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From Podium to Publication: How to Transform a National Social Science Association (NSSA) Presentation into a Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

by

Eileen N. Whelan Ariza, Florida Atlantic University

Susanne I. Lapp, Florida Atlantic University

The transition of a conference presentation into a peer-reviewed journal article represents a critical juncture in a scholar's professional development. This process, which is both an art and a science, is particularly significant for emerging scholars navigating the complex landscape of academic publishing. This comprehensive guide was written by the NSSA editors in support of presenters affiliated with the National Social Science Association (NSSA) to provide a systematic and research-informed pathway from the conference podium to a successful journal publication. Drawing upon established scholarship in academic writing, pedagogical strategies for publishing, and best practices in scholarly communication, we synthesize essential steps for manuscript preparation, adherence to submission protocols, principles of ethical authorship, and effective engagement with peer feedback. By aligning with the conventions of the NSSA Journals and the rigorous standards of APA 7th edition reference style, authors can significantly enhance their contributions to interdisciplinary dialogue and elevate their scholarly visibility within the broader academic community.

Keywords: Academic publishing, conference to journal process, manuscript preparation, peer review, scholarly communication

Introduction: Bridging the Gap Between Presentation and Publication

Conference presentations provide invaluable opportunities for scholars to disseminate their research, receive immediate feedback, network, and engage in dynamic intellectual exchanges. However, the inherent brevity and often informal nature of a presentation differ substantially from the detailed, evidence-based arguments required for a peer-reviewed journal article. The National Social Science Association (NSSA) plays a vital role in fostering scholarly discourse, and its journal provides a dedicated avenue for conference presenters to formalize and amplify their research findings. This paper aims to demystify the transformation process, offering NSSA presenters a structured approach to convert their oral contributions into publishable manuscripts. We emphasize that this transformation is not merely an expansion of content, but a recontextualization and deepening of the scholarly work for a distinct audience and purpose.

Understanding the NSSA Journals' Scholarly System

The NSSA Journals stand as a cornerstone for scholars who have presented at NSSA conferences, providing an accessible yet rigorously vetted platform for their work. Its overarching mission is to promote practice-informed research and foster interdisciplinary contributions across a broad spectrum of social science disciplines, including but not limited to education, psychology, sociology, health, and cultural studies. Maintaining scholarly consistency and rigor, all submissions must strictly conform to the guidelines outlined in the APA 7th edition (American Psychological Association, 2020). This adherence ensures clarity, logical structure, and applied relevance, a hallmark of NSSA scholarship.

Manuscripts submitted to the NSSA Journals should demonstrate a profound understanding of both the target readership and the journals' specific expectations. Typically, submissions range from 12 to 25 double-spaced pages (excluding ancillary materials) and must include a meticulously prepared title page, a concise abstract of 250 words or fewer, 3–5 relevant keywords, a complete, alphabetically organized reference list, and appropriately APA structured in-text citations that also

appear on the reference page.. Eligibility for submission is exclusive to NSSA presenters, underscoring the journal's commitment to showcasing work originating within the NSSA community. The journal's readership comprises a diverse audience, including educators, practitioner-scholars, and social scientists actively seeking applied insights and evidence-based practices that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. This interdisciplinary audience requires a writing style that strikes a balance between disciplinary specificity and broad accessibility.

Structuring Your Scholarly Article for Impact

The successful conversion of a presentation into an academic article hinges on adopting a suitable structural framework that accommodates the depth and rigor expected of journal publications. For NSSA submissions, three primary structural formats are suggested, each tailored to different types of scholarly inquiry:

IMRAD Format (Wu, 2011). This traditional structure is highly recommended for empirical research. It systematically organizes the manuscript into distinct sections: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. This format provides a clear roadmap for presenting original research, detailing the research questions, methodology, findings, and their implications.

Reflective Format (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018): This structure is ideal for practice narratives, case studies, or pedagogical insights. This format encourages a more narrative and interpretive approach, and it typically includes an Introduction, followed by a detailed Context section, an in-depth Analysis of the experiences or observations, and a concluding section on Implications for practice or theory.

Theoretical Format (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Swales & Feak, 2012: This structure is best suited for conceptual arguments, literature reviews, or theoretical advancements. It generally is comprised of an Introduction, a comprehensive review of Framing Literature, the development of the central Argument, and a convincing Conclusion that synthesizes the theoretical contribution and suggests future directions.

Regardless of the chosen format, every scholarly article should clearly articulate a well-defined research question/s or central thesis. The narrative must expertly weave theoretical framing with practical application, demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between scholarship and real-world impact (Kamler & Thomson, 2014). Authors are strongly encouraged to cite primary sources diligently, avoid excessive direct quoting, and integrate existing scholarship conversationally into their arguments (Hyland, 2005). Furthermore, the judicious use of metadiscourse, or language that explicitly guides the reader through the text, is crucial for orienting interdisciplinary audiences and reinforcing the overall coherence of the manuscript, particularly in a journal that serves a diverse readership. Examples of such metadiscourse include language phrases such as "This section will explore...", "In contrast to...", and "Therefore, it can be argued...".

Stylistic Precision and Cultivating Reader Awareness

Academic writing for the NSSA Journal demands a careful balance between confident argumentation and intellectual accessibility. As Belcher (2019, p. 308) observes, effective scholarly prose favors an active voice, breaks down complex ideas into digestible parts, and introduces key terms early for clarity. The author's voice plays a pivotal role in setting both tone and authority, articulating beliefs and findings with precision. However, language must be carefully calibrated. Claims should be stated assertively yet responsibly. Overstated or unsubstantiated assertions risk weakening the credibility of the argument just as much as overly tentative language does.

A critical consideration for NSSA authors is the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of potential reviewers and readers. It is vital to remember that reviewers may not share the author's specific disciplinary lens. Therefore, providing adequate background information, ensuring seamless transitions between ideas, and maintaining a clear logical flow are not merely stylistic choices but are fundamental requirements for effective communication.

Beyond content, formatting serves a functional purpose. Strict adherence to APA-style headings is essential for organizing the manuscript hierarchically and enhancing readability. Short

paragraphs and the judicious use of bullet points can break up dense text, making complex information more approachable. Tables and charts, when used, must genuinely clarify comparisons, present data efficiently, or illustrate complex relationships, rather than merely duplicating textual information. Murray (2011) recommends approaching revision in distinct phases, beginning with a review of the manuscript's overall structure, then refining sentence-level clarity and flow, followed by detailed editing for grammar, and concluding with a read-aloud to enhance rhythm and readability.

Submission Procedures and Ethical Authorship

The submission phase is a critical gateway to publication, demanding meticulous attention to detail and adherence to ethical guidelines. Before submission, it is imperative to delineate the roles of all contributors, meticulously following standards for lead, co-author, and corresponding author. This ensures that all individuals listed as authors meet the criteria for authorship (e.g., substantial contributions to conception or design, data acquisition or analysis, drafting or critically revising the manuscript) and have unequivocally approved the final version of the manuscript for submission. (Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences Office of Research, n.d.)

The NSSA's specific submission process typically requires authors to complete an online form that verifies their affiliation, contact details, and, crucially, their prior conference presentation. The completed manuscript is generally emailed to the designated journal editors. This email should be accompanied by a concise, professional subject line and, optionally, a brief cover letter. The cover letter serves as an opportunity to succinctly frame the article's relevance, originality, and its contribution to the existing body of knowledge within the social sciences, as well as how it aligns with the NSSA Journals' aims and scope.

Authors can typically expect to receive initial feedback within approximately two months of submission. Editorial decisions generally fall into three main categories: acceptance, request for revision and resubmission, or rejection. Regardless of the outcome, each decision presents a valuable

opportunity for growth. If invited to revise and resubmit, we encourage you to thoughtfully engage with the reviewers' feedback. Such a request indicates that the manuscript demonstrates merit but requires further development to meet the publication's standards.

Engaging with Peer Review and Strategic Revision

Peer review is an indispensable cornerstone of academic publishing, providing constructive critique that is central to scholarly growth and the enhancement of manuscript quality. Belcher (2019) emphasizes the importance of viewing feedback not as a personal judgment but as a collaborative opportunity to refine and strengthen ideas. When responding to reviewer comments, maintaining a respectful and professional demeanor is critical. Authors are encouraged to utilize a revision response letter that systematically addresses each comment point-by-point. This structured approach not only ensures that all feedback is acknowledged but also signals professionalism and a commitment to scholarly dialogue.

Rejection, though undoubtedly discouraging, should not be interpreted as a judgment on an author's abilities or the inherent value of their work. As Kamler and Thomson (2014) point out, such decisions often stem from a disconnect between the manuscript and the journal's scope, questions around originality, or the need for further development, not from any fundamental shortcoming on the author's part.

In the revision process, it is essential to carefully document how reviewer feedback has been addressed. Authors should clearly link their revisions to specific reviewer comments, explain the rationale behind any substantive changes, and, when diverging from suggestions, provide thoughtful justification. A transparent and well-reasoned response not only demonstrates scholarly rigor but also fosters constructive dialogue with editors and reviewers, often paving the way toward eventual acceptance.

Final Proofing and Professional Resubmission Etiquette

Before resubmission, a meticulous final proofing stage is non-negotiable. This step involves comprehensive mechanical editing, encompassing rigorous grammar checks, strict APA 7th edition compliance, and absolute citation accuracy. Authors must ensure that all direct quotations are properly sourced with corresponding page numbers and that every in-text citation has a matching, accurately formatted entry in the reference list. Attention to visual readability, through consistent headings, appropriate spacing, and coherent paragraph structure, is vital, as it significantly enhances the flow and comprehension of the scholarly argument.

Should you choose to resubmit, authors should include a succinct change summary or a detailed response-to-reviewers document that outlines how each piece of feedback was addressed. This document, alongside a note of appreciation for the reviewers' and editor's time and effort, reinforces the author's professionalism and respect for the scholarly peer-review process. This final act of academic courtesy can contribute positively to the overall perception of the manuscript.

Lessons from the Field: Cultivating Scholarly Writing as Practice

Drawing upon the experiences of successful NSSA publications and broader academic publishing wisdom, several best practices emerge as foundational to a productive scholarly writing journey.

Define Your Purpose Early:

Intentional positioning of your article, clear identification of its target audience, and precise articulation of its scholarly contribution are essential from the outset. A well-defined purpose guides every aspect of the writing and revision process (Belcher, 2019).

Embrace Revision as Writing:

Rather than viewing multiple drafts as setbacks, understand them as integral steps in a continuous refinement process. Each iteration offers an opportunity to sharpen arguments, enhance clarity, and deepen analysis (Murray, 2013).

Write in Community:

Seek and integrate feedback from trusted mentors, academic peers, or established writing groups. Collaborative engagement nurtures clarity, reveals blind spots, and enriches the depth of scholarly work (Belcher, 2019).

Cultivate Your Scholarly Voice:

Active engagement with feedback not only strengthens your ideas but also contributes to developing a distinctive and confident scholarly voice. This practice entails articulating complex insights with precision while maintaining intellectual integrity (Murray, 2013; Belcher, 2019).

View Publishing as Iterative:

Each submission, whether accepted, revised, or rejected, forms part of an ongoing academic evolution. Publishing is not a singular endpoint but a developmental process that shapes a scholar's voice and engagement with their field (Kamler & Thomson, 2014).

Conclusion

The transformation of a conference presentation into a peer-reviewed publication represents a significant intellectual synthesis and a demonstration of stylistic precision. For scholars affiliated with the National Social Science Association, this journey is uniquely supported by a journal that places a high premium on clarity, interdisciplinary relevance, and reflective scholarly practice. By diligently adhering to the research-informed strategies outlined in this guide, from the initial stages of manuscript preparation through the critical phases of peer review and revision, authors can significantly enhance their ability to contribute meaningfully to their respective fields. Successfully navigating this pathway from podium to publication not only affirms a scholar's place in the broader academic discourse but also amplifies the impact of their research, fostering continued intellectual growth and professional recognition. It shows that your work was not just a presentation, but it was worthy of becoming a peer-reviewed scholarly publication.

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Rank Choice Vote in New York

by

Anita Chadha

University of Houston, Downtown

Rank choice vote (RCV) is an electoral reform method which allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference: first, second, third and so forth. Voters first ranked choices are tallied and if a candidate receives more than half of the first choices, that candidate wins. If there is no majority winner after counting first choices, the voter's second ranked choices are counted and so on until there is a winner. As of 2025, fifty-two U. S. jurisdictions used RCV one which reached fourteen million voters. While five states Nevada, Kansas, Alaska, Hawaii, and Wyoming used RCV for their 2020 Democratic presidential primaries and two states, with Maine and North Carolina used RCV for their 2024 presidential races. Nonetheless, the most notable use of RCV was by New York city in 2021 as it represented the largest use of RCV in a mayoral election in the nation. The method helped elect the most diverse slate of candidates New York has ever seen more accurately reflecting the city's diverse constituencies in terms of race, gender, and ideology. New York second use of RCV in 2023 mirrored their 2021 experience with turnout levels rising to the highest in the city's history. Now New York City approaches another hotly contested, high-profile RCV mayoral primary election in 2025 making New Yorks use of RCV no longer the electoral reform story for New Yorkers but their future.

Keywords: Rank choice vote, Instant runoff voting, Electoral reform, New Yorks use of RCV.

Introduction

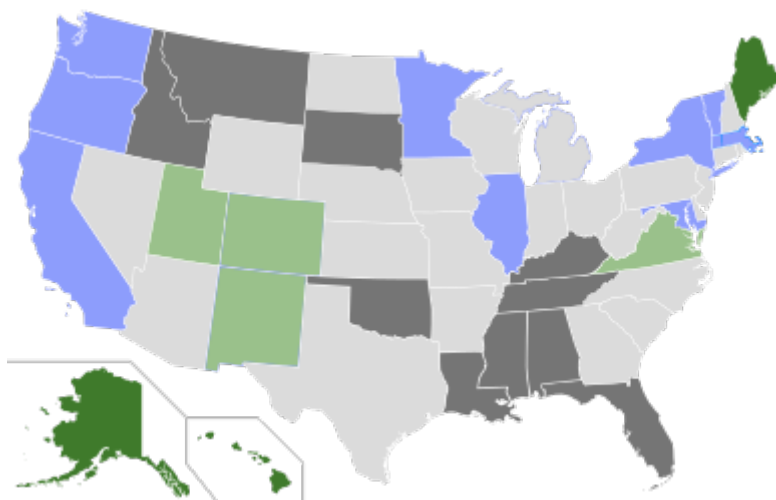
Ranked-choice voting (RCV) is an electoral reform method where voters rank candidates in order of preference. Counting voter preferences then follow a round-by-round counting process to determine a majority winner or if a candidate has won with more than half of the vote. When the candidate receives more than half of the first choices, that candidate wins, just like in any other election. However, if there is no majority winner after counting first choices, the race becomes an "instant runoff." The candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voters who ranked that candidate as their first choice have their votes count for their next choice. This process continues until a majority winner, or a candidate wins with more than half of the vote.

RCV has risen exponentially across the nation with fifty-two jurisdictions using the method one that encompasses 14 million voters (Fair vote, 2025). Relatedly, five states used RCV for their

presidential primaries and caucuses in 2022 while two states Maine and north Carolina used RCV for their presidential races in 2024 as shown in Figure 1 (Fair vote, 2025). In addition, increasing support for RCV across the political spectrum has grown from senators and representatives across the country including Senator Romney, and 2024 vice-presidential hopeful and then Governor Walz who signed it into Minnesota law.

Figure 1

RCV Across the Nation



Note: <https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting-information/#where-is-ranked-choice-voting-used> .

Some state-wide elections
Local option for municipalities to opt-in
Local elections in some jurisdictions
RCV banned state-wide.

Factually San Francisco made history becoming the first city in the nation to adopt RCV in 2004. While Manie made history becoming the first state in the nation to use RCV for their congressional elections in 2018 while further expanding their use of the method for their presidential primary in 2020. Similarly, Alaska made history during their race for their only U.S. congressional seat in 2022. Peltola, the first Democrat to hold the seat in fifty years and the first Native American in the state won having defeated former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin (Fair vote, 2022). Yet the most newsworthy and historic use of RCV to date in the nation was New York city's use of RCV 2021 as it represented not only the largest use of RCV in the nation but was also the most

diverse RCV election in the country (Fair vote, 2025). Since then, New York used RCV in 2022 and will use it later this year in 2025.

New York's journey to RCV in 2021

New York's journey to RCV started in 2019 when a charter commission voted unanimously to place a charter amendment on that year's ballot that would establish RCV for all primary and special elections. Yet, RCV would not be used for its general election or to elect candidates to county, state, or federal office (Risch, 2019). The proposal of the method was opportune as the city's term limits would leave a large majority of seats for citywide offices, borough president, and city council open.

However, rolling out a new electoral reform method in 2021 was fraught with difficulties. For one, the spurious attacks on the 2020 election's legitimacy had voters on against changes to voting rules. Secondly the pandemic created social distancing rules that needed new policies and changes in voting. And thirdly there was uncertainty around city finances, leaving fewer resources for voter education than policymakers had hoped. The fourth challenge was the rollout of the new electoral process itself from redesigning their ballot, to educating voters, poll workers, and candidates on the method as well as on campaign strategy changes. Additional to these new processes 2021 was packed with confounding factors for New York from a complex redistricting process, a split primary, a series of special elections and ballot proposals for the city.

Opponents and Proponents

Furthermore, there was a large degree of skepticism from both supporters and opponents. Opposition came from six New York city council members including the leading Black mayoral candidate, Eric Adams, who argued that RCV was rushed despite initially supporting RCV. They filed a suit in State Supreme Court in Manhattan seeking to stop the city from starting the new voting system. Adams remarked that "From my discussions with New Yorkers in lower-income

communities of color, I am concerned that not enough education has been done about rank-choice voting to ensure a smooth transition to that method so soon,” (Rubinstein et al., 2021).

Similarly, Black elected officials raised objections. They argued that without substantial voter education, the system would disenfranchise voters of color. Moreover, not only would the method disenfranchise voters of color but Black candidates as well as RCV would increase the chances of a runoff versus a traditional approach where a Black candidate might perform better in a contest with only two names on the ballot (Rubinstein et al., 2021. P. 28). Yet contrary to Adams's remarks others argued that “...throughout the country, RCV is working well for communities of color... but that New York City is a different city.” (Rubinstein et al., 2021, p.28).

Meanwhile, other opponents questioned whether the city’s problem-prone Board of Elections could roll out such a complicated system during a pandemic. Besides, they argued that the city, its Board of Elections, and its Campaign Finance Board had violated the law by failing to explain the specific software that would tabulate the votes, and that voter education of the new method was insufficiently done (New York City (2021).

Although the method had adversaries on both sides overwhelming New Yorkers voted (74%) in favor of RCV for their next 2021 election (Fair vote (2021). Soon the City Council enacted legislation in February 2021 to set standards for the city’s public awareness and educational campaigns of RCV.

Rolling out RCV: The voter educational campaign

The multifaced electoral processes from educating the voters, the poll workers, and candidates, to the ballot design and protocol for those ranking incorrectly required much training and monies. To address the varied concerns Mayor de Blasio providing an unprecedented \$15 million voter education campaign (NY City, 2021). Quickly the New York City campaign finance Board (CFB), became the lead agency for RCV education (New York City (2021). The CFB used the

research from the Center for civic design who had focused on Black and Hispanic/Latino communities reaching out to these underprivileged communities.

In parallel, the city created a website specific to RCV: <https://vote.nyc/page/ranked-choice-voting> which featured an online voter guide and interactive tools where voters could practice ranking and learn the step-by-step instructions on how RCV worked as shown in Figure 2. They added images of what the ballot would look like and that voters would choose up to five candidates on the mayoral primary ballot. They explained why votes should rank candidates maintaining that voters could vote their conscience without losing their vote and that ranking would not hurt their favorite candidate. The city printed voter guides mailing it to 3.4 million registered voters who were eligible to vote. These offered guidance on completing the ballot, explained the ballot-counting process, and provided a tear-out sheet voters could use to rank their choices for each office and bring with them to vote.

The city also explained how the counting of votes would follow a round-by-round process with rounds of elimination continuing until there are two candidates left. If a candidate won a majority of first-preference votes, he or she was the winner. If no candidate won a majority of first-preference votes, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes was eliminated. First-preference votes cast for the failed candidate are eliminated, lifting the second-preference choices indicated on those ballots. Next a new tally determined whether any candidate has won a majority of the adjusted votes. The process continued until a candidate with the most votes in the final round won. And that after a candidate was eliminated, his or her votes would be redistributed to the next ranked candidate on the ballot. They provided voters with a sample ballot as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

RCV Ballot

What Your Ballot Is Likely To Look Like

Mayor Rank up to 5 choices Mark no more than 1 oval in each column Alcalde Clasifique hasta 5 opciones Marque no más que 1 óvalo en cada columna 市長 分類最多五個選擇 標記最多五個圓點在每個表格		Choose 1st	Choose 2nd	Choose 3rd	Choose 4th	Choose 5th	Public Advocate Rank up to 5 choices Mark no more than 1 oval in each column Defensor Público Clasifique hasta 5 opciones Marque no más que 1 óvalo en cada columna 公益維護人 分類最多五個選擇 標記最多五個圓點在每個表格		Choose 1st	Choose 2nd	Choose 3rd	Choose 4th	Choose 5th
Teagan Kelly 提根 凱利	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Kali Lopez 卡里 洛佩茲	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Jess Allen 傑斯 亞倫	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Kami Edwards 卡米 愛德華茲	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Oba White 歐巴 懷特	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mosi Morales 莫西 莫拉雷斯	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Suzu Jenkins 蘇祖 詹金斯	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Taylor Gutierrez 泰勒 古蒂耶瑞斯	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emerson Brooks 艾曼生 布魯克斯	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Write-in candidate por escrito 寫入未列名候選人	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Write-in candidate por escrito 寫入未列名候選人	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Council Member Rank up to 5 choices Mark no more than 1 oval in each column Miembro del Consejo Clasifique hasta 5 opciones Marque no más que 1 óvalo en cada columna 市議員 分類最多五個選擇 標記最多五個圓點在每個表格	Choose 1st	Choose 2nd	Choose 3rd	Choose 4th	Choose 5th	
Comptroller Rank up to 4 choices Mark no more than 1 oval in each column Contralor Clasifique hasta 4 opciones Marque no más que 1 óvalo en cada columna 州主計長 分類最多四個選擇 標記最多四個圓點在每個表格	Choose 1st	Choose 2nd	Choose 3rd	Choose 4th	Choose 5th	<input type="radio"/>	Zion King 錫安 金	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Bailey Walker 貝利 沃克	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Flynn Anderson 弗林 安德森	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Hayden Ramirez 海登 瑞米雷茲	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Reese Clark 瑞斯 克拉克	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Rio Evans 瑞歐 艾文斯	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Farah Bailey 法拉 貝利	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
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**RANK
THE
VOTE NYC**

In tandem two groups, Rank the Vote NYC and Common Cause NY led RCV education. These groups outreach campaigns included direct-to-voter outreach through online seminar presentations, text messages, a broad-based media campaign, a citywide postcard mailing, extensive promotion on social media, and an explainer video in thirteen languages (Rank the vote N.Y, 2021). Rank the Vote NYC hosted more than six hundred online and in-person trainings and created a coalition of more than 750 organizations that focused on engaging hard-to-reach populations, including older voters, new voters, and low-turnout communities.

The coalition talked to 55,000 low propensity voters at their homes and distributed 1.5 million copies of RCV materials which explained the processes in thirteen languages (Arabic, Bangla, Chinese, English, French, Haitian Creole, Khmer, Korean, Nepali, Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese) (Rank the vote, N.Y, 2021). Each eligible voter received a printed voter guide with a specific focus on voters from Black and Latino communities. Adding to these efforts and in an attempt not to alienate voters they expanded the board to include former City Council Speaker Mark-Viverito and member Chong, to “help empower communities that have been historically left out of these conversations.” (Lewis, 2022).

Rolling out RCV: educating the candidates.

Another form of educational campaign was to educate mayoral candidates on campaign strategies as RCV meant that candidates were competing to be voters' second and third choice as well as their first. This meant that in cross-endorsements could help candidates build coalitions outside of their traditional base to expand their outreach and improve their chances of winning. Quickly, Andrew Yang adopted the strategy when he endorsed Kathryn Garcia as a second choice in the mayoral race. The strategy helped Garcia to pull ahead of Maya Wiley to earn a place in the final round where Garcia placed second within one point of Eric Adams.

