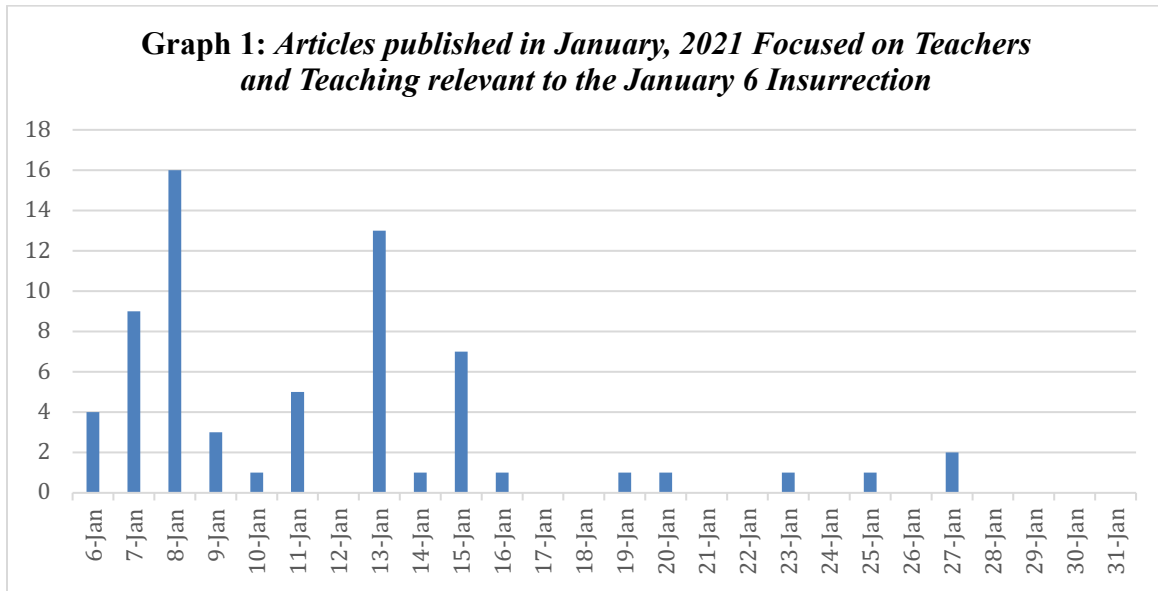
        This collection of news stories represents the mainstream media discourse pertaining to classroom teaching about the January 6 insurrection. With a politically divisive issue such as the January 6 insurrection, any community discord regarding education policy or teacher actions taking place in the public forum or on social media was likely to grab the attention of mainstream media (see Durkee, 2021; Richard, 2022), and modern internet search engines will find those reports. These media reports capture discourse across the political spectrum, and they provide us with a view of both teaching practices celebrated by the community and those that are rejected as indoctrination. Importantly, with a lack of other observational data on what educators taught about the insurrection in the days following January 6, these media reports may be the best source of information for telling us what practices were used in America's classrooms.
        Within this sample, the media was clear in articulating preferred methods for how teachers should engage in lessons about politically contentious events.[2] Reading through each article, ped-

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and facts. Articles with identical text and articles centered on the same teacher were counted as a singular occurrence as part of this sample.
    2. It is important to note that while the mainstream media filters narratives, screening and selecting ideas that are acceptable to most citizens (Fowler, 2013; Malin & Lubienski, 2015), in this case, promoting lesson strategies that the media sees as acceptable to wider society, more research must be conducted before claims are made regarding a lesson's ability to withstand public scrutiny, especially in communities that are severely divided along political lines, and in communities that are underrepresented by mainstream media. In short, this media discourse analysis provides a barometer for judging what society tolerates as acceptable practice, but it does not indicate actual conditions on the ground.

agogical methods and dominant themes discussed in the text were identified (Table 1). The accounts of teaching and the recommendations for teaching revealed in these accounts provide a treasure trove of lesson ideas and pedagogical strategies that can guide educators. When understood in conjunction with the substantial literature on citizen education already existing, these accounts provide a solid foundation for suggesting how educators can proceed with teaching politically contentious public issues.

Table 1: *Occurrence of Selected Themes in Articles Covering the Teaching of January 6, 2021*[3]		
Theme	# of Articles Discussing the Theme	% of Articles Discussing the Theme
Argument given for Pausing the Curriculum	13	24.07%
Teachers Creating a Safe Environment or Caring for Students' Emotional Needs	12	22.22%
Teachers recognizing Student Voice	10	18.52%
Argument for teaching Facts or Lessons on finding Facts	10	18.52%
Lessons on Media Literacy	9	16.67%
Lessons on Social Justice Issues like addressing Inequality	9	16.67%
Teacher involvement in January 6 Insurrection	8	14.81%
Lessons on Historical Background or Themes	7	12.96%
Lessons on Civil Discourse Skills	7	12.96%
Lessons allowing students to Discuss Emotions	6	11.11%
Argument given for staying Neutral on Political Issues	6	11.11%
Writing Prompts or journaling	5	9.26%
Teachers Encouraging Student Questions	5	9.26%
Argument given for Stay the Course or Avoiding topic	5	9.26%
Lessons on Democratic Norms like Free Speech or Fair Elections	4	7.41%
Teachers beginning class with Community Meeting	2	3.7%
Concern for Age-Appropriate Instruction	2	3.7%
Argument given for teaching about January 6 outside the social studies classroom.	2	3.7%
Teachers Encouraging Healing	1	1.85%
Teacher Notifying Parents	1	1.85%
Lessons on Political Concepts	1	1.85%
Total Articles in Sample	54	100%

Arguments for Pausing the Curriculum

Concern about indoctrination in schools increases whenever there is a rise in political division (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017; see also Kingkade, 2020; Micolucci, 2020), and in the days following January 6, the media was ever-vigilant searching for teachers accused of misleading and indoctrinating children about the insurrection. The media reported on teachers who spread misinformation about the event, such as one substitute teacher in Florida who was fired after telling her students that Antifa was behind the attack (Ghosh, 2021; see also DaSilva, 2021; Froelich, 2021).

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3. Note: Discussion of different themes may appear in the same article.

The media also reported on lessons containing content and messaging deemed too extreme by the community. One Tennessee high school teacher, for example, was fired after having his students read Ta-Nehisi Coates *The First White President* and showing Kyla Jenée Lacey's performance of the poem "White Privilege" as hooks for lessons about the 2020 election and the attack on the Capitol (Green, 2021; Wagner, 2021; see also Schemmel, 2022).

Several news outlets reported on teachers who were directly involved in the January 6 insurrection (e.g., Associated Press, 2021; Casiano, 2021; Grzegorek, 2021; Kremer, 2021; KY3 Staff, 2021; Matusek, 2021; Popichak, 2021; Raymundo, 2021; Stimson, 2021; Williams, 2021a). Most of these teachers were forced to resign, were fired outright, or were being investigated when news of their involvement was published, but at least one teacher involved in the attack returned to the classroom and spoke about his involvement with students before being placed on leave (Berti, 2021; Fox, 2021; Grablick, 2021). Worth noting is a report of two teachers in Arkansas who were *not* removed from the job after news of their involvement in the January 6 coup attempt surfaced (Peacock, 2021).

While the overwhelming majority of teachers who engaged their students in lessons about the January 6 attack did so with professionalism and expert skill, stories like these have proliferated a narrative that public school teachers are bent on indoctrinating students, a narrative that has elevated society's concern, both on the left and the right, and increased scrutiny of all educators, even those teaching in a fair-minded way (Hollingsworth, 2022).

With the fear of being accused of indoctrination, it seems no surprise that many fair-minded teachers avoid engaging in politically contentious issues altogether (e.g., Gomez, 2021; Meckler, et al., 2021). After the January 6 insurrection, for example, some school districts in Florida, hoping to "avoid potential blowback from parents," told educators to avoid discussing the attack (Gabor, 2021, Jan. 14). One teacher in Des Moines, Iowa also reported that her school administrators sent faculty members a warning to be careful about how they taught the January 6 attack (Hollingsworth, 2022). One Los Angeles teacher reported that she "kept the conversation brief because she did not want to inflame tensions" (Gomez, 2021). As Anton Schulzki, president of the National Council for Social Studies and a classroom teacher in Colorado, put the concern succinctly, "there may be some teachers who are going to feel the best thing for me to do is to ignore this because I don't want to put myself in jeopardy" (Wermus, 2022).

However, despite airing concerns about political backlash, or citing educators' anxieties about deviating from the "curriculum map" (Strauss, 2021a), the media, overall, broadcast tacit approval of teachers who paused their scheduled lessons and engaged their students in discussions about the January 6 insurrection (e.g., Cruz, 2021; Harper, 2021; Herron, 2021; Holcombe, 2021; Koran, 2021; Mackay, 2021; Pelletiere, 2021; Strauss, 2021a; Taketa, 2021).

In a January 8 report in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, one high school social studies teacher in San Diego said, "You have to address it, it would be a disservice not to address it" (Taketa, 2021, Jan. 8). In a January 9 article in *People*, a vice-principal in a D.C. area school stated, "To move forward with another day of school as if what happened is a normal day would be a disservice to our students and staff" (Mauch, 2021). And in a January 11 article in the *Los Angeles Times,* one high school history and government teacher in California stated, "I can't, in good faith, teach government and not teach this…They were ready to talk about it" (Gomez, 2021).

Importantly, the media also recognized the work of educators teaching in conservative districts trying to help their students establish a fair-minded understanding of the event. On January 8, the *Fayetteville Observer* reported on one eighth-grade teacher in Nash County, North Carolina

who stated, "I know the county I teach in is full of Trump supporters who may very well be (my students') family, but that's not going to stop me from having this discussion" (Gordon, 2021).

Reports furthered a narrative that ignoring the issue, or not giving it proper attention in the classroom may do more harm than good. In an online article published in *Greater Good Magazine* on January 15, David Schonfeld, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at the Children's Hospital Los Angeles stated, "educators may worry they don't know the right thing to say and will unnecessarily upset students. But saying nothing can say a lot to children – that adults are unaware, unconcerned, or unable or unwilling to provide support in difficult times" (Schonfeld, et al., 2021). In an article published by WVIR, an NBC affiliate in Charlottesville, VA, a social studies teacher in Albemarle County, Virginia, summarized the issue, "To not bring things up is kind of a dishonesty, and I think we need to let them know that we know things are happening in the world" (Hirschheimer, 202; see also Will & Sawchuk, 2021).

In an article posted on *Erie News Now*, a website covering news for both NBC affiliate WICU and CBS affiliate WSEE, a high school social studies teacher in Erie, Pennsylvania articulated his concern for the future of our democracy if teachers do not engage students in hard conversations about politically contentious issues, "We really feel like it's our job that our students know how to protect democracy, which means they need to understand how our government works, how our institutions work, how our elections work and how citizens can fruitfully participate in our political culture and our political society" (Jonathan, 2021; see also Barton, 2021).

These reports are clear evidence of teachers employing a pragmatic pedagogy with lessons that focus on students' immediate interests. When the next political crisis erupts, it is imperative that fair-minded educators take the lead in preparing tomorrow's citizens for the work of repairing our fractured nation, not ignoring the issue, or inciting more division – the stakes couldn't be higher (Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021, p.23).

Creating a Safe Environment and Modeling Caring Relationships

Understanding that there is a need to pause the curriculum and bring children together to discuss contentious public issues is a key tenet of pragmatic citizenship education, but what else does this curriculum entail? As expected, media coverage of teaching the January 6 insurrection revealed support for a curriculum that focused on citizenship knowledge such as media literacy and civil discourse skills (discussed below). However, it also revealed educators integrating social and emotional learning with their lessons on democratic knowledge; these lessons showed teachers modeling the creation and maintenance of caring relationships, a disposition that should not be neglected when preparing future citizens.

Nel Noddings (1984; 2005) builds on Dewey's concept of pragmatic citizenship education to argue that we must teach children how to build and maintain caring relationships, a curriculum that teaches students moral values and the ability to care for one another. Additionally, teachers must be attuned to children's needs when working through uncomfortable conversations regarding politically contentious issues and students must be taught the skills necessary for navigating those situations (Noddings & Brooks, 2017). Others have provided frameworks for how teachers can structure aspects of this curriculum in their classrooms (e.g., Greene, 2019; Horsch, Chen & Wagner, 2002; Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Mehta, 2020). In short, if we wish to teach children how to maintain a civil democratic society in which each citizen can pursue life, liberty, and happiness, then we must engage in a curriculum that emphasizes care as a first principle (Noddings, 2003).

This aspect of instruction is often missing from curriculum guides on how to teach public issues; perhaps because some versions of this curriculum have become battlegrounds in the "war over knowledge" (Reilly, 2022; see also Blad, 2020). Social and emotional learning and civics education have been framed in opposition to each other (Stearns, 2016; 2020; Strauss, 2021b, Zhao, 2020); however, the media discourse surrounding the teaching of January 6 makes clear that teaching children to build and maintain caring relationships ought to be a prerequisite for any other lessons on critical thinking and other civics knowledge. One-fifth of the articles in the sample (12 articles, 22.2%), discussed the need for teachers to create safe environments and/or model caring relationship for their students; this was the most prevalent theme after arguments for pausing the curriculum.

This value for education was captured in a January 15 article published in the *Hechinger Report,* in which one high school science teacher in Portland, Maine reflected on her experiences teaching a different tragic event, the attacks of September 11, 2001. The teacher summarized this philosophy: "In that very instant that day it became really crystal clear to me what public education really is about…It's about teaching human beings, and it's not science or English or social studies or math … It's about teaching human beings how to become good people" (Fittes, 2021). So, what can educators do to teach children how to build and maintain caring relationships?

Creating Safe Spaces

For many teachers on and after January 6, the first goal in the classroom was creating a space where students felt safe (Hirschheimer, 2021; Koran, 2021; Mauch, 2021; Pelletiere, 2021; Turner, 2022). Students expressed fear that the violence would spread across the country, and for many, the school was a harbor from the uncertainty presented in the outside world (Gomez, 2021).

The next step is for teachers to model how to manage questions, worries, and anxieties about the event as they emerge (Kamenetz, 2021). In the words of one middle school social studies teacher in Virginia, "We as adults become a little more inured to things that happen in the world around us and we forget that we have coping mechanisms that the students are just beginning to develop. I think to let them unlock those mechanisms in their own minds is a really important job for educators to do" (Hirschheimer, 2021). A high school teacher in Colorado reported that he did one-on-one check-ins with students who were "greatly affected" by the events of January 6. In his words, "This is going to be a day to listen to our students" (Pelletiere, 2021; see also Blad, 2021; Herron, 2021).

It's important to remember that the images and messages of a traumatic event such as the attack of January 6 may not be appropriate for all children (Axelrod, 2021). In a January 7 NPR report, a kindergarten teacher outside Tucson, Arizona summarized her message to her students, "I think I'd probably tell them that today some people threw big naughty grownup temper tantrums because they didn't like how the vote for president turned out. They did this instead of using their words and it was a little scary, just like it can be scary when you see another kid (or sibling?) throw a BIG temper tantrum. They were loud and interrupted our leaders while they were doing important work. But helpers stopped them and our leaders got to do their jobs!" (Kamenetz, 2021).

Also important is the realization that not all students come into the classroom ready to talk about recent traumatic events, or they may be interested in talking about other issues that are more pressing to their lives at that time. An elementary teacher in the Seattle area reported that she opened her morning meeting ready to give her students "a chance to explore their feeling," and

more of them wanted to talk about the Amber Alert they had just seen rather than the attack on the Capitol that happened just the day before (Resmovits, & Bazzaz, 2021).