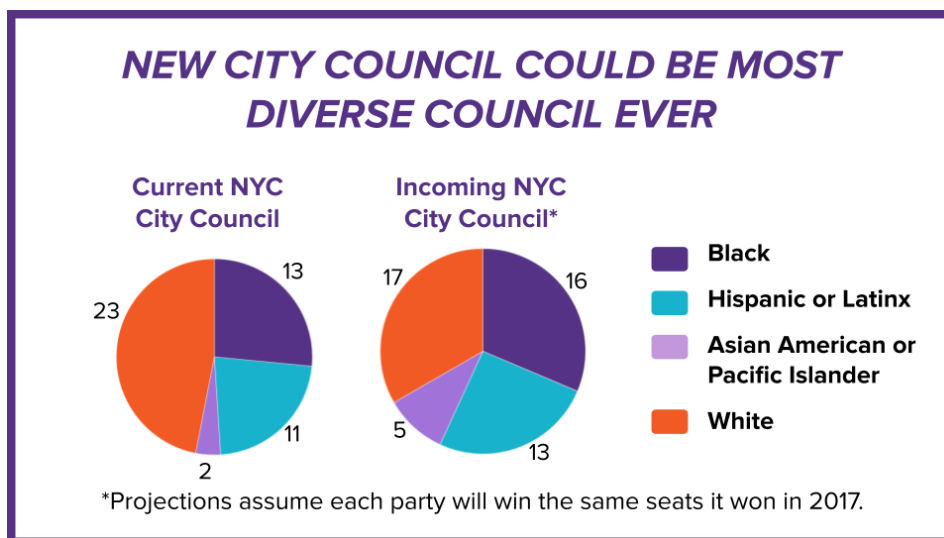
Sandra Nurse in council district thirty-seven use the strategy as well collaborating with other campaigns for training events or literature distribution and went on to win the nomination. Similarly, several candidates in the Democratic primary for Richmond Borough President informally worked together, with candidate Cesar Vargas explaining, "I think ranked-choice voting has made (the campaign) more collegial... I can see my competitor not just as a candidate to compete against me, but also as someone who can also support me by collaborating with his community because I can do the same for him because at the end of the day, he or she can be part of my voters' options." (Fair vote, 2021).

Projecting NY City first use of RCV, 2021

Projections for New York's first use of RCV in 2021 found that the method would help elect an incoming council that would be much more diverse than ever before. And that they were poised to elect more Hispanic, Black and Asian Americans that would more accurately represent New York's diversity as shown in Figure 3 (Stern, 2021). Other projections found that taxpayers would Save More than \$10 Million dollars by moving over to RCV. Among these cost savings was \$15 million saved by avoiding a run-off (Stern, 2021).

Figure 3

Projected city council wins.



RCV in New York: results

New York City held their first RCV election and astoundingly, the city recorded their turnout to be the highest they had ever experienced in 30 years with more than 930,000 voters participating in the 2021 primaries (Dell & Otis, 2021). Data collected showed that a majority, 95%, of New Yorkers found their ballot simple to complete. Moreover, as the city had projected New Yorkers elected the most diverse city council than in any prior election as shown in Figure 4 (Stern, 2021).

Figure 4

The Diversity of Winners in New York's RCV Elections



Lamendola, C et al., 2021: Why Women Won in 2021: How a Twin-Track Approach Advanced Women's Representation on the New York City Council

Moreover, as anticipated RCV did challenge campaign strategies most visibly was the race for the mayor which featured thirteen candidates. Eric Adams had strong first-choice support, yet he

fell short of a majority of first choices. The race continued until there were two candidates left after multiple rounds of counting.

While several candidates were eliminated from the contest, Adams, Wiley, and Garcia gained the most votes from supporters of eliminated candidates as shown in Table 1. By the sixth round, Garcia overtook Wiley for the second-place position after earning almost 45% of active transfer votes from Andrew Yang supporters. A large majority of Wiley’s transfer ballots went to Garcia in the final round, but not enough to overcome Adams’s strong lead. Eric Adams won the race after eight rounds of counting as shown in the same Table 1, becoming the city's second-ever Black mayor elected with majority consensus. While the history-making top three finishers in the mayoral race included two people of color and two women. And for the first time, a woman came within striking distance of City Hall (Fair vote, 2021). Overall eighty-three percent of New Yorkers ranked at least two candidates on their ballots in 2021.

Table 1

Round-by-Round Results, NYC Democratic Mayoral Primary

<i>Table 1</i>								
<i>Round-by-Round Results, NYC Democratic Mayoral Primary</i>								
Candidate	Round one	Round two	Round three	Round four	Round five	Round six	Round seven	Round eight
Eric Adams	30.7%	30.8%	30.8%	31.2%	31.7%	34.6%	40.5%	50.4%
Maya Wiley	21.4%	21.4%	21.4%	22%	22.4%	26.1%	29.1%	
Kathryn Garcia	19.6%	19.6%	19.6%	19.9%	20.5%	24.4%	30.5%	49.6%
Andrew Yang	12.2%	12.2%	12.3%	12.6%	13%	14.8%		
Scott Stringer	5.5%	5.5%	5.5%	5.7%	6.1%			
Dianne Morales	2.8%	2.8%	2.8%	3.2%	3.3%			
Raymond McGuire	2.7%	2.7%	2.7%	2.8%	3.0%			
Shaun Donovan	2.5%	2.5%	2.5%	2.6%				

Note: Lamendola, C et al., 2021: Why Women Won in 2021: How a Twin-Track Approach Advanced Women's Representation on the New York City Council

Other Historic Wins

For the first time in the city's history three candidates came from behind to win due to the ranked nature of RCV. The first of these was the race for the Democratic Primary for City Council D25, where Shekar Krishnan an Indian American had initially fallen behind Chen on first votes when absentee and affidavit ballots were factored in. Yet he won the race becoming the first individual of south Asian descent to join the city council (Stern, 2021).

The second, was the Democratic Primary for City Council D9 where Kristin Richardson Jordan was behind when first choices were all tabulated, by five hundred and twenty-five votes but she surpassed the incumbent City Council Member Bill Perkins by just one hundred votes after amassing lower-ranked votes overtaking him. The third was for the Democratic Primary for City Council D50. David Carr pulled ahead of his challenges after tabulation of votes.

Furthermore, there were other notable historic gains with thirty women leading their races for City Council seats, with a large majority (86%) of them being women of color. This was a historical leap from New York's previous record in 2009 of eighteen women serving in the Council (Common Cause, 2021). In addition, six openly LGBTQ members of the Council and at least six foreign-born New Yorkers on the Council were in the lead. In fact, additionally elected were the first queer-identifying Black women, Crystal Hudson, and Kristin Richardson Jordan to the city council. A 23-year-old candidate, Chi Osse, became the youngest-ever Council member elected. While minority representation grew with the first Muslim woman, Shahana Hanif winning. The first ever Colombian American council member, Jennifer Gutiérrez, and the first Indian American, Shekar Krishna, the first Indian American elected to the city council.

Post-election surveys in 2021

Post-election exit polls conducted by Edison Research for Common Cause NY and Rank the Vote NYC in 2021 determined the clear winner was the new voting method with over 1.1 million

New Yorkers making history voting in the largest and most diverse RCV in the nation. The polls found that an overwhelming large majority of New Yorkers across both racial and ethnic groups (95%) found that the RCV ballot was simple to complete and 78% said they understood ranked choice voting well (RCV, New York, 2021).

With an additional majority of New Yorkers (78%) remarked that they understood RCV extremely or very well, and again with extraordinarily little variability between ethnic groups' understanding of RCV. These included large majorities of Black, Hispanic, Asian, and white voters. Similarly, large majorities of each ethnic group, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and white voters found their ballot simple to complete as shown in Table 2 which compares voters understanding of RCV and the ballot by ethnicity (Solomon, 2021).

Table 2

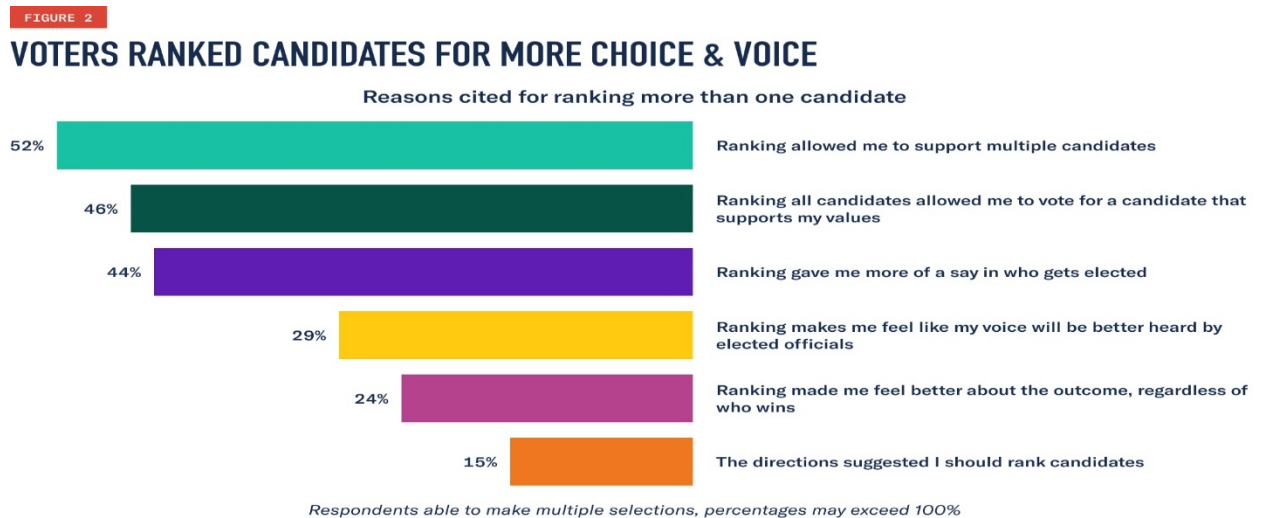
Post-election Survey by Ethnicity

Understood RCV well		Ballot was simple to complete	
Black	77%	Black	93%
Hispanic	80%	Hispanic	95%
Asian	77%	Asian	97%
White	81%	White	95%

Post-election surveys further found that voters ranked candidates in the Mayoral Primary for a variety of reasons. A majority (52%) indicated that ranking allowed them to support multiple candidates. Another majority (46%) remarked that ranking allowed them to vote their values. While still others maintained that ranking provided them a greater say in who elected officials (44%), that elected officials (29%) heard their voice and that they would feel better about the outcome, regardless of who won (24%) as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Why Voters Ranked Candidates in the Mayoral Primary



As to the process itself, an overwhelming large majority of New Yorkers (83%) ranked at least two candidates on their ballots in the mayoral primary. The majority of those who opted not to rank did so because they only had one preferred candidate. While another majority (42%) of voters maximized the method by ranked at least five candidates" (Solomon, 2021). Additional post-election analysis data showed that the median error rate across these ranked choice voting contests was 0.5 a rate lower than the error rate in NYC in 2021. And that a large majority, (77%) supported using RCV in future local elections (Fair Vote, 2024).

With data showing that New Yorkers understood and used RCV effectively, the executive director of Common Cause/NY and chair of Rank the Vote NYC remarked,

"The largest ranked choice voting election in United States history was a major victory for New York voters who found it easy and empowering, with 77% eager to use it in future elections, ". "Ranked choice voting gives voters a greater say in the outcome of the election, guarantees that the winner is the consensus choice of the most voters, and encourages more active civic participation from both voters and candidates. The data also confirm that our years-long outreach and education efforts

paid off brilliantly, and we are so grateful to our community partners who made sure New Yorkers were ready to rank."(Solomon, 2021).

New York's Second Use of RCV in 2023

New York City used RCV for the second time in 2023. Unlike their first RCV experience the 2023 cycle was a quieter election with voter education and the administration of elections running successfully without the legitimacy of the method under question. Similarly, unlike the first cycle, there were not any highly visible races with voters having elected their mayor and those that were term limited in 2021. Furthermore, there were fewer races totaling fourteen primaries with three or more candidates including in Democratic, Republican, and Conservative Party primaries.

Election Administration and Voter Education

Similarly, the New York city campaign finance board successfully conducted various voter education and voter engagement initiatives. NYC Votes, a nonpartisan voter engagement initiative of the New York City Campaign Finance Board conducted seventy-five RCV education presentations which covered a range of topics including what RCV is, how it works, how to mark a ballot, and how ballots are counted and distributed printed and online guides on RCV. They additionally hosted training sessions and open webinar sessions for the public in partnership with 57 organizations. (Fair vote, 2023). In total, the agency's outreach es had 1,606 attendees and trained 450 people to deliver RCV education to diverse communities throughout New York (Fair vote, 2023) including events conducted in languages other than English.

Toward these educational efforts NYC Votes printed Voter Guides and mailed them to 3.4 million registered voters who were eligible to vote in the primary one that contained extensive information about ranked choice voting. It offered guidance on completing the ballot, explained the ballot-counting process, and provided a tear-out sheet voters could use to rank their choices for each office and bring with them to vote. The voter information website nycvotes.org highlighted ranked choice voting information for visitors and provided interactive tools to assist voters. A ranked choice

voting explainer video was produced in several languages, with voice-overs, subtitles, and translated on-screen text. The videos were published on YouTube and embedded on a multilingual website. A social media toolkit offering suggested captions and graphics illustrating the RCV process was translated in various languages and shared with numerous government agencies and partner organizations.

The practice ballot and print materials were translated in various languages as well from Bengali, Chinese (simplified and traditional), Punjabi, Spanish, and Urdu in an effort to improve RCV education and address outreach gaps. Outreach gaps were expanded in neighborhoods with above-average error rates on their ballots. Additionally, a paid “train-the-trainer” program would prepare and compensate civic organizations and associations for training their own communities. Moreover, NYC Votes enhanced its education of voters under 30 with targeted social media reels, as well as by partnering with influencers to reach audiences that might otherwise be hard to target. Similarly, they were transparent in how election results would be posted at the close of polls on election day. And that the results would include first-choice votes from early voting, election day and any valid absentee ballots canvassed but will not include affidavit ballots.

An online practice ballot was provided, ensuring voters would understand how to complete their ballots during the election. The online Voter Guide included a tool that allowed voters to drag and drop their ranked choices in order and save their rankings to bring to the polls. This digital education effort for RCV was supported by a \$500,000 advertising campaign. Moreover, advertisements ran on popular platforms like Google, Meta (Facebook/Instagram), YouTube, Snapchat, and Twitch, as well as print, connected RCV, radio, and out-of-home placements like bus shelters and subway kiosks.

The campaign directed voters to online resources for additional information and reached 4.3 million voters who made more than 124,000 visits tonycvotes.org in the weeks leading up to the June primary. Upon completion of the advertising campaign, data showed a 2.2% increase in turnout

among typically low-turnout voters who watched NYC Votes videos in their entirety. Voters under the age of 30 were 2.8% more likely to vote after seeing one or more NYC Votes advertisements. These numbers indicated that voters were interested in RCV and engaged with the videos shared ahead of the RCV primary.

Additionally, the city explained the different voting equipment that would be used unlike their first RCV effort in 2021. In explaining the Automark ballot marking device they reexplained that the process of ranking and counting votes until a winner resulted would be similar to 2021. Yet unlike their first effort as they anticipated receiving a sizable number of mail-in ballots they incorporated a “ballot cure” period allowing voters to correct any issues with their mail-in ballots. Ballot curing involved two elements. First was the notification where election officials had to determine and notify a voter if there was a ballot discrepancy and that they could cure or correct their vote. The second was describing how, and by when, a voter may correct and successfully recast their ballot.

Campaign strategies

Likewise, and similar to 2021, cross collaboration became the norm in 2023. For instance, in district 9 opponents Yusef Salaam and Al Taylor expressed support for one another, encouraging voters to rank each other first and second (Fair vote, 2023). This type of collaboration between opponents was nearly unheard of in choose-one races, where a vote for one candidate was effectively a vote against all the others. However, as RCV created opportunities for coalition-building and cross-endorsements, the method allowed candidates to support each other without harming their own prospects.

Regardless of candidate behavior, the ultimate decision of how to rank lay with each voter. For voters, their comfort with ranking of candidates depended on the context of the election and by the competitiveness of the district (in this case districts 1, 9, 13, and 41) than on demographic factors. For example, in District 1, a Whiter district overall, white voters used more rankings. In Districts 9 and 41, flat or nearly flat lines indicated no statistically significant relationship between race or

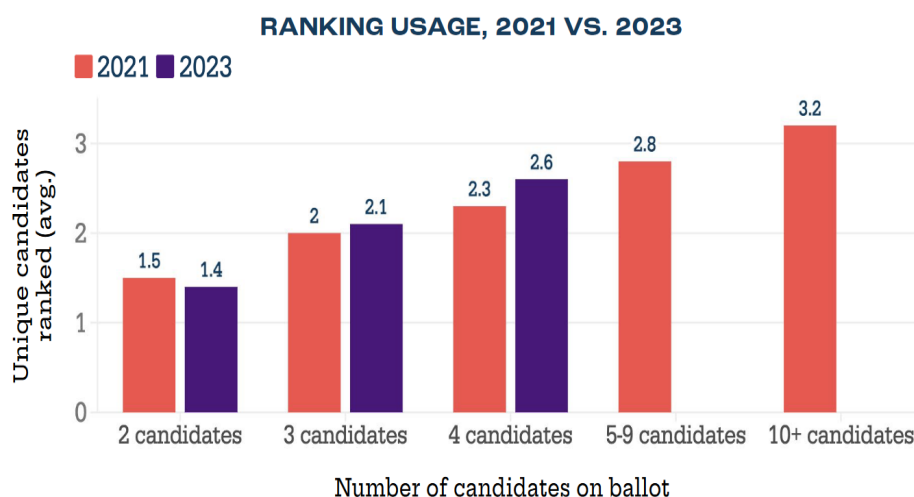
ethnicity and the number of candidates ranked (Fair vote, 2023). While in District 13 Democratic primary, voters of color tended to use more rankings than White voters, with particularly strong ranking from Black voters.

Post election 2023

Remarkably a larger majority of New Yorkers voted in 2023 versus their 2021 RCV effort with one million New York voters of all demographic backgrounds ranking candidates and with the process running smoother than it had in 2021. In 2023 approximately, sixty three percent of voters ranked multiple choices in races with three or more candidates. In races with four candidates, sixty seven percent used at least two rankings. And in comparison, to 2021 more voters ranked candidates in 2023 in elections that were comparable in size. However, fields that were crowded in 2021 drew more ranking in the races with five or more candidates as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Number of Candidates on Ballot



Cross collaboration and wasted votes.

And similar to 2021 cross collaboration among candidates was common in 2023. Yet in 2023 voters also learnt how ranking protected their vote choice if a candidate dropped out of the race. This happened when incumbent Kristin Richardson Jordan from district 9 withdrew from

the race one month before the election earning ten percent of first-choice preferences. New Yorkers learnt that when a candidate withdrew late in a race, their name would continue to appear on the ballot which led to “wasted votes” if voters selected that candidate without knowing that they dropped out of the race. However, 90% of Jordan’s voters also ranked a second choice, so those ballots didn’t “go to waste as second choice rankings were counted (Otis, 2023). Nonetheless, RCV was considered to be a success in 2023 as it was in 2021. Now New Yorkers are once again poised to test the RCV method as they prepare to cast their ballots for mayor in June of 2025.

New York’s RCV Election 2025

New Yorkers now prepare for another round of elections using RCV in June of 2025. Ahead of the election eleven candidates have announced that they are running for the Democratic nomination for mayor of New York. Among them was incumbent Mayor Eric Adams who had run when RCV was first implemented in New York in 2021 and now has become the first mayor in New York to be indicted on federal bribery, fraud, and conspiracy charges receiving several calls to resign before the end of his term.

And earlier this year (2025) the U.S. department of justice ordered federal prosecutors to dismiss all charges against Adams without prejudice pending a review to be conducted following the general election in November (Huang, 2025). This propelled Adams to exit the Democratic primary announcing that now he would run in the general election as an independent, setting up a possible “spoiler” problem.

Projections for New Yorks 2025 Race

Now ahead of the race several polls have projected that while New York has been historically a blue city, the 2025 mayoral race will be one of the first tests for how New York Democrats confront a rightward shift in a reliably blue city for several reasons (Ann, 2025; McDonough, 2025). For one, with three major candidates for mayor a Democrat, a Republican,

and Adams it's possible the winner will not have support from a majority of voters, and that the next mayor of the nation's largest city could be decided by quirky electoral math instead of simply being the most popular candidate. For another incumbent and indicted mayor Eric Adams struggles have drawn a crowded field of challengers eager to unseat him among them is former Governor Andrew Cuomo (Emerson polling, 2025).

Ahead of the race several polls have found that indeed former Governor Andrew Cuomo has 38% support followed by Zohran Mamdani and then incumbent mayor Eric Adams (Emerson polling, 2025; Ann, 2025). In addition, polls find that "Cuomo's support generally increases as voters' age increases, going from 21% among voters under 30 to 44% of voters over 70. While "Black and Hispanic voters are behind Cuomo at 47% and 45% support." (Emerson polling, 2025).

And that in a hypothetical general election with Eric Adams running as an independent candidate, 43% would vote for Cuomo, 13% for a hypothetical Republican nominee Curtis Sliwa, 11% for Mayor Adams, and 4% for independent Jim Walden (Emerson polling, 2025; Ann, 2025). Moreover, the poll found that a majority of voters (63%) would like to see the next Mayor stand up to Trump, while 28% would rather see the Mayor work with Trump while nine percent were unsure (Emerson polling, 2025; Ann, 2025).

RCV Democratic Primary Simulation

Other than the varied pre-election polls a RCV simulation found that in the final ranking rounds, incumbent Adams narrowly edged out Lander (25% to 22%), but Cuomo ultimately secured a majority (53%), underscoring his broad appeal across different voter blocs. Cuomo won the RCV simulation highlighting his dominant position in the current electoral landscape, yet dynamics are likely to shift, especially since Cuomo has yet to officially enter the race (Ann, 2025).

As to New Yorkers continued support for the RCV method, a majority (52%) still favor RCV. However, now for the first time New Yorkers show a partisan divide as only 42% of Republicans support RCV, compared with stronger Democratic backing (Ann, 2025).

Conclusion

The RCV momentum grows across the nation with New York's affirming its use. While post analysis from New York's first use of RCV in 2021 found that a large majority (65.5%) of voters used the method for their city council races an equally large majority (56.9%) of voters used RCV in 2023 (N.Y votes, 2023). In addition, the 2023 RCV election year was seen as a transitional year where New York City failed to generate broad excitement about their off-year redistricting elections.

Now ahead of the 2025 RCV election the New York city campaign finance board has recommended several changes. The first of these is that the city should synchronize NYC's odd-year city elections with even-year state and federal elections to boost turnout. The second, is to create a civic engagement fellowship program to enhance voter education efforts by embedding fellows within four priority communities. These groups are to be 1) Voters under the age of 30; 2). Immigrant voters including New Americans, and those with limited English proficiency; 3). Voters with disabilities and 4). Voters with a criminal or felony conviction to increase turnout (N.Y votes, 2023).

The future of RCV across the country and in New York is bright and is expanding every year. While fifty-two jurisdictions currently use RCV various other jurisdictions have upcoming implementations in 2025, and 2026 and still others are currently considering its use. Yet for New Yorkers the method has been a fitting experiment, it is longer the electoral reform story but their future and is clearly still welcome.

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College Culture and Cannabis: Examining Ethnic Variations in Perceptions Post-Legalization

By

Selenda Cumby, Eastern New Mexico University

Presley Shilling, Eastern New Mexico University

Janet Birkey, Eastern New Mexico University

Legalized cannabis use has grown steadily, especially among college students, prompting concern about its academic consequences. While prior research often links frequent use to diminished academic outcomes, like lower GPAs and delayed graduation, this qualitative embedded case study explored how undergraduate students at a Midwestern U.S. university perceive these effects following state-level legalization in 2021. Administered through an anonymous online survey in fall 2024, the study captured diverse student perspectives, with a particular focus on demographic differences across race and ethnicity. Most participants reported little to no negative academic impact from cannabis use, indicating that it did not significantly influence their motivation, attendance, or completion rates. Interestingly, White students used cannabis less frequently than their Hispanic and Mixed Race peers, though those who did reported higher usage rates. Across all groups, cannabis was widely perceived as having minimal effect on motivation or extracurricular involvement. These findings diverge from existing literature based on objective academic metrics, a discrepancy likely due to this study's reliance on self-reported perceptions. The research design prioritized accessibility and inclusivity, while acknowledging limitations such as a small sample size, geographic specificity, and potential response bias. Even so, it underscores the need for broader, mixed-methods studies that span varied regions and populations. Future research could compare users and non-users and examine undergraduate versus graduate perspectives to uncover more profound insights into evolving student attitudes toward cannabis.

Keywords: legalized cannabis use, college student academic outcomes, college student perceptions, online survey, case study

Introduction

In 1995, 75% of the voting population voted against the legalization of cannabis. In 2016, just 21 years later, the voters' desire to legalize cannabis changed drastically, with 60% of the population voting for the legalization of cannabis (Kilmer & MacCoun, 2017). By 2025, cannabis laws had shifted significantly, with more than half of the U.S. population living in states where adults aged 21 and older could legally use it for non-medical purposes (Planalp, 2025). This is in addition to the 39 states, three territories, and the District of Columbia that have legalized cannabis for medical use (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2025).

Although historically the social use of cannabis has been frowned upon by the general public, users are growing, just as the legalization of cannabis is also increasing. While many individuals might have smoked cannabis in their experimental college years, college users are also increasing due to the legalization and societal acceptance of the drug (Kilwein et al., 2020). Although medical cannabis has been used in numerous states for decades, there are new concerns regarding students who can legally purchase and use cannabis as they choose.

Despite societal acceptance of legalized cannabis, community members, including college faculty and administration, have concerns. These concerns revolve around academic success as well as physical and mental health issues. However, while faculty and administrations have concerns they need to address, one question that few researchers are examining is: how do undergraduate students view the usage of cannabis? The gap in research surrounding this topic reveals that little research has been conducted on the topic since 2020. Additionally, there is a lack of research on diverse student populations (i.e., age, race, income), which results in a lack of data on student perceptions in states where cannabis is legalized.

Since standardization of cannabis is now a part of the academic landscape (Kilwein et al., 2020), it is a prevalent topic that must be addressed on a variety of levels. Understanding how students view and use cannabis is critical to faculty, administrators, and community members as they navigate the future of academic support on many levels (Wright & Krieg, 2018). Faculty can use this information to develop curriculum and talk to students about the potential impact of cannabis usage on the learning process and how they can provide added student support. Administrators will likely lean more toward policy development and resource allocation, along with prevention programs.

As usage continues, the rate of new mental health needs may also increase (Kilwein et al., 2020). Mental health supports may also include how to motivate students who engage in legal cannabis use (Arria et al., 2015; Donnelly et al., 2022), in addition to attention and memory concerns (Rivera-Olmos & Parra-Bernal, 2016; Schwartz, 1989). Mental health needs also increase (National

Academies Press, 2017), students lack motivation, and the fact that it may impair attention, memory, and learning (Marie & Zölitz, 2017; Pearson et al., 2017) are all reasons to continue research in this controversial area.

This study explores how undergraduate students perceive their own relationship with cannabis, as well as how they perceive their peers' connections to it, while focusing on a diverse population. Specifically, this research will answer two questions: What are undergraduate students' perceptions regarding the use of legalized cannabis in relation to academic consequences? How might these perceptions be compared and contrasted with the descriptive statistics?

The researchers used an online survey as a case study qualitative research tool to gather data from a wide range of undergraduate students, for easy accessibility and convenience, and to ensure anonymity, reducing social bias from their findings. Additionally, standardization was guaranteed since the same questions were asked of all responders, and in the same format. Kilwein et al. (2020) note that "focus groups revealed that cannabis use is quickly integrating into the college social environment where it now holds a unique social position regardless of the user status of the state in which they reside (p. 738)."

Literature Review

The legalization of cannabis across various states in the U.S. has prompted extensive research into its implications for public health, economics, and social behavior. Particularly in the college population, understanding the trends of cannabis use, its prevalence, and its subsequent impact on academic performance is crucial for fostering healthy educational environments. This literature review explores the legal context of cannabis legalization, trends in usage among college students, and the impact of cannabis use on academic performance, ultimately underscoring the need for targeted interventions and policy guidance.

Legal Context and Economic Prevalence

The legalization of cannabis has been a significant policy shift in many states. In New Mexico, the legalization of recreational cannabis in April 2021 signaled the onset of a rapidly growing market, with sales commencing a year later. Initial sales figures were striking, with \$5.2 million generated within the first week of sales, outstripping early sales in states like Colorado (Arshad et al., 2023). By December 2022, New Mexico's total recreational cannabis sales surpassed \$214 million, representing a monthly growth rate of 3.4% (Arshad et al., 2023).

This burgeoning market is not confined to economic statistics; it has implications for societal behaviors, particularly among youth and young adults. Studies have demonstrated that cannabis use rates among college students are comparable to those of their non-enrolled peers, indicating a normalization of cannabis use in young adult populations (Pearson et al., 2017). Moreover, research from Colorado highlights a stagnant trend in cannabis use frequency among college students before and after legalization (Jones et al., 2018), suggesting that legalization may not significantly alter consumption patterns but could reinforce existing behaviors.

Trends in Cannabis Use Among College Students

The Monitoring the Future Survey (2024) has identified concerning trends in cannabis use among college students. In 2019, 44% of college students reported cannabis use, which slightly decreased to 40% by 2024. This apparent decline in user rates could be misleading, as it masks an underlying increase in the frequency of daily use, raising important questions about potential health and academic repercussions. Notably, this increase in daily consumption is significant; while more students may be abstaining from occasional use, those who do consume cannabis are doing so more frequently, which could exacerbate the adverse outcomes associated with cannabis use. This duality of usage underscores the importance of differentiating between rates of use and patterns of consumption. Increasing daily use among a subset of college students may indicate heightened risk

for adverse academic and health outcomes, creating a compelling need for further investigation into the motivations behind such usage patterns.

Impact on Academic Performance

The relationship between cannabis use and academic performance among college students is increasingly scrutinized within academic literature. A consistent finding across multiple studies is the correlation between cannabis use and lower GPAs among users compared to non-users (Arria et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2018). Jones et al.'s (2018) study in Colorado, conducted after the implementation of the Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol Act, presents a critical examination of the educational consequences of cannabis use. The research revealed that cannabis use was prevalent among college students, particularly daily users, and identified a decline in binge drinking. This encouraging trend nevertheless does not mitigate the potential negative impact of cannabis use.

Arria et al. (2015) employed a longitudinal cohort study design to ascertain the direct and indirect effects of cannabis use on GPA and time to graduation, highlighting the role of class attendance as a mediating factor. Their findings indicated a negative correlation between increased cannabis use and declining GPA, suggesting that cannabis consumption serves as a barrier to academic achievement. Students who reported increasing or frequent usage patterns were not only more likely to drop out but also to delay graduation. This phenomenon could have far-reaching implications for workforce participation and overall educational attainment.

Moreover, Phillips et al. (2015) and Suerken et al. (2016) have contributed to the understanding of how cannabis use affects academic motivation. Their research indicates that cannabis users often report lower motivation levels, which translate into poorer academic outcomes. Suerken et al.'s (2016) investigation of first-year college students identified distinct trajectories of cannabis use and highlighted the negative ramifications for attendance and GPA. Students within the increasing or frequent usage categories consistently displayed lower academic performance, thus reinforcing the association between substance use and diminished educational engagement.

Cognitive Impact and Cognitive Performance

Beyond academic performance, studies indicate that cannabis use can negatively affect cognitive functions, including attention, memory, and learning capabilities (Marie & Zölitz, 2017; Pearson et al., 2017). Marie & Zölitz (2017) conducted research in the Netherlands, where a policy change affecting legal access to cannabis provided a unique opportunity to study its effects on student performance. This study revealed that even moderate cannabis access could impair academic performance, which emphasizes the importance of further contextual studies as legislation evolves in different regions. With evidence pointing towards an association between cannabis use and cognitive impairments, there is a pressing need for comprehensive strategies and programs tailored to address the unique challenges faced by college students. This need is compounded by the reality that many college students might underestimate the potential adverse effects of cannabis use on their academic and cognitive functioning.

Previous Studies on Student Perceptions

Empirical evidence indicates that students who utilize cannabis tend to demonstrate a pronounced support for its legalization and decriminalization. These individuals often regard cannabis as less addictive and consider it safer in comparison to alcohol (Mendoza, 2019; Pearson et al., 2017). Furthermore, significant transformations in attitudes, intentions, and behaviors concerning cannabis consumption have been documented as students' progress through their first year of college. This trend reflects an increasing favorability toward both cannabis and tobacco use (Stewart and Moreno, 2013).

A study conducted by Mendoza (2019) at Texas State University examined the attitudes and perceptions of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in Political Science and Public Administration programs. The findings revealed that a considerable majority (89.4%) of respondents supported the legalization of cannabis. Among those who reported using cannabis, the predominant motivations for consumption included recreational enjoyment (31%), stress relief (22%), anxiety

management (19%), and addressing symptoms of depression (14%) (Mendoza, 2019). This research contributes valuable insights into the evolving perspectives of students regarding substance use within a changing legal context.

Gaps in Literature

The existing body of literature illuminates the relationship between cannabis use and academic performance among college students; however, several critical gaps warrant further exploration. First, there is a notable shortage of studies focusing on states that have enacted cannabis legalization since 2020. This limitation restricts our understanding of how newly established markets impact cannabis consumption patterns and the consequent effects on academic outcomes for students in these regions. Additionally, there is an inadequate representation of diverse student populations within current research. The experiences and academic challenges faced by students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds may differ significantly; yet existing studies frequently overlook these complexities. A comprehensive examination of these populations is essential for developing targeted interventions that are inclusive and effective.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need for more in-depth data on student perceptions regarding cannabis use and its potential effects on their academic journey. Understanding students' attitudes, beliefs, and contextual factors influencing their consumption can provide valuable insights into the social dynamics surrounding cannabis use in higher education settings. Addressing these gaps in future research is imperative for informing policies and practices that promote academic success and well-being among college students in an increasingly complex landscape of cannabis legalization. Ultimately, a more nuanced understanding of these issues will facilitate the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies tailored to the diverse needs of student populations.

Methodology

A qualitative embedded case study was conducted to report undergraduate students' perceptions of legalized cannabis usage and possible effects on academic success. The focus of this

case study was a state university in the Midwest of the United States, where cannabis was legalized in April of 2021. The participants at the university were undergraduates who had finished one full school year since the legalization of cannabis, which bound the study in time and experience to the fall semester of 2024. This case study research involved a contemporary and real-life context (Yin, 2014) and was defined by what is "the edge of the case: what will not be studied" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 28). The edge of the case that was not studied included high school students who were taking dual credit classes or students who were located on branch campuses.

The study is considered explanatory due to the utilization of student perceptions answering "what" and "how" research questions:

Research Question #1: What are undergraduate students' perceptions regarding the use of legalized cannabis in relation to academic consequences?

Research Question #2: How might these perceptions be compared with descriptive statistics that focus upon ethnicity?

The embedded sub-units within the case of the undergraduate students were descriptive factors that included analysis of age, ethnicity, and gender, with the focus of this article being ethnicity. The findings utilized both within-case analysis and cross-case analysis, which strengthened the validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Miles et al., 2014).

The researchers in this qualitative case study utilized an entirely qualitative online survey to collect new understandings of the college student perception of a social issue (Braun et al., 2021). The data collected included views, experiences, and practices that were measured through both descriptive analysis and trend analysis. The survey provided a wide-angle lens that assisted with hearing "within" group voices and perspectives from various groups of students. The online survey provided a voice for students who would have otherwise refrained from a face-to-face interview, facilitating participation due to the anonymity (Rance et al., 2010). The participant and researcher

also had the advantage of being easily accessible through participation either on a computer or on a cell phone.

Research Site

The researchers utilized a criterion sampling strategy for the selection of participants at the state university in the southwestern region of the United States. The criterion included all undergraduate students located on the main campus and who had a school email address in the fall semester of 2024. The students were considered of any age following high school graduation, full-time or part-time, and living on or off campus. The campus population is a Hispanic-Serving University and in the fall of 2024 included 4250 undergraduate students, with the largest ethnic groups being 41% Hispanic, 37% White, 8% Unknown, 5% African American, 3% Native American, and 2% two or more races (ENMU, 2025). There was a larger population of females (65%) compared to males (35%). The age groups of the campus were classified as traditional (ages 18-21), post-traditional (ages 22-31), and non-traditional (ages 31+). According to College Factual (2025), 31% of the campus students are traditional, 25% are post-traditional, and 29% are non-traditional.

Procedures

Researchers in Qualtrics created the online survey to measure the perceptions of legalized cannabis usage and the possible effects on academic success. The researchers, with varying educational backgrounds, improved the survey by analyzing biased language and conclusions. The subscale of the questions included: (a) demographic questions, (b) beliefs about cannabis, (c) perceived availability of cannabis, (d) personal impact of cannabis usage, and (e) academic consequences of personal cannabis use. Immediately following IRB approval, the survey was piloted, and some questions were removed to relieve survey fatigue.

Permission from the research department was obtained to send the survey out to all undergraduate students on the university's main campus. On November 4, 2024, three email batches

were sent to students to remedy the issue of the email going to spam. The email contained an introduction to the study and the survey link that could be accessed through a computer or a cell phone. The survey was accessible until November 30, 2024.

Data was collected and stored through Qualtrics, with only the three researchers having access to the results. Student identifiable information was not obtained. When results were downloaded into Excel for creating graphs for display, the file and computer were both password-protected. Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was utilized, as well as Excel's ability to sort data of varying groups of voices for comparison within and across embedded sub-units.

Comparison data analysis results were displayed using descriptive analysis and trend analysis. The descriptive analysis involved summarizing the data set, while trend analysis was used to identify patterns that may indicate an upward or downward trend. Trend analysis also assisted in visualizing the comparison of varying groups.

Results

As the data were analyzed, it was important for the researchers to remember that the purpose of the study was student perception and that the data were self-reported. The perceptions measured fell into two categories: perceptions of others and perceptions of self. The advantage of having a self-reporting study is that the data received reflects the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of individuals, providing insight into differences, such as between embedded sub-units (Psychology, 2024).

The data analysis of this embedded case study began with the collection of data through Qualtrics. The qualitative data were downloaded into Excel, and then the data were cleaned to identify and rectify inaccurate or incomplete data for consistency and quality assurance (Holmes, 2025; Mourya et al., 2012). The data was removed if there was less than 85% completion or if it was

completed between November 1 and November 30, 2024. The remaining number of survey participants was 94.

Participants

The participants of the survey exhibited both similarities and differences in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity compared to the campus population. The survey participants were predominantly female (71%), consistent with the campus student population, which was also predominantly female (65%). Other areas of variation included the participants' and campus's age groups. The survey participants included 37% traditional, 37% post-traditional, and 26% non-traditional, whereas the campus included 31% traditional, 25% post-traditional, and 29% non-traditional. The ethnicity of the participants was found to be similar to that of the campus, except for a larger number of White and Mixed Races, while fewer Hispanic participants, as presented in Figure 1. The focus of further analysis was based on these three ethnicities, White, Hispanic, and Mixed Race, due to having the largest number of survey participants.

Figure 1

Ethnicity Comparison of Survey Participants with Campus

Note. This figure illustrates the percentage of various ethnic groups among survey participants and the student population on campus.

Descriptive Trends

In qualitative research, descriptive trends can be utilized to analyze data. This data can be expressed in percentages, which can allow for comparisons of various groups or voices. The focus of the data in this research project included the trends and gaps between the three largest ethnic groups that participated in the survey.

The descriptive trends identified that the majority ($\geq 65\%$) of all three ethnic groups were classified as full-time students who were Juniors or 4th year Seniors and perceived themselves as having a GPA of 3.0 to 4.0. Variations were also identified, as the White group categorized

participants as either traditional or non-traditional in age, lacking those post-traditional. In contrast, the Hispanic and Mixed Race groups both identified as traditional. There were also variations, with the majority of Hispanic and Mixed Race participants being female. In contrast, the White participants had a larger percentage of males, along with the majority being female. Although the majority of participants in all three ethnic groups demonstrated employment, there were variations in the groups' residence, first-generation status, and socio-economic status. Table 1 provides a visualization.

Table 1

Descriptive Trends of Three Ethnic Groups

White

Hispanic

Mixed Race

Age

39% 18-21; 33% 31+

58% 18-24

56% 18-21

Gender

57% Female

83% Female

75% Female

Classification

84% Junior/ Senior 4*

66% Junior / Senior 4

69% Junior / Senior 4

GPA

84% 3.0 – 4.0

71% 3.0 – 4.0

81% 3.0 – 4.0

Enrollment

84% Full-time

83% Full-time

69% Full-time

Residence

55% Off-campus

54% On-campus

38% with Family

Employment

67% Employed

79% Employed

75% Employed

1st Gen

27% Yes

50% Yes

69% Yes

Socio-Econ

29% \$50 - \$74,999

33% Less \$25,000

44% \$50 - 74,999

Note. The most significant percentage of each survey answer is listed for each of the ethnic groups according to the descriptive survey questions.

*Senior 4 represents a student who is a Senior and in their fourth year of college.

Beliefs and Perceived Availability

Two of the four measured perceptions on the survey included questions that addressed the personal beliefs regarding other college students on campus and the perceived availability of cannabis. The first belief question asked the participant what the most common reason students use cannabis in college is. In contrast, the second question asked how cannabis legalization has impacted the mental health of college students. When analyzing the data of the three ethnic participants, there were three prominent choices among the groups: (a) to relax or reduce stress, (b) to have fun and enhance social experience, and (c) to alleviate anxiety and depression. However, the White participants focused extensively on relaxing and reducing stress, whereas the Hispanic and Mixed Race participants selected the social experience of having fun. The results of the second belief question demonstrated that all three groups believe that there is a moderate impact on the students' mental health due to the legalization of cannabis. See the visualization of these results in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Perceptions of Beliefs & Availability of Cannabis

Note. This figure demonstrates the answers of the three ethnic groups about why college students use cannabis and if there is an impact on the college students' mental health.

When analyzing the questions regarding the students' perception of the availability of cannabis on campus, the results demonstrate that all three groups believe local dispensaries offer easy access. At the same time, the Mixed Race group also marks friends as a source of easy access. The question of whether cannabis is as readily available on campus as alcohol, all three ethnicities marked that it was equally available.

Personal Impact

The third series of questions measured the personal impact of legalized cannabis on the survey participants. The questions asked of all participants related to their perception of campus safety and whether they had ever used cannabis. The participants who had never used cannabis were skipped to the next group of questions relating to academic consequences. The participants that had selected the choice of cannabis usage answered personal perception questions furthering our research in the following areas: (a) how often used, (b) would use in the next six months, (c) impact on academic performance, (d) impact on class attendance and completion of assignments, and (e) impact on participation in extracurricular activities.

Campus safety was perceived as being safe or very safe by all three ethnic groups. The results of the personal impact question regarding cannabis usage were varied. The White participants had 47% who had never used cannabis, the Hispanic participants had 30%, and the Mixed Race participants had 25%. These participants were then skipped to the next series of questions related to academic consequences. The remaining participants who disclosed having used cannabis were 53% White, 70% Hispanic, and 75% Mixed Race.

Of the three ethnic groups, White (38%) and Mixed Race (33%) demonstrated a larger percentage of students who self-reported to use cannabis daily or almost daily in comparison to Hispanic (18%). This gap was also identified as the Hispanic participants were considerably less likely to use it in the next six months than the White and Mixed Race participants. The most significant gap between the three groups was on the question of whether there was an impact on participation in extracurricular activities. The Mixed Race participants (83%) stated that there was an increase due to cannabis usage, whereas there were 73% White and 63% Hispanic participants who stated there was no increase.

Personal Impact questions that had similar responses from all three ethnic groups included the participants being very likely to use cannabis in the next six months and stating that there was no negative impact on academics or motivation to attend class or complete assignments.

This information is self-reported, and the study does not include college data to confirm the student reports. See Figure 3 below for a visualization of the personal impact data.

Figure 3

Personal Impact of Participants' Self-Reporting Users

Note. This figure demonstrates the personal impact on the survey participants who self-reported having used cannabis. Participants who self-reported never using were not included in these personal impact questions.

Perceptions of Academic Consequences for the College

In the last series of survey questions, the participants were asked questions related to their perceptions of academic consequences for the college. These questions shifted their perceptions from self-reporting to reporting of the overall college students on campus. These questions included: (a) impact of legalization of cannabis on academic performance, (b) impact on motivation to complete a degree, (c) impact on campus attendance rates, (d) impact on completion rates, and (e) overall impact on the campus' academic environment.

Most of these questions had a variation on the answers between one or more of the ethnic groups, with the voice of the Mixed Race accentuating the belief that cannabis has little consequences for the university. The White and Hispanic participants marked that there was a slight or moderate impact of cannabis on the academic performance of the college students on campus. In contrast, the Mixed Race participants marked slightly or not at all. When asking about the impact on class attendance rates, the White had slightly higher rates of 35%, while the Hispanic (42%) and Mixed Race (69%) had stronger perceptions of cannabis not affect attendance rates. The White and Hispanic groups also perceived a slight impact on completion rates for the university, while the Mixed Race group perceived no effect, with 69%.

The one question that all three ethnic groups had a similar response to is the question regarding the impact on the student motivation to complete a degree. Although all three groups' most significant percentage voiced that the use of cannabis had no impact on the student motivation, the Mixed Race group stated with an overall 69% in comparison to White (29%) and Hispanic (25%). Visualization of this series of questions can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Perceptions of Academic Consequences for the College

White

Hispanic

Mixed Race

Impact of legalization on the academic performance of college students

29% Moderately

25% Slightly

25% Slightly

17% Moderately

38% Not at all

38% Slightly

Impact on student motivation to complete degrees

29% Not at all

27% Moderately

25% Not at all

25% Slightly

69% Not at all

Impact on class attendance rates

35% Slightly

33% No effect

42% No effect

69% No effect

Impact on campus completion rates

39% Slightly

38% Slightly

69% No effect

Impact on the overall academic environment on campus

29% Moderately

42% slightly

56% Not at all

Note: This series of questions was based on the perception of student participants and not verified with college data. The Mixed Race data demonstrates a stronger perception on several questions in comparison to the White and Hispanic participants.

Discussion

The research study focused on undergraduate students' perceptions of legalized cannabis and its academic consequences at a public university in the southwestern region of the United States. This specific interpretation of the findings explored the overall perceptions of cannabis use on academic consequences along with descriptive statistics concerning race and ethnicity, particularly among White, Hispanic, and Mixed Race students. When addressing research question one, which focused on the participants' perceptions regarding the impact of cannabis on academic performance, the findings indicated a significant disconnect between participants' self-reported experiences and the academic outcomes typically associated with cannabis use. Many participants indicated that they

perceived no negative impact on their academic performance, motivation to complete their degrees, class attendance, or degree completion. The perceptions regarding the overall campus climate reflected a variety of beliefs about the effects of cannabis on academic performance, with responses ranging from moderate to slight, or even none at all. This general sentiment translated into a consensus that cannabis use had little to no effect on attendance and completion rates on the college campus.

The second research question centered on comparing these perceptions with descriptive statistics related to race and ethnicity. The majority of participants were aged 18-21, predominantly juniors or fourth-year seniors, had GPAs ranging from 3.0 to 4.0, and identified as White, Hispanic, or Mixed Race. The findings showed that White participants were less likely to use cannabis compared to their Hispanic and Mixed Race counterparts. However, among those White participants who did use cannabis, the frequency of use was reported to be higher than that of the Hispanic and Mixed Race participants. All three racial and ethnic groups surveyed shared a common belief that cannabis has no impact on student motivation. Furthermore, when asked about the impact of cannabis use on participation in extracurricular activities, Mixed Race participants primarily reported an increase in participation. In contrast, Hispanic and White participants reported no increase or an unaffected status.

The findings of this study align and contrast with existing literature on cannabis use among college students. Participants primarily reported that their motivations for using cannabis were centered around social enjoyment, alleviating anxiety, and managing stress or depression, reflecting an area of alignment with existing literature (Mendoza, 2019). While participants generally perceived little to no impact of cannabis use on their academic performance, motivation, and overall completion rates, previous research has linked cannabis usage with lower GPAs, increased class skipping, and impaired cognitive functions such as attention and memory (Arria et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2018; Marie & Zölitz, 2017; Pearson et al., 2017; Suerken et al., 2016). This disparity can be

attributed to the different methodologies employed, as the current study relied heavily on student perceptions and opinions. In contrast, previous studies concluded from concrete data such as grades and attendance records.

Limitations and Implications

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size of the research was relatively small, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. A larger and more diverse sample could provide broader insights and enhance the robustness of the results. Second, the research was conducted in a specific geographical area, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other regions with different cultural, social, or economic contexts. Third, reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for response bias. The accuracy of self-reported data can vary significantly, which may impact the validity of the results.

Despite these limitations, this study has significant implications for various stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and researchers. A key implication is the need for larger-scale investigations to encompass diverse populations across various states and regions in the United States. Such studies would enhance the generalizability of findings and provide a deeper understanding of regional differences in perceptions and behaviors related to cannabis use. Additionally, adopting a mixed methods approach that integrates both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews would allow for a richer exploration of students' perceptions. Furthermore, future research could benefit from comparing attitudes between cannabis users and non-users, as well as examining differences between undergraduate and graduate students. This comparative analysis could reveal trends influenced by educational background and context.