In a January 6 *Education Week* article, one high school teacher in Virginia reminded readers that each student may have different needs when it comes to how they deal with emotions surrounding traumatic events, and author Evie Blad interviewed Marc Brackett, a psychologist and director of the Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence, who reminded readers that student anger, distraction, or agitation, may actually be symptoms of feeling scared or overwhelmed (Blad, 2021). Teachers must help their students feel safe when the world surrounding them feels so uncertain.

Creating Space to Share

Once students are provided a safe place, both physically and emotionally, Philadelphia Superintendent William R. Hite, Jr. urged his teachers to create "the space, the time, the permission, the trust, the support to talk about what they observed, the emotions it generated, the questions they had" (Graham, Hanna, & Burney, 2021). A high school teacher in the Tampa Bay area echoed this sentiment, "I would simply say there is going to be a lot of raw emotion. What the teacher needs to do is realize this is going to be there and not try to shut down the emotion, but try to steer it into a discussion where everyone feels heard." (Sokol, 2021). In a January 8 article in the Massachusetts based *MetroWest Daily News,* James Cressey, an associate professor of education at Framingham State University, summed up this strategy, "Start with letting students talk" (Razzaq, 2021; see also Miller, 2021).

Several articles (5 articles; 9.26%) reported teachers having their students write as a way to process through the events of January 6 (e.g., Graham, Hanna, & Burney, 2021; Hollingsworth, 2022). A high school teacher in Virginia told of the benefits of writing, especially when whole-class discussions are difficult due to digital environments (Blad, 2021). Writing gives students "space for vulnerability," helps them develop voice, and "makes them feel safer taking risks" (Blad, 2021).

One high school English teacher in Massachusetts had her 11th grade students write poems about the attacks, "to talk about how they were feeling, or to record their own history of the day" (Graham, Hanna, & Burney, 2021). An elementary school teacher in D.C. asked her students to write about how the January 6 attacks might be portrayed 10 years in the future in history books (Meckler, et al. 2021). The authors of a January 7 *Washington Post* article on teachers' efforts noted the educator, "played soothing music as the children wrote" (Meckler et al, 2021).

A high school teacher in New York made the argument for student journaling, "To give them a chance to journal silently, even five minutes, with some prompts, really goes a long way for them to be able to really put together vocabulary and express how they're feeling" (Cruz, 2021, Jan. 8). This vocabulary is essential if we expect children to further engage in critical thinking and civil discourse about contentious public issues (Noddings, 2013).

Teaching and Promoting Non-Partisan Democratic Ideals

Along with the call for a curriculum aimed at building and maintaining caring relationships, the media also broadcast the need for teachers to help students critically think about the event with fair-minded lessons that promote non-partisan democratic ideals.

Several articles (6 articles, 11.11%) communicated educators' desire to maintain a neutral posture when teaching the event. As Kirsten Taketa reported in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* on

January 8, "Many teachers said they are being careful to avoid pressing their own beliefs and opinions onto students" (Taketa, 2021). Austin White interviewed a local teacher in the *Pueblo Chieftain* on January 11 who "tries to stay as politically neutral in his classes as possible to allow students to form their opinions on good principles and facts" (White, 2021; see also Axelrod, 2021; Sanchez, 2022).

Many teachers "reflexively" adopt this "neutral" posture (Siegel-Stechler, 2020), or "balanced" approach (Hess, 2004), when teaching politically contentious issues, especially in a political environment where society is concerned about indoctrination (Greenfield, 2021; Wermus, 2022). However, the media also communicated that a neutral posture alone does not adequately address the realities of our politically charged society. For example, in an opinion piece published on Bloomberg.com on January 14, Andrea Gabor (2021) recounts how one teacher in Virginia attempted to maintain a balanced classroom discussion about the January 6 insurrection, only to see certain students bombarded with "racist attacks from classmates."

Teachers must not become "paralyzed by being unbiased," especially on principles that are important for citizenship in a pluralistic democracy (Will & Sawchuk, 2021). Therefore, the question becomes not how teachers can maintain a neutral posture, but rather what biases they *should* bring into their classroom and which biases they should leave at the door (Camicia, 2021; Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson, 2021; Siegel-Stechler, 2020). In other words, what dispositions should teachers promote in their classrooms? As Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (2015) state in *The Political Classroom*, "For the most part, teachers who make good decisions about when and how to share their political views are first and foremost setting a tone of fairness and mutual respect in the classroom" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015 p. 202 quoted in Camicia, 2021, p.292; see also Resmovits & Bazzaz, 2021).

The media discourse surrounding the January 6 insurrection reveals that society celebrates mindful teachers who consider these biases and "make good decisions" to advocate for non-partisan democratic values articulated in the U.S. Constitution. Specifically, the media privileged teachers who promoted students' dispositions toward critical thinking, media literacy, and civil discourse.

Critical Thinking

Many of the media reports (9 articles; 16.67%) in the days following January 6 focused on educators directly addressing the nation's growing support for authoritarianism and the associated social justice issues that underpinned the attack (e.g., Fittes, 2021; Kamenetz, 2021). One teacher in Vermont went as far as to state, "If you are a teacher, especially if you are a social studies teacher, and you are not planning to address the racial inequalities & white supremacy in what happened today, change your plans. Your students need you to" (Barton, 2021).

Having students consider public issues is essential for the maintenance of our democracy, but how educators present those lessons may differ depending on the political environment in which they teach (Wermus, 2022). As discussed above, some public issues - like institutional racism - have been politicized to such an extent that classroom discussions of those topics may put certain teachers at risk of charges of indoctrination. Also, teachers must consider that no matter how powerful or important their message is, students with closed minds are not listening (see Koran, 2021). So, a pragmatic educator helps students develop the dispositions for critically thinking about these issues rather than trying to promote a certain set of political or moral beliefs, with

the faith that students who practice fair-minded thinking will come to a fair moral judgement on their own.

At its base, critical thinking about contentious public issues starts with questions and the ability to "rethink or change" views on issues when new facts or understandings become apparent (Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson, 2021, p. 308), and many reports on teaching the January 6 attack focused on educators encouraging their students to question what happened on that day. In an interview published by WBNG on January 7, Rachel Murat, New York's 2020 Teacher of the Year, said, "If we're going to have people that want to be civically engaged as adults, we're going to need to develop that fostering (sic) of asking questions and being curious" (Dixon, 2021).

Challenging students to come up with their own questions can be as simple as beginning the class with a prompt to write down whatever questions or thoughts come to mind (Hirschheimer, 2021; Stevens, 2021), or as one teacher in North Carolina did, show the class various pictures taken inside the Capitol at the time of the attack and ask students, "What do you notice?" and "What do you wonder?" (Harper, 2021; see also Blad, 2021; Matson, 2021; Resmovits & Bazzaz, 2021). A high school teacher in Massachusetts started the class with the prompt, "It was an extraordinary day and it became, obviously, even more extraordinary. What are your reactions, thoughts or questions?" (Razzaq, 2021).

In her Bloomberg editorial, Andrea Gabor (2021), reminds teachers that "having students help guide discussions by encouraging them to ask questions helps to protect teachers from community blowback. It also gives students a greater stake in the conversation." Teachers can position themselves as active learners alongside their students. As one D.C. area teacher put it, "I reassured them [her students] those were questions I had myself, but I didn't have the answers" (Meckler, et al., 2021, Jan. 7). A Colorado high school teacher put it another way, "I'm in no better stance … to really understand what's going on" (White, 2021, break in original article).

The media reported on many teachers, especially teachers working in politically divided communities, who used thematic teaching and historical analogs to help their students understand the events of January 6 (e.g., Harper, 2021; Rosenberg, 2022). In an article published by CNN on January 23, a high school history teacher in Virginia suggested comparing the events of January 6 to other historical events to "help put some context around the riots" (Holcombe, 2021). He suggested using conversations about immigration during the 1920s, or the British burning of the Capitol during the War of 1812 as foundations (Holcombe, 2021; see also Chasanov, 2021; Meckler et al., 2021). Using historical analogs can be useful because they can limit discussion of a highly combustible topic such as January 6 and turn thinking into abstraction and conceptual understanding. Teachers can take some of the emotion connected with an event out of the classroom to allow students to think about ideas without the shadow of politics influencing their conclusions.

Media reports of educators teaching the January 6 insurrection showed how educators who model critical thinking encourage students to make connections to similar events, and those discussions often steered towards fair-minded conclusions about what happened without any prompting from the teacher (Cruz, 2021; Gomez, 2021; Holcombe, 2021; Meckler, et al., 2021). As one Missouri high school teacher working in a district represented by an election denier stated, "Most of my students had not fully viewed the events and were shocked…Most of our community in southeast Missouri voted for Donald Trump. However, not one student spoke up to defend him or his crowd that stormed Congress yesterday" (Meckler, et al., 2021; see also Koran, 2021). This raises the central importance of facts when engaging students in critical thinking about an event.

Clarifying Fact from Disinformation

It is important to note that *all* students come into the classroom with some level of background knowledge and opinion about current events. American classrooms are increasingly diverse (Blad, 2021), and as one teacher on Twitter reminded readers, even students with special needs, who people may assume are not aware of events, are "engaged and aware politically" and should not be discounted when it comes to their ability to raise questions (Strauss, 2021a; see also Resmovits & Bazzaz, 2021).

The *Washington Post* reported on one fourth-grade teacher who decided to let his students bring up the topic of the January 6 attacks, "and it didn't take much to open the floodgates, even over Zoom" (Meckler, et al. 2021). As one elementary school teacher in Asheville, North Carolina stated in a January 8 Blue Ridge Public Radio report, "If we give the eight or nine year olds, the respect of honoring the fact that they to (sic) bear witness to these experiences and events and give them an opportunity to speak to them, it only helps them feel seen and heard more" (Herrington, 2021). In the words of one high school teacher in New York, "students in every way, shape and form need their voices to be heard…In order to do that, they also need to feel that their voices matter" (Axelrod, 2021).

However, it's also important to recognize that not all students come into the classroom with the same level of knowledge (Blad, 2021; Turner, 2022), and it is the educator's responsibility to model critical thinking that shows students how to find and evaluate reliable information so they can build their knowledge (Axelrod, 2021; Peddie, 2022; Will & Sawchuk, 2021; Wilk, 2021).

Especially when events are happening quickly and facts are still unclear, teachers must model critical thinking and their role as an active learner. In a January 8 article in the *Burlington Free Press,* Alex Shevrin Venet, author of *Equity-centered Trauma-informed Education,* argued that it's okay for teachers to not know the answers and to model that. She recommended that teachers, "position yourself alongside your students as a questioner, rather than positioning yourself as an arbiter or sage" (Barton, 2021; see also Dixon, 2021). It's important for teachers and their students to remember that some facts can be clarified the next day while others can be identified as central questions that need to be "held" until the facts are revealed/clarified.

Modeling active learning, teachers can then engage their students in the search for facts relevant to the issue, a prevalent theme in the media coverage of January 6 (10 articles; 18.52%) (e.g., Fittes, 2021; Graham, Hanna, & Burney, 2021; Strauss, 2021a). *Good Morning America* highlighted Jenn Sims, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Alabama who reminded the audience of the importance of establishing facts when looking at politically contentious events: "Too many teachers are having what I call both-sides-ism. A teacher needs to step in and provide empirically accurate information" (Pelletiere, 2021, Jan. 7; see also Rosenberg, 2022; Singer, 2022). In her January 11 column in the *Chicago Tribune,* Heidi Stevens (2021) reminded readers, "Without an agreed upon set of facts, how can we combat climate change, deadline (sic) viruses, the social problems that plague and harm us?" This search for facts raises the need for teachers to show their students how to discern reliable sources when finding information.

Media Literacy

A 2021 study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that exposure to digital media is associated with increased beliefs in conspiracy theories, particularly related to COVID-19, while

exposure to traditional media was associated with decreased belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation (Coninck, et al., 2021). This finding is important for understanding why students need education on media literacy, specifically where to find reliable sources of information.

There is a clear difference between *The Washington Post* and TikTok, just as there is a clear difference between MSNBC and Fox News, and students need to learn how to discern facts from misinformation along with how to appraise political bias embedded in media reports. Students need lessons that teach them the value of institutions that deliver reliable unbiased facts, and they need to learn the value of fact checking information that comes from any of those sources.

The media coverage of teaching January 6 and the many opinion pieces published in the weeks following the attack, revealed strong public support for media literacy as a top priority for educators (9 articles; 16.67%) (e.g. Gabor, 2021; Holcombe, 2021; Sokol, 2021; Williams, 2021b). Many articles focused on the need to help students decern reliable sources for information (e.g., Meckler, et al. 2021; Sokol, 2021). In the words of one Pennsylvania social studies teacher, "You have to take the information and make sure your facts are correct so you can start thinking about the situation in a way that's reasonable and makes sense and that's something we're trying to teach our students everyday" (WENY, 2021).

For some teachers, lessons on media literacy after the January 6 attack focused, not only on finding reliable information, but also on how that information was conveyed. One teacher in San Diego, for example, had students examine various media outlets to see if the people who participated in the attempted coup were described as "rioters," "protesters," or "Trump supporters" (Taketa, 2021; see also, Davis, 2022). This same method can be used having students compare the images media outlets use to represent the event (Gabor, 2021). The key aim here is to develop students' critical thinking when it comes to media.

Civil Discourse

Helping students develop the values, understandings, and skills associated with media literacy is important, but equally so is developing students' abilities to participate effectively in civil discourse about public issues. Wheeler-Bell and Swalwell (2021) state, "a healthy democracy creates and protects spaces for rich and vibrant public debates about what problems exist, why they exist, and what we should do about them" (p.18). In the words of Steven Camicia (2021), "Students need to learn how to participate in democratic communities, and discussion is central to this participation" (p. 289 citing Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996 and Parker & Hess, 2001; see also Rubin, 2021).

Students need to know that democracies require citizens to challenge ideas and criticize views, and that healthy civil discourse in classrooms should not threaten or end friendships (Onosko, Kopish, Swenson, 2021, p. 308). In his report on teaching the January 6 attack, *Times Herald-Record* reporter Daniel Axelrod stated, "teachers should make young people feel heard and emotionally supported, while apolitically teaching that Americans can be civil while disagreeing" (Axelrod, 2021). In fact, reasonable deliberation can bring communities together by showing individuals they have more in common than they thought (McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021; Wheeler-Bell & Swalwell, 2021). Onosko, Kopish, & Swenson (2021) remind readers that creating classroom spaces where students build and practice civil discourse requires careful unit planning and instructional strategies that promote this type of activity.

One technique for helping students develop a disposition for civil discourse is modeling the creation of ground rules for discussion. For example, it was reported that an AP US government teacher in Asheville, North Carolina "…encouraged [students] to listen, tolerate differing world views, and above all else, 'be kind'" (Gordon, 2021). Another teacher in Pitt County, NC asked her class, "How do you disagree with someone in a respectful manner?" (Gordon, 2021).

In a January 6 *Tampa Bay Times* report, one Florida high school teacher reminded readers that educators must be role models of human empathy, especially when discussing events as hurtful as the January 6 attack (Sokol, 2021). A 20-year veteran social studies teacher in New York said he requires students to "explicitly acknowledge" points of agreement with their peers before expressing any disagreement (Matson, 2021). An educator in Massachusetts highlighted the need to, "help students have robust discussion, disagreements and collaborative sessions through our civic dispositions" (Razzaq, 2021, Jan. 8). Teachers acknowledged that passions can be strong on both sides of an issues, but if we hope to avoid events like the January 6 attacks from happening again, teachers must find ways to "help shape those conversations into civil ones" (White, 2021).