Conclusion

While this study focused on undergraduates' use of cannabis, universities are seeing the daily effects of undergraduates' use in the areas of physical, mental, and academic concerns. While many argue that universities should educate students and maintain appropriate boundaries by refraining from interfering in their personal affairs, this is an area where their personal lives intersect with their scholarship. Such student choices as cannabis usage can affect those around them—peers, faculty, and surrounding communities.

Universities play a vital role in supporting not only their students but also the broader campus community, including those who work closely with students. One practical approach is offering targeted workshops that address physical well-being, mental health, and academic success. By promoting on-campus mental health services, often included in students' tuition, institutions can help students navigate stress, manage addiction, and build resilience. Medical professionals can educate students on the potential health risks associated with cannabis use and guide harm reduction while recognizing signs of dependency. Additionally, universities can bolster academic performance by offering tutoring and study support for those in need of academic reinforcement. By investing in the well-being and academic growth of their students, universities not only shape individual success stories, but they also cultivate a healthier and more resilient campus community for all.

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Exploring Mental Health and Its Connections to Fentanyl and Pain Pill Addiction in Young Adults

By

Dr. Annalease Gibson, Albany State University

Nat'yanna Pratt, Albany State University

Tionni D. McDaniels, Albany State University

The opioid epidemic has disproportionately affected young adults in the United States, particularly those with co-occurring mental health disorders and histories of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). This study explores the relationship between ACEs, opioid misuse, and mental health disorders among young adults aged 18-25 at Albany State University, with a focus on Albany, Georgia, a rural area facing significant barriers to treatment. Grounded in trauma and psychodynamic theory, this research examines how early-life trauma contributes to maladaptive coping mechanisms, increasing the risk of opioid dependence. Existing literature highlights the intersection of substance use disorders (SUDs), anxiety, and mood disorders, emphasizing the need for integrated, trauma-informed treatment approaches. However, limited research specifically addresses the unique challenges that young adults in underserved communities face. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the behavioral and psychological factors driving opioid addiction. Through identifying key barriers and motivators, our research will inform the development of targeted, trauma-focused interventions that promote resilience, rehabilitation, and the adoption of healthy coping mechanisms. Findings will contribute to social work best practices, advocating for improved access to comprehensive mental health and addiction services.

Keywords: Mental Health, Addiction, Young Adults, Opioid Addiction, Adverse Childhood Experiences

Introduction

The opioid epidemic has significantly impacted populations in the United States, with young adults emerging as a particularly vulnerable group. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2021), opioid misuse among youth and young adults has become a growing concern, often co-occurring with mental health disorders like anxiety and other risk factors. The increasing prevalence of opioid use among individuals aged 18-25 has become a national concern due to its high potential for addiction and long-term consequences. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (2021) outlines that opioids are a class of drugs primarily used for pain

management, including prescription medications such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, methadone, and synthetic opioids like fentanyl. While these drugs serve important medical purposes, they also carry a high risk of dependence and misuse.

Many individuals struggling with substance use also have a history of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which are traumatic events occurring before the age of 18. Research by SAMHSA (2021) highlights that ACEs contribute to both substance misuse and the development of mental health disorders, creating a cycle of vulnerability that persists into adulthood. Despite the recognized link between trauma, mental health, and substance use, few programs specifically address the unique needs of young adults facing these challenges.

Given these concerns, further research is needed to explore the specific factors driving opioid misuse in young adults, particularly the impact of ACEs and co-occurring mental health disorders. A deeper understanding of these connections can inform the development of targeted interventions that address both substance use and underlying trauma.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) contribute to opioid misuse and co-occurring mental health disorders among young adults aged 18-25. The findings of Goodman (2017) indicate that "Individuals who experience childhood trauma often develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, including substance misuse, as a means of self-medication. Trauma disrupts emotional regulation, increases susceptibility to mental health disorders, and impairs decision-making, all of which heightens the risk of opioid addiction. Understanding these interconnections is essential for developing trauma-informed interventions that address both addiction and mental health challenges.

Our study will be conducted at Albany State University in Albany, Georgia, providing a rural outlook to this growing national issue. According to Beeber (2018), 92.8% of young adults aged 18 to 25 who required substance use treatment in the past year did not receive specialized care,

underscoring the gap in access to appropriate services. Kalin (2020) and Langdon, Dove, and Ramsey (2019) further emphasize that addiction and mental illness often reinforce one another, making recovery difficult without integrated treatment. Additionally, unresolved childhood trauma can result in long-term psychological distress, increasing vulnerability to substance dependence, and complicating the recovery process (Goodman, 2017). By investigating these relationships, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on opioid misuse and mental health in young adults. The findings will highlight the importance of trauma-informed social work practices and evidence-based treatment programs, advocating for more comprehensive interventions that simultaneously address substance use disorders and underlying trauma.

Significance of the Study

Despite the increasing prevalence of opioid misuse in young adults, research on this population remains limited. This study will address the limited research on opioid addiction among young adults aged 18-25, particularly those with co-occurring mental health disorders such as mood and anxiety disorders. This research is particularly significant for rural communities like Albany, Georgia, which often face substantial barriers to mental health and substance use treatment. Many young adults struggling with opioid misuse have a history of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which have been linked to both mental health disorders and maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance use (Goodman, 2017). By examining the relationship between ACEs and opioid addiction, this study provides critical insights into the behavioral and psychological factors driving substance use among young adults.

The findings from this research will help inform the development of integrated, trauma-informed interventions that improve treatment approaches for young adults, particularly in underserved areas. By advocating for evidence-based treatment models that address both mental health and substance use, this study aims to bridge gaps in access to care, enhance intervention

strategies, and support policy changes that improve long-term outcomes for young adults affected by opioid addiction.

Literature Review

This review focuses on the intersection of substance abuse, trauma, and mood disorders in young adults aged 18-25. With substance abuse steadily rising in this population, young people face increasing vulnerability to the complexities of mental health challenges and substance dependency. According to SAMHSA (n.d.), "In 2018, of the 5.1 million young adults with a substance use disorder, nearly 9 in 10 did not get treatment." This statistic underscores the critical gap in access to care and the need for further research to develop evidence-based interventions within the social work profession.

Anxiety-related disorders are among the most common psychiatric illnesses in the United States (Langdon, Dove, & Ramsey, 2019). Many young adults struggling with substance use disorders (SUDs) also experience co-occurring mental health conditions, such as anxiety and mood disorders. The compounding effects of trauma and mental illness further increase the risk of substance misuse in this population. SAMHSA (2018) defines trauma as an event or series of events experienced as physically or emotionally harmful, threatening, or overwhelming, with lasting effects on an individual's functioning. Research has shown that opioid disorder (OD) in particular, and anxiety disorders frequently co-occur, often leading to more severe clinical outcomes (Langdon, Dove, & Ramsey, 2019). These overlapping issues highlight the importance of integrated, trauma-informed treatment approaches that address both mental health and opioid use simultaneously.

This analysis utilizes trauma theory and psychodynamic theory as its theoretical framework to explore the complex relationships between trauma, mental health disorders, and substance use. By examining the links between mood and anxiety disorders, opioid use disorder, and trauma, this review seeks to synthesize current literature on these co-occurring issues, identify existing best practices, and highlight areas for further research. Addressing opioid use disorder and anxiety-related

symptoms together has the potential to improve clinical outcomes and promote more comprehensive and trauma-informed support for young adults (Langdon, Dove, & Ramsey, 2019). Additionally, this review will highlight the lack of research on opioid misuse and mental health disorders in rural areas such as Albany, GA. By emphasizing the importance of localized studies, it will contribute to the literature on the unique challenges faced by young adults in underserved communities and the need for targeted interventions.

Substance Abuse¹

Substance use disorder (SUD) is characterized by a problematic pattern of substance use that leads to clinically significant impairment or distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Effective education and awareness about the harms of substance use, alongside the support of friends, parents, and caregivers, can significantly reduce the risk of developing SUDs (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2020). Opioid use disorder (OUD) is similarly defined as a problematic pattern of opioid use resulting in notable impairment or distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Approximately 1.6 million individuals in the United States are affected by OUD (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020).

For individuals under the age of 60, overdose deaths have become the leading cause of death in the U.S. (CDC, 2020). Prescription opioids, in particular, are the primary source of opioid addiction and overdose-related fatalities, contributing to what is now considered the most severe overdose epidemic in American history (Manchikanti, Kaye, Knezevic, & Hirsch, 2017). The human toll is devastating, with communities experiencing profound mental health effects due to the frequent loss of life related to prescription medication overdoses, in addition to the considerable financial burden imposed by opioid addiction, which generates billions of dollars in healthcare costs each year (Florence et al., 2016).

Preventative strategies, such as prescription drug monitoring programs, state-level prescription drug regulations, and public education on the safe storage and disposal of opioids, are

critical in curbing the misuse of prescription opioids, OUD, and opioid overdoses (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020).

Substance abuse and Mental Health Issues

Substance abuse and co-occurring mental health disorders, such as anxiety and mood disorders, pose significant challenges for young adults. Mental illness is broadly defined as a disorder that can cause psychological and behavioral disturbances of varying severity (Goodman, 2017). The relationship between trauma, mental health, and substance abuse is deeply interconnected, with research indicating that unresolved trauma contributes to both mental health disorders and substance use. Goodman (2017) and SAMHSA (2018) studied the connection between trauma, mental health, and substance abuse. SAMHSA (2018) notes that "Trauma can cause short and long-term effects, affecting coping mechanisms, relationships, or developmental tasks. Research has shown a strong connection between trauma, mental health, and substance abuse, with 84%+ of adults with mental health issues having a history of trauma." These findings highlight the critical role of trauma in the development of substance use disorders.

One of the most well-documented risk factors for substance use disorders (SUDs) is Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Early-life trauma has been shown to significantly impact long-term health and behavior, increasing the likelihood of individuals adopting harmful coping mechanisms to manage stress and emotional distress. SAMHSA (2018) highlights the severe health consequences of ACEs, stating that "ACEs have serious health consequences for adults, for example, adoption of health risk behaviors as coping mechanisms (e.g., eating disorders, smoking, substance abuse, self-harm, sexual promiscuity); severe medical conditions (e.g., heart disease, pulmonary disease, liver disease, STDs, gynecologic cancer) and early death." These findings underscore how early trauma disrupts emotional regulation and decision-making, often leading to substance use to self-medicate. Over time, these maladaptive behaviors increase the risk of addiction and make recovery more

challenging, particularly for young adults who may lack access to early intervention and mental health resources.

The opioid crisis has further intensified these challenges, particularly for young adults, who remain one of the most affected populations. The widespread availability of highly potent opioids, such as fentanyl and prescription painkillers, has contributed to a sharp increase in overdose deaths since the 2010s (Beeber, 2018). At the same time, young adults experience some of the highest rates of alcohol and illicit drug use disorders, with 10.7% (3.7 million or 1 in 9) meeting the criteria for a substance use disorder (Beeber, 2018). Despite the growing need for intervention, access to treatment remains severely limited, as many young adults do not seek care due to financial constraints, a lack of awareness about available services, or the belief that they can manage the issue independently (Beeber, 2018). These barriers prevent many from receiving early intervention and comprehensive treatment, further worsening the long-term effects of substance use and mental health disorders.

Research by Kalin (2020) and Langdon et al. (2019) emphasizes the importance of integrated, dual-treatment approaches that simultaneously address substance use and co-occurring psychiatric disorders. Studies indicate a substantial comorbidity between mental illness and substance use, with 9.2 million adults experiencing both a mental illness and a substance use disorder within one year (Kalin, 2020). Anxiety-related symptoms, particularly intolerance of distress, can weaken impulse control, increasing susceptibility to addiction. Langdon et al. (2019) suggest that simultaneously addressing opioid use disorder and anxiety-related symptoms may lead to improved clinical outcomes for this vulnerable population.

To effectively support young adults struggling with substance abuse and mental health disorders, interventions must be trauma-informed, integrate mental health care, and address disparities in access to services (Langdon et al., 2019; SAMHSA, 2018). Many individuals with substance use disorders remain undiagnosed or unaware of their mental health conditions, further complicating recovery (Beeber, 2018). This gap highlights the urgent need for more accessible,

comprehensive, and integrated treatment options tailored to the unique challenges faced by young adults.

Substance Abuse in Albany, GA

Substance abuse is often a greater challenge in rural areas due to limited economic opportunities, reduced access to healthcare, and fewer specialized treatment facilities. Although Albany, Georgia, is home to several mental health and rehabilitation centers, there is little research specifically examining substance abuse trends in this region. However, local emergency response data provides insight into the growing crisis. In 2023, Dougherty County EMS responded to overdose cases weekly, reporting 20 cases in May alone. In the previous year, 2022, a total of 249 cases required Narcan dispensation (Allen, 2023). Additionally, the prevalence of mental health symptoms in the region has doubled compared to the previous year (Godley, 2021). These statistics highlight the urgent need for more research and intervention strategies tailored to rural communities like Albany.

Substance Abuse in College Students and HBCUs

Current and prior research on substance abuse in college students aged 18-25 emphasizes the impact substance abuse can have on a young adult. Substance misuse is common among college students and can result in academic, physical, mental, and social problems (Mosel, 2024). Lipari & Jean-Francois (2016) conducted a national study on substance abuse in college students aged 18-25. They found that between 2011 and 2014, on average, 559 full-time students tried prescription opioids for the first time each day. Despite this study highlighting the importance of targeting college students affected by opioid use nine years ago, limited research has been done to address this issue. More recent findings indicate that by sophomore year, 50% of college students report being offered an illicit opioid for nonmedical use (Freibott, Auty, Stein, & Lipson, 2024). Studies analyzed by Mosel (2024) show that nearly half of college students meet the criteria for at least one substance use disorder (SUD). This widespread availability of opioids, combined with the high prevalence of

substance use disorders among college students, underscores the urgent need for continued research and intervention strategies to address opioid misuse and its long-term consequences.

As mentioned previously, young people face increasing vulnerability to the complexities of mental health challenges and substance dependency. "The prevalence of co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorders among young adults has increased 22 % in the past three years, and more than one-third of today's college students meet clinical criteria for anxiety or depression (Freibott, Auty, Stein, & Lipson, 2024)." Opioid addiction is especially concerning in young adult populations due to its increased risk of overdose (Freibott, Auty, Stein, & Lipson, 2024). Available evidence indicates that while young adult drug use has remained stable in the last decade, young adult overdoses involving fentanyl, a highly potent synthetic opioid, and opioids have tripled since 2019 (Freibott, Auty, Stein, & Lipson, 2024).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) hold an often-overlooked position in the opioid crisis. While the opioid crisis initially affected mainly White-Americans, recent studies in the 2020s have outlined Black-Americans as one of the fastest growing populations in opioid related deaths (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Despite this increase in fatalities, research on substance abuse in HBCU institutions has remained generally stagnant surrounding opioid use. Kapner (2004) was among the first to examine drug and alcohol use at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). He found that the emphasis on character development at HBCUs played a significant role in reducing alcohol consumption on campus. However, he also highlighted the lack of research on illicit drug use among Black students, both at HBCUs and in general. Kapner emphasized the need for further studies, particularly on the misuse of prescription drugs and other substances, which are increasing in prevalence. Despite his call for more research in 2004, there remains a significant gap in studies on substance use at HBCUs today. This gap in research also extends to mental health disparities. A recent study found that among college students of color with a mental health concern, African American students had 73% lower

odds of being diagnosed. In comparison, Asian students had 51% lower odds of receiving therapy (Freibott, Auty, Stein, & Lipson, 2024). These disparities highlight the ongoing need for more research and institutional support for students of color, particularly in addressing both substance use and mental health challenges at HBCUs and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma Theory

Trauma is an identified event or series of events that is experienced by the individual as physically or emotionally harmful, threatening, or overwhelming and that has lasting and holistic effects on the individual's functioning (SAMHSA, 2018; NIMH, n.d). Trauma Theory is a therapeutic model that looks at clients' functioning because of psychological or physical traumatic events. Trauma theory promotes trauma-informed care and considers the impact trauma has on a person's social, emotional, and spiritual functioning. For example, from a substance abuse perspective, a therapist using this theory might suggest that substance abuse is a coping mechanism developed in response to a specific trauma.

Trauma theory is based on central properties such as dissociation, attachment, reenactment, long-term adult effects, and impairment in emotional control (Goodman, 2017). Dissociation is a coping mechanism often seen in trauma that involves the division of an individual's personality to endure the traumatic experience. Attachment disruptions from trauma can hinder individuals' ability to form secure relationships and trust others (Goodman, 2017). Reenactment is when individuals replicate traumatic events; this can offer a sense of connection and control. An effective trauma-informed intervention realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery. To do so, the intervention must recognize signs and symptoms of trauma in clients. Recognize families, staff, and others involved with the system and respond by fully integrating knowledge about trauma (SAMHSA, 2018). In conclusion, Trauma theory looks at an individual while considering trauma-informed interventions to promote healing and recovery.

Psychodynamic Theory

Psychodynamic theory, initially developed by Sigmund Freud, has played a significant role in shaping social work practice (Deal, 2007; Traylor, Overstreet, & Lang, 2022). This theory seeks to explain human behavior by examining unconscious processes, internal forces that operate outside of an individual's awareness (Deal, 2007; Traylor et al., 2022). Freud proposed that unconscious motives, desires, fears, and anxieties drive human actions. When distressing thoughts or memories surface, individuals develop psychological defenses, known as defense mechanisms, to protect themselves from painful realities (Traylor et al., 2022).

Psychodynamic theory aligns with social work practice in two key ways: (1) its emphasis on the therapeutic relationship and (2) its integration of the person-in-environment perspective (Gottdiener, 2021). These principles highlight the importance of understanding how an individual's past experiences, particularly early childhood experiences, influence present behaviors and emotional struggles (Gottdiener, 2021). One application of this theory in social work is in the study of opioid addiction. The psychodynamic model, particularly the self-medication hypothesis, suggests that substance use disorders function as a defense mechanism against intolerable emotional states (Gottdiener, 2021). In the case of opioid addiction, individuals may use opioids to numb overwhelming feelings of rage, depression, and trauma-related distress. This perspective closely aligns with trauma theory, which emphasizes the long-term impact of adverse childhood experiences on adult mental health and addiction patterns.

When an individual's unconscious desires or distressing memories begin to surface, they may trigger internal conflicts between the id (which houses instinctual drives), the superego (which imposes moral and societal expectations), and the ego (which mediates between these forces) (Sheey, 2013). If the individual successfully represses these urges, they remain in the unconscious. However, if repression fails, anxiety emerges, activating defense mechanisms that distort or inhibit awareness of painful mental content (Brandell, 2004; Sheey, 2013). In the context of opioid addiction, substance

use may serve as an unconscious coping mechanism, helping individuals avoid confronting deeply buried psychological conflicts. By applying psychodynamic theory to opioid addiction, social workers can better understand the emotional and psychological underpinnings of substance use disorders. This insight underscores the importance of trauma-informed care, where addressing unresolved emotional pain is central to effective intervention and treatment strategies.

Psychodynamic Therapy

People undergoing psychodynamic treatment may reveal suppressed emotions and unconscious factors influencing their current behavior (Fonagy, 2015). This therapeutic approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of various mental health issues and disorders. Psychodynamic therapy can be tailored to meet the unique needs of individuals dealing with diverse mental health challenges, highlighting its potential for supporting long-term recovery and emotional well-being (Cherry, 2023). Psychodynamic therapy is effective in treating numerous mental health conditions. By confronting and processing the underlying causes of anxiety, individuals can reduce symptoms and improve emotional resilience (Cherry, 2023). This treatment approach fosters a deeper awareness of unconscious thoughts, feelings, and experiences, helping individuals identify the root causes of their problems. With these psychological insights, individuals are better equipped to make informed decisions and experience lasting well-being (Klein, 2020).

Problem Statement

Young adults with high Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) scores face an increased risk of opioid misuse and co-occurring mental health disorders. However, there is a lack of trauma-informed substance abuse interventions tailored to this population. Research indicates that early trauma is linked to substance use as a maladaptive coping mechanism, with ACE exposure significantly correlating with increased vulnerability to opioid dependence and psychological distress (Goodman, 2017). However, existing treatment models often fail to address the underlying trauma that contributes to substance misuse, limiting their effectiveness in long-term recovery.

Without trauma-informed approaches, young adults struggling with substance use may experience worsened mental health outcomes and barriers to effective care (Mosel, 2024). This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the relationship between ACEs, opioid misuse, and mental illnesses like anxiety and mood disorders, providing insight into how social workers can implement best practices for trauma-informed substance abuse care in young adults.

Research Questions

Which categories of adverse childhood experiences (e.g., abuse, neglect, household dysfunction) most strongly predict the frequency or severity of opioid misuse among young adults at Albany State University?

What are the most commonly reported mental health struggle/s (e.g., anxiety, depression, PTSD) among students with high ACE scores at Albany State University, and how do they compare to those with lower ACE scores?

Among students who report opioid use, what percentage have also experienced high ACE scores, mental health symptoms, and self-harm behaviors?

How does the emphasis on character development and leadership at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) relate to patterns of opioid misuse among students aged 18-25, based on self-reported substance use and mental health history?

Methodology

Research Design and Sample

Our research design is exploratory (inductive) in nature, aiming to develop a hypothesis and build a foundation for understanding the connections between specific mental illnesses, opioid substance abuse, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in college students. The study will employ a quantitative approach to gather and analyze data, ultimately answering research questions that will inform best practices in social work. By using the ACE test, the research will identify both barriers and risk factors that contribute to addiction, providing insight into the connection between

early trauma and substance use. Gaining insight can be accomplished through a survey, which will explore the relationships between variables such as mental illness, opioid use, and ACEs.

The survey will be administered to college students aged 18 to 25 at Albany State University. It will include demographic questions, an ACE test, and sections on mental health and drug usage. The demographic section will gather basic information such as age, gender, and ethnicity, allowing us to contextualize the results in terms of the population's diversity. The ACE test will assess adverse childhood experiences, asking participants about their exposure to abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction before the age of 18. This test is crucial in identifying the extent of early trauma and its potential impact on current mental health and substance use behaviors. Additionally, the survey will include questions about opioid misuse and mental health, focusing on anxiety, mood disorders, and self-reported drug usage. Questions in this section will ask whether participants have ever used illicit substances such as prescription painkillers, their history of mental illness, and whether they have engaged in self-harm behaviors.

For sampling methods, we will use stratified random sampling to ensure that students from all academic classifications (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) are proportionally represented. The survey will be administered by setting up a table in a central location on campus. Students will be invited to participate by scanning a QR code, which will direct them to the survey. After signing the consent form we will provide, they will be able to complete the survey. This method ensures that we reach a diverse range of students while minimizing biases and enhancing the generalizability of the results.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

For our upcoming research, we will utilize the survey method to collect data. This approach was selected because it efficiently gathers information from our target population while maintaining anonymity. The survey will focus on students at Albany State University, aged 18-25, and will include questions related to demographics, the ACE test, and a section on mental health and drug

usage. The survey will be administered by setting up a table in a central location on campus, where students will be invited to participate by scanning a QR code to complete the survey after signing the consent form. Data will be collected through Microsoft Forms, and the survey will be distributed via QR codes at the table set up in a central campus location. This procedure will encourage students to scan and complete the survey on their mobile devices. By directly engaging with students, we aim to make participation convenient and encourage respondents to be honest and open. Data collection will occur over a week. During this time, we will monitor responses and begin formulating hypotheses based on the data. Once the data collection phase is complete, we will analyze the responses, test our hypotheses, and compare the results to generate new insights that address our research questions.

Data Analysis

This study will use descriptive and exploratory statistics to examine patterns between ACEs, opioid use, and mental health. Descriptive statistics will provide an overview of ACE scores, substance use patterns, and demographic details, helping to identify common trends among participants.

An exploratory analysis will dig deeper into how ACE scores, environment, and substance use severity connect. It will determine whether higher ACE scores are linked to more severe substance use and mental health challenges. It will also explore how opioid addiction affects different areas of young adults' lives, including mental health, school, and social relationships, while considering outside factors like financial struggles or family instability. The results will help uncover relationships between early trauma and substance use, giving a clearer picture of the factors that contribute to addiction in young adults.

Significance and Limitations

The findings of this study will help social workers determine the best practices for supporting young adults struggling with substance abuse. By using the ACE test, this research will identify both

barriers and risk factors that contribute to addiction, providing insight into the connection between early trauma and substance use. The ACE test and selected theories offer a framework for understanding how childhood experiences shape mental health and substance use patterns in young adults.

Additionally, this research is particularly significant for rural communities and Black young adults at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), as these populations are often overlooked in substance use studies. Many rural areas lack access to specialized addiction and mental health services, making it critical to explore how trauma-informed interventions can better serve these communities. Black young adults, especially those attending HBCUs, face unique social and systemic challenges that may impact substance use patterns and access to care. By focusing on this population, the study will contribute to a more inclusive understanding of substance abuse and provide insights that can inform culturally competent, trauma-informed interventions.

One limitation of this study is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias, as participants could underreport or overreport sensitive information related to drug use or mental health. Additionally, setting up a table in a central location on campus may not capture a fully representative sample of the entire student population, as students who frequent that area may differ from those who do not. Furthermore, the study's focus on a single institution may limit the generalizability of the findings to other colleges or broader populations.

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Fitness Communication: Improving Fitness Outcomes through Communication Research

By

Chris Gurrie, University of Tampa

This research draws on insights from organizational cultural approaches to better understand fitness outcomes for participants and organizations. The work takes an organizational theoretical framework paired with applied outcomes to understand how communication research intersects with the practice of fitness and how communication data can improve the lives of participants in sport, fitness, and business activities by understanding the intersections of organizations, culture, health, and marketing.

Keywords: Fitness communication, organizational communication, Marketing, Gyms

Introduction

Fitness is big business. According to IBISWorld (2022), gyms and health clubs comprise a \$36.6B dollar business. This 2022 figure accounts for the US market share only and constitutes a 3.7% growth over the previous year. These figures do not account for individuals who spend little to no cash money on fitness regimes, yet still spend hours running, jumping, flipping, and swimming individually or within communities of practice. For many, the commodity of time is equally valuable to money and completely unaccounted for by GDP or market reports—thus implying fitness an even bigger part of American culture and time.

The author is interested in better understanding how improved human communication can improve the general area of human physical fitness. Specifically, what role does communication as the art of creating better shared understanding play (or contribute to) in the 36 billion dollar industry of fitness as well as within the lives of those who work and enjoy fitness as some point of their lifestyle—time or money notwithstanding? Ask one person about “fitness” and their mind immediately produces large-scale, big-box, corporate gyms like LA Fitness or Crunch. Another person may consider “fitness” to be the intense outdoor training for a benchmark marathon like IronMan or the Boston Marathon. Yet another person may not realize their walking everyday during Covid and making good food choices was also fitness.

Contained in this article are the results of a current study of fitness communication with an analysis of how communication practice works in the context of physical fitness. To do this I use insights from work on organizational culture and its general assumptions about reality, symbols, and interpretations to build a view of place and community. Over 400 respondents provided open-ended answers to 14 questions, resulting in more than 2400 responses to questions about various communication attitudes, behaviors, values, and practices as they take place in the respondents' spaces and places of fitness. The analysis of the data for the current study employed Creswell's Thematic Analysis (2008) as a means to code responses into like ideas, and those ideas were prepared for digestion on the track to answering the questions: 1) How does organizational cultural theory explain communication behaviors and applied practices in places of fitness, and finally, and 2) How does understanding these answers and links lead to helping individuals who practice fitness with others (or themselves), and professionals within fitness communities therefore organizing [and understanding] culture and health.

Theoretical Framing and Literature

Fitness can be difficult to define. Is it the composition of all the elements of body and mind working together aiding someone in surviving and thriving, or is it exemplary elements of looking good naked? To provide a baseline of fitness I chose the National Academy of Sports Medicine's definition (NASM):

Fitness includes five essential components, flexibility, cardiorespiratory fitness, muscular endurance, muscular strength, and body composition. Fitness is vitally important to health and wellness as well as to the ability to engage in normal activities of daily living (ADLs) without excessive fatigue. Physical activity and exercise training programs should be designed with the intent of improving each of the key components of health-related physical fitness in addition to preventing chronic disease (e.g. heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis etc.) (NASM, 2021).

A Google search provides hundreds of definitions for fitness—each one varied in nuance. I chose NASM’s definition for its broad appeal and because NASM is the major accreditation body for physical and personal trainers in the public-facing fitness world (e.g. corporate gyms, personal training gyms, and often group fitness).

A second difficulty in operationalizing how communication impacts or is related to fitness was understanding what aspect of communication to study. For practical purposes it is easier to identify what I am not seeking to study. This study and its related components do not intend to critically analyze self-esteem, body concepts, of uses and gratifications of social media. Conversely, I was equally not intending to study marketing campaigns for personal trainers or Crossfit gyms. Instead, I was interested in the human communication layers nestled within interpersonal communication within the organization that is fitness. This idea was widely obtuse at first because, with communication many often generally think of communication(s) with a defacto media tilt, and contemporarily related to social media management. As communication scholars seeking to make fitness spaces a positive *space* for their related agents, I needed to use communication framework demonstrative of the elements for this study. Thus, the conceptual framework for this work is *organizational cultural theory*, with an intended purpose of application to practice.

Organizational Culture

West and Turner (2018) showcase Michael Pacanowsky and Nick O’Donnell-Trujillo’s 1982 organizational culture theory (OCT) in that organizations can best be understood using a cultural lens, an idea originally proposed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz asserted organizational culture is like a spiderweb. The web is spun as people go about their business, and the residue remaining is the communication process. West and Turner posit the goal of researchers should be to think about all the possible weblike (features) in organizations. In this study, I broadly consider general areas [as “all possible”] of fitness to better understand how communication helps or hinders respondents attain their goals and participate in their cultures. Moreover, I rely upon the

three assumptions of organizational cultural theory to aid in the mapping of the survey instrument and to guide in understanding fitness communication.

Assumptions of organizational cultural theory (West & Turner, 2018).

1. Organizational members create and maintain a shared sense of organizational reality, resulting in a better understanding of the values of an organization.
2. The use and interpretation of symbols are critical to an organization's culture.
3. Cultures vary across organizations, and the interpretations of actions within these cultures are diverse.

Later I outline the survey instrument questions informed by the OTC assumptions (see Appendix A). To create those questions, I turned to the literature.

Body image and social media

Gym culture and its various studies are top of mind now for many scholars. Gyms, fitness trends, and fitness culture provide excellent contexts for which to study various aspects of individuals, agency, trends, image, and more. Much of the current literature focuses on critical analysis of fitness culture, social media, and other various levels of esteem, identity, and positivity. For example, Rojkowski and Schops (2020) found the social media access of today leads to visually-driven social media feeds that constitute avenues paved with ostentatious displays of obsessively shaped bodies that appear like flawless statues carved out of white marble. They write that especially on Instagram, the body constitutes an object of consumption needing to be continuously sculptured to meet the aesthetic requirements of the postmodern fitness regime, and, consequently, experience aesthetic inclusions.

Turnock (2021) studied rural gym spaces, and reports in his work *Rural Gym Spaces and Masculine Physical Cultures in an Age of Change: Rurality, Masculinity, Inequalities, and Harm in the Gym*, the gym is an increasing site for social research. Much work is spent identifying the importance of understanding gender construction and performance in forming policy to address inequalities in gym access, and harms within gym-going cultures. Turnock cites Mansfield et. al.

(1993) noting the gym has become and increasing site for social research in recent years, and while the intersections of gender, culture, and space in gyms have been studied for some time, the rise of social media-oriented “workout culture” and parallel ‘wellness’ trends in society, gym training has become increasingly popular, leading to a renewed focus on these cultural sites (Hakim 2018; Cone et. al., 2018, Sharon-David et.al., 2020; from Turnock (2021).

Of the numerous and varied digital subcultures emerging with the rise of photo-based social media during the 2010s, the culture surrounding fitness stands out as one of the more notable (Daudi, 2022). The same study posited research identified the fitness phenomenon “fitspiration” as consisting largely of users engaging in behaviors of self-sexualization and self-objectification, following an inherent focus within fitness on the body, its maintenance, and ultimately its appearance (Daudi, 2022).

Felice, Rafoul, Meyer, and Neiterman (2019) studied the impact of social media on body image relative to gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men. This study was notable for the current work because it more so addressed body image and social media within men. While it does not go on to specifically discuss organizational culture it does find recent evidence indicates that interactive media-based web technologies such as social networking sites have an appreciable effect on users’ perceptions of and attitudes toward their own bodies, as well as resultant weight and shape control behaviors (2019). Felice et. al. (2019) also found a gap in the literature on social media’s impact on body image disturbance in gay and bisexual men. Their study focused on that gap by surveying and extending existing theory using a critical review methodology. The current study of fitness communication seeks to use theoretical framework to conduct research and report findings that may offer answers in the gaps in the literature my colleagues addressed.

Some literature moves away from social media image and perceptions related to fitness culture and covers social media use on employee engagement within fitness organizations. This work surfaces when I reference “fitness and organizational culture.” For example, Men, Neil, and Ewing

(2020) explored how internal social media influences employee engagement. They surveyed 1150 employees from various organizations in the United States that had adopted internal social media, and the results show that employees use of internal social media contributes to an enhanced level of perceived transparency. This work supports the organizational cultural work of fitness employees conducted by MacIntosh and Walker (2012). They found culture is embedded in the relationships among individuals and is important to understanding the philosophy, values, and beliefs that guide human social activity. Therefore, I conclude the transparency found in social media use may help with the increased perception of culture.

Organizational culture and fitness

Mentioned before, I am more interested in how communication is *practiced* in places of fitness and how understanding and improving applied communication practice may improve fitness outcomes and culture. Scanning the literature for seminal work in fitness communication produced nascent results when compared to previous work in body image, social media, and critical analysis. Yet, some studies do inch closer to explaining fitness culture and its relative parts. Cardone (2019) posits gyms offer an environment for individualized training and social encounters that are today attractive to a broad and culturally diverse group of people. That work showed that in a gym, cultural differences play out in both exclusionary, rejecting behaviors and a gym-specific habitual principle of mutual help in sport activities that binds members and transcends cultural differences (p. 1).

The behavior of peer support was supported by the work of Bailey, Benson, and Bruner (2017). They studied the growth of Crossfit and the organizational culture surrounding it. Participants' accounts revealed that the artifacts of the organizational culture included the rugged, industrial appearance of the gym and the social nature of members' interactions prior to and following each workout (pg. 1). Espoused beliefs and values identified included pride in the gym and their workouts, inclusivity, and a strong sense of community that extended beyond the gym.

MacIntosh, Doherty, and Walker (2010) compared the perception and impact of organization culture on staff working in for-profit and non-profit organizations in the fitness industry. Their theoretical framework borrowed from Schein (1991) citing when organizations form, core values and beliefs emerge based on founding principles and ways of doing things. Over time, the ongoing negotiation and practices of group members who enter the organization further shape the values and beliefs central to organizational life and inform both acceptable and unacceptable ways of how jobs are performed (Kusluvan and Karamistafa, 2003; MacIntosh, et.al., 2010).

The above study concluded that with the exception of sales, subcultures do not exist by sector based on the cultural dimensions examined (they surveyed respondents about sales, staff competency, atmosphere, connectedness, formalization, service equipment, service programs, and organizational presences). In their 2X8 ANOVA they found no variation in perception of organizational presence, which was reported as surprising given the cultural dimensions it represents. The scholars also reported no significant difference in the perception of atmosphere (between profit and non-profit gyms), which led them to surmise that upbeat and friendly atmosphere, as reported in the results, were expected and revealed by most respondents. This work surmised the evidence suggests industry-wide culture in the fitness domain, with limited cross-sectional variation—which, strengthens the argument that industry demands and dynamics shape the values, beliefs, and underlying assumptions about how things are done in an organization within that industry.

When thinking about the future of applied and organizational communication and fitness, or the place one finds in their fitness spaces Pattinaja (2020) suggests adhocracy culture is the way for gyms to run when considering management styles. Described as original, dynamic, entrepreneurial, innovative, risk-taking, prepared for changes, aggressive and flexible; Pattinaja posits this style is the most innovation-oriented culture whose main goal deals with fostering adaptability, flexibility, and creativity, in order to face uncertainty, ambiguity and information overload (Felipe, Roldan, &

Leal-Rodriguez, 2017; Pattinaja, 2020). It is suggested in this work that leadership styles of big gyms lead to the cultural feeling of those gyms' members.

Research Questions and Purpose

The research review in this study revealed a gap in the literature related to human communication at the gym reporting how people perceive their own space, how the artifacts interact with the intended workout and theorizing about the relationship between fitness and communication. I can look to many sub-disciplines in the communication field for guidance, but this was the obtuse and abstract nature of the original concept. This current study in fitness communication intends to create information for peers and readers to better understand:

RQ1. How does organizational cultural theory explain communication behaviors and practices in places and spaces of fitness?

RQ2. How does understanding these answers and links lead to helping individuals who practice fitness with others (or themselves), and professionals within fitness communities, replicated studies now and in the future, and a possible sub area of knowledge within the communication field?

Method

I am a communication scholar in the academy who actively participates in fitness activities in my private life. My fitness activities come from group fitness classes, yoga, and surfing to working with personal trainers, big box gyms, Crossfit, and bodybuilding. The current paper is one piece of a larger study of fitness communication. Here I highlight my methods in obtaining data to discern and code popular themes for discussion.

1. The questionnaire instrument (appendix A) was a combination of questions created after reviewing the literature and mapping to the theoretical framework of organizational cultural theory. There are 14 open-ended questions to solicit free responses from respondents.
2. Upon IRB approval, the questionnaire was created in Qualtrics and distributed electronically.
3. The sample for this work is a convenience sample. The questionnaire link was distributed via the researcher's social media accounts—publicly, and in classrooms and at places of fitness. There were no demographic questions created to exclude or include individuals for any classification or reason. The first question asks how the respondent links themselves to the world of fitness.

In the case of this study, anyone who links themselves to the fitness world is included, regardless of the NASM definition.

4. The instrument was distributed early 2022 thru today and remains live. While the researchers reside in the Southeastern part of the United States, I recognize responses from across the entire US and possibly outside the country.

Coding

With 438 responses and 14 questions, there were over 4,400 responses for coding. To code the responses, I used Creswell's Thematic Analysis (2008). Responses were aggregated together to form major ideas. Like codes, themes, have labels that typically consist of no more than two to four words. In thematic analysis there may be several types of themes, and I used Creswell's suggestion of 1) major/minor themes (often called ordinary) 2) unexpected themes, 3) hard-to-classify themes.

For this paper I chose to analyze the following survey questions that are mapped to OCT.

<p>Q3. How would you describe the “culture” of one of more of your [current or past] public paces of fitness (gym, studio, corporate fitness, etc.)?</p> <p><i>This question is based on OTC assumption 3: Cultures vary across organizations, and the interpretations of actions within these cultures are diverse.</i></p>
<p>Q8. Are there communication behaviors in the fitness world that would be confusing to people outside the fitness world?</p> <p><i>This question is based on OTC assumption 1: Organizational members create and maintain a shared sense of organizational reality, resulting in a better understanding of the values of an organization.</i></p>
<p>Q9. What are some “symbols,” behaviors, or artifacts that are specific or critical to the fitness world or industry? This may be clothing trends to social media habits.</p> <p><i>This question is based on OTC assumption 2: The use and interpretation of symbols are critical to an organization's culture.</i></p>

The larger study had 14 questions about training, what one would want their trainer to know, and other related fitness experience inquiries. This paper reflects themes to the responses related to OTC. (Questionnaire, see Appendix A).

Results

Q3. How would you describe the “culture” of one of more of your [current or past] public paces of fitness (gym, studio, corporate fitness, etc.)?

This question is based on OTC assumption 3: Cultures vary across organizations, and the interpretations of actions within these cultures are diverse.

Of the 438 responses to this open-ended question, I report the following results:

The major theme is positive, or the most noted responses were what I called positive perspectives on the respondent’s gym culture. 36 responses fell unquestionably into a positive perspective.

These included answers like:

- a. The culture of outdoor enthusiasts tends to be welcoming.
- b. My corporate gym has a hometown feel.
- c. There’s a certain comradery among my fellow gym-goers we keep an eye on each other and help each other out.
- d. Friendly
- e. Accepting
- f. Positive

Multiple respondents repeated the above selected quotations in some format. This was the overall theme to the gym culture question, that the atmosphere was positive.

The minor theme is negative, or the second most noted responses were negative. 19 responses fell unquestionably into a negative perspective.

These included answers like:

- a. Unwelcoming
- b. Intimidating
- c. Monster people
- d. There isn’t a lot of sharing of information
- e. Creeper gym culture
- f. Douchey
- g. Brotastic
- h. Toxic culture

Several respondents repeated the above selected quotations in some form. This was the minor theme, and it was the second most popular descriptor of the culture of the respondents’ gyms.

The unexpected theme was isolation. Many respondents mentioned “getting in and getting it done,” or working alone with headphones on. While it was expected to have positive and negative feelings toward gym and fitness culture, it wasn’t assumed, based on the literature, from the lens at which fitness has negative or positive implications, that respondents would mention their isolation.

For example:

- a. Self-guided
- b. Low key
- c. Focused
- d. Keep to themselves
- e. Prefer working out alone
- f. Individualized journey
- g. Mind their business

Hard to classify theme could be a major theme by itself. Respondents mentioned really specific things that speak to the nature of the organizational culture theory, but do not necessarily fit into any major theme of positive, negative, or unexpected. Some of those responses were possibly negative or positive, and in some cases quite ordinary, or quite unexpected.

For example:

- a. My last gym was like a nightclub in terms of peacocking and I loved it.
- b. Masculine
- c. A social party, it seems
- d. The other gym I go to has a more “gym bro” culture where there are older bald men who just workout upper body and forget they have legs too. They come across as creepy to me personally and I now avoid going to that gym. There are also porn stars at that gym too, who do not hide that they are porn stars. That means the gym is very looks-based and you get judged a lot in that way.
- e. Yoga studios are supportive
- f. Orange theory can be pushy in sales, but great atmosphere.
- g. I am part of the “afterwork” crowd at the gym. Mostly people similar to me trying to stay in shape with few “intense” members.
- h. Prioritizing physique over health
- i. Crossfit and group fitness culture

Q8. Are there communication behaviors in the fitness world that would be confusing to people outside the fitness world?

This question is based on OTC assumption 1: Organizational members create and maintain a shared sense of organizational reality, resulting in a better understanding of the values of an organization.

Of the 430 responses to this open-ended question, I report the following results:

The *major theme was vernacular*. 12 respondents mentioned specific language associated with their gym cultures. Several responses included the words jargon, vernacular, lingo, and speech. Some were less specific but mentioned talk related to the gym.

For example:

- a. If we’re talking about vernacular, then sure: Smith machine, etc.
- b. There are terms we use when explaining workouts to others.

- c. The use of the word “bro.”
- d. Jargon like words, “max out” and “super sets.”
- e. I think people who aren’t into fitness don’t understand the connection to those are really into it.
- f. People who are really into fitness talk about it in more details and use buzzwords more than the casual fitness-goer.
- g. Randomly talking to strangers in the gym about what they’re doing in the moment, like “good job,” or “nice set.”
- h. There is generally a “fitness language” people wouldn’t understand if they don’t go to the gym.

The minor theme was non-verbal communication, directly mentioned or related to bodies and image. 8 respondents directly mentioned these ideas as communication behaviors related to the gym.

For example:

- a. Unhealthy body image.
- b. Shallow single men and women only interested in their image.
- c. Progress pictures can seem vain and validating.
- d. Maybe the non-verbal behaviors that denote people’s interest in a machine.
- e. The intense focus on each other’s bodies.
- f. Things like making a non-verbal cutting hand gesture to ask if someone is done with a piece of equipment. There are lots of non-verbal communications like this in the gym.
- g. Unspoken communication on whether or not a machine is being used.

The unexpected theme was supplement and meal prep. 5 respondents clearly mentioned supplements and meal preparation as being specific to communication behaviors.

For example:

- a. It may not be “communication” but things like meal prep and not drinking, eating sweets etc. blocking your time for workouts and meal prep may be confusing to others.
- b. Time, supplements needed, affects to social life, mental health, unhealthy obsession.
- c. People don’t understand their bodies and how to fuel and drive it properly.
- d. Performance enhancing supplements.
- e. Outside the fitness world steroid use is seen as horrible and absolutely taboo. Inside the fitness world it is seen as another class.

Hard to classify themes were unclear, but there were random responses worth mentioning.

For example:

- a. No matter how appealing your body may be to others, most people only see the flaws in themselves and wished they were bigger, more toned, skinnier, etc.
- b. Yes [communication culture]. Yoga studios and their expressions of emotion and support. This is pretty unique to that fitness environment and may be seen as weak in strength training gyms.

- | |
|---|
| c. I think people EXPECT there to be this lingo and behavior of grunting and “smacking asses” but there is not. |
|---|

Q9. What are some “symbols,” behaviors, or artifacts that are specific or critical to the fitness world or industry? This may be clothing trends to social medial habits.

This question is based on OTC assumption 2: The use and interpretation of symbols are critical to an organization’s culture.

Of the 405 responses to this question, I report the following results.

<i>The major theme was selfies, Instagram, and photos. 25 respondents mentioned this specifically.</i>
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For example:

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Looking tough, walking tough, wearing tight clothes, posting pics of body (in workout gear, some gym culture has become sexualized, especially with social media.b. The selfie in the mirror at the big box gym is a huge behavior that to me has a negative impact on the fitness industry.c. Also social media plays a huge role. Social media is never reality and trainers pretend it is. Creating and image of false reality.d. You have to have social media to be relevant in today’s fitness industry. Instagram, at minimum. TikTok helps. I’d say the best fitness people on social media talk about working out, fitness and diet.e. Spandex, flexing, sports bras, specific shoes, gym mirror selfies.f. Headphones, supplements, and sauna selfiesg. Selfies seem to definitely be a big thing. Sometimes they have practical application for tracking progress or for online coaching. But other times not so much.h. Social media. Shirtless selfies/videos. |
|---|

<i>The minor theme was clothing, tank tops, leggings, and shoes. 19 respondents clearly identified these aspects as fitness artifacts.</i>
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For example:

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Crossfit, metal and sweat, lifting belts and gloves, chalk powder, headbands, leggings, group fitness classes, Chuck Taylors, gym bags, hair ties, hand towelsb. Lululemon Redcon1, etc.c. In Crossfit status is largely communicated by the shoes you’re wearing, gym clothes, drinking waters, health food.d. Expensive footwear and clothinge. Tank tops, yoga pants, gloves, headphones, selfies!f. Tank tops, cut off shirts, compression pants, leggings, sports bras, sweatbandsg. The tank top.h. The use of the word “bro,” revealing clothing, and attention seeking actions/choices. |
|---|

<p><i>The unexpected theme was distinctly negative, unhappy, or related to certain circles or status. 11 respondents cited something related directly to this</i></p>
<p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. “Look how happy I am. Stay motivated and love yourself!” But in reality most of these influencers hate themselves and are more unhappy than ever. b. They use their clients as validation for their own self-image. c. Status is large communicated by the shoes you’re wearing. d. Workout clothes highlight who does and does not belong. e. I’m sure the higher-end workout clothes send a message [of status] but I’m not in that circle. f. I see plenty of social media posts about how working out is the other barrier between some people and loneliness and depression. g. I used to think Lululemon-wearing people were pretentious until I started working there and realized the clothes last forever.

<p><i>The hard to classify theme were respondents who talked about outdoor or personal activities as fitness.</i></p>
<p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I think it depends on the group you’re referring to. Swimmers have a wide range of symbols, language, behaviors, equipment, etc. There are certain etiquette practices in lap swimming, as well as sue of weight machines. b. In this new world of smart fitness products for home use, getting your users to share their experiences as much as possible helps to build community. I’m in a Peloton moms group on FB and I have started to only join the sessions the group is chatting about or by the instructor they’ve been highlighting. c. Expensive clothes. Clothes are not affordable to all. Membership fees can be inaccessible to many. d. My first thought is protein shakes, pre workout bends, etc. Food related products that are often denounced by health professional.

Discussion

The current study seeks to understand answers to the aforementioned research questions while using data from the various survey questions:

RQ1. How does organizational cultural theory explain communication behaviors and practices in places and spaces of fitness?

RQ2. How does understanding these answers and links lead to helping individuals who practice fitness with others (or themselves), and professionals within fitness communities, replicated studies now and in the future, and a possible sub area of knowledge within the communication field?

Related to RQ1, regarding organizational cultural theory relative to the communication behaviors and practices within spaces of fitness. OTC tells us the use and interpretation of symbols is critical to an organization's culture. Question 9 directly asked respondents about symbols of their fitness spaces, and respondents provided robust answers. To me, the cultural framework fits nicely with this study to understand fitness communication and how the spaces surrounding it are themselves culture. It is not difficult to understand gyms and studios are small spheres and spaces of culture. What is of note is the interpretive aspect of the symbols. The themes above discuss workout clothing, selfies and social media. Some respondents thought these actions made sense based on the framework of the fitness space, while even so others thought it may be gratuitous or vanity—which emerged in minor themes. This work is not to understand self-esteem, body image, or uses and gratifications of social media and shame. Instead, I suggest fitness goers, gym and studio owners, and general readers observe the cultural nature of gyms, possibly seek to understand the symbols and artifacts, and possibly approach organizations, coaching, and training with the knowledge the complete culture is comprised of these systems of symbols and rituals. This may help people find their place within fitness spaces and help create communities and organize communication data within organization for better health outcomes.