Conclusion

On the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of President Kennedy, WBNS TV in Columbus, Ohio reported on differing reactions to the news of the president's death in the aftermath of the assassination (10tv.com, 2013). The report interviewed Douglas Gray, who on Friday, November 22, 1963, then a sophomore at Murrah High School in Jackson, Mississippi was taking a test when he heard the announcement that someone had fired on the president's motorcade in Dallas, Texas. Gray's teacher ordered the class to remain silent, but from other rooms he could hear, "cheering and whooping and hollering" (10tv.com, 2013). The next period, Gray and his classmates learned that the president had died, and in reaction, the music teacher in charge of the class ordered the students to sing "Dixie" – a direct insult to the slain president who had fought for the expansion of civil rights (10tv.com, 2013).

Half a century later, Gray as well as millions of other students who were in school on that tragic day could recount exactly where they were when they heard the news, and could recount how their teachers and school administrators responded. Fifty years from now, today's students will remember how their teachers reacted to the insurrection of Wednesday, January 6, 2021 just the same. When the next political crisis erupts, the stakes involved will be no different.

Teaching today, in this "war over knowledge," is harder than ever, and teachers must be courageous in their attempts to balance the political demands of their communities with the necessity of preparing children for citizenship. However, the work is needed, and media coverage of teaching in the days and weeks following January 6 provides a map for how educators can successfully prepare students, our future democratic citizens, to examine, discuss, and debate contentious public issues.

In January 2022, I repeated my research methods and found about a dozen media reports of teachers' lessons concerning the insurrection that took place the year before; on the two-year anniversary (January 2023), media coverage was even less. The media may have lost interest in covering how teachers help students understand this still-contentious issue, but America's educators must remember these lessons so we can be prepared for the next time an event like this happens.

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Hearing First-Generation Students: Classroom Speech Practices and Academic Engagement among a Student Population at Risk[1]

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Abstract

College students whose parents did not attend college have significantly higher attrition rates than do continuing-generation college students. Understanding perceived opportunity for and acceptability of self-expression may enhance efforts to improve first-generation students' educational outcomes. Data from a U.S. national survey revealed college satisfaction positively correlated with comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class. This correlation was significantly stronger for first-generation students, who were less likely to report expressing their ideas or opinions in class, despite being more likely to value being encouraged to do so. When first-generation students participate despite feeling uncomfortable, they are less likely than continuing-generation peers to report doing so despite thinking their opinions are important for others to hear.

Keywords: *first-generation students, student engagement, college satisfaction, self-expression, classroom participation, student persistence*

Introduction

In recent decades, higher education researchers have begun studying first-generation college students, focusing on their high attrition (Billson & Terry, 1982; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Ishitani, 2006) and group characteristics (Terenzini, et al., 1996). Qualitative studies by London (1989; 1992) and Stieha (2010) addressed social and cultural dislocation experienced by first-generation students attempting to reconcile family loyalties with academic aspirations. Lack of cultural capital hinders first-generation students in fully entering the college student role (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Group-conscious interventions can improve outcomes (Stephens, et al., 2014; 2015). Less well understood is how first-generation and continuing-generation students compare in engagement (Kuh, 2003).

Since its 2003 advent, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has included generational status. That first-generation college students ("first gens") differ from continuing-

generation students ("continuing gens") in precollege characteristics and experiences is undisputed; what educators and institutions could do to engage these students and improve their odds of academic success, by contrast, raises questions worth pursuing. Do first gens differ meaningfully in their quality of engagement? Are certain aspects of college experience especially important to address to improve first gens' educational outcomes?

Answers depend on the variables under consideration (e.g., college aspirations, involvement in extracurricular or co-curricular activities, and peer interactions; Pike & Kuh, 2005; NSSE, 2008, 2015; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Padgett, et al., 2012)—and on how one defines engagement. The literature has not yet captured how variables of engagement among first gens may change over time—or perhaps reflect the higher education climate of an era. Survey data from the University of California reveals that motivations, expectations, and attitudes of first gens in 2005 differed in important ways from those of students ten and twenty years earlier (Saenz, et al., 2005). Whereas, for example, parental encouragement and desire for financial success nearly doubled in importance, the proportion who agreed colleges should prohibit racist or sexist speech on campus declined slightly between 1995 and 2005 (while an increasing proportion of continuing gens agreed.)

Classroom speech climate—the norms and practices regarding self-expression and exchange of ideas in and out of the classroom—has yet to be factored into measures of engagement, but we think it should be. The extent to which students perceive their ideas and opinions as valued and validated may be an indicator of involvement in their own learning process and sense of belonging in a learning community (Rendon, 1994; Roehling, et al., 2011). First gens generally lack the social capital held by continuing gens, so they may merit special consideration owing to cultural disparities regarding the value of self-expression. We also recognize the power polarized political climates may exert over peer interactions in university settings, particularly class discussions, participation in campus activism, and the disparate impact such power may have on the speech practices, if not necessarily the private beliefs, of individuals across different student groups. Risk of self-censorship in "a hostile opinion environment" is likely as great in the midst of today's debate over microaggressions as it was during political correctness debates of twenty years ago (Hayes, et al., 2004, 277; Loury, 1994; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Zamudio-Suarez, 2016).

Our research questions are informed by the perspective that self-expression on college campuses is integral to student engagement and, by extension, contributes to intellectual development and academic success:

1. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall college experience satisfaction? If so, is the relationship between comfort sharing opinions and ideas with college experience satisfaction stronger for first-generation students?

2. Does comfort expressing and sharing opinions and ideas in class correlate with overall satisfaction with college classes? And if so, is the relationship between comfort sharing opinions and ideas with satisfaction in college classes stronger for first-generation students?

3. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall satisfaction with college activities? If so, are relationships between comfort sharing opinions and ideas in class with satisfaction in college activities stronger for first-generation students?

4. Do first-generation students differ significantly from continuing-generation peers in their willingness to express their opinions and ideas in uncomfortable class situations?
5. Do first-generation students differ significantly from continuing-generation peers in their perception of the value of their opinions and ideas to class discussion?
6. Are first-generation students more likely to consider expressing their ideas and opinions an important college experience goal?

We also note incidental findings potentially of interest when developing strategies to engage first-generation students.

Literature Review

Our thinking about college student engagement and persistence is guided by theoretical models developed by Astin (1984) and Tinto (1987). Working from the premise that the physical and psychological energy a student invests in studies, student organizations, and peer-faculty interactions constitute "involvement" in the academic experience, Astin (1984) saw institutions as largely responsible for devising policies to stimulate that energy. Tinto (1987) understood persistence as a function of social and academic integration, to which individual students and academic leadership contributed. Although neither singled out first gens as a group to study, Tinto (1998) in his later work identified non-residential institutions such as community colleges—still the primary gateway institution for many first gens, but one where, if integration is to happen, it is likely to happen solely in the classroom—as promising sites for cooperative learning.

Despite broad agreement that engagement should be a top priority, consensus defining engagement, much less achieving it, remains elusive. Effective educational practices for the five NSSE benchmarks encompassing various dimensions of undergraduate life emerge from student survey responses, ranging from time on task and paper length requirements, to items reflecting institutional commitment to inclusiveness and diversity, such as having a supportive campus environment, talking with students of different beliefs, values, or ethnicities, contributing to class discussions, and discussing ideas outside of class (NSSE, 2010). Some think these benchmarks are too broad and lack theoretical rigor (Steele & Fullagar, 2009; Burch, et al., 2016). Another objection is that urging students to engage implies assignation of accountability—though whether to institutions or students is unclear—when in reality, "Engagement may simply be the byproduct of a learning environment that suits the student" (Axelson & Flick, 2011, 42).

Key indicators suggest first gens are less engaged. Pike and Kuh (2005) found first gens were more likely to have lower educational aspirations, lower academic and social engagement, and less likely to perceive their campus environment as supportive. Padgett and colleagues (2012) found that as first-year students, first gens scored lower on measures of openness to diversity and on dimensions of psychological well-being that included positive sense of self and autonomy—results, they argued, which could be mitigated by increased interaction with peers and faculty. Strikingly, a recent study of first-generation college seniors found that at the liberal arts colleges studied, first gen seniors benefited equally with continuing gen seniors in terms of development of family life, civic engagement, interpersonal relationships, problem solving and overall intellectual development, and, consistent with the negative selection hypothesis (Brand & Xie, 2010) benefited more from institutional preparation for career paths (Dong, 2019). First-generation students who are able to engage benefit greatly from college education. The question remains how to promote

engagement and avoid the attrition that prevents many first-generation students from completing their educations.

Prescribing increased interactions may paradoxically shift responsibility for capitalizing on social opportunities in the first year of college onto a group among whose chief disadvantages are less cultural and social capital (Padgett, et al., 2012). Soria and Stebleton's (2012) regression models, which compared survey responses of first gens and continuing gens, addressed this issue, focusing on frequency of interactions with faculty, class discussion contributions, raising ideas and concepts from other courses during class, and asking "insightful" questions (680); on all these engagement and retention indicators, first gens scored lower. Stephens, et al. (2012) went further, proposing a "cultural mismatch theory" to explain patterns of underperformance. The problem, they explained, lies in a conflict between the culture of the American university itself, which has long reflected "pervasive middle-class norms of independence that are foundational to American society," and "working-class norms of interdependence" that first gens are more likely to have internalized (1180-1181). Universities impose models of self that presuppose a command of cultural norms alien to some students' pre-college life experiences: e.g., Stephens and colleagues (2012) quote a first gen focus group participant: "Neither of my parents went to college. So they never told me what to do in college because they didn't really know how to interact with teachers, speak up in class, and develop my own opinions" (1194).

Scant research addresses Tinto's observation about two-year colleges as potentially better equipped to engage by promoting "learning communities" (173). Over one-third of parent-dependent students enrolled at community colleges are first gens, while the proportion of first gens who began at two-year schools then earned a bachelor's degree within six years is less than half that of students with at least one parent with a four-year degree (Ma & Baum, 2016). The benchmark means report of the 2017 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2017) found students perceived their community colleges did well at providing support to succeed, but in reporting their own efforts revealed they only "sometimes" contributed to class discussion or made a presentation. McClenney (2007) noted in her analysis of CCSSE data that persistence and strength of engagement closely correlate even among high risk students (142). Interestingly, Pascarella and colleagues (2003) found that although first gens in community colleges lagged in scientific reasoning, openness to diversity, and learning for self-understanding, their writing skills tended to exceed those of other students—a discovery which, if generalizable, should give pause to researchers for whom "speech" is limited to spoken expression.

Method

Participants

Data were from a nonprobability sample of United States college students collected online by YouGov, an Internet-based data analytics and marketing research company, for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonpartisan nonprofit in partial fulfillment of a grant provided by the John Templeton Foundation.

YouGov collected data from 1395 college students in their marketing panel, then, using a sampling frame based on demographic data, reduced the sample to 1250 individuals to better match demographics of U.S. college students. YouGov developed the sampling frame using 2013 U.S. college student population characteristics as described in a National Center for Education Statistics report (NCES; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Of the participants, 442 (35.4%) reported that they did

not have a parent who had attended college (first gens); 775 (62%) reported having one or more parent who had attended college, and 33 (2.6%) did not know if a parent had attended college. For additional information on participant demographics, see Table 1.

Table 1: *Participants' Demographic Data*

n	%	Demographic Information
685	54.8	Identified as female
529	42.3	Identified as male
19	2.9	Identified as transgender
17	1.4	Identified gender as other
760	60.8	Identified as White
158	12.6	Identified as Black or African-American
183	14.6	Identified as Hispanic or Latino
4	0.3	Identified as Native American
7	0.6	Identified race or ethnicity as Other
391	31.3	Attended a 2-year institution
859	68.7	Attended a 4-year institution
957	76.6	Attended public colleges or universities
256	20.5	Attended private colleges or universities
37	3	Uncertain whether their schools were public or private
963	77	Attended full-time
287	23	Attended part-time
822	65.8	Age 18-24 (Traditional college-aged students)
229	18.3	Age 25-34
199	15.9	Age >=35

Materials and Procedure

Panel members meeting selection criteria (currently enrolled undergraduates living in the U.S.) had the opportunity to participate. Participants completed a 64-item survey (Full survey in

Naughton, 2017) aimed at understanding U.S. college students' opinions and attitudes regarding free expression on their campuses.

Participants received YouGov points, which can be accumulated toward rewards (e.g., tote bags and gift cards). Survey data were collected from May 25, 2017 to June 8, 2017. YouGov also provided data previously collected for use in YouGov research projects.

Harvard University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that the project was IRB exempt.

Results

Analyses used unweighted data. For generational status analyses, we used data from the 1217 students who self-reported generational status.

1. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall college experience satisfaction?

We computed a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between overall college satisfaction, as measured by the item "Overall, how satisfied are you with the experience you have had at your college or university" (1 = very satisfied, 2 = satisfied, 3 = unsatisfied, 4 = very unsatisfied) and responses to the item, "In my college classes, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas and opinions" (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree). Comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class significantly positively correlated with students' overall satisfaction with their college experience, r =.376, N = 1250, *p* = 2e-43.

We computed the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for college experience satisfaction with comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class for first-generation students; there was a significant positive correlation, r = .438, n = 442, *p* = 4e-22. For continuing-generation students, there also was a significant positive correlation, r = .318, n = 775, *p* = 1e-19. We conducted a Fisher's Z test to determine whether the difference in correlation was statistically significant; the difference was statistically significant, Z =2.348, *p* = .009. The positive correlation between college satisfaction and comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class was significantly stronger for first-generation students.

2. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall satisfaction with college classes?

We computed a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between college class satisfaction, as measured by the item "Overall, how satisfied are you with the classes you have taken at your college or university" (1 = very satisfied, 2 = satisfied, 3 = unsatisfied, 4 = very unsatisfied) and responses to the item, "In my college classes, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas and opinions" (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree). There was a significant positive correlation, r =.372, N = 1250, *p* = 3e-42. Comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class significantly positively correlated with students' overall satisfaction with classes.

We also computed the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for class satisfaction with comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class for first-generation students; there was a

significant positive correlation, r = .365, n = 442, *p* = 2e-15. For continuing-generation students, there also was a significant positive correlation, r = .281, n = 775, *p* = 2e-15. We conducted a Fisher's Z test to determine whether the difference in correlation was statistically significant; the difference was not statistically significant, although there was a trend for correlations to differ, Z = 1.57, *p* = .058.

   3. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall sat-
   isfaction with campus student activities?

   We computed a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between college class satisfaction, as measured by the item "Overall, how satisfied are you with the on-campus student activities at your college or university" (1 = very satisfied, 2 = satisfied, 3 = unsatisfied, 4 = very unsatisfied) and the item, "In my college classes, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas and opinions" (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree). Comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class significantly positively correlated with students' overall satisfaction with classes, r =.321, N = 1250, *p* = 2e-31.
   We computed the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for satisfaction with campus student activities with comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class for first-generation students; there was a significant positive correlation, r = .365, n = 442, *p* = 2e-15. For continuing-generation students there also was a significant positive correlation, r = .281, n = 775, *p* = 2e-15. We conducted a Fisher's Z test to determine whether the difference in correlation was statistically significant; the difference was not statistically significant, although there was a trend for correlations to differ, Z = 1.57, *p* = .058.

   4. Do first-generation students differ significantly from continuing-generation peers in
   their willingness to express their opinions and ideas in uncomfortable class situations?