Related to RQ2 further exploring how communication and its understanding could help individuals who practice and improve communities (applied practices), assumption 3 and answers/themes from question 3 related to cultures vary across organizations, and the interpretations of actions within these cultures are diverse helps to explore this avenue. The themes specifically point to the diversity across spaces of fitness. This is not novel considering the weights and programming at a Crossfit gym seem obviously different from those of a yoga studio. What seems to be universal as a major theme across respondents is the positivity suggested in spaces that are welcoming, encouraging, and enthusiastic. The themes support the cultural framework that cultures vary across organizations and the interpretations are diverse. It makes sense some find body image,

mirror-selfies, and tight clothing part of a vain self-promoting culture, where others enjoy showing off the progress they make and the work they do. The OTC assumption suggests it has always been like this and will continue to be like this—social media and its permeation are simply the new norm. Knowing the diversity of fitness spaces can help fitness professionals and fitness-goers to select and thrive in fitness organizations that match the diverse culture they seek.

Here I mention the earlier review of literature. Seemingly there is a gap about fitness, communication, and culture and how those areas can benefit from knowing more about fitness-goers' attitudes. It seems the current study aligns with Turnock (2021) in that gym spaces are becoming increasingly social and therefore areas with a specific culture are important to their patrons. It furthermore is supported by the notion from MacIntosh and Walker (2012) about culture being embedded in relationship of individuals but goes further in updating those findings.

In short: non-verbal and verbal communication play a large role in fitness culture. The themes above support this from use of artifacts like clothing and shoes to behaviors like asking for gym equipment or taking a selfie at the gym. Moreover, even when someone practices fitness alone, they communicate about it later with discussion among others, social media posts, and photos and clothing outside the practice space. The theoretical framework of organizational culture theory seems to support fitness places as cultures that can be interpreted. Understanding the framework could better help gym-goers and owners better create spaces for everyone. Finally, these understandings could promote an applied organizational communication practice that helps with diverse fitness participants and creates welcoming spaces for all—I argue this would be a positive place for practice. It may also be applied to communities of practice related to sport, health, and fitness.

Limitations

Possible limitations to this study include the wide-range of self-reported responses from this convenience survey. Participants were not selected based on demographic information or

location, which could lead to differences between those very same markers. Moreover, a future researcher may wish to understand women's attitudes toward certain questions, etc.

Future Implications and Conclusion

Working on this project I wonder (dream?) if fitness communication could be its own subdiscipline of communication. It does seem it could be ripe for an increased area of study, perhaps layered in and on top of existing communication theories or within organizational communication. The purpose in doing so honors the billion-dollar fitness industry and its breakneck growth now and in the coming years. Replicating this study and publishing various data may help researchers and fitness goers-alike find their place within this unique and growing culture.

I suggest the future of fitness communication study and practice rests and will continue to rest with understanding fitness communication culture, place, and space, through examining the organization of health and culture. The outset of this paper and the study highlighted my intention for possibly collecting data that could help those interested in fitness spaces—gym owners, gym goers, or coaches, while closing gaps in the literature. Understanding the critical nature of self-esteem, mirror-selfies, shoes, artifacts, and more is important, yet OTC suggests that will continue to be part of the fitness and gym cultures. I suggest that understanding the culture as such can help harness ways to reach diverse populations and create spaces of inclusivity, community, and personal freedom. Moreover, my suggestion for the future is to better understand how positive culture, or cultural at all, could be cultivated among the diverse fitness landscapes. For example, some respondents mentioned their use of Peloton or the Mirror, which are at-home pieces of fitness equipment where participants are linked via online communities. Studies like this now and, in the future, could help inform programmers who create community among fitness-goers who are actually isolated while working out. This type of work, I conclude, could increase the positivity among communities of practices in a world increasingly stratified by practicality and interest. The

organizational nature of fitness communication can then be studied within practice multiple communities seeking to know more about how participants can improve their personal goals and health/body goal outcomes.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire: Fitness Communication General Open-ended Survey

Organizational Cultural Theory invites all researchers to observe, record, and make sense of the communicative behavior of organizational members (Paconowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982).

The purpose of this study is to discover where and how communication fits into the fitness culture.

- 1) How do you connect yourself to the world of fitness? Be as specific as you have time for. Examples may include: "Trainer, bodybuilder, dance instructor, (or all of these) with timelines (20 years, college athlete, dance school owner, yoga master, etc.).
- 2) Where do you primarily workout for your own fitness?
- 3) How would you describe the "culture" of one or more of your [current or past] public places of fitness (gym, studio, corporate fitness, etc.)? (based in assumption 3)
- 4) In your own words, or the words of your education and background, how would you define "fitness?"
- 5) What is something personal trainers and fitness coaches should know about communication with clients? Be as specific as possible.
- 6) How do you find interpersonal communication within the fitness world to be different than other areas? (E.g. schools, business, or even healthcare?)
- 7) What are some things you've seen [at the gym] about how people talk, behave, make friends, or areas related to self-esteem?
- 8) Are there communication behaviors in the fitness world that would be confusing to people outside the fitness world? What are they? Can you give an example? (based on OCT assumption 1)
- 9) What are some "symbols," behaviors, or artifacts that are specific or critical to the fitness world or industry. This may be clothing trends, to social media habits. (based on OCT assumption 2)
- 10) How could communication (of any kind) be improved in the fitness world? How would this happen? Why would it be important?

- 11) What do you think is the future of communication in the fitness industry/world? Be as imaginative as you have time for. (Answers may include media, advertising, training, etc.).
- 12) Do you think communication styles within the fitness industry differ for members of LGBT groups, persons of color, White suburban America, or other? If so, say who, how, and why?
- 13) To your knowledge, how could applied communication strategies improve areas of the fitness world? How? Be as specific as you have time for. (Typed strategic communication in the survey).
- 14) What would you want someone studying fitness communication and its members to know about the fitness world as it relates to communication and improving communication outcomes/and, or, fitness outcomes?

Developing Emotional and Cultural Intelligence in New ESOL Teachers: A Reflective Analysis of Action Research Design for Mentoring Support

by

Viktoria Korogodsky, Florida Atlantic University

This reflective essay examines the methodological design of an action research study focused on supporting new ESOL teachers through emotional intelligence (EQ) and cultural intelligence (CQ) mentoring. Drawing on a researcher's personal teaching experiences and existing literature, this analysis explores the theoretical foundations and practical considerations involved in designing research that addresses the intersection of emotional and cultural competencies in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) education. The essay reflects on the challenges of creating mentoring frameworks that specifically target the unique needs of new ESOL teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. The analysis demonstrates how action research methodology places teacher voices at the center of inquiry. This approach proves essential when examining the complex emotional and cultural dynamics that ESOL teachers navigate daily. Key considerations include ethical implications of mentoring relationships, epistemological foundations of culturally responsive teaching, and the potential for systematic change through collaborative inquiry. Through examining the research design process, this reflection contributes to the scholarly conversation about innovative approaches to teacher professional development in multicultural educational settings and offers insights for researchers, teacher educators, and professional development specialists interested in developing comprehensive support systems for ESOL educators navigating the intersection of emotional and cultural intelligence in their practice.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, ESOL teachers, action research, mentoring

Teacher preparation programs often emphasize pedagogical techniques and language acquisition theory; yet, in the lived reality of diverse classrooms, educators are immersed in emotionally charged, culturally complex situations that defy such structured training. This dissonance became starkly real for me on my first day as an ESOL teacher, when a tearful kindergartener taught me more about the emotional labor of teaching than any course ever had. This was my first day teaching in Westchester, NY. The principal's voice snapped over the loudspeaker, urgently requesting my presence in a kindergarten classroom to assist with a newcomer student. I walked into the classroom and saw a little Japanese boy sitting under a desk. Tears streamed down his face as he let out loud sobs while his teacher and classmates looked on with a mixture of concern and helplessness. Despite my training in language acquisition strategies and pedagogical methods, I felt completely unprepared for the emotional and cultural complexity of that moment. I didn't just need to know how to teach English, but I needed to understand how to emotionally connect with a child experiencing

cultural displacement and how to help create a bridge between his world and the new environment he found himself in.

Successful ESOL instruction requires more than linguistic and pedagogical knowledge - it demands high levels of both *emotional intelligence* (EQ) - the ability to recognize and manage emotions in oneself and others to navigate relationships effectively (Goleman, 1998) and *cultural intelligence* (CQ) - the ability to adapt and function effectively in culturally diverse settings (Ang & Van Dyne, 2015).

This realization crystallizes a fundamental tension in ESOL education between the theoretical preparation teachers receive and the emotional and cultural complexities they must navigate in diverse classrooms. While existing research acknowledges the role of emotional and cultural intelligence in effective ESOL teaching, it also reveals a critical gap in formal teacher preparation addressing these complexities in an integrated way. Gkonou and Mercer (2017) and Dewaele et al. (2018) highlight how ESOL teachers rely on emotional intelligence to build relationships and manage classrooms yet often draw on personal rather than professional training to navigate cultural challenges. Others (Kutsyuruba et al., 2017; O'Hara et al., 2020; and Clark & Byrnes, 2012) emphasize the importance of mentoring, cultural competence, and emotional support for novice teachers, but note that institutional structures and professional development rarely address these dimensions holistically. Together, these studies suggest that the intersection of emotional and cultural demands remains undertheorized and underdeveloped in teacher education. This motivated my interest in exploring how new ESOL teachers develop these competencies in emotional and cultural intelligence and what specific mentoring support they need to navigate the complex dynamics of their classrooms. Therefore, the primary research question (RQ) guiding this inquiry is: *How do new ESOL teachers perceive the value of EQ and CQ training, and what specific mentoring support do they identify as necessary for managing cultural and emotional challenges in their classrooms?* In addition, three sub-questions further support RQ, each examining the cultural and emotional challenges new ESOL teachers encounter, ways in which they currently approach these challenges, and the types of mentoring support most beneficial for them.

The choice of research design to effectively and fully respond to these research questions emerged from the requirements of the *EDF 6918 Action Research in Schools and Communities* coursework, a component of the doctoral curriculum at Florida Atlantic University (FAU). The course requires teachers to base their inquiries on classroom practice while they develop systematic reflection methods to find solutions

that enhance student learning and professional development. It enables the researcher to create a plan that directly supports both personal and professional goals, as well as the teaching environment, through designing inquiry questions, conducting observations, analyzing real-world challenges, and engaging with the ethical dimensions of practitioner research. The research study establishes new ESOL teachers as active participants who can direct meaningful changes to cultural and emotional challenge management in their classrooms. The action research method provides the ideal approach to investigate these questions, as it combines reflective practice with inquiry-based research and ongoing improvement efforts, aligning with both the course principles and teacher-identified needs.

The purpose of this reflective essay is to examine the intellectual and methodological development of a research project designed to address these questions by exploring the conceptual foundations, design choices, and ethical considerations involved in creating an action research study focused on EQ and CQ mentoring for new ESOL teachers. It offers critical reflections on the research methodology, shaping the study's design and direction, and contributes to the scholarly conversation on theoretical and practical considerations essential for designing effective professional development in multicultural educational contexts.

Theoretical Background

ESOL teacher development involves multiple competencies that intersect in complex ways - emotional, cultural, and pedagogical knowledge all play crucial roles. A growing body of research suggests that new ESOL teachers encounter challenges that go far beyond typical classroom management or content delivery issues (O'Hara et al, 2020). These educators must navigate intricate cultural dynamics while addressing the linguistic, social, and emotional needs of our increasingly diverse student populations.

Goleman (1998) defines *Emotional Intelligence* (EQ) as an individual's capacity to recognize and manage emotions in themselves and others while effectively navigating relationships. In ESOL contexts, this encompasses the ability to create emotionally safe spaces where students feel comfortable taking language risks, recognize anxiety and frustration in learners navigating both language and cultural barriers, and manage teacher stress when facing complex communication challenges. At the same time, Cultural Intelligence (CQ), defined as an individual's ability to function across different cultural contexts effectively (Ang & Van Dyne,

2015), becomes equally critical as ESOL teachers work with students from varied linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Gkonou and Mercer (2017) surveyed 890 teachers globally and found that ESOL teachers generally scored highly on measures of emotional intelligence and social intelligence. Their mixed-methods study identifies specific practices employed by emotionally intelligent teachers, including the strategic use of student names, attention to nonverbal communication, and the conscious use of classroom space. These practices directly support the importance of teachers' ability to build meaningful relationships with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Dewaele et al. (2018) in their survey of 513 ESOL and EFL teachers suggest that emotional intelligence and teaching experience positively correlate with creativity and classroom management skills and that emotional intelligence enhances teaching effectiveness more significantly than other factors, such as language proficiency. Their study further reveals that teachers often rely on their own “teaching experience and the variety of past classroom experiences to interpret and respond to current classroom events and manage the class” (Dewaele et al., 2018, page number?), thereby depending heavily on experiential knowledge rather than formalized training when responding to emotional and cultural classroom dynamics. This suggests a critical need for structured professional development that integrates emotional and cultural intelligence development rather than treating these competencies as separate skill sets.

The literature on professional development for ESOL teachers discusses the importance of addressing both emotional and cultural dimensions. In their systematic review of international research on beginning teachers, Kutsyuruba et al. (2017) identify cultural competency as one of the critical needs, which is especially important for teachers working in diverse settings. The researchers find that novice teachers experience professional dissonance between their idealistic teaching approaches and established school cultural practices, which can lead to decreased effectiveness and higher attrition rates. This phenomenon demonstrates the essential connection between emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity in educational settings. (Kutsyuruba et al., 2017). O'Hara et al. (2020) provide further clarification on the correlation between EQ and CQ, arguing that novice teachers need both theoretical knowledge of language acquisition and a practical understanding of academic language to effectively teach English language learners. They suggest that teachers require

skills beyond content knowledge; they need emotional and cultural awareness to identify language demands and provide appropriate scaffolding. The researchers further find that effective ESOL instruction requires teachers to develop a comprehensive understanding of academic language that extends beyond vocabulary acquisition, along with the ability to recognize the specific linguistic challenges embedded within educational materials and assignments. This connects directly to both emotional and cultural intelligence: teachers with higher EQ can better sense students' frustration with language demands and respond with appropriate support, whereas well-developed CQ can help recognize how cultural backgrounds influence students' approaches to academic language. When teachers combine these intelligences, they can identify the technical language barriers and the emotional and cultural factors that impact how diverse learners engage with academic content. These practices lead to more responsive and effective instruction (O'Hara et al., 2020). The interconnection between emotional awareness, cultural sensitivity, and pedagogical knowledge suggests that professional development should address these domains simultaneously.

Such well-designed mentoring programs are especially beneficial to novice ESOL teachers, who require extensive support in developing their teaching skills and cultural understanding. In fact, Clark, and Byrnes' (2012) study of 136 elementary school teachers in the initial stages of their careers finds that emotional support ranked as the most valuable form of mentoring assistance, where teacher participants valued mentors who demonstrated active listening skills and offered encouragement during times of professional uncertainty and self-doubt. The study also reveals that institutional factors significantly influenced mentoring effectiveness: administrative support, especially common planning time with mentors, enhanced the perceived value of mentoring relationships. Teachers who had planning time and observation opportunities rated mentoring experiences higher than those without these supports. This underscores the importance of both emotional components and systemic support in effective mentoring relationships. Hayden and Gratteau-Zinnel (2019) show that mentors play a critical role in developing pedagogical content

knowledge through structured reflection and analysis of student responses by providing concrete support, demonstrating effective teaching practices, and addressing specific challenges of teaching English language learners. Two skills are critical: the ability to evaluate and choose culturally appropriate instructional materials and the capacity to value and build upon students' existing language strengths from their first language (Gratteau-Zinnel, 2019). O'Hara et al. (2020) agree: the skilled mentors demonstrated how to strike the right balance between explicit language instruction and immersive learning experiences, and craft meaningful language objectives while implementing appropriate scaffolding techniques. Interestingly, mentoring combined with action research can be particularly powerful for developing teachers' capacity to address cultural and emotional challenges in ESOL classrooms at multiple levels: department, teacher, and student (Herrera, 2018).

While current research establishes the importance of both emotional and cultural intelligence in ESOL teaching, the researcher is joining the scholarly conversations in several key areas that require further investigation. First, most studies examine emotional and cultural intelligence in novice teachers separately, rather than exploring their intersection in the specific ESOL contexts. Second, research on mentoring for ESOL teachers often focuses on general pedagogical support rather than specifically addressing the emotional and cultural challenges unique to multicultural language learning environments. Third, limited research exists on how new teachers perceive and value training in these areas, particularly regarding what specific mentoring support they identify, as necessary. Building on Herrera's (2018) application of action research, this study examines how this methodology can bring participant-teachers' voices to the forefront in the co-development of mentoring frameworks that address the interplay between emotional and cultural intelligence. By centering teacher perceptions and lived experiences, the research aims to contribute to the design of more contextually responsive and pedagogically effective professional development models for ESOL educators.

Research Settings and Design

The study aims to recruit multiple participants, novice teachers who teach ESOL to multilingual and multicultural students in grades K-12, across various classroom periods, to function as mentees. Additionally, the project aims to leverage the expertise of teacher-mentors - experienced

educators who will provide contextual information and validate the approach. These seasoned professionals will not be direct participants in the mentoring intervention but will serve as sources of expert knowledge about mentoring practices in ESOL contexts. The researcher, with her extensive experience as an ESOL teacher and PhD student in Curriculum and Instruction with a background in educational psychology, will serve as the primary mentor in the study.

The planned research timeline, presented in Table 1, outlines specific objectives, methods, and researcher roles for each stage of the action research cycle. The structured sequence of activities, starting with orientation and relationship building and ending with reflection and presentation, demonstrates how mentoring, data collection, and reflexive practices will be integrated during the study period. Notably, the qualitative study will gather information about the mentees' experiences and perceptions through a semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom that explores the mentees' background, current challenges related to cultural and emotional aspects of teaching, and perceived support needs. Questions will focus on the challenges faced due to cultural differences, current approaches to managing emotional situations, and the types of support the mentees felt would be most beneficial.

Table 1
Timeline of Research Activities

Time	Activity	Notes
1	Week Study Preparation	Development of research questions and design Creation of materials and protocols Sending out recruitment fliers
2	Week Initial contact with mentees	Initial email and phone conversation with ESOL teacher Discussion of Action Research project Sharing of consent form and design plan Teacher agreement to participate as mentee
3	Week Consultation with experienced mentors	Discussion of mentorship structures and requirements Information about mentor training programs Insights on ESOL teacher professional development Perspectives on effective mentoring approaches
4	Week Initial Interview with mentees	Conduct via Zoom Establish baseline understanding of challenges Explore cultural and emotional aspects of teaching Identify perceived support needs
5	Week Materials shared with mentees	Research plan Reflection journal template EQ/CQ introduction materials

5-6	Week	Mentoring sessions via Zoon	Address classroom challenges with student behavior Discuss cultural differences in group work Provide strategies for classroom management
6-7	Week	Data collection and communication	Mentees to complete reflection journal entries Email exchange on stress management strategies
8	Week	Final phase of study	Share more EQ & CQ training materials Conduct final mentoring session via Zoom Collect final reflection from mentees

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed for analysis. The mentees are expected to maintain a reflection journal throughout the study period, with entries made after significant classroom events using a structured template. It will include prompts to encourage reflection on the emotional and cultural aspects of teaching, such as descriptions of challenging classroom situations, emotional responses, cultural factors, strategies used, self-assessment of effectiveness, and support needed for similar future situations. Detailed notes will be taken during each mentoring session. These notes will document the mentees' issues and challenges, the mentoring strategies provided, the mentees' reactions and insights, and the action plans developed to address ongoing difficulties. The mentoring session notes will capture the development of the mentoring relationship and the evolution of the mentee's approach to classroom challenges. A final reflection by the mentees will address strategies for handling challenging student behavior, the impact of cultural awareness on classroom management approaches, the most valuable mentoring support received, perspectives on culturally influenced student behaviors, and additional support needs for increased classroom confidence. This reflection will provide insight into the mentees' growth throughout the mentoring process and help assess the effectiveness of the mentoring support provided.

A mentor reflection journal will also be maintained to document observations, insights, and potential biases throughout the research process. This reflective practice will serve as both a data source and a strategy for mitigating bias. Finally, brief interviews will be conducted with experienced ESOL teacher mentors to gain supplementary perspectives on mentoring needs and best practices for supporting new ESOL teachers.

Reflections on Action Research as Methodological Choice

Traditional academic papers usually present methodology sections as brief technical descriptions that fulfill the requirements of research design, data collection, and analytical technique explanation; they are very convincing from the standpoint of methodological transparency and replicability, yet most fail to engage deeply with the reasoning behind selected methods and the ethical and epistemological aspects that influence research inquiries. To compensate for this shortcoming, this section sets aside procedural reporting that will be part of a completed study and advances to present a critical evaluation of action research as a methodological selection. The recursive nature of action research, along with its relational and reflective characteristics, makes it an effective framework for context-specific participatory inquiry and a powerful tool for producing meaningful outcomes that combine theoretical understanding with practical change. This reflective analysis demonstrates how the method's recursive, relational, and reflective characteristics enable the study to achieve its dual goals of scholarly understanding and professional development. However, the discussion that follows requires two essential points to be recognized.

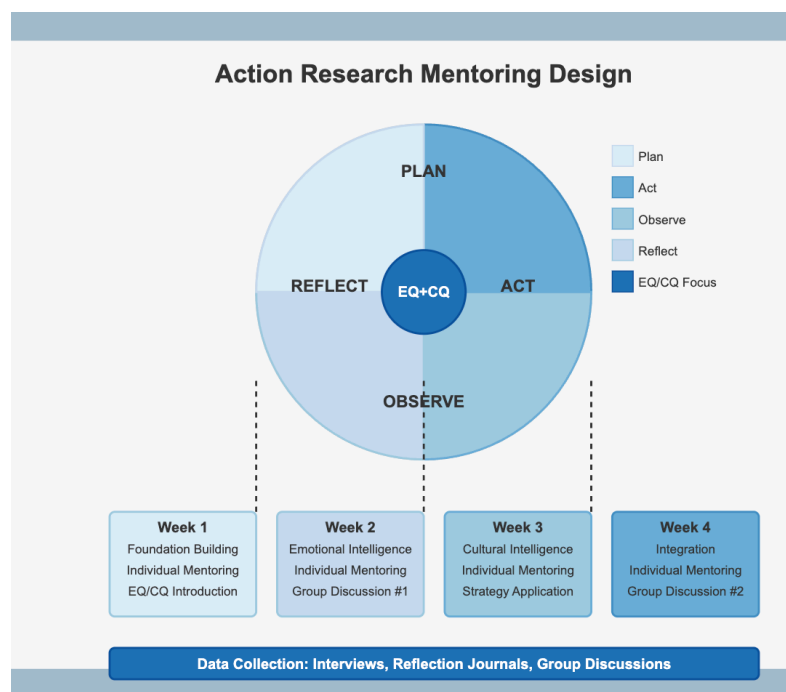
First, the role of a teacher. The theoretical framework that enables answering stated research questions recognizes teacher knowledge as having multiple dimensions, encompassing not only content and pedagogical knowledge but also the emotional and cultural competencies that teachers need to be effective in diverse classrooms. The framework draws on Goleman's (1998) conceptualization of emotional intelligence and Ang & Van Dyne's (2015) cultural intelligence model, positioning these constructs as interconnected rather than separate competencies, with a teacher emerging as the main object of research. It is precisely this conceptualization of teachers as active research participants who drive the inquiry process through their reflective practice that creates the distinction between treating teachers as *objects* versus *subjects* in research that matters. Whereas positivist traditions pursue generalizable knowledge through detached observation, the constructivist and participatory approach of action research positions teachers as subjects who actively participate in knowledge construction through their practice. In this research, the teacher serves as both the data source and the researcher who develops research questions from personal experience while creating interventions and collecting evidence to reflect on practice improvement. This research method, known as “action research,” supports teachers' self-directed actions while respecting classroom environments and aims to create both knowledge and positive changes in local educational settings. Action research provides an

emancipatory alternative to traditional models by placing teacher voices and experiences at the center to create research that maintains academic rigor while directly addressing educational practice needs. Action research represents a systematic and collaborative approach in which teachers investigate their own practice through cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Herr & Anderson, 2014), aligning with the research goal of understanding teacher perceptions and developing responsive mentoring frameworks. Figure 1 discusses the cyclical nature of action research, encompassing planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, and provides a structured approach for examining how mentoring relationships develop over time and how teachers apply new understandings in their practice. Unlike traditional research approaches that position teachers as subjects, action research recognizes teachers as co-researchers capable of generating knowledge about their own professional needs and experiences.