   We performed a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between college students' generational status and whether they have expressed ideas and opinions in class discussions. The relationship between these variables was significant, X2 (2, N = 1217) = 16.56, *p* = .000047, v = .117. Of the first gens, 306/442 (69.2%) reported having expressed their ideas and opinions in class, and of the continuing gens, 617/775 (79.6%) reported having expressed their ideas and opinions in class. First gens were significantly less likely to have expressed ideas and opinions during classroom discussions.
   The item "In my college classes, there are times when I share my ideas and opinions, even when I am uncomfortable doing so." (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree), was asked only of participants who reported disagreement with the item, "In my college classes, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas and opinions" (13.4%; 167/1250: strongly disagree = 128; disagree = 39). Of these 167 participants, a total of 96 (40 first-generation students; 53 continuing-generation students; 3 generational status unknown) endorsed sharing ideas and opinions even when uncomfortable doing so. Thus, 57% of students who reported being uncomfortable sharing ideas and opinions in class still shared ideas and opinions, at least sometimes.

   5. Do first-generation students differ significantly from continuing-generation peers in
   their perception of the value of their opinions and ideas to class discussion?

We performed a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and whether students endorsed "I thought my opinion was important for others to hear" as a reason they participate despite feeling uncomfortable. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (2, N = 93) = 9.31, p = .002, v = .316. Of the 40 first-generation college students who responded, 5 (12.5%) endorsed the item; of the 53 continuing-generation college students, 22 (41.5%) endorsed it. First gens were significantly less likely to report participating when uncomfortable even though they thought their opinions were important for others to hear.

We also conducted a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and whether participants endorsed "I disagreed with what others were saying" as a reason they participate despite feeling uncomfortable. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (2, N= 93) = 5.17, p = .023, v = .236. Of the 40 first gens who responded, 9 (22.5%) endorsed the item; of the 53 continuing gens, 24 (45.2%) endorsed it. First gens were significantly less likely to report participating when uncomfortable because they disagreed with what others were saying.

6. Are first-generation students more likely to consider expressing their ideas and opinions an important college experience goal?

Participants read a list of fifteen possible college experience goals, from which they selected the three most important to them (see Table 2 for a complete list with selection frequency). "Learn specific skills and knowledge for my future career" was, by far, the most endorsed of the fifteen choices (58.4% of first gens; 60.1% of continuing gens).

**Table 2: *Which of the Following are the Three <u>Most</u> <u>Important</u>
Things You Want to Gain from Your College Education?***

Item	1st gen %	Cont. gen %	X2	p-value
1 Belong to a campus community where my values are shared.	7.5	6.7	.248	.62
2 Explore controversial issues using evidence-based claims.	9.5	7.6	1.32	.25
3 Grow and learn in a safe and comfortable environment.	25.6	23.5	.664	.42
4 Learn how to use gather and thoughtfully use evidence to support my claims.	14.5	18.2	2.77	.09
5 Better understand how to value diversity.	7.2	5.0	2.5	.11
6 Understand and evaluate the ideas of others, even when I disagree with them.	15.2	15.6	.045	.83
7 Learn how to turn controversial topics into meaningful dialogues.	8.4	7.2	.523	.47
8 Be encouraged to share my ideas openly.	11.8	8.1	4.35	.04
9 Be exposed to diverse intellectual viewpoints.	19.5	20.9	.363	.55
10 Explore career options for after college.	37.3	38.5	.15	.70

11 Develop my personal identity.	27.4	27.6	.01	.93
12 Learn specific skills and knowledge for my future career.	58.4	60.1	.36	.55
13 Meet people and develop friendships.	26.0	29.2	1.38	.24
14 Become a better analytical writer.	7.5	10.5	2.96	.09
15 See the world from someone else's perspective.	8.1	8.5	.05	.82

We performed a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and whether participants endorsed "Be encouraged to share my ideas openly" as one of their three most important college experience goals. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (2 $N = 1217) = 4.35, p = .037, v = .060$. Of the first gens, 52/390 (11.8%) endorsed it, whereas 63/712 (8.1%) continuing gens endorsed it. First gens were significantly more likely to endorse being encouraged to share their ideas as one of their most important college experience goals.
Additional Findings
Additional notable differences between first gens and continuing gens included differences in low priority college experiences; marital status; housing; and type of institution attended.

Low Priority Experiences

Participants also indicated which three of the list of possible college experience goals were least important to them. We performed a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and whether participants endorsed "Grow and learn in a safe and comfortable environment" as a low priority experience. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (2, $N= 1217) 10.04, p = .002, v = .091$. Among first gens, 67/442 (15.2%) endorsed it as a low priority, relative to 176/775 (22.7%) of continuing gens. Thus, first gens were significantly less likely to consider growing and learning in a safe and comfortable environment to be a low priority.

Marital Status

We conducted a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and marital status. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (4, $N= 1171) 16.12, p = .003, v = .117$. Among first gens, 318/442 (71.9%) had never been married; among continuing gens 620/749 (82.7%) had never been married. (For frequencies, see Table 3.)

Table 3: *Student Marital Status*

Marital Status	1st gen %	Cont. gen %
Married	15.8	12.3
Separated	1.3	2
Divorced	4.9	3

Widowed	1.3	3
Never Married	71.9	82.7

Although most college students had never been married, first gens were significantly more likely to have been or be married than were continuing gens.

Housing

We conducted a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and housing. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (2, N= 1210) = 19.13, p =.00001, v = .126. 78/438 (17.8%) first gens reported living on campus; 222/772 (29.1%) continuing gens reported living on campus. First gens were significantly less likely to live on campus.

Type of Institution

We conducted a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and type of institution (two-year/community college versus four-year institution) attended. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (1, N = 1217) = 14.88, p = .0001, v = .111. 168/442 (38.0%) first gens reported attending a two-year/community college; 212/775 (27.4%) continuing gens reported attending a two-year/community college. First gens were significantly more likely than continuing gens to attend a community college.

Discussion & Implications

If the campus speech controversy is to be made meaningful within the sphere of higher education beyond yet another public relations crisis to be managed, it will be by recognizing free speech's role in fostering student engagement and intellectual development inside the classroom. It is important to appreciate that students' perceptions of the value of speech, including their own, may vary significantly across subpopulations. Advocating policies supporting free speech is insufficient; it also is essential to recognize that first-generation students may be less likely to express their ideas in a classroom setting in the first place, whatever the speech climate at their institution. Because of the correlation between students' comfort sharing opinions and ideas in class discussion with overall satisfaction with college classes and with their college experience, we think participation in class discussion should be included among factors considered in future engagement and persistence research.

Despite decades of scholarly attention to the dynamics of class discussion and participation, up to and including millennials (Karp & Yoels, 1976; Fassinger, 1995, 2000; Fritschner, 2000; Rocca, 2010; Roehling, et al., 2011), much remains unknown about how first gens negotiate this defining, enriching, and not infrequently contentious feature of the college experience. Our data suggested that while a positive correlation between comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class and their overall satisfaction with college appears slightly stronger among first gens by comparison with their continuing gens, significant differences emerged when actual behaviors were considered. That first gens in our sample not only were less likely to report having expressed their perspectives during discussion, but were less likely to overcome their reticence because they con-

sidered their opinions important, or in order to express disagreement, reveals substantially dissimilar classroom experiences for first gens. It was therefore striking to find first-generation students were marginally more likely to identify "Be encouraged to share my ideas openly" among their three most important college experience goals—suggesting a mismatch between first-generation students' college expectations and realities confronted in the classroom.

That continuing gens were far more likely to report contributing to class discussion because they felt their opinions "important for others to hear," suggests that differences in self-expression between the groups may extend to differences in self-assessment even before speech is exercised. In other words, if continuing gens feel their opinions are important to be shared, they might be expected to venture more confidently, and more often, into class discussions. Continuing gens may benefit from confidence in their opinions—more attention from instructors, greater opportunity for cognitive growth through dialogue and debate—but it does not necessarily follow that first gens, by default, hold their own ideas in low esteem, but rather, that only a minority succeed in finding a place for their perspective in the majority conversation. Are continuing gens, in this sense, analogous to "native speakers" in the college setting, endowed not only with cultural but linguistic capital? Does class discussion, as conventionally structured, privilege those endowments, and in turn, revalidate them?

Our findings carry policy implications for institutions committed to increasing diversity while strengthening engagement and retention. Academic leaders can recognize there is "more than one cultural model of how to be a student" (Stephens, et al., 2012), and that even institutional language we take for granted may have unintended effects—excluding students whose life experiences predispose them to cooperative, rather than competitive, styles of learning and participation. Targeted pre-matriculation interventions, such as faculty-led summer bridge programs and workshops, could help acculturate first gens to college classroom norms and dynamics (Martinez, et al., 2009). Properly designed and realized, such opportunities could challenge students to explore and experiment with different forms of discourse in group discussion settings, to articulate and gain confidence in their own ideas and opinions, much like the process of "cultivating voice" described by Jehangir (2009). As evidence seems to corroborate Tinto's (1993; 1998) hypothesis that the persistence of some students is largely a function of what happens in the classroom, it should not be assumed that our assumptions about the value of campus social activities hold true for all students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Higher education institutions have long been criticized for reproducing social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, et al., 1994; Margolis, 2001; Tsui, 2003; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). A central premise of critiques is that students enter college with unequal reserves of cultural capital, resulting in disparate academic outcomes. Although discussion of cultural capital theory is beyond the scope of this paper, our findings point to the role classroom discussions may play in mediating the self-expression of students whose pre-college experiences and influences may limit their ability to access discourse conventions of "college classroom talk" (Brooks, 2016). Given the importance assigned by respondents to college culture encouraging the open expression of ideas, and the positive correlation that emerged between students' comfort expressing themselves in class and their overall satisfaction with college and classroom experience, indications that first gens are behind their peers in actual participation are cause for concern. What is less clear is the degree to which their reported reticence results from classroom speech climate. Not all non-participation can be attributed solely to a shortage of verbal capital, and indeed, the two items that emerged as significantly less likely to be selected by first gens as reasons to speak despite discomfort during class discussion—belief in the importance of one's opinion and disagreement

with what others are saying—differ in the discursive contexts to which they might apply. How we interpret the reluctance to speak—a lack of self-efficacy or an act of self-censorship—is a matter for further research.

Privilege plays a role: First gens were significantly less likely to devalue growing and learning in a safe environment. This difference could indicate the buffering effect social privilege may provide continuing gens, who may have less experience with being in physically unsafe environments and be more likely to perceive that they can return home to a comfortable environment if necessary. On-campus housing may result in a higher degree of engagement, and reduce time spent on household responsibilities (e.g., cooking and cleaning,) but typically is more expensive. First gens are significantly more likely to attend less costly two-year/community colleges. Although most students are unmarried, first gen are more likely to be married than are continuing gens, so when developing programs for promoting student engagement, strategies for including married students merit consideration.

Limitations

Because the data were cross-sectional, one cannot infer how important class discussion behaviors are to first gens' academic persistence. Also, just as it is not our intention to suggest that participation in class discussion alone determines the quality of engagement for any particular individual, neither are we claiming that generational status by itself determines students' willingness to express their opinions during class discussion. The survey elicited student perspectives on classroom speech experiences generally; data are not disaggregated to distinguish, for example, class discussions in a "low consensus" humanities course from a "high consensus" STEM course.

In some regards, individuals who participate in marketing research panels significantly differ from individuals who do not. According to a Pew Research Center report (Kennedy et al., 2016,) samples for online nonprobability surveys include a disproportionate percentage of participants who take an interest in political or civic matters, which may impact generalizability of findings. Online non-probability samples are especially prone to error/limited generalizability for findings regarding Black and Hispanic populations, although this may be less of a problem sampling adults who have more formal education (Kennedy et al., 2016). Furthermore, there were only four Native American participants, making the subsample too small to meaningfully consider. Further research is especially warranted to examine attitudes and opinions of Students of Color.

The sample is of college students in the United States, and because of differing laws, cultural norms, and other factors, findings may not generalize to other populations.

Future Directions

Fostering a campus environment in which first gens feel their voices matter begins in the classroom. Instructors who lead class discussions and rely on strong student participation should consider incorporating elements of a "learning partnership" model (see Baxter-Magolda, 2004) which, by situating learning in the student's experience and validating their ability to construct knowledge, positions the student to become the "author" of their intellectual and personal growth (42). Four-year institutions can consider following the lead of community colleges in taking public speaking seriously as a curricular offering, a discrepancy noted by Klosko (2006). Public speaking courses offer students the opportunity to develop fundamental rhetorical skills and confidence in self-expression.

Colleges and universities could signal institutional support of first-generation students by sponsoring events like the First Generation College Celebration Day spearheaded in 2017 by the Council for Opportunity in Education and the Center for First-Generation Student Success and observed by partnering institutions around the country with guest speakers, mentoring sessions, and inclusive programs (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2018). Another possibility is to develop a first semester course for first gens in which students experience mentoring, build community, and gain familiarity with campus resources and opportunities.

To better hear first-generation students, and to help first-generation students develop their voices on campus, we recommend:

- Rendon's (1994) validation model of student learning is powerful: Faculty should embrace their role as a student's potentially most important "validating agent," taking the effort to learn the cultural histories of their students and incorporate multiple perspectives into the class environment, and "to liberate students to express themselves openly even in the face of uncertainty" (47).
- Stephens' et al.'s (2015) difference-education intervention strategy offers first gens who have persisted the opportunity to make a difference for incoming first gens by delivering oral presentations on their transitions to and through college— narratives which may emphasize rather than downplay the working-class backgrounds of some presenters. Much of the power of this empirically-validated strategy stems from its public speaking format.
- Institutional approaches to building first gens' cultural capital are wide-ranging, and many are in development. "Carrot and stick" strategies may push students to take advantage of culturally broadening opportunities (Lederman, 2013).
- While a discussion of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary institutions is beyond the scope of this paper, the large-scale shift to distance learning necessitated by the crisis may have exacerbated existing disparities between first gen students and continuing gen students because of differences in access to and proficiency using digital tools (Soria et al. 2020; also see Goudeau, et al., 2021). Conversely, platforms such as Zoom may improve access because of removing obstacles to attendance and also may change the dynamics of participation in discussions. These are open areas of inquiry.

The disparities we found in classroom speech attitudes and practices between first gens and continuing gens warrant further inquiry. To what extent can attitudes and practices be attributed to pre-college experiences—academic, familial, communal, or some combination thereof? To what extent are they a function of campus-specific speech climate, classroom dynamics, or institutional type? How first-generation students choose to participate in class discussion may comprise a small part of their overall engagement strategy, and perhaps compensatory academic experiences contribute no less significantly than self-expression to cognitive and personal growth (Pascarella et al., 2004). Although discomfort in the classroom can be productive, it also can be destructive (Taylor & Baker, 2019), and in our study, discomfort differentially impacts students, more greatly inhibiting first gens from participating.

Although our findings do not call into doubt the wisdom of mandatory class participation, they should make educators more sensitive to, if not necessarily accommodating of, demographic variables at play in any class discussion. This, in turn, should prompt greater reflection: What do

we mean by class discussion? Do we value the contribution of all participants equally, and if not, why not?

The subject of classroom speech is relative: One person's speech, it could be argued, may be another's microaggression—a controversial and impactful higher education topic outside the focus of this paper (Sue et al., 2007; Kanter et al., 2017; Lilienfeld, 2017; Sue, 2017). The issue of trigger warnings, too, has generated extended debate over best classroom practices, with some positing trigger warnings help achieve equal access for students who have PTSD, provide informed consent for discussion of outcomes of oppression and marginality, and are a matter of basic decency and respect (Rae, 2016; Gavin-Hebert, 2017; Karasek, 2016,), while others worry trigger warnings may be growth-inhibiting, unintentionally promote a view of women as psychologically fragile, and that students needing trigger warnings should be provided PTSD treatment (Vatz, 2016; Doll, 2017; McNally, 2016). As both microaggressions and trigger warnings are closely associated with classroom instruction and interaction (Morris, 2015; Lester, at al., 2017; Knox, 2017), whether they intersect with and impact student speech practices—and if so, how—is a question of substantive contemporary importance, with implications for scholarship, instruction, and policy.