The study design incorporates a four-week intensive virtual mentoring program, with a four-week preparation period, targeting new ESOL teachers with 0-2 years of experience from different school districts in South Florida. This context was selected because South Florida classrooms often represent vast student diversity, with teachers working with students from varied linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Florida's ranking as the third largest nationally in English Language Learner population, serving over 300,000 ELL students who speak more than 243 different languages (Bureau of Student Achievement through Language Acquisition, 2025), makes this context particularly relevant for examining EQ and CQ development needs.

Figure 1

Action Research Mentoring Design Diagram



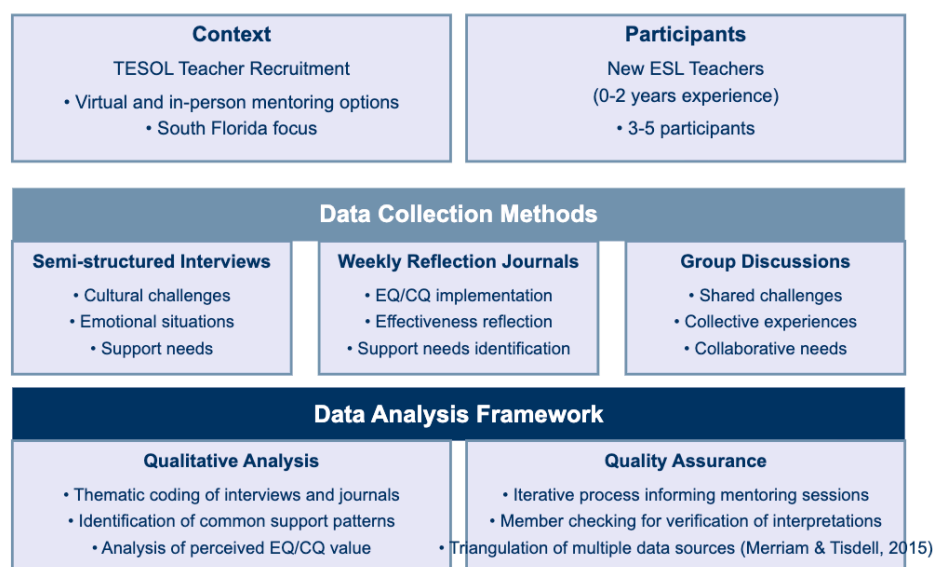
Second, the role of a researcher. As a former ESOL teacher, I have faced many of the same challenges that this study examines. This experience provides me with an insider's perspective that helps me understand what participants go through and build trust with them. However, this closeness also introduces potential biases that I should continuously monitor and address. My own struggles with professional burnout and the positive impact of effective mentoring have shaped why I believe this research matters. My academic training in both linguistics and organizational psychology influences my perspective on the connection between emotional and cultural intelligence. Such settings, where the researcher functions as a mentor, offer both emotional support and pedagogical guidance that help novice teachers deal with uncertainty and the affective aspects of teaching, alongside their vulnerability. Therefore, the *researcher* fulfills two functions in this study by acting as a researcher and serving as a mentor. The researcher functions as a mentor to offer both emotional backing and pedagogical guidance that helps novice teachers deal with uncertainty and affective aspects of teaching alongside their vulnerability. As a researcher, one must acquire data while analyzing patterns and interpreting findings. The dual nature of research, while advantageous, presents a challenge and imposes additional moral duties on the researcher because mentoring relationships naturally create power disparities

between parties. The study design prioritizes participant well-being and growth as its primary focus, with data collection needs secondary to informed consent procedures that ensure voluntary participation, confidentiality, and no penalties for withdrawal. The study provides a safe space for honest reflection through the use of pseudonyms, alongside secure data handling and clear distinctions between research activities and school administrative tasks. The researcher's background as an ESOL teacher who experienced the research problems firsthand brings enhanced depth and complication to the investigation. The researcher's insider knowledge enables stronger rapport yet demands careful examination to minimize personal biases. The research process benefits from two journal systems for observations and mentoring discussions and regular peer reviews with qualified ESOL mentors to protect analytical integrity and respect mentoring relationships. The researcher's dual role stands as a strength in practice-oriented action research because it connects the essential elements of care and inquiry to professional learning transformation.

Figure 2 demonstrates how this research integrates multiple data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews exploring teachers' backgrounds and current challenges, weekly reflection journals with structured prompts encouraging examination of emotional and cultural aspects of teaching, and detailed mentoring session documentation capturing the development of mentoring relationships and evolution of teachers' approaches to classroom challenges. The qualitative analysis follows a systematic two-cycle coding process, beginning with the identification of text segments related to research questions and progressing to grouping codes into broader thematic categories. This approach allows for recognition of patterns while maintaining attention to individual teacher experiences and perspectives. The iterative nature of data analysis, which occurs throughout the study rather than only at the end, aligns with action research principles by allowing mentoring strategies to adapt based on emerging findings. The emphasis on teacher perceptions and experiences reflects a belief that effective professional development must be responsive to practitioner-identified needs rather than top-down mandates.

Figure 2

Methodology Overview



This epistemological stance recognizes that emotional and cultural intelligence manifest differently across contexts and that mentoring approaches must be adaptable to individual teacher backgrounds, student populations, and school environments.

Contributions, Limitations, and Future Opportunities

While the study is underway, and findings are not yet available, it is premature to discuss specific contributions this research makes to educational theory. Evidently, it aims to study the interaction between emotional and cultural intelligence in ESOL settings and explore the interplay between these two dimensions. However, this reflective essay is expected to make unique contributions both academically and in the practitioner's domain. First, this essay challenges the conventional instrumentalist approach to methodology sections by presenting them as more than technical information disclosures. The paper develops an expanded methodology framework, establishing it as a space for questioning research reasons, ethical aspects, methodological goals, and the researcher's positions. It advances theory by advocating for a reflective methodological approach in research writing that generates meaning. Second, the essay integrates Goleman's Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Ang & Van Dyne's Cultural Intelligence (CQ) frameworks into teacher knowledge theory to create a multidimensional theoretical model. The theory demonstrates that professional competence exists within relational, emotional, and cultural domains, which advances current theoretical

knowledge about teacher identity and capacity. Third, the dual-practice model of action research unites inquiry with care. It presents action research as an emancipatory relational process that combines inquiry with emotional support, especially in mentoring contexts. The theoretical framework supports action research as a method that produces both data and transformation through care-based reflection and empowerment practices.

This research opens several avenues for future investigation. Extended timeline studies could examine how EQ and CQ development occur over longer periods and how changes in perspective translate into sustained classroom practices. Comparative studies across different career stages could illuminate how mentoring needs evolve as teachers gain experience. The integration of quantitative measures of emotional and cultural intelligence with qualitative exploration of teacher experiences could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these competencies develop. Longitudinal research examining the impact of EQ and CQ focused mentoring on teacher retention and student outcomes would demonstrate the broader educational implications of this approach.

However, several limitations require acknowledgment. The focus on teacher perceptions, while important, represents only one perspective on mentoring effectiveness. Future research incorporating student voices and outcomes would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of mentoring impact. The virtual mentoring format, while practical, may limit understanding of how EQ and CQ development occurs through classroom observation and in-person interaction. The South Florida context, while relevant for many diverse educational settings, may not represent the experiences of ESOL teachers in different geographic or demographic contexts. Replication across varied settings would strengthen the generalizability of findings and mentoring frameworks.

Conclusion

This reflective analysis of action research design for EQ and CQ mentoring reveals the complexity involved in creating professional development that addresses the multifaceted challenges facing new ESOL teachers. The intersection of emotional and cultural intelligence represents a critical area for continued scholarly investigation, particularly as educational environments become increasingly diverse. The action research methodology proves essential for centering teacher voices in understanding professional development needs while creating opportunities for collaborative inquiry and practical change. The emphasis

on teacher perceptions and experiences reflects recognition that effective mentoring must be responsive to practitioner-identified needs rather than externally imposed frameworks.

Key insights from this reflection include the importance of addressing emotional and cultural intelligence as interconnected rather than separate competencies, the value of structured mentoring that provides both emotional support and practical guidance, and the need for institutional support that enables meaningful mentoring relationships to develop. The research design presented here provides a framework for investigating these dynamics and contributes to the scholarly conversation about innovative approaches to teacher professional development.

As educational environments continue to evolve, the need for ESOL teachers equipped with high levels of emotional and cultural intelligence will only increase. This research contributes to ongoing efforts to develop more effective, responsive, and sustainable approaches to supporting teachers in navigating the complex dynamics of multicultural classrooms. The future implementation of this research design, with appropriate IRB approval, is expected to provide empirical evidence to support or refine the theoretical framework and practical recommendations developed through this reflective analysis. The reflections described in this essay demonstrate the value of careful attention to methodological choices, ethical considerations, and theoretical foundations in designing research that has potential for meaningful impact on educational practice. In fact, the reflective process itself demonstrates the value of systematic inquiry into researchers' own practices, modeling the kind of reflective engagement required to support the teachers.

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Measuring Globalization in Higher Education: Developing A Scorecard for Social Impact and Academic Excellence

by

Lincoln D. Johnson, University of Nevada Las Vegas

Globalization has become a defining feature of higher education, reshaping institutions through international collaboration, student mobility, and the integration of global perspectives in curricula. Yet, measuring the extent and impact of globalization in higher education remains a challenge. This presentation introduces a comprehensive Globalization Scorecard designed to assess how institutions engage with globalization across academic, social, and economic dimensions. Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks from sociology, education, and policy studies, the scorecard evaluates indicators such as international student representation, global research partnerships, cultural inclusivity, and equity in access to international opportunities. Through case studies and preliminary findings, this presentation highlights trends, gaps, and best practices in institutional globalization efforts. It emphasizes the scorecard's utility as both a diagnostic tool for self-assessment and a benchmark for promoting accountability and innovation in higher education. By exploring the broader implications of globalization on social equity and academic excellence, this study invites educators, policymakers, and researchers to collaboratively enhance the role of higher education in an interconnected world.

Keywords: globalization, scorecard, internationalization, framework, higher education, evaluation, policy

Introduction

Globalization has fundamentally transformed the landscape of higher education. Universities are increasingly operating within a globally interconnected framework, marked by the mobility of students and scholars, international partnerships, and the globalization of knowledge production. However, how institutions measure their engagement with globalization, and the broader social and academic outcomes associated with it, remain underdeveloped. This process of internationalizing higher education has been described as three (3) phases: The first phase is the set-up of the design, which includes the strategic intent, mission statement, strategic vision, corporate strategy, and strategic plan. The second phase is the implementation of the design. The third phase is the evaluation of the design by measuring achievements against intentions (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2007, pp.329-330). While a majority of universities worldwide have mastered phases one and two, the third phase, the evaluative phase, has been done through trial and error in a majority of instances. This article

proposes a conceptual and methodological framework for evaluating and measuring globalization in higher education through a novel *Globalization Scorecard*.

Globalization, in the context of higher education, refers to the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of universities, scholars, and students across national boundaries, resulting in the internationalization of curricula, greater mobility of students and faculty, and a surge in cross-border research collaborations. “This definition makes it clear that internationalization is not an end in itself; changes in world and scientific policy have further strengthened the importance of international cooperation” (Ghaderi, 2021, p.300). This means that as higher education influences and is influenced by globalization, international interconnectedness through cooperation and collaboration is vital to ushering in a new era of higher education impact. This process transforms educational practices by embedding global perspectives into learning outcomes, fostering multicultural competence, and driving innovation through the exchange of ideas and knowledge on a global scale. “The movement of people has long characterized the international dimension of higher education but, increasingly, programs and entire institutions are on the move, as are institutional models and approaches to teaching and learning” (Rumbley, et al., 2012, p.10). This level and relevance of globalization in higher education has become a priority to universities around the globe, traversing institutional size and profile, reputation and ranking to becoming “a phenomenon of interest to an extraordinarily broad cross-section of higher education institutions in all parts of the world” (2012, p.23).

There is a growing need for a clear, evidence-based framework to evaluate how effectively higher education institutions embrace globalization—*not only* through academic rankings or economic contributions, but through their commitment to inclusivity, diversity, and authentic global engagement. Challenges to institutions of higher education emerge with attempts to operationalize and sustain an international mission statement into educational practices and, more specifically, with helping academics to develop shared understandings of internationalization that can be supported by

strategy, policy, and plans (Agnew, 2012, p.474). This is important because instead of blind decision-making and resource appropriating, higher education institutions need a framework that can address these issues and provide guidance and advisement on conception, implementation, maintenance, and evaluation of globalization processes. Such a framework should assess whether institutions create equitable access to international opportunities, promote culturally responsive practices, and foster an environment where all students, regardless of background, can thrive in a globally connected academic landscape.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was evaluated, contrasted, and analyzed through a lens comprised of the *Academic Scorecard* (O’Neil, et al., 1999) and Qiang’s *Conceptual Framework of Internationalization of Higher Education* (Qiang, 2003). The *Academic Scorecard* (O’Neil et al., 1999), is based on the *Balanced Scorecard* (Kaplan & Norton, 1992), which helped establish four perspectives of scorecard implementation. A scorecard links performance measures with the behavior of managers and employees (stakeholders). It shows how results are achieved using four perspectives: *stakeholder perspective, internal business perspective, innovation and learning perspective, and academic management perspective*. These four perspectives were then matched with the “rationales for internationalization” (Qiang, 2003): *social and cultural rationale, economic rationale, academic rationale, and political rationale* and adapted to create the *Globalization Scorecard – The Johnson Ranking of Global Engagement (JRGE)*.

The results of this study were purposefully constructed to gather strong evidence for or against the need for the *Globalization Scorecard* utilizing the four (4) globalization scorecard (JRGE) domains: 1) *stakeholder perspective/social and cultural rationale*; 2) *internal business perspective/economic rationale*; 3) *innovation and learning perspective/academic rationale*; 4) *academic management perspective/political rationale*. “When cross-cutting internationalisation functions are integrated across institutional structures, processes, and operations, they work as

‘gears’ that accelerate the internationalisation of the core institutional functions. This, however, also requires the higher education system and institutional cultures and governance to be supportive and enabling of the internationalisation process” (Uzhegova & Baik, 2020, p.849):

Figure 1

Johnson Ranking of Global Engagement (JRGE) Scale of Global Engagement Framework

The Scale of Global Engagement - Indicators of Globalization at Universities

Stakeholder Perspective/ Social and Cultural Rationale	Internal Business Perspective/ Economic Rationale	Innovation and Learning Perspective/ Academic Rationale	Academic Management Perspective/ Political Rationale
International Students, Faculty, and Administrators			
Global Consciousness	Brand Image/Recognition	International Research Collaboration	Top-Down Administrative Support and Involvement
Global Programs and Activities	International Partnerships	Publications/Citations Worldwide	International Offices
Meaningful Interaction/Integration on Campus	Funding/Fundraising for Global Activities	Active, Academic Cross-Border Engagement	Closely-Coupled Systems
Student Exchange/Study Abroad Programs	Joint Ventures/Degree Programs	Visiting Scholars/Joint Appointments/Faculty-Staff Mobility	Awards/International Recognition/Fellowships

Social Science Perspective

Globalization is not merely a set of economic transactions or policy shifts—it is a dynamic social process that reshapes how societies interact, exchange knowledge, and define identity. In the context of higher education, globalization influences institutional practices, cultural engagement,

and access to opportunities on a global scale. It challenges traditional educational boundaries by fostering cross-cultural collaboration, digital learning platforms, and transnational academic communities. Uzhegova and Baik (2020) acknowledge that the top-down government agenda to modernize and internationalize higher education has focused on quick, quantifiable results that can improve the position of universities in international institutional rankings; this focus on short-term outcomes has meant that universities pay less attention to long-term strategies for institutional changes including promoting an institutional culture that is supportive of internationalization (p.856). Culturally, globalization promotes both the diffusion of ideas and the risk of homogenization, requiring institutions to balance global influence with local relevance. Economically, it drives the international competition for talent, resources, and innovation, which in turn affects how universities prioritize programs, partnerships, and funding models. Ultimately, understanding globalization as a social process highlights the interconnectedness of equity, access, and institutional responsibility in shaping inclusive, globally-engaged educational ecosystems.

Globalization in higher education is deeply intertwined with several key social science theories that help explain its broader impact:

- Cultural Exchange: Globalization fosters intercultural dialogue and mutual learning by exposing students and faculty to diverse values, languages, and worldviews. Theories of cultural exchange suggest that international educational encounters can reduce ethnocentrism, promote empathy, and support global citizenship development—though they can also risk cultural homogenization if not managed thoughtfully.
- Social Capital: From a sociological perspective, globalization builds both bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding capital strengthens ties within cultural or national groups, while bridging capital connects individuals across diverse backgrounds. International education increases access to networks that can influence career mobility, innovation, and leadership opportunities in a globalized workforce.
- Educational Equity: The benefits of globalization are not evenly distributed. Equity theories underscore how global education opportunities—such as study abroad, research collaborations, and English-dominant academic publishing—often privilege students from

higher socioeconomic backgrounds or institutions with more resources. A globalization framework rooted in equity seeks to identify and dismantle these barriers, ensuring that access to global learning is inclusive and just.

Key Questions

During this study, two key questions emerged:

- What dimensions of globalization are most relevant to higher education?
- How can we measure the social and academic impacts of these dimensions?

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on globalization in higher education has emphasized various dimensions, including academic mobility (Knight, 2004), internationalization strategies (Altbach & Knight, 2007), and the global knowledge economy (Marginson, 2006). Yet, there remains a lack of standardized metrics to assess globalization's multifaceted impact. “Internationalization has become an increasingly strategic agenda for universities across the world driven by global impacts and higher education institutions which are rapidly changing to 'become international' in response to growing geopolitical and economic imperatives (Saied, 2020, p.5). Previous frameworks often privilege economic and reputational outcomes, such as global rankings and tuition revenue from international students, while overlooking social impact and equity dimensions. Internationalization may be seen as a vehicle for establishing a system of global standards and promoting education quality in order to prepare qualifications properly to meet the global requirements of societies, economies, and labor markets (2020, p.5). This study integrates insights from critical globalization studies, policy analysis, and social justice frameworks to construct a more holistic evaluative model.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. We first conducted a comprehensive review of existing internationalization assessment tools, including those developed by UNESCO, the OECD, and leading research universities. Drawing on this review, we developed a prototype Globalization Scorecard – The Johnson Ranking

of Global Engagement (JRGE) consisting of four domains: (1) Academic Engagement, (2) Social Impact, (3) Economic Participation, and (4) Institutional Commitment. We are encouraged to consider a Higher Education Institution's whole approach across all its international activities (Henson & Pugna, 2019, p.787).

We used institutional data, surveys, and publicly available reports to score institutions on each metric. Case studies were conducted at five diverse institutions across North America, Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa. Data sources included institutional reports, interviews with stakeholders (administrators, faculty, staff, students, alumni), self-assessment and publicly available metrics. In the future, the scorecard should be administered with an on-site visit and study to ensure qualitative metrics are met. Kreber (2009) explains that the motivation for increased cross-border delivery of education can be explained in two ways: 1) There is now a much greater market for higher education, particularly in countries with less well-developed higher education systems. It is through cooperating with institutions in other countries, and the sharing of resources this implies, that teaching and research programs can be enriched and become affordable to the institution; and 2) Universities in Western countries see this increased demand for higher education, particularly in so-called developing countries, as a welcome opportunity to boost their budgets, which have experienced substantial declines in public contributions over the past decade (2009, p.3).

Findings

Preliminary analysis reveals considerable variation in institutional engagement with globalization. While high-ranking institutions tend to excel in economic and academic indicators, many fall short on metrics related to social impact and equity. Much of the debate surrounding internationalization still remains heavily embedded in national policies and institutional contexts (Iosava & Roxå, 2019, p.225). For instance, few institutions systematically track the socioeconomic backgrounds of students participating in global mobility programs. Cultural inclusivity and support structures for marginalized international students were found to be unevenly implemented. While it

is a global phenomenon and subject to multiple interpretations at national, institutional and individual levels, it is also highly contextual and very much bred and enacted locally considering the internal dynamics of institutions; this creates a bridge between the institutional policy makers and the micro-level change agents, such as faculty members and academic leaders, whose agency often prompts further institutional actions (2019, p.226).

The scorecard also surfaced best practices, including: 1) Targeted financial aid for first-generation students participating in international exchanges, 2) Integrative curriculum models embedding global issues across disciplines, and 3) Decentralized internationalization strategies that empower faculty and local communities. Internationalization of higher education is seen as one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalization, yet at the same time respects the individuality of the nation; A country's unique history, indigenous culture(s), resources, priorities, shape its response to and relationships with other countries (Qiang, 2003, p.249).

Discussion

[T]he international dimension of education has always been one of the defining aspects of the educational process in the institutions that have provided education and/or training in one form or another (Ciubăncan, et al., 2021, p.217). The Globalization Scorecard provides a more nuanced lens through which to assess globalization in higher education. By expanding the evaluative criteria beyond economic outputs, the tool foregrounds issues of equity, inclusion, and social responsibility. “The key idea behind comprehensive internationalisation is the recognition of a variety of models and approaches, allowing each institution to choose its own strategy, without a common model or objectives, which might, however, be difficult to implement” (2021, p.216). The scorecard functions both diagnostically and strategically, enabling institutions to identify strengths, address weaknesses, and set goals aligned with their mission and values.

However, challenges remain. “While academic values will always be at the core of any academic establishment, the focus now seems to be on the elements that were once marginal in the

structure of said institutions” (Ciubăncan, et al., 2021, p.219). Institutions differ widely in resources, geopolitical contexts, and institutional histories, which can affect their capacity to globalize equitably. Therefore, the scorecard must be adaptable and contextualized rather than prescriptive. “Approaches to internationalisation, be it abroad or at home, range from cooperation to competition between institutions, countries and regions” (2021, p.216).

In examining how globalization benefits are distributed in higher education, several key gaps and inequities emerge: socioeconomic barriers to participation, under-representation of marginalized groups, global south institutions are under-partnered, language and cultural bias, digital divide in global learning access, and inequitable faculty participation. Universities across the globe are implementing a “comprehensive” view of internationalization – one that has become an imperative rather than an option in today’s globalized world (Ciubăncan, et al., 2021, p.220). Addressing these gaps requires intentional policy, inclusive program design, equitable funding models, and partnerships grounded in mutuality and respect.

Conclusion

As globalization continues to shape higher education, institutions must critically assess their roles in fostering inclusive and impactful global engagement. The Globalization Scorecard offers a pathway for such assessment, emphasizing the need for balance between academic excellence and social impact. Future work will refine the scorecard through broader validation and explore its application across diverse higher education systems. This tool invites a collective commitment to reimagining global education in the service of equity, excellence, and ethical international collaboration.

The Globalization Scorecard is a conceptual tool designed to assess and compare how higher education institutions engage with globalization across multiple dimensions—academic, social, economic, and institutional. “While the terms “internationalization,” “policy” and “programs” are commonly used and it can be argued that practitioners and policymakers in the higher education field

share a general understanding about these notions, there are varying interpretations of their actual meaning and scope” (Helms, et al., 2016, p.2). Unlike traditional global rankings, which often emphasize prestige or financial outcomes, the scorecard offers a holistic, equity-centered framework that evaluates metrics such as international partnerships, inclusivity in global programs, support for underrepresented students, and the integration of global perspectives in curricula. It empowers institutions to track progress, benchmark against peers, and align their globalization strategies with broader goals of academic excellence and social impact. This suggests that policies have both an *ideological* element (general goals, a set of guiding ideas) and a *practical* element (a plan for action, influencing specific decisions). In terms of internationalization, the latter typically consists of programs and activities intended to operationalize and achieve the former (2016, p.3).

The significance of the Globalization Scorecard for stakeholders lies in its ability to provide clear, data-driven insights into how institutions are advancing global engagement and equity. “[T]he internationalization of higher education is one of the integral aspects that have constituted the organization of the university since its origin” (Wassem, et al., 2020, p.520). For policymakers, it serves as a strategic tool to inform funding, accountability, and policy development. For educators, it offers a framework to align teaching, research, and service with global goals. For students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, it highlights institutional commitment to inclusivity, access to international opportunities, and culturally responsive support systems—ultimately promoting a more just and globally aware learning environment.