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"Not impossible to do": Why Community College Students Participate and Persist in Voluntary Financial Education Programs

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Abstract

One major issue with improving college student financial wellness is that nearly all financial wellness programming is voluntary. Moreover, many college students do not participate in financial wellness programming, even if it is free and on-campus. Filling a critical research gap, this study sought to understand why community college students participate in voluntary financial education programming. Employing a phenomenological approach through in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 14 community college students, results suggest community college students are strongly motivated by both relational (friendly staff, accommodating scheduling) and external (cash incentives, building banking history) factors when participating in financial education programs. These results suggest practitioners need to adopt different approaches when marketing and recruiting for financial education programs, especially for working adult students and parents, while strategically partnering with financial institutions to lower the participation bar. Implications for research, policy, and practice are addressed.

Keywords: financial education, community college students, financial wellness, personal finance, financial literacy

Compared to peers attending four-year institutions, community college students are much more likely come from low-income backgrounds, be commuter students, be non-traditional students, and/or be working parents with intensive childcare commitments (Faber & Slantcheva-Durst, 2020; Grawe, 2018; Taylor et al., 2023). For these reasons and more, researchers have consistently found that community college students are often at high risks of poverty, housing insecurity, food insecurity, and a plethora of other financial and personal crises that may prevent the students from earning their degree and procuring a job (Gupton, 2017; Ilieva et al., 2019; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mercado, 2017). In no uncertain terms, community college students are some of the most under-supported, under-resourced, at-risk postsecondary students in the United States (U.S.).

To stem many of the financial-related issues that community college students face, many community colleges across the country have launched financial education programs meant to in-

crease students' financial literacy and promote positive financial behaviors in areas such as banking, saving, understanding credit, budgeting, understanding loans, and other topics (Popovich et al., 2020; Sims et al., 2020; Serna & Taylor, 2019). Since these programs' inception, many studies have praised these programs for their ability to help lift students from poverty and provide students with lifelong skills and tools to navigate financial situations and manage their money appropriately (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; Klepfer et al., 2020; Kruger et al., 2016; Nomi, 2005; Salinas & Hidrowoh, 2018).

However, across many community colleges and community college systems in the U.S., financial education is not mandatory (Collier, 2015; Peng et al., 2007; Serna & Taylor, 2019). Financial education programs in community colleges have employed various financial education models, including for-credit personal finance courses (Peng et al., 2007), peer-to-peer money mentoring models (Collier, 2015; Goetz et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2021a, 2021b), and incentivized savings account programs (Serna et al., 2021) to provide students with ample choice, and hopefully, encourage voluntary participation. Yet, community colleges have struggled to encourage broader community college student participation in financial education programs, partially out of a time crunch that many community college students face given their work and family commitments that four-year students often do not have (Holland, 2019; Illieva et al., 2019; Klepfer et al., 2020; Nomi, 2005; Salinas & Hidrowoh, 2018). Subsequently, many community college students have struggled to gain financial knowledge and develop financial wellness while in school, simultaneously struggling with poverty, housing insecurity, food insecurity, and other crises (Gupton, 2017; Ilieva et al., 2019; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mercado, 2017).

Rendering community college student participation in financial education programs doubly troubling is that most of the research into financial education programs has focused on three separate strands of research: program development (Collier, 2015; Kruger et al., 2016), knowledge of student loans (Lee & Mueller, 2014; Montalto et al., 2019), and student outcomes of those attending four-year institutions (Joo et al., 2008; Lim et al., 2014; Murphy, 2005; Shaulskiy, 2015). As the literature has focused much more on four-year institutions than community colleges, it is critical to focus on community college financial education programs, and specifically, how these programs can encourage and incentivize participation beyond mere education regarding student loans.

This study's aims are to both fill extant research gaps and inform how community college financial education programs can better recruit students and incentivize participation. Thus, this work examines the qualitative experiences of 14 community college students who voluntarily participated in a multi-pronged financial education program (including an incentivized savings program, a peer-to-peer money mentoring program, and online financial education modules) facilitated by a large community college system in the U.S. South. The main research questions of this study are as follows:

> RQ1: What motivated community college students to voluntarily enroll in a financial education program?
> RQ2: What motivated continued community college student participation in a financial education program?

Thoroughly answering these critical questions will not only fill extant gaps in the research but also inform how community colleges can better develop attractive, flexible, and responsive financial education programming for their students. Moreover, diverse financial education programs will benefit from knowledge of the program under study, as the program is multi-pronged

and could inform how many different financial education programs can improve student participation, possibly increasing this study's relevance across varied institution types (community colleges, four-year institutions, online institutions).

Literature Review

A plethora of studies at the community college and four-year institution level have reported on the efficiency, effectiveness, and importance of financial education (Beer & Bray, 2020; Britt et al., 2015; Chen & Volpe, 2002; Collier, 2015; Cude et al., 2006; Durband & Britt, 2012; Goetz et al., 2011; Lee & Mueller, 2014; Lim et al., 2014; Montalto et al., 2019; Murphy, 2005; Palmer et al., 2010; Peng et al., 2007; Popovich et al., 2020; Serna et al., 2021; Serna & Taylor, 2019; Taylor et al., 2022; Sims et al., 2020). As a result, this literature review will not exhaustively recap these studies, and instead, this focused literature review will examine how financial education programs are marketed to students and how these programs recruit, retain, and engage students to motivate participation and optimize the benefits of these programs.

Marketing Financial Education Centers and Students Seeking Financial Education

Broadly speaking, Bell et al. (2012) reported on the most effective recruiting and marketing methods for a financial education program as suggested by professionals, suggesting that word of mouth (87% of programs), mass email (50%), information booths or tables and brochures and flyers (47%), and campus newspaper advertisements and bulletin board displays (27%) were the most effective methods. However, professionals suggested and implemented these marketing methods, not the students, possibly limiting this research.

In research related to help-seeking behaviors among students needing financial counseling, Choi et al. (2016) explained that many young people (college students) do not actively seek financial counseling and are unfamiliar with the field. As a result, Choi et al. (2015) examined how students at a Midwestern university were referred to a financial education center. Choi et al. (2015) explained that "emails and websites were major sources of referral for seeking financial counseling among college students" (p. 69), with 22% of all referrals claiming to have learned about the institution's financial counseling services through "friends and family members, or student organizations" (p. 69).

Analyzing the efficacy of a financial education center within a large Midwestern university, Britt et al. (2015) reported that the center promoted programming through "new student orientation, a visit from a staff member during one of their classes, posters around campus, or word of mouth," explaining that all center programming was strictly voluntary (p. 172). These approaches were echoed by Serna et al., (2021) who outlined one financial education center's communication with students and reported that professionals recruited community college students into the financial wellness program through classroom visits, solicitation emails, and tabling at student organization fairs.

Recruiting through Personal Finance Courses

Few community colleges offer financial education courses as parts of degree programs, and Palmer et al.'s (2010) study of four-year university students focused on the benefits of a financial education course that satisfied a general education requirement. Therefore, this course

counted on a student's record toward graduation. Otherwise, no research has been conducted to examine student enrollment behaviors when offered financial education courses over other general education courses, or whether students view financial education courses as worthy of elective credit over another area of study/personal interest. Regarding the efficacy of financial education courses to provoke motivation for further financial education, Lim et al. (2014) found that students who have already taken a financial education course were more likely to seek out future financial education, but the researchers did not report how or why students were motivated to initially take the financial education course. Additionally, Sims et al. (2020) were able to recruit four-year institution students from a first-year college success course and embed financial-related content into the course materials by emailing the students and taking volunteers.

Beer and Bray (2020) reviewed several financial education programs at community colleges and provided an overview of Berkshire Community College's (BCC) personal finance class, which was offered both online and in-person. For Beer and Bray (2020), the class was able to grow as BCC partnered with nearby colleges and non-profit organizations to spread the word, while also offering a flexible course format to cater to adult and non-traditional learners. Similarly, Beer and Bray (2020) reported on Capital Community College's (CCC) personal finance course, which was offered free of charge to all students. Beer and Bray (2020) reasoned that "One challenge that CCC is addressing is how to better incorporate the course into a guided-pathways model so students are encouraged to take the personal finance course without accumulating unnecessary credits," (p. 17), speaking to the difficulty of student degree planning when personal finance courses are rarely required in many non-business degree programs.

Beyond courses, multiple studies have used financial incentives, such as gift cards and money, to incentivize students to participate in one-time or short-term financial education interventions at four-year institutions (Peng et al., 2007; Popovich et al., 2020). At the community college level, only Serna et al.'s (2021) study detailed how a large urban community college recruited community college students to participate in an incentivized student savings account, which required the program leaders to invite students to participate by email survey and then provided cash incentives to the students after completing financial wellness milestones, such as completing a financial aid application or meeting with a financial coach.

Recruiting through Mentoring Programs

Pertinent to recruiting students to financial mentoring/coaching/counseling programs, Collier (2015) suggested that mentoring in both synchronous and asynchronous settings online and in-person would render financial mentoring most accessible to the largest numbers of students, possibly encouraging participation by lowering the hurdle of access. The only other studies related to recruiting students into and incentivizing students within peer money mentoring programs are Taylor et al.'s (2021a, 2021b) studies which delved into how peer money mentors had benefited from their roles both during their time as a student and after graduation. Therein, Taylor et al. (2021a, 2021b) argued that peer money mentors learned of the peer mentoring program and were encouraged to participate because it would boost their resume and provide a convenient, well-paying, on-campus job. However, in Taylor et al.'s (2021a, 2021b) studies, the participants were former peer mentors and not student mentees, limiting the impact of the research and its implications for how to recruit mentees into a peer money mentoring program. Otherwise, to date, no studies at the community college level have explored what motivates community college students to voluntarily

enroll in a financial education program and what incentivizes their continued participation in a financial education program.

Conceptual Framework

This study is framed by Wigfield and Eccles' (2000) expectancy-value theory (EVT) of motivation, supported by the notion that individuals choose to participate in certain activities/programs based on 1.) whether they believe they will be supported and can succeed and 2.) the extent to which they value the activity/program. EVT builds upon Bandura's (1977) notion of self-efficacy, which at its core, is an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation given cognitive (what one thinks), behavioral (how one acts), and environmental (where one is situated) determinants. As a result, Wigfield and Eccles' (2000) EVT and Bandura's (1977) notion of self-efficacy will be applied in this study and to guide the research team when analyzing data, and specifically, identifying certain values and tenets of self-efficacy that community college students revealed during interviews.

Of motivational values, Wigfield and Eccles' (2000) outlined three main values that motivate learners: utility value, attainment value, and cost value. Per EVT, "utility value or usefulness refers to how a task fits into an individual's future plans," (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p. 72), such as learning to save money for a large purchase or Moreover, utility value captures more 'extrinsic' reasons for engaging in a task, such as doing a task not for its own sake but to reach some desired end state (p. 73): This could be related to earning a cash incentive for completing financial education tasks, such is the case regarding the financial education program in this study. Attainment value is the perceived importance of performing well on a given task that may result in future benefits (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), such as learning how to understand credit and build one's credit for future financial freedom. Finally, cost value "refers to how the decision to engage in one activity (e.g., doing schoolwork) limits access to other activities (e.g., calling friends), assessments of how much effort will be taken to accomplish the activity, and its emotional cost," (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p. 72). Here, finances have been found to be the source of considerable stress and a reason why individuals drastically alter their behavior (Britt et al., 2015; Joo et al., 2008; Lim et al., 2014).

Additionally, Bandura's (1977) notion of self-efficacy informs this study, primarily helping the research team understand how community college students were motivated to participate in voluntary financial education. Specifically, Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy supported the research team's analysis of how community college students thought about their financial literacy and wellness (cognitive), how students acted in ways that supported program participation (behavioral), and how students viewed their institution of higher education and learning support (environment). Ultimately, these two different lenses of self-efficacy—EVT (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977)—guide this study. These theories encapsulated two critical aims of this study—to better understand why community college students are initially motivated to participate in financial education programming and what motivates continued participation—rendering these theories appropriate for this study.

Methods

This Methods section will explain how the team solicited and recruited student participants, collected and analyzed data, and addressed this study's limitations. Our interview protocol

is available upon request. This study was classified as exempt by the team's institutional review board (IRB), and all IRB materials can also be provided upon request.

Study Site and Identifying Participants

We gathered data during the 2019 Spring semester from full-time community college students at Center Technical College (CTC, a pseudonym), one campus as part of a larger, 11-campus community college system. This system is located primarily in the downtown area of a growing megapolis in central Texas. Overall, the CTC student population is nearly 40,000 students with 77% attending part-time, 60% female, 41% White, 38% Hispanic, 32% over the age of 25, and 92% being first-time degree-seeking students.

We collaborated with CTC's communications office at the central branch of the community college to identify and recruit students. We were able to send an email to a random collection of 250 students who had opted-in to receive institutional emails, including solicitation emails for participation in research studies. The recruitment email included a summary of the research study, IRB documentation and materials, and the anticipated timeline for completing the interviews. To incentivize participation, we gathered office and learning supplies—such as notebooks, pens and pencils, and highlighters—and informed students that they could choose their items if they participated. If students were interested in the study, we asked students to respond to the email and let the research team know when they were available for an interview, with interviews to be held at the most central and largest location in CTC's 11-campus footprint.

After the project leader confirmed each student's eligibility to be in the study (needed to be enrolled at CTC), we collaborated with each student to schedule a time for the interview to take place. A brief demographic description of each participant can be found in Table 1 below:

Table 1: *Display Matrix of Interview Participants (n=14)*

Name	**Age**	**Race**	**Gender**	**Major**	**Employment Status**
Elena	19	Hispanic	Woman	Computer Science	4 hrs per week
Diego	22	Hispanic / White	Man	General Studies	15 hrs per week
Jerard	24	White	Man	Computer Science	25 hrs per week
Maria	28	Hispanic	Woman	Health Information Technology	15 hrs per week
Annibel	19	Black	Woman	Psychology	20 hrs per week
Valeria	28	Hispanic	Woman	Computer Information Technology	10 hrs per week
Christina	24	Asian	Woman	Health Science	40 hrs per week

Tori	21	Asian	Woman	Nursing	10 hrs per week
Merissa	25	White	Woman	Architectural & Engineering CAD	16 hrs per week
Lola	33	Black	Woman	Early Childhood Education	25 hrs per week
Jeremy	20	White	Man	Business Administration	20 hrs per week
Devin	40	Black	Man	General Studies	40 hrs per week
Julie	47	White	Woman	Nursing	20 hrs per week
Gaby	21	White	Woman	General Studies	35 hrs per week

The research team hoped to recruit a sample of students who were representative of the overall population at CTC, and we mostly achieved that goal. Of participants, the average age of each participant was 26.5 years of age (32% of CTC students are aged 25 or older), 71% were women (CTC is overall 55% women), and 64% were students of Color (CTC is 58% students of Color). Moreover, all students were beyond their first semester at CTC, every student was enrolled full-time, and all students intended to remain at CTC until they finished their associate degree.

Data Collection

A phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study, as prior phenomenological research in education has posited that phenomenological approaches are meant to explore an individual's personal background, the details of the experience of the event (i.e., publishing an op-ed), and reflections of that individual upon the meaning of that experience or event (Reddick et al., 2020; Seidman, 2019). Ultimately, adopting a phenomenological approach allowed the research to investigate the nature or essence of the lived experience of community college students, allowing them to reflect upon their motivations for participation in financial education programming. As a result, we posed questions that focused on what Seidman (2019) suggested was a three-interview approach: questions about one's personal background and experiences, the details of one's experiences, and reflections on the meaning of that experience. This approach allowed the research team to understand the personal context of faculty members in this study and how they articulated and reflected on their own experiences, accomplishing the primary aims of phenomenological work.

Overall, 14 community college students participated in semi-structured interviews for the study. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio recorded with permission from the participant as indicated on the IRB documentation. Interviews took place at the largest DCC branch campus in a central location, accessible for all participants in this study. The interview protocol included questions related to how community college students learned of the financial education program, what motivated these students to enroll in the program, and what motivated students to continue participation in the program. The interview protocol can be provided upon request by the research team.

Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews (Maxwell, 2013) with 14 community college students in a large, urban community college system. These participants served as the primary data source to better understand community college students' motivations for participating in financial education programs. All 14 interviews were electronically transcribed and uploaded to an encrypted database for collaborative analysis. Each research team member separately performed two rounds of initial coding using *a priori* themes deduced from Wigfield and Eccles' (2000) expectation-value theory (EVT) and Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy framework.

First, using EVT, the research team coded data according to EVT's three main value types: utility value, attainment value, and cost value. Second, the research team coded data according to Bandura's (1977) main components of how individuals develop self-efficacy: cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors. After these first two rounds, the researchers collaborated to compare themes and check for consistency and accuracy of the first rounds of coding (Miles et al., 2014). Then, collaboratively, the research team performed a third round of line-by-line coding that included sub-coding (Miles et al., 2014) to elaborate upon which financial education concepts were embedded into EVT values (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) and Bandurian (1997) factors that motivated community college students to participate in financial education programming.

This third round of coding went beyond our three *a priori* themes to focus on specific financial education topics, such as *budgeting, banking*, *understanding credit*, and *planning for large purchases*. This round of coding uncovered sub-themes related to student motivation for participating in financial education programs, possibly informing which topics are most attractive to students and which topics students feel are most important for them to learn. Such insight may help future financial education programs facilitate engaging, interactive programming for community college students.

Finally, the research team performed a final, collaborative round of cross-checking and analysis (Miles et al., 2014) to ensure that major themes and sub-themes were accurate and appropriately represented the data. Given the relative novelty of this study's research questions and a lack of prior research to guide analysis, the research team felt justified in conducting the final round of coding to ensure that student voices were captured accurately, and that both theories were considered and applied accurately.

Limitations

This study's limitations are primarily concerned with time and space constraints of the interviews, along with the type and volume of students interviewed. First, the sample of students interviewed were close to, yet not entirely representative of, the CTC student body or community college students more broadly. Future studies could focus on different demographics of community college students, as well as adult or non-traditional community college students, more rural community college students, or community college students taking predominantly online classes.

As the larger CTC district serves an overall map of eight counties, this large service area rendered it challenging to find a convenient, accessible location for all interviewees. Even though the research team selected the largest and most central CTC campus as the interview site, some participants reported a 45 minute or longer commute to campus. Moreover, CTC students regularly face extended commute times (often totaling over 1.5 hours) due to dense traffic across CTC's

urban landscape. Additionally, the interviews were held between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. due to CTC's interview room scheduling policies, and this time frame may not have been the most conducive for students, especially those with part- or full-time jobs or those with caretaking or parental responsibilities. Future studies could facilitate data gathering in online or telephone settings, at earlier or later hours of the day, or at multiple campus locations to facilitate a wider, more in-depth range of student participation.

Finally, the research team recruited the community college students in this study via an institutional email list, meaning that this project only solicited a student population who regularly checks their institutional CTC email account. As was the researchers' personal experiences, many community college students at CTC did not regularly check their emails, rendering email communication a limitation of this study. Future studies could try to recruit participants through other forms of communication, such as flyers, tabling, social media, or word-of-mouth to encourage broader participation, and thus, deeper or broader insights into community college student motivation for participating in voluntary financial education.

Findings

Successfully answering this study's research questions, we will thematically report our main findings in two categories with three subcategories for each main finding:

1.) Why students voluntarily enrolled in a financial education program: 1a.) visible, familiar, and friendly staff, 1b.) simplicity and relevance, and 1c.) financial incentives.
2.) What motivated students to continue participation in a financial education program: 2a.) good communication, 2b.) diversity and simplicity of program offerings, and 2c.) financial incentives.

Why Volunteer? Visible, Familiar, and Friendly Staff

From the very beginning of the interviews, it was clear that community college students volunteered for financial education because they knew who was running the program and they perceived the program staff to be friendly and approachable. For Bandura (1977), this environmental factor was a strong motivator for many students to voluntarily enroll in financial education. Valeria explained that her motivation was "Honestly, Alyssa [a pseudonym] and the Peer Money Mentor Program. Everyone was nice." Similarly, Annibel also remembered Alyssa and explained, "I went to a scholarship workshop my first semester and that's where I met her. Then we had a meeting last semester. She's great."

Lynette [a pseudonym] was also a popular staff member, with multiple students recalling how visible, familiar, and friendly Lynette was when recruiting for the financial education program. While explaining why he volunteered, Diego recalled that, "Alyssa and Lynette are always reaching out to us. They are the "go-to." We're comfortable with you. When I say we, all of us, and including myself. That made it easy to get started." Similarly, Elena recounted an experience with Lynette when she remarked, "I love the teacher (Lynette). She's really nice. I don't know, I'm just trying to say that I'm happy how it turned out." Here, several community college students not only had positive recollections of financial education staff members, but they could recall positive experiences and tie to experiences to specific staff members they knew by name.

For students who could not recall staff by name, other students had nothing but nice things to say about how the CTC staff was visible, familiar, and friendly, making it more comfortable to volunteer for financial education. Lola remembered, "You (CTC staff) helped me set up the whole system, and I've had nothing but positive experiences with them. Super good." Maria also recalled her first encounter with Mr. Grey (a pseudonym), who "had this little stack of flyers" on his desk and "told me that he could help me get started on the process, and I said, 'Yes, why not?' because I knew him well enough." Reflecting on an in-class visit from the financial education staff, Christina remarked that she volunteered because of the friendliness of the staff: "I saw you [Lynette] before, you came to my class. So, when I saw you [Lynette was at an information table in the hallway of one of the campus buildings], I signed up."

Ultimately, Gaby summed up the feelings of many community college students in this study. When describing her volunteer process for financial education, Gaby asserted, "Seeing you all, you all really reaching out to us and really trying to help us out. Is there anything I would change? Not really. Everyone was pretty great." In her experiences and others like her, Gaby appreciated seeing the staff, and the familiarity of the staff lowered the bar to volunteering, especially given that finances can be a difficult topic for students to discuss with anyone, much less someone the student has not seen consistently.

Why Volunteer? Simple, Relevant Programming for College Students

A second overwhelming factor to encourage community college student volunteerism for financial education was that the signup process was simple, and the program's content was relevant to college students. Framed by Wigfield and Eccles' (2000) EVT, both the simplicity of signup and relevance of content to college students can be viewed as a weighing of utility and attainment value, followed by the cost value of the sign-up process. First, community college students learned about the program offerings and felt they aligned with what could be useful to them (utility value) as well as understanding that the gained knowledge would serve them well in the future (attainment value). Once staff introduced the signup process, students viewed the signup process as having a very low cost--the decision to sign up did not hinder or "cost" students much time or effort, which could take away from other activities or priorities.

Regarding the relevance of the programming, Lola stated that accomplishing "tasks like "completing the FAFSA" is "that's something that we as college students do all the time, so it's very easily attainable." Jeremy also connected the program materials specifically to college students, explaining:

> When I was looking, researching more into it, the list of activities they all provided like getting a bank account done, setting up a direct deposit. I feel like those are good goals to have towards general savings of money because perhaps those lead to scholarships which can save you money on tuition, and that's a real problem for a lot of students.

Devin also had a very personal story to share of his pathway back to education and his motivations for volunteering for financial education:

> I'm an adult student, not somebody coming from straight out of high school. I haven't been in school for 10 years. I've been in the workforce for a while. Getting out of debt and learning how to save is the biggest thing that I think students can benefit from. Especially

budgeting--that is a life skill that everybody should learn. Because I'm a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, the hardest thing to do is learn how to save the money. When you're learning how to save making like $8 an hour again like a student, it's still the habit that I needed to learn. Being able to do that and sitting down having somebody to do your budget with you is doing that.

We appreciated Devin's candor and told him as much. However, other students shared similar sentiments regarding the relevance of the programming, especially regarding how college students could benefit from saving money. This strong Bandurian (1977) cognitive factor of recognizing a knowledge gap and seeing financial education as beneficial was crucial for student motivation. Christina asserted:

As a student, I'm really having a hard time-saving money. If I see my money on my account, I'll spend it like right away because, I don't know, but just for entertainment, or for food. I don't really eat. I just want to spend it. I don't know why. I don't know, maybe I just grew up like that. When I heard about this program for students, I'm like, "Oh, if I have a separate bank for my savings, then I'm not going to be able to spend it all." That's how I got motivated to join.

Like Devin and Christina, both Annibel and Tori also claimed that learning how to save money was especially motivational for college students—and a Bandurian (1977) behavioral factor for volunteering for a financial education program. Annibel said, "Honestly, I think saving is something that- or knowing how to save correctly, like investing, is something that is not really taught to students. So, when I saw that program, I was like, 'This is a great opportunity for me to learn how to save the right way.'" Tori echoed Annibel, saying, "It's great motivation for students to open a savings account. I'm lazy, it's just that I need motivation." Here, many community college students viewed financial education programming as having both utility and attainment value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) specifically for college students, motivating their volunteerism.

Then, during the signup process, Valeria explained that "During the course of the process, it was really just to fill out a form. I think the sign up was easy." Gaby also remarked that, "The sign-up process, it was very easy though because all we did was get a sheet of paper and we filled out and we started to get in. It was easy." Similarly, Jeremy explained, "Signing up was fairly easy. I just went through the directions sent to me in the email and I'd sign up with it." Additionally, Julie, Tori, Christina, Maria, and Elena also commented on the simplicity of the signup process, lowering the bar to participation in the financial education program. Julie also flatly said, "Getting involved was ridiculously easy. Just fill out a form and then someone contacts you. It took all the thinking out of it." Ultimately, in addition to finding utility and attainment value in the programming, community college students also found volunteering for the programming to have a very low-cost value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), lowering the bar to participation, in exchange for high utility and attainment values.

Why Volunteer? Money Talks

Finally, among factors related to motivating community college students to volunteer for financial education, finances were unsurprisingly critical. Of note, these community college students had the option to sign up for an incentivized savings account program that provided students

with small ($25) deposits for completing financial education tasks into savings accounts, established during a partnership between the community college and a local credit union. As part of the overall programming, many community college students remarked that these small deposits into their savings accounts were great motivators for not only volunteering for the financial education program but also opening those savings accounts. Valeria said, "The incentive that it gives was important. I guess with the lack of knowledge of money, I didn't really know what other benefits I was going to get from the program until I heard about the money." Gaby also said, "The financial incentives also were really great. Free money for college students sounds great. That's why I signed up." Others commented:

> Jerard: Motivations? I needed to start saving some money obviously! Definitely, the incentives were very motivating for me. I love free money or almost free money.
> Jeremy: When I received the email invitation, the cash incentive was obviously a good place to start.
> Tori: When this program came up, and it says that y'all are going to give us money for opening a savings account, I'm like, that's pretty much my motivation right there not to procrastinate anymore and join.
> Merissa: I think getting the extra money was nice.

Although many students bluntly stated that money was a motivator for volunteering, Julie went a bit deeper and connected the financial incentive to her future plans as a nurse:

> It was money, that's mainly what it is, but I am going back to school at a late age. I don't really have any savings and I'm planning on going to the nursing program, which I'm going to need money for. I'm just trying to get the ball rolling and then start motivating myself to start saving again because I haven't done that in a few years.

In closing, many community college students volunteered for financial education out of a desire for the money in a sense of utility value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). However, some students did connect the financial incentives to future plans, signaling a Bandurian (1977) sense of behaviorism toward self-efficacy and strong attainment value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), as Jerard's notion of "free money" could translate into Julie's future plans for nursing school.

Why Persist? Clear, Consistent Communication

Although there were several factors to motivate students to initially volunteer for financial education programming, there were also several factors that kept community college students engaged in the financial education programming that they had volunteered for. Perhaps the most important and most influential factor noted by community college students in this study was excellent communication delivered by the financial education program staff, often in the form of constant reminders to engage with the program. Maria noted, "I may not communicate enough, but I do like the reminders you send me. The communication is great," while Merissa said, "I think what you all have been doing so far is great, like sending the reminders and I'm like, 'Yes, I still need to do that.'" Similarly, Elena explained, "You [the staff] would remind me about the program and what I had to do, and I was like, "Thank you." I totally forgot about it. So then, I was like, 'Sweet.' I got the work done really quickly."

Echoing both Elena and Maria, Annibel said, "I have gotten a lot of reminders. I'm still actually in the process of doing my financial literacy course, but I have gotten a lot of reminders about that, and I appreciate those. They keep me on track." Valeria also commented on the communication, as helpful reminders to complete the program's educational goals, saying:

> The communication worked great. I think the consistency, too, was perfect. It was like, "You can get busy, and you forget to see this. You've done great this far in your program." And I was like, "That's cool." That was really motivating to me.

In this regard, consistent communication with community college students motivated them and engaged them in financial education, a clearly Bandurian (1977) behavioral factor leading to these students' sense of self-efficacy within the program. Moreover, this consistent communication may have also represented a low-cost value or a reminder of the attainment or utility value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) of the program's offerings, suggesting that community college students may need reminders that financial education is good for them.

Why Persist? Diverse, Simple Programming

Another important factor motivating community college students to continue to engage in financial education was the diversity and simplicity of the program's offerings. To be clear, this community college offered a wide variety of financial aid education program offerings, including in-person and virtual financial coaching, online learning modules, the aforementioned incentivized savings account, and larger group presentations on important financial topics (saving, building credit, managing student loans, etc.). Because of the diversity, and simplicity, of the program's offerings, community college students stayed engaged and motivated.

Gaby explained, "There's so much to do. Either doing your FAFSA or learning online. Or meeting with a financial coach. That's awesome. I think people like a lot of options. Typically, I like a lot of options." Diego said something similar, asserting:

> I stayed motivated because it was always a change of pace. Doing online stuff can get boring and repetitive but it wasn't too much. Like the savings account. That wasn't too much, and so I'll keep doing it. I mean, you make it not impossible to do.

Here, it seemed that students liked the diversity of options that the program offered but also that those options were somewhat limited, so as not to present a paradox of choice and overwhelm the students.

Students also commented on the relative ease of the program's offerings, claiming that tasks were helpful but simple enough to be squeezed into busy schedules. Christina reasoned that, "The tasks are pretty easy, and with the reminders, I get them done. I am busy, but I get them done. They're easy enough." Devin also commented on the ease of the tasks, saying, "The online courses are pretty fast and they're simple. It's some videos, some reading, a good mix. It's a simple program." Like Christina and Devin, several other students including Elena, Jerard, Tori, and Gaby all commented on the simplicity of the program, including completing tasks such as meeting with a financial coach or completing their FAFSA, as reasons for their persistence of the program. Ultimately, the diversity of the program offerings provided cognitive stimulation (Bandura, 1977)

for ample self-efficacy, while the simplicity of the offerings balanced the utility, attainment, and cost value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) in students' perspectives, helping them persist.

Why Persist? Money (Still) Talks

The monetary incentives built into the financial education program was a strong motivator for community college students to volunteer for the program itself. However, those incentives also proved to motivate students' sense of persistence within the program. Here, these incentives proved to hold strong cost value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), while also adjusting students' behavior to achieve greater levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) while enrolled in the financial education program.

Of the financial incentives, Elena claimed, "Stuff happens and then I realized, 'I want my $25,' and so I'd see an email and I'd do it because of that money." Likewise, Tori said, "The incentives were great. Each thing I did was more money and seeing that was awesome." Maria commented, "The small incentives are always nice to have, I guess. I already try to save some money, but to have a separate account and get more seems nice," while Devin flatly said, "They're [the financial incentives] were great. Who doesn't love more money?" Like others, Devin, Jeremy, and Julie also commented on how the financial incentives were motivational for their persistence in the program.

In fact, community college students in this study were so motivated by money, Annibel had a particularly insightful, and humorous, response to our question about motivation during the program: "The money was motivational. Knowing that I'd get the money, I did it. I'm not gonna lie [laughs]. But next time, maybe give away a million dollars instead [laughs]?" Although Annibel confessed this while laughing, it is important to note that only one student actually mentioned the dollar amount of the incentive as a motivational factor: Elena, who mentioned the $25 per incentive format. As a result, financial education programs could experiment with financial incentives and offer lower incentives to engage greater numbers of students. Inversely, Annibel made a good point: Could a greater financial incentive spur students to complete even more difficult financial education tasks (beyond completing a 15-minute online course or renewing their FAFSA)? Ultimately, cost value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) was particularly important for community college student persistence within a financial education program, as the financial incentives were strong enough to alter their behavior and positively affect their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Discussion

Findings from this study both successfully answered this study's research questions and made novel contributions to the literature focused on community college student financial wellness. Moreover, these findings yield important implications for the development and administration of financial education programs on community college campuses, especially as they interact with multiple facets of a students' financial wellness. Research implications also emerged as they relate to both how students can provide formative and summative feedback to improve financial education programs, as well as how community-based organizations partner with institutions of higher education to plan and facilitate financial education programs. Future research should engage with students to understand why students are drawn to financial education programs and how these

programs can begin to collect student feedback—both to inform programming and evaluate programming—to better understand how to create financial education programs that students want to participate in.

Perhaps the clearest connection this study makes to prior research is this study's findings that community college students were strongly motivated to volunteer for and persist in financial education because of financial incentives. Both Peng et al. (2007) and Popovich et al. (2020) investigated how gift cards or cash could incentivize students to participate in one-time or short-term financial education interventions at four-year institutions. This study demonstrates that the same may be true at the community college level: Students are motivated by financial incentives. Additionally, this study echoes Serna et al.'s (2021) findings that community college students may view money as a consistent motivational factor for persistence within financial education programs beyond incentivized savings accounts. Students in this study claimed that money motivated them to volunteer and then to complete such tasks as meeting with a financial coach or completing the FAFSA. Here, money motivates and does so across many components of a financial education program.

Additionally, prior work by Choi et al. (2015) and Britt et al. (2015) articulated that four-year university students often sought financial education from professional staff, viewing these stakeholders as trusted sources of information. This study extends this work to community college students and elaborates on Choi et al. (2015) and Britt et al. (2015). In this study, community college students volunteered specifically because they knew a professional staff member working for the financial education program. In fact, students in this study had such close contact and had established such good relationships with these staff members that they could easily recall them by name and praised them when given the chance. Moreover, community college students were drawn to friendly, helpful staff who may have been rendering finances an easier or more comfortable topic to discuss, as prior research has found that many college students feel uncomfortable talking and learning about their finances (Cude et al., 2006; Goetz et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2022).

Closely related to the friendliness and professionalism of staff, community college students also appreciated the consistent, clear communication to gently remind students to participate. As discussed earlier, community college students needed behavioral interventions (Bandura, 1977)—in the form of financial incentives and reminders—to volunteer for the financial education program and persist. However, the community college environment in which students developed their financial wellness self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) also mattered, as community college students in this study felt comfortable and vulnerable enough with CTC's professional staff to open up and learn about a potentially difficult topic.

Community college students in this study also expressed an appreciation for the financial education program's simple and diverse curriculum, which was both relevant to college students and did not impede students' academic or personal lives. Wigfield and Eccles' (2000) notion of cost value is important here: The financial education program was organized in a way that allowed students to complete tasks that 1.) they could have likely completed as a postsecondary student anyway (completing the FAFSA or attending a lecture) and 2.) they could accomplish with relative ease (a 15-minute online learning module or a meeting with a financial coach). Here, students weighed the costs and benefits of the financial education program, and with a few reminders, embraced the program's content. In addition, there is an emotional component to cost value: How emotional a person perceives a task to be will often dictate whether it is accomplished (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). However, the friendly, professional staff apparently lowered that emotional bar for community college students in this study, making them feel comfortable, while the students

were free to weigh the cost value (and utility and attainment value) of the financial education program.

This study also yields important implications for the development of financial education programs and future research opportunities. First, the financial education program under study had partnered with a local credit union to help provide financial incentives to students. Beyond Serna et al.'s (2021) recap of a community-based partnership with a community college, much more investigation should be focused on how community colleges can develop programming and raise funds alongside community-based organizations. Understanding that higher education budgets are often tight, strategic partnerships with community-based organizations may help community colleges build and sustain financial education programming that would likely be bolstered by providing students with financial incentives (account deposits, scholarships, gift cards, etc.).

Moreover, future research could investigate how financial education programs yield feedback from community college students, especially as it relates to the nature of the programming and its attractiveness. For program leaders, it would be hard to imagine being able to improve programming and increase volunteerism without a feedback loop from the most important stakeholders of the program: the students. From here, researchers could evaluate several aspects of the program. First, researchers could compare curricular offerings to demonstrations of student knowledge to understand the effectiveness of financial education programming. Moreover, researchers could perform qualitative research with students to learn how students experience financial education program and which elements of the program keeps them engaged. Investigating these two elements of current financial education programs would not only inform how extant programs could be improved but also inform how future programs can build curriculum that is relevant to community college students to encourage program persistence.

Conclusion

As an emerging subfield in higher education, the financial wellness of community college students—and college students in general—should continue to garner interest from practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in higher education. This study suggests that an important component of financial education at the community college level is understanding how community college students are motivated to volunteer and persist in such programming. Here, students described a financial wellness program that lowered the bar of participation through a simple signup process, conducted relevant program activities, and was staffed by friendly, professional staff. For financial wellness programs in their infancy, training staff and facilitating a simple signup process would be great starting points. Then, as the program matures, the program could gather feedback from students to increase the relevancy of the program and its curricular offerings.

However, beyond this study's limitations of evaluating a program with embedded financial incentives that not every program could replicate, many community college students could be recruited into financial education programs with relative ease. Students in this study, simply put, wanted financial education that was simple to sign up for, was administered by friendly and communicative staff, and contained curricula that was simple and relevant. For students, they wanted financial education that was "not impossible to do" and kept them engaged through different forms of multimedia and curricular content. And for program leaders, administering a program that students enjoy is "not impossible to do," either.

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Education Theory & School Realities

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Abstract

Factors associated with special education teacher shortages include stress, lack of support, personal factors, and the inability to create connections between the specialized college courses and everyday school-based practices. Examining the different components of the teacher preparation programs and their feasibilities within the reality of Pre-kindergarten through Grade 12 schools will provide insight that could improve teacher preparation programs. In-service and pre-service special education teachers reflected on their on-the-job practices and how these practices relate to the teacher preparation program that they have successfully completed. In this paper, these reflections are examined in light of theory-to-practice models.

Keywords: Theory to practice, special education, teacher preparation, student teaching, individualized education plan, transition goals

Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education, special education continues to be one of the highest-need fields in the country (Cross, 2017). Many factors contribute to this need, including stress and burnout, lack of administrative support, personal and contextual factors related to teaching (Berry et al., 2011), and ambiguity in caseloads and responsibilities, as well as position inconsistencies (Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013)

Despite the breadth and depth of knowledge students obtain in their prospective teacher preparation programs, novice teachers can easily be overwhelmed by responsibilities such as attending to each student's schedule, improving students' behavior, and enhancing their academic performance. It has been well established that student outcomes improve when partnerships occur between Pre-kindergarten–12 (PK–12) schools and institutions of higher education (IHE). Improving the quality of teacher candidates' collaboration with one another and with their supervisors is one element that might mitigate these issues (Iscan, 2015).

Beginning special education teachers have the technical knowledge to work with students on foundational skills, but they may struggle to connect their own educational knowledge to the intervention programs used in their cooperating schools (Brunsting et al., 2014). Therefore, it is recommended that such links be substantiated during students' coursework by comparing evidence-based practices to practices used in specific school districts (Brownell et al., 2011; Iscan, 2015).

Both PK–12 schools and IHE need to be open to new ideas that may bring changes to each program's framework (Altieri et al., 2015). Efforts to bridge the gap between teaching theory and

teachers' practice have not yet come to fruition (Kimball, 2016). Hence, this paper will further investigate the difficulties that contribute to the gap between theory and practice by interviewing teacher candidates and experienced teachers and asking them to reflect on what factors they think contribute to this gap. This research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are experienced teachers' and student teachers' perspectives on their ability to apply what they have learned in IHE in their classrooms?
2. What recommendations do experienced teachers and student teachers have for IHE to help in-service teachers transition to their future roles as special education teachers?

Participants were either experienced teachers who had earned undergraduate degrees in education from various colleges in a Midwestern state, or they were student teachers pursuing undergraduate degrees in education from the same state. Three experienced teachers who had supervised student teachers as well as one student teacher and one student teacher intern were interviewed (Table 1).

Table 1: *Participants Information*

	Role	**License and Degree**	**Formal Teaching experience**	**School grade level**
Participant 1	Teacher	Cross-Categorical License	15 years	Elementary and Middle school
Participant 2	Teacher	Cross-Categorical License	8 years	High School
Participant 3	teacher	Cross-Categorical License	27 years	High school
Participant 4	Intern student teacher	Cross-Categorical License	3 months	Elementary
Participant 5	Student teacher	Cross-Categorical License	3 months	Middle to high school

The interview conditions can be described as authentic or realistic, because they were not preceded by specially designed elements to enhance the student teachers' experiences at their cooperating schools.

Method and Data Collection

There are five participants in this study: three experienced teachers who had a bachelor's degree in education, one student teacher was pursuing a bachelor's degree in education, and one intern teacher who was pursuing a bachelor's degree in education as well. All participants are

graduates of various higher education institutions in a midwestern state in the United States. Participants in this article will be referred to as participant 1 through participant 5.

Participant 1 was a cross-categorical special education teacher with a second degree in vocational rehabilitation. Participant 1 has 15 years of school experience and currently works with students with high support needs in middle school but has also worked in elementary schools. Participant 2 was a special education cross-categorical special education teacher with eight years of experience teaching high school students with varying levels of support. Participant 3 was a cross-categorical special education teacher with 27 years of experience who worked with high school students who require varying levels of support. Participant 3 also has prior experience working with elementary and middle school students. Participant 4 worked as an undergraduate intern in a high school, providing academic support to students with low support needs in subjects such as math and English Language Arts (ELA). Participant 5 was an undergraduate student teacher completing their field experience in an elementary school, primarily working with students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD). Participants 4 and 5 were both in their final semester and were completing their final field experience. However, participants 5 worked more closely with a cooperating teacher and was not given full responsibility of a classroom or full caseloads, while the intern student teacher (Participant 4) was given full classroom responsibilities and full caseloads.

Each participant was interviewed once, and the interviews lasted between 47-65 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, then two graduate research assistants cross-examined the accuracy of the transcriptions. The researcher examined the interviewees' responses and identified themes and categories for the open-ended questions and answers. The researcher contacted participants whose answers were ambiguous as a result of the use of speech fillers and sought clarifications. Participants' responses were manually coded into two themes: those directly related to the interview questions (expected themes) and those inspired by the participants' narratives (unexpected themes). For information on expected and unexpected themes, see Table 2. Three criteria were used to determine the presence of a theme: whether more than one participant addressed the theme, whether the topic was addressed intensively even if only by one participant, and whether the topic was related to theory or previous research. Some of the themes were broken down into sub-themes. One theme, for instance, involved experienced teachers discussing how their practices change more frequently than they would like. This theme was further divided into changes to the curriculum, changes to the intervention programs, changes to the assessment process, and changes to the standards (Table 2).

Table 2: *Data*

Expected Themes-Inspired by Interview Questions	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
Participants stated that they were able to apply what they learned in the following courses:					
Classroom Management	√	√	√	√	
Writing IEPs	√	√		√	√
Behavior Intervention		√	√		
Transition		√	√		
Participants stated that they could only apply what they learned in the standardized assessment course to a limited extent	√	√		√	√

Participants identified the following as areas of difficulty for student teachers:					
Time spent writing the edTPA	√		√	√	√
Teaching content at varying rates of instruction based on the instructional needs of each individual learner		√	√		√
Managing a busy and consistently changing daily schedule			√	√	√
Participants made the following suggestions to help novice teachers transition to working in school settings:					
Create a more credit-hour-intensive IEP course	√		√		
Train pre-service teachers on how to work with students who have mental health issues	√	√	√		
Prepare in-service teachers to work with students with autism	√				
Expose pre-service teachers to academic intervention programs	√	√			
Expose in-service teachers to state required assessment		√	√		
Discuss how to successfully write and submit the edTPA while attending to school-related tasks.				√	√
Unexpected Themes-Inspired by Participants' Narrative	**P1**	**P2**	**P3**	**P4**	**P5**
Participants reflected on the nature of the rapid change that occurs in their schools from one school year to the next. These changes can be classified into the following categories:					
Changes related to the standards		√	√		
Changes related to assessment	√	√			
Changes related to the curriculum		√	√		
Changes related to intervention programs	√	√			
Challenges related to logistical unexpected daily changes					
Uncertainties in the assessment process	√	√		√	
Behavioral challenges		√			√
Managing multiple schedules	√		√	√	
Absence of teachers or students			√		√

Note: P=Participant

The number of coding agreements among the researcher and two graduate research assistants were counted, and the reliabilities of the themes and sub-themes ranged from 89 to 95 percent.

Interview Questions for the Experienced Teachers

    (1) Talk about times when you were able to make full connections between your undergraduate coursework and everyday practice in your classrooms.
    (2) Talk about times when you were able to make partial connections between your undergraduate coursework and everyday practice in your classrooms.
    (3) Talk about times when you were unable to make connections between your undergraduate coursework and everyday practice in your classrooms.
    (4) What do you suggest the university, cooperating teachers, or student teachers could do to make that full connection happen?
    (5) Describe some of the most challenging aspects of the student teaching experiences.

(6)   Make suggestions for how you or the university can overcome these challenges.

Interview Questions for the Student Teachers

(1)   Talk about times when you were able to make full connections/implementations between your undergraduate coursework and everyday practice at your cooperating school.
(2)   Talk about times when you were able to make partial connections/implementations between your undergraduate coursework and everyday practice at your cooperating school.
(3)   Talk about times when you were unable to make connections/implementations between your undergraduate coursework and everyday practice at your cooperating school.
(4)   What do you suggest the university, cooperating teachers, or student teachers could do to make that full connection happen?
(5)   Describe some of the most challenging aspects of your student teaching experience.
(6)   Make suggestions for how you, the cooperating teacher, or the university can overcome these challenges.

Expected Themes

Topics Intensively Covered in the Teacher Preparation Program

The teacher candidate and experienced teachers stated that they learned a lot from classes that addressed Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), classroom management, and behavior modification.

> The classes that I think of that I definitely made those connections with, were the foundations of education classes, a foundation of reading class, an IEP assessment class, that I found very beneficial, and the class on classroom management that covered information that has helped me in my current classroom. (P 1, experienced teacher)

> Obviously, IEPs have changed since I graduated from college, but I've taken a lot from what I've learned in these classes about writing IEPs and writing objectives in general. I had to tweak what I have learned because things change so fast (P3, experienced teacher)
> I would say classroom management. I've used several different strategies [from that class]. One that stuck out to me was love and logic just because when I did my student teaching, I had a teacher who used it and I got to do a book study on it, so that was really cool! (P2, experienced teacher)

However, the experienced teachers expressed that the assessment classes they took addressed assessment tools that they did not need to use at their schools and suggested that the assessment courses shift their focus to curriculum-based assessment and assessment of reading profiles.

In the assessment class, I would really focus on some reading assessments. I'm sure it's hard for them [universities] to keep up [with the changes at PK–12 levels], but [it is beneficial to administer] different reading assessments and how to incorporate results into their [students'] IEPs. (P1, experienced teacher)

There're always different interests, inventories, and intellectual tests that we do, like now we have the DLM [state required academic assessment] and the alternate assessment [that are given to students with intellectual disabilities in order to assess their performance in various academic areas] so all the testing has changed; the stuff that you learned at school, you can't really implement. There're things that they [student teachers] can't be exposed to [prior to working at PK–12 school settings]. (P3, experienced teacher)

Elementary and middle schools focus very much on math and reading goals. At the high school level, it's harder because it is credit based. When you're working with a "severe disability," students are essentially transitioning into a long-term care and when you're working with students with learning disabilities they might be transitioning into college. (P2, experienced teacher)

A Change in Perceived Cases of Autism and Mental Health

The experienced teachers expressed the need for teacher preparation programs to more thoroughly cover certain specific disabilities because of a perceived increase in the number of cases, a perceived need for more specialized intervention, or both. One teacher emphasized the need to cover knowledge and training practices relevant to Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in teacher preparation programs. The teacher expressed concern that the number of students diagnosed with ASD has increased. The experienced teachers also stressed the importance of knowledge and interventions relevant to mental health issues as they observed a growing number of students who needed help with depression, bipolar disorder, and even suicide. One teacher expressed the need for teacher preparation programs to address covert behaviors through methods such as suicide prevention. The same teacher added that there is a school psychologist, but the school psychologist cannot accommodate everyone due to their busy schedule.

Autism Spectrum Disorder is an area where I feel anything that college students could get would be very beneficial for their students; We've seen the rates of autism go up and I think that college students could do a level 1 training. (P1, experienced teacher)

I think the number one battle that we are fighting right now is mental health. I remember that class where we read a book on bipolar, and I learned about oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, ADHD. You learn about all these different things [in college], but when you get to your school you [need to] learn about all the programs that are or are not available. (P2, experienced teacher)

The other thing that is so prevalent right now [in PK-12 settings], and we're learning more about, is the students at risk of committing suicide. I just feel university students should be exposed to spotting the signs and making referrals. (P2, experienced teacher)

Unexpected Themes

Rapid Changes in the PK–12 School Settings

The experienced teachers raised concerns about the fact that school districts change their curriculum and/or intervention programs frequently, which makes it very hard for IHE to cover the constantly changing programs. This theme arose when the interviewees were asked about times when they were unable to make connections between their undergraduate coursework and every-day practice in their classrooms. The experienced teachers were not sure whether IHE could keep up with such changes. Participants also mentioned assessments as another area of education that faced constant change. Two experienced teachers stated that there was so much state testing going on that it was hard to keep up with, especially considering the speed at which these assessments change. Participant 1 offered the following explanation:

> DLM [Dynamic Learning Maps] is a required state test that assesses the academic pro-gress of students with the most severe cognitive disabilities in English Language Arts and Mathematics. So, there's so much state testing. This is the other thing I would try to at least inform student teachers. This has honestly changed four times probably in the last few years, from WKCE to the Badger, now to the Forward [examples of state-required testing].

Another area of frequent change that experienced teachers mentioned was the instructional and intervention programs used. The experienced teachers stated that various factors, including grade level, could affect how well a program is implemented.

> READ 180 [a commercial reading intervention program] wasn't even here at the high school when I started, and now it's in elementary, middle, and high school, and we're slowly phasing it out of the high school because it's working in the lower levels better. We got the updated version and so we had to go to another training. (P1, experienced teacher)

> Next year, I'm going to be co-teaching a world history class, teaching a pull-out social studies class and a technology education class, and then I have resource room. So, it changes from one year to the next. I've never taught the same thing in all eight years that I've taught, not one year to the next. (P2, experienced teacher)

> Right now, we use the common core standards [of ELA and math] a few years ago that was different, and it sounds like that could be changing so I realize that that's a hard thing to keep up with especially at the university level. (P1, experienced teacher)

Busyness and Uncertainties

There was a consensus among participants that their work lives are busy, in part because of constantly changing schedules and situations. One teacher candidate used the term "flexible" to describe the role of special education teachers and added that they did not know what their coop-erating teacher would have done if they had not been helping them with their case load.

Participants provided information on the factors that contributed to their busy workdays. Teachers spent a significant amount of time on testing (especially state-required testing) and accommodating each student as required during testing. Circumstantial factors also contributed to participants' busy and inconsistent schedules: a teacher might pull a student out to give them a test, but downloading the test might take anywhere from five minutes to an hour; a student who was scheduled to take a test on a specific day might be absent; or a student with behavioral challenges might be struggling, which takes time from their schedule and that of the other students in the class. Participant 4 explained some of these factors:

> There are many things that change throughout the day that I feel I end up using one concrete lesson plan a day when I've written ten. Because it [the schedule] changes so much, or a kid doesn't come [to school]. That's a lot of time to spend on lesson plans and not be able to actually implement because of daily things that come up. I feel there are so many things I want to try and do, like different projects, but I feel there's just not enough time.

Participant 4 went on to explain the most difficult aspects of scheduling for them:

> I would say the most challenging thing is juggling those schedules. Because being in a cross-categorical classroom, certain personalities just don't mix. So, there are a few times during the day where you just get two students in the same room that are going to set each other off and it happens pretty frequently; on a weekly basis that is.

Discussion

Rapid Changes in the PK–12 School Settings: Can IHE Catch Up?

In this study, experienced teachers were more articulate when describing the changes that occur within their schools from one year to the next. The student teachers did not talk much about these changes, probably because they had not been teaching long enough to witness them. The experienced teachers discussed changes to the standards that students must meet by the end of each school year, changes to the state-mandated assessment tools and the processes that go with them, and changes to the curriculum and intervention programs that their school districts use (Table 2). The constant change in their year-to-year practice may limit their opportunities to accumulate knowledge and experiences needed to bridge the knowledge they gained through their teacher preparation program to the intervention program or assessment tools used in their school.

Despite the changing nature of intervention and assessment programs in PK–12 settings, the experienced teachers suggested that IHE integrate knowledge related to the most commonly used programs in PK–12 settings into preservice teachers' course work (Table 2). Student teachers are equipped with knowledge of evidence-based reading, math, and content area instruction, which is in essence not different from the recommendations offered by the US Department of Education Improving Reading Outcomes for Students with or at Risk for Reading (Connor et al., 2014). Once aspiring teachers are given authentic opportunities to teach, that knowledge can make a difference in their students' performance (Diez, 2010). Similarly, it is expected that novice teachers will use the rigorous methods or formal theories that they learned at their IHE to create informal theories that are based on the unique components of the school environment and its culture (Reason & Kimball, 2012). Despite the constantly changing practices in PK–12 settings, experienced teachers

in this study suggested that IHE should focus more on PK–12 culture, challenges, and logistical variables in general, all of which fall under informal theories in Reason & Kimball (2012) model. Only one experienced teacher mentioned a formal theory (Love and Logic); many of the experienced teachers' recommendations for the IHE were more related to integrating knowledge of school-based logistical variables.

Logistical Factors and Busyness

When busyness arises from uncertainties, one cannot help but examine the situation closely. Participants in this study emphasized how their unpredictable daily schedules interfere with their plans and what they intend to achieve with their students. According to the participants, these inconsistencies are related to the time-consuming state-mandated assessment process, challenging student behaviors, managing conflicting schedules of students with different support needs, and unexpected absences of students and/or teachers (Table 2). Should these challenges be addressed in the coursework to bridge the gap between theory and practice, or are these circumstantial or logistical issues that should be addressed in-service rather than pre-service? If we decide on the latter and continue to view these challenges as irrelevant to teacher preparation programs, how can we bridge the gap between theory and practice?

The theoretical components covered within teacher preparation programs need to be put into practice by novice teachers. In that case, the gap between theory and practice is natural. However, if the gap between theory and practice results from logistical factors, then it will not be possible to bridge the gap by making changes only to teachers' preparation programs; changes should also extend to the PK–12 schools. Based on the participants' responses, it appears that some teachers think they are busy addressing technical aspects of teaching, so they do not have adequate time to focus on meaningful pedagogy. These technical challenges also extend to teacher candidates training at their cooperating schools. Although teacher candidates meet with their cooperating teachers (mentors) to discuss instructional and behavioral concerns related to their caseloads, teacher candidates spend a significant portion of their day helping the cooperating teacher meet the demands of their busy schedule.

Assessment and the Inquiry Cycle

The experienced teachers stated that the assessment classes they attended covered assessment tools that they did not need to use at their schools. Another concern raised by the teachers was the differences between high school and elementary and middle school in terms of the use and administration of the assessment tools. That is, most high school students in special education programs have already been diagnosed, and reviews of their IEPs rarely result in a need for comprehensive evaluations and new diagnoses. Even parents seemed to be more interested in the results of state testing than in the results of tests administered as a result of IEP revisions. Because high school students' success is generally credit based, objectives are more clear-cut and are more of a focus. Participants thought that the IEP classes were valuable, but that they needed more in-depth coverage. One teacher mentioned that based on their knowledge of middle schools, teacher preparation programs need to shed more light on the difference between goals and objectives that are most likely to be associate with certain disability types and severities; for example, appropriate goals and objectives for many students with high support need may focus on long-term care,

whereas appropriate goals and objectives for students with low support needs pertain to transitioning to college.

One participant expanded on the stated differences in the writing of IEP goals across grade levels to emphasize the importance of preparing elementary and middle school teachers to write IEP goals that progressively and gradually merge with goals related to transitioning into college or society and work.

Teacher candidates' ability to interpret state-required standardized tests should not be considered the ultimate purpose of assessment in education settings. Teacher candidates should be well-grounded in students' proficiency levels to make instant instructional decisions or apply the "inquiry cycle" (Greenberg & Walsh, 2012). Teacher candidates must have enough opportunities during student teaching to make such crucial instructional decisions. Greenberg & Walsh (2012) emphasized the importance of constantly investigating the efficacy of teacher training in assessment. The knowledge required of teacher candidates regarding assessment can be classified into three domains: 1) Measuring students' level of proficiency, or assessment literacy; 2) analyzing the data accrued through assessment literacy, or analytical skills; and 3) using performance data to make instructional decisions (Greenberg & Walsh, 2012). Based on these domains, teacher preparation programs at IHEs need to map the skills and curricula presented in the coursework to determine the extent to which pre-service teachers get enough opportunities to analyze and use the data they obtain from PK-12 students to make instructional decisions.

Assessment in PK-12 school settings can take different forms. A school district's assessment may be curriculum based, in which teachers create their own assessments of the skills and curricula that align with the learning standards for a certain grade level. In other school settings, however, teachers might use a software-based, commercial intervention program. In addition to providing customized probes for assessment, such software creates a chart of individual student's progress and suggests specific instructional material. Because of these two different trends in intervention and assessment, it is suggested that we investigate the impact of using a readily available intervention program supported by software that suggests instructional routines on student teachers' or educators' ability to hone their skills in creating their own assessment materials

Student population and Preparation of Teachers

The observation made by one teacher about the increase in cases of students diagnosed with ASD is correct. According to the U.S. Department of Education's (USDE) 42nd Annual Report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2020), between the years 2008 and 2017, the percentage of students ages 6-11, 12-17, and 18-21 that were reported under the category of ASD increased. Specifically, they respectively increased by 86.1%, 147.8%, and 163.2% in 2017 compared to 2008. In-service teachers are well prepared to understand and identify the characteristics of students with autism, including the need to create a routine and use visual communication aids. The teacher preparation program may not address a commercial intervention package in detail, but the underlying practices and their rationale are delivered in light of the general characteristics of ASD. In terms of emotional disturbances, the United States Department of Education (2020) report did not include information regarding the different categories of emotional disturbances; instead, the collected data focused more on the graduation rates of students with emotional disturbance and related disciplinary issues, such as interim alternative educational settings, detention options/facilities and expulsion.

Conclusion

In this study, experienced teachers and preservice teachers discussed challenges related to rapid changes in assessment, curriculum, and intervention programs (Table 2). All participants mentioned the challenges of managing a constantly changing daily schedule. Participants attributed these changes to factors such as complicated assessment processes, behavioral challenges, and teacher or student absences (Table 2). Participants suggested that IHE place greater emphasis on developing IEP-rich content courses; expose pre-service teachers to academic intervention programs, primarily the reading and math intervention programs that are widely used in school settings; expose preservice teachers to state-mandated assessments; incorporate more content related to measuring progress and analyzing data for PK–12 schools; train student teachers to manage constantly changing schedules; prepare preservice teachers to work with students who have mental health issues or autism; and teach preservice teachers how to write a Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) while managing other responsibilities (Table 2).

Teacher candidates and novice teachers were introduced to formal scholar theories during their teacher preparation programs, but it is unclear whether they will be able to apply that knowledge to effectively navigate the constantly changing aspects of curriculum, intervention programs, assessments, and daily schedules at their schools. The experienced teachers in this study thought there was merit in incorporating readily available intervention programs into teacher preparation program coursework to emphasize the science or pedagogy embedded in them and, hopefully, will assist novice teachers in navigating similar programs in their prospective schools.

The participants reflected primarily on logistical unexpected daily changes that disrupt their lesson plans. According to Reason & Kimball (2012), practice must be based on formal scholarly theories, which are typically addressed in teacher preparation programs. Formal theories are crucial for preventing invalid assumptions while formulating informal theories (Evans & Guido, 2012), which are unique to each institution's environmental and cultural factors. According to the participants' inspired narratives, logistical challenges appear to have a negative impact on the process of teaching and learning. If we consider these challenges to be inherent in the teaching and learning process, then teacher preparation programs must equip in-service teachers with skills and methods for managing them. However, if these issues represent a true barrier to providing high-quality learning experiences in the classroom, we recommend that they be addressed as quickly as possible in the educational settings where they occur.

In addition to the feedback loops that were suggested to inform institutional contexts and informal theories in Reason and Kimball's (2012) model, the researcher would like to emphasize the importance of a feedback loop that extends to formal theories: This feedback loop could provide scholars and researchers with an opportunity to extend research to common institutional and environmental challenges. Such scholarly efforts could improve the quality of practice by keeping informal theories and formal theories in a constant state of checks and balances. Over time, this series of checks and balances could better clarify the differences between obstacles to teaching and learning and benign environmental factors that are common in school settings.

Limitations

The participants in this study came from different school settings and graduated from different institutions of higher education in a midwestern state, but the findings cannot be generalized to the overall population. However, the findings can be used to gain insight and understanding

about how to better bridge the gap between theory and practice. Another limitation of this study is that all of the experienced teachers chose to become cooperating teachers, which means they received assistance from student teachers. The fact that they sought out student teachers may indicate that work variables in those locations were less than ideal, or it may reflect the cooperating teachers' commitment to education and the improvement of teacher preparation programs.

This research aimed to initiate a discussion about the variables that might contribute to the gap between teaching theory and practice. The study looked into the realities of teaching and learning at the PK–12 school levels. Participants' responses revealed that PK–12 schools and IHE need to be open to new ideas that may bring changes to each program's framework.

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