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Understanding Social Determinants of Health: A Study for Non-Clinical Healthcare

Students

by

Heather Merkley, DHSc, RHIA, Weber State University

The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) mandated healthcare organizations to report social determinants of health risk factors. The Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) encompass a wide range of components that influence individual health outcomes based on conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age. CMS requires healthcare organizations to screen for five SDOH risk factors, which are food insecurity, interpersonal safety, housing insecurity, transportation insecurity, and utilities (CDC 2024). The SDOH reporting mandate is part of the CMS to improve health disparities.

For non-clinical students, such as health information management and health administrative students, who do not provide direct patient care, a comprehensive understanding of SDOH is crucial for data management, analysis, and careers in healthcare settings to improve population health. As SDOH risk factors are data that are integrated into electronic health records, they can become robust tools for improving patient care and health equity. To prepare for future business and healthcare management careers, non-clinical allied health students must be educated on SDOH risk factors and data, and how to incorporate this data to improve patient outcomes. Through a combination of research, discussions, practices identifying SDOH, and case studies, this paper explores methods for educating non-clinical healthcare students on SDOH. Providing knowledge, application, and reflection will prepare non-clinical allied health students on how to integrate SDOH factors into their future non-clinical healthcare careers.

Keywords: Social Determinants of Health (SDOH), allied health students' learning of SDOH, University Support Services and Food Insecurity

Introduction

Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) refers to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age that affect their health outcomes. These determinants include factors such as socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, employment, social support networks, and access to healthcare. Understanding SDOH is crucial because these factors can significantly influence a wide range of health risks and outcomes, often contributing to health disparities among different populations.

In non-clinical allied health degree programs, such as health information management (HIM), SDOH is used to enhance the understanding of how data and information can be leveraged to improve health outcomes. HIM and health administration (HA) play a critical role in collecting,

analyzing, and managing health data found in electronic health records, which includes information related to SDOH (Chen et al, 2020). By integrating SDOH into their work with healthcare data, healthcare professionals can help identify trends and patterns that inform public health strategies, policy-making, and resource allocation, ultimately aiming to reduce health disparities and improve health outcomes.

The importance of hands-on learning in applying SDOH knowledge cannot be overstated. Engaging in practical experiences allows students to move beyond theoretical understanding and see real-world applications. By interacting with university support services related to potential SDOH factors, students can gain a deeper appreciation of how these determinants affect individuals and communities. This experiential learning helps students develop the skills needed to address SDOH in their future non-clinical healthcare careers.

To improve SDOH learning for HA and HIM students, this research focused on teaching SDOH to non-clinical healthcare students. Non-clinical healthcare students are students who are learning about jobs in the healthcare industry that do not involve direct patient care. Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, has two programs that fall in the non-clinical healthcare description, which are the HA and HIM programs. Students in these programs are required to take an undergraduate-level Healthcare Reimbursement and Revenue Cycle Management course that discusses healthcare policies regarding healthcare payments and reimbursement (Weber State University Catalog, n.d.). Healthcare costs continue to be the number one cause of personal bankruptcy in the United States. Financial barriers have huge impacts on public health outcomes when people cannot afford healthcare and do not receive timely and appropriate treatments. This can result in higher rates of chronic diseases and complications that are more expensive to treat. Financial strains of healthcare costs disproportionately affect marginalized and underserved communities who may already face multiple SDOH challenges (Grossi, 2024).

The healthcare reimbursement course provided opportunities for SDOH discussions for students to experience with faculty on US healthcare reimbursement, health policies, SDOH challenges, and their impact on public health outcomes. This course was taught in an online setting, which provided students with SDOH learnings, discussion, applied practice, and reflection.

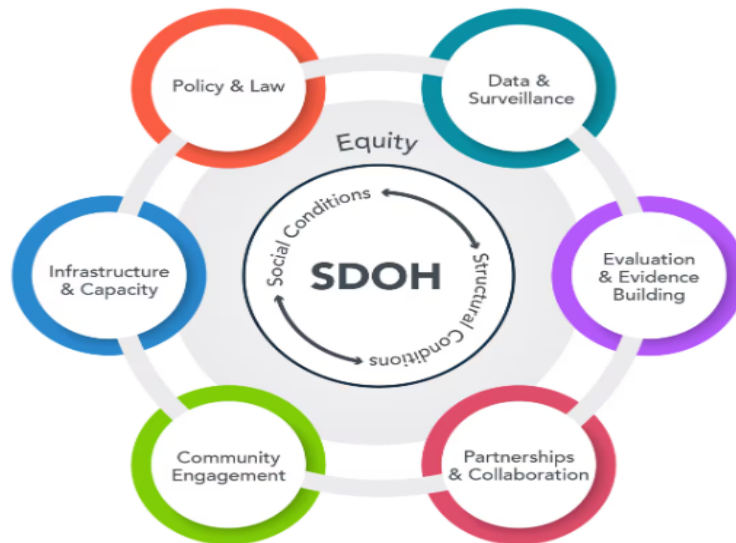
Both the HAS and HIM programs at Weber State University are accredited and have competencies related to SDOH. Although SDOH competencies vary between these two nonclinical programs, SDOH is taught to apply, analyze, and reflect on potential SDOH challenges. The faculty worked on implementing SDOH practice activities for one year within this course before the start of this study.

Literature Review

In 2024, CMS began requiring healthcare providers to collect data on SDOH. These rules aim to improve patient outcomes by addressing non-medical factors that influence health. The SDOH are nonmedical factors that significantly influence health outcomes based on conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age (CDC 2024). Some examples that CMS requires healthcare organizations to screen are the five SDOH risk factors, which are food insecurity, interpersonal safety, housing insecurity, transportation insecurity, and utilities (CDC 2024). The SDOH reporting mandate is part of the CMS to improve health disparities. Figure 1 shows the Centers for Disease Control framework to help healthcare agencies (such as CMS) make decisions about SDOH resources.

Figure 1

Social determinants of health at the CDC



Source: CDC 2024.

While there continues to be SDOH education in clinical healthcare programs for nursing and medical students, there has been less focus on SDOH to nonclinical healthcare students (Brown et al., 2021). Healthcare Administration Services (HAS) and Health Information Management (HIM) students are two examples of nonclinical healthcare students. Although they play an integral role in healthcare, HAS and HIM students do not provide direct patient care. Nonclinical HIM and HAS graduates may work in the revenue cycle management, medical coding, or administration, and applying SDOH knowledge can be beneficial to patients with SDOH challenges. There is an increasing call for HIM and HAS students to understand and apply SDOH, as both HAS and HIM education accreditation programs require SDOH to be understood and evaluated.

Many allied healthcare programs, such as nursing, respiratory therapy, radiology technicians, dental hygiene, HIM, and HAS, teach SDOH at different levels based on program curriculum. For example, simulation activities may be used in a nursing program (709 of ASAHP Brown). In trying to increase SDOH education for HAS and HIM, new activities and applications have been researched.

Teaching SDOH to Allied Healthcare Professionals

Brown et al (2021) conducted a study of how online undergraduate healthcare students prioritized SDOH on patient health and well-being. To assess SDOH education, discussions, and activities were created using the World Health Organization (WHO) SDOH framework. The WHO SDOH Framework includes social, economic, and political factors such as income, education, housing, transportation, neighborhood, social norms, political systems, stress, food, and racism (WHO, 2025). Some activities used in this SDOH study included pre- and post-SDOH surveys, online discussion posts, and four assignments, which included a simulation, case study, photography of SDOH within the community, and a service-learning experience. Findings from this study showed changes in perception regarding SDOH of students. Brown et al (2021) noted that rating SDOH in a pre- and post-survey allowed educators to assess SDOH perspectives and evaluate SDOH based on students' feedback. Creating service-learning and critical thinking SDOH assignments built a better understanding of the negative ramifications of SDOH and empathy for future healthcare professionals.

Documentation of SDOH in Health Record

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2024) emphasizes the importance of addressing SDOH to improve health equity and public health outcomes. When patients are asked about their SDOH challenges through a questionnaire or survey, it provides clinicians with a better understanding of the patient's SDOH circumstances. One example of a questionnaire or screening tool is the Tool for Health & Resilience in Vulnerable Environments (THRIVE). Gathering this information can assist clinicians with potential noncompliance with their medical treatment based on circumstances that are out of the patient's control. Some examples could be the inability to have transportation for healthcare treatment, financial challenges, and decreasing dosage of medications so they last longer, or access to healthy, fresh foods (Rohatgi, 2022).

Several healthcare companies, such as Kaiser Permanente and Boston Medical Center, have used the THRIVE screening tool to incorporate SDOH challenges within the patient health record for improved SDOH within their communities. This helped address patients' SDOH challenges and allowed healthcare providers to intervene and offer solutions to SDOH through data collected and integrated within the health record.

THRIVE data is available to assist multiple local, state, and national initiatives on SDOH (Prevention Institute, n.d.). Further, this data is publicly available and can be used to create case studies for educators in teaching SDOH. This data can further be analyzed by allied health students, such as HIM and HAS, to engage in discussion and assess SDOH by prioritizing and taking action to improve patients' SDOH. Modules, videos, and other similar training have been created to assist in understanding and provide resources for SDOH challenges (Prevention Institute, n.d.). For teaching nonclinical healthcare students about SDOH, it is important to have SDOH cases that focus on their future healthcare roles and how they can improve healthcare communities through case practices for nonclinical healthcare roles.

SDOH, Professional Identity, and Values

Providing mechanisms for nonclinical HAS and HIM students to explain sociopolitical influences on health is important to address the level of professional identity. Having a foundation of the US Healthcare System and healthcare policies provides a foundation to explore SDOH. In a study, Tarfa et al (2023) found that using students' future professional identity and how it impacts SDOH, as well as knowledge and attitudes of SDOH, created a foundation for future pedagogical work on SDOH learning outcomes. Providing professional ethics and education foundation, experiential learning, conceptualization, self-reflection, and socialization can increase ways in which cultural differences are intertwined with SDOH within the healthcare system (Tarfa et al., 2023). This could be an alternative method of teaching nonclinical healthcare students of SDOH through professional identity and values formation rather than direct patient care interaction.

University Support Services and SDOH

Many colleges provide support services such as mental health counseling, student wellness, food pantries, and free public transportation, which improve student success and resources available to students. Henderson (2025) noted that counseling services and support groups helped improve students overall well-being. These services collectively create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Another university support service is food insecurity. Approximately one-third to one-half of university students in the United States experience food insecurity, which can lead to poor academic performance and physical and mental health outcomes (Johnson, K., 2020). Providing food pantries and ensuring students are aware of this service can improve student learning and healthy outcomes. Food insecurities significantly impact people who have SDOH challenges (Thareja et al, 2024). When people lack reliable access to healthy foods, it can lead to malnutrition, a weakened immune system, and an increased susceptibility to chronic diseases.

SDOH Food Insecurity in a University Setting

Addressing SDOH risk factors in a college setting can help reduce stigma while increasing access to resources. In addition to a university food pantry, students may be eligible for governmental nutrition resources. Barriers to other governmental food insecurity programs for college students can exist because of a lack of knowledge, qualifications for programs, application and paperwork process, and eligibility requirements (Landry et al., 2024). Educating university students about these resources can shift the culture of food insecurities, eliminate stigma and other barriers, and provide the nutritional support necessary for college students. Figure 2 shows a list of student challenges with food insecurity and the long-term outcome of learning, applying, and using food insecurity resources.

Figure 2

Socio-Ecological Model of Barriers to College Student Food Access.



Source: Landry et al., 2024

Manboard et al. (2020) found that universities providing support services promoted student well-being and social support. Addressing food insecurity is crucial for promoting the well-being of university students and others who face SDOH challenges in a university setting. Furthermore, educating university students of SDOH challenges and support services through experiential learning can reduce barriers to food insecurity and other SDOH risk factors.

Experiential Learning in a University Setting

Teaching HA and HIM students about SDOH through hands-on learning and reflection can be an effective approach. Through the practice of accessing and using support services within their university can provide valuable hands-on learning of support services. Students who are aware of the services can utilize and participate in their improvements. This direct involvement helps students understand the complexities of SDOH and the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Incorporating case studies and reflective discussions can deepen students' understanding. For nursing students, Hekel et al. (2022) found that presenting realistic scenarios can help achieve critical thinking for scenario-based testing, such as the nursing National Council Licensure Examination. After providing access to SDOH learnings, resources available, students are equipped and able to apply knowledge to a case study. Kaligotla et al (2024) found that nursing

student reflections showed evidence of critical thinking and empathy for addressing SDOH risk factors. Follow-up with reflective discussions where students can share their insights and experiences from each other's perspective can encourage critical thinking and foster a deeper appreciation of social factors influencing health.

Kiles et al (2020) conducted a review of active-learning strategies for teaching SDOH to find gaps in educating pharmaceutical students on SDOH. Patient care simulations, as well as discussing cultural competence, were common learning methods. Findings show that SDOH was being taught as required by competencies, but not all SDOH concepts were being taught with active learning competencies. Brown et al (2023) discussed using art factors such as photography to help students address SDOH within their communities.

As interventions and strategies for SDOH continue to persist, so do best practices and challenges in teaching SDOH to HA and HIM, and other non-clinical health care students. There continue to be multiple methods of teaching SDOH-related competencies to healthcare students.

Methodology

As SDOH challenges continue to persist so do methods of teaching students about SDOH. This study sought to find other opportunities to teach HA and HIM students about SDOH challenges. Using SDOH learnings, resources, simulation activities, and reflection, a study was developed to assess the SDOH of HA and HIM students.

Data for this quantitative and qualitative study were collected in two parts. The first part of this study was focused on understanding SDOH, awareness of support services that could be related to SDOH, and reflection on SDOH for revenue cycle management professionals (A field for HAS and HIM graduates related to the healthcare reimbursement course). Data was collected in the healthcare reimbursement fall 2023 semester. Findings from part one of this survey were reviewed, and some changes were implemented to improve support services that could potentially affect SDOH learnings.

The second part of this survey focused on the reflection of SDOH applications for non-clinical HAS/HIM students potentially seeking a revenue cycle management career. Data was collected during the health care reimbursement fall 2024 semester. Participation was anonymous and optional. The study was reviewed and determined to be exempt by the University IRB committee.

As the instructor for the Revenue Cycle Management course, the initial research portion of this study focused on the SDOH learnings and simulation activity of support services for populations with SDOH challenges. Data analysis for the quantitative study was provided using summary statistics. The qualitative study findings were discussed among HAS/HIM faculty as well as the advisory board to evaluate if responses showed an appropriate reflection for the determination of SDOH analysis.

The study period consisted of two semesters spanning over one year between 2023-2024. Statistics and demographics, including age, gender, and year of schooling, were gathered. The total number of students for both phases of the study was gathered. The data was divided into two sections. The first part of this study was completed in Fall 2023 and included an analysis of the SDOH learning and simulation practice. The questions included.

Question 2: In this course is a list of Student and Community Support Services. Throughout this semester, have you used any of the resources or websites provided?

Question 4: On a rating scale of 1-5 (low to high), how helpful were the links and resources available in one module to you?

Question 5: How likely will you be able to use some of these services or refer someone in need to some of these services this year? Are there any other associations or service links that should be included to provide a sense of support to students?

The second part of this study completed in Fall, 2024 section evaluated the perceived learnings of SDOH, simulation, and reflection of SDOH for future revenue cycle management healthcare professionals.

Scenario: As a Revenue Cycle specialist at Wildcat hospital, how can identifying Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) improve patient health outcomes? Reflect on SDOH discussions, Student and Community Support Services Module, and your HAS or HIM professional education. Consider this from a non-clinical standpoint.

Results

The number of students participating in each phase of the study is listed in Table 1. The year in school and age group for part 1(2023) of the study are listed in Tables 2 and 3. Table 4 lists the questions related to resources available. Scenario 1 was given as a case study to the fall 2024 students.

Table 1

Number of Students Participated by Semester

Semester	2023		2024	
	#	of	#	of
	Students		Students	
	18		23	

Table 2

Year in School

Class	2023
Freshman	1
Sophomore	2
Junior	4
Senior	11
Total	18

Table 3*Age group*

	Age group	2023
25	18-	7
34	26-	5
44	35-	2
54	45-	4

Table 4

Question 4: On a rating scale (1-5 likeliness from low to high), how helpful were the links and resources available in one module to you?

Question 5: How likely will you be able to use some of these services or refer someone in need to some of these services this year? Are there any other associations or service links that should be included to provide a sense of support to students?

		2023				
#	Question	1 Unlikely	Very Unlikely	2 Likely	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely
4	Question	3		3	4	2
5	Question	0		1	3	4

The results findings of whether providing a list of Student and Community Support Services associated with SDOH was helpful, 82.3% found a module showing resources could be helpful to very helpful.

Over seventy percent (72.7%) of students felt likely to very likely that they could use some of the services or refer someone in need to these services throughout the year. An additional question allowed students to provide feedback from other sources to assist them, which included adding Veteran Affairs resources.

The second part of the study was a scenario that was asked to the Spring 2024 students. No demographics were collected.

Table 5

Post-SDOH Reflection Scenario: As a Revenue Cycle specialist at Wildcat Hospital, how can identifying Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) improve patient health outcomes? Reflect on SDOH discussions, the Student and Community Support Services Module, and your HAS or HIM professional education. Consider this from a non-clinical standpoint.

Responses to Post-SDOH Reflection Scenario 1

-As a Revenue Cycle specialist at Wildcat Hospital, identifying social determinants of health and supporting equity and inclusion can improve patient outcomes by ensuring that all patients receive appropriate financial assistance and access to care based on their unique needs. By addressing factors like socioeconomic status, education, and healthcare access, we can reduce barriers to care, ensure timely treatment, and improve patient satisfaction, ultimately leading to better health outcomes and a more efficient revenue cycle.

Being mindful of social determinants is important in healthcare, employment status, financial limitations, having transportation, childcare, and housing all affect the way someone lives and cares for themselves. We can assume that everyone has these things, and they play a huge role in their overall healthcare. As a revenue specialist, I would need to make sure that processes were in place to accommodate patients with diverse needs. This could help with the patient's financial stress, access to healthcare, which will overall contribute to a better patient outcome.

-Identifying social determinants, supporting equity, and inclusion can help improve patient outcomes by addressing the underlying social factors that influence not just the health factors of residents within the community. Healthcare providers can develop and customize interventions that address the resident's needs beyond medical treatment. For example, Ogden, UT, has the highest population of Hispanics and Latinos. By considering this factor, understanding their culture and language could help increase patient volume and patient outcomes for patients of Hispanic or Latino descent.

Identifying social determinants and supporting equity and inclusion can improve patient outcomes by creating a culture of inclusivity that helps patients regardless of age, race, language, and background to get the healthcare that they need. That can be by having more bilingual staff or paperwork for those of different cultures to understand exactly what is happening, helping them to be an integral part of their health care. And by understanding the barriers of why patients in the community are not seeking the care they need that some of those barriers can be addressed, and people can receive the care that they need.

-As a student at Weber State University and a future Revenue Cycle Specialist at Wildcat Hospital, I understand the importance of addressing social determinants of health to improve patient outcomes. By recognizing barriers like socioeconomic challenges and access to healthcare, I can help implement financial policies that ensure patients receive the care they need without undue stress. Supporting SDOH challenges is about creating a system where every patient feels valued and empowered to prioritize their health. These efforts directly contribute to better outcomes and stronger community trust.

-Understanding how social determinants affect healthcare is essential to improving patient outcomes. By addressing financial concerns, education and access to healthcare, the hospital is able to better understand how to help these patients. Creating a community of acceptance and

support in the hospital will improve patient outcomes by providing much needed resources some patients may not have.

-From a non-clinical standpoint, as a Revenue Cycle specialist at Wildcat Hospital, improving Revenue Cycle Management is necessary. When hospitals understand the social factors influencing a patient's ability to pay, they can implement more tailored billing and payment processes. For example, if a patient is facing economic hardship, the hospital may offer more flexible payment options or connect them with external resources (such as grants or subsidies). Addressing financial barriers directly can reduce the likelihood of delayed or forgone care.

-As a Revenue Cycle Specialist at Wildcat Hospital, I see that understanding social factors affecting health and promoting fairness can improve patient outcomes. When we tailor our financial policies to meet the diverse needs of patients, we better understand their backgrounds. This helps us offer easier payment options and remove barriers to care. By creating a supportive environment, we encourage patients to seek necessary treatments and stick to their care plans. This leads to better health outcomes, greater patient satisfaction, and stronger community involvement.

-Identifying social determinants as well as supporting equity and inclusion can improve patient outcomes by allowing healthcare professionals to take into consideration a broader list of environmental factors that may be impacting their patients' overall health. This will hopefully allow for a more personalized treatment plan when taking care of the patient, having a positive effect on their overall health. Identifying social determinants could also provide insight into how effectively and efficiently a patient will be able to recover or follow a treatment plan. If an individual is homeless, they will have a much harder time following any regimen a doctor gives them. If someone has inadequate access to food or even high-quality, healthy food, it could impact their health or recovery progress. Identifying these things will help healthcare professionals tailor

a patient's treatment to their lifestyle and situation, because we are not all in the same situation and have the same health condition.

Discussion

Teaching non-clinical HA and HIM students about SDOH helps students recognize the broader context in which health and illness occur. Factors such as socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood, employment, and social support networks significantly influence healthy outcomes. By grasping these determinants, non-clinical HA and HIM students can better appreciate the complexities of patient care, the multifaceted components of health, and challenges with reimbursement; this understanding can lead to more effective healthcare and support services.

This study allowed students to have hands-on practice through learning about support services available to students at the university level. A university functions like a small community by providing a range of support services similar to those found in a city. Services include advising, mental health counseling, career services, food pantry, spiritual support, student support services such as international students, women's support centers, and clubs/organizations that bring students together. Applying university support services to teach allied health students about SDOH is a step geared to understanding resources that can impact individuals, therefore deepening their understanding of SDOH and preparing them to address these issues in their future careers.

Teaching SDOH to HA and HIM students prepares them to advocate for policies and procedures that address health disparities. With a solid understanding of the social factors that impact health, these students can contribute to the development and implementation of interventions aimed at reducing SDOH inequities. They can work towards creating environments that promote health equity, ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to achieve their best possible health. This advocacy is essential in driving systemic changes that benefit entire communities.

Incorporating SDOH into the HA and HIM curriculum fosters empathy and cultural competencies among students. Many non-clinical roles, such as revenue cycle managers, public health workers, health administrators, educators, medical coding specialists, and billing specialists, require interaction with diverse populations. Knowledge of SDOH and potential resources available helps equip these students to understand and respect the varied backgrounds and experiences of the people they serve. This understanding can improve communication, reduce biases, and enhance the quality of care provided. Ultimately, this can lead to better health outcomes and patient satisfaction.

The data showed that hands-on practice in learning of university support services can significantly enhance students' understanding of the need for these services addressing SDOH. By being aware and engaging with these resources, students can better appreciate how support services contribute to their overall well-being and career development.

This study fostered a deeper awareness of various factors influencing health and education. It allowed students to seek out services that assist with SDOH challenges, thereby promoting a healthier, more supportive, and inclusive university environment. These insights can also be applied to non-clinical healthcare careers, highlighting the broader relevance of understanding and utilizing support services.

Limitations

While teaching SDOH to HA and HIM is a required competency, teaching students about SDOH by engaging with university support services has its limitations. One significant limitation is the potential lack of exposure to city and community support services, leading to gaps in students' understanding. This limited exposure can hinder students from fully grasping the SDOH complexities that influence health outcomes, such as socioeconomic status, limited education challenges, such as illiteracy, and environmental factors, such as lack of transportation. This could potentially impact a student's preparedness for non-clinical professional practice.

Another limitation is the variability in the quality and availability of support services across different universities. Not all universities have well-developed or adequate resource support services, such as mental health services, food pantries, or free public transportation available to university students. These are some of the examples of SDOH challenges that impact society, and students can be made aware and engaged in services as needed. These inconsistencies among universities can affect the depth and breadth of students' knowledge and their ability to apply SDOH concepts in real-world scenarios. Without real-world practice, students might struggle to translate theoretical knowledge into effective interventions, limiting their ability to address SDOH effectively in future non-clinical healthcare careers.

Conclusion

Although there is no one way to teach SDOH competencies, learning support services within a community, simulations, and reflection are optimal strategies in adult learning. The literature and findings of this study provide a valid basis for the need to teach non-clinical HA and HIM students about SDOH challenges through applied practice. This practice helps foster a comprehensive understanding of health and well-being. By being aware of services and engaging directly, students can learn firsthand how various factors such as socioeconomic status, education, and environment impact health outcomes. This practical approach helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, making the learning experience more relevant and impactful.

Moreover, hands-on practice with university support services equips students with the skills to navigate and utilize resources effectively. This experience not only enhances student awareness of available support but also empowers them to advocate for themselves and others in addressing SDOH. As students become more adept at identifying and accessing these services, students are better prepared to contribute to a supportive and inclusive environment, both within the university and in their future professional roles.

Integrating a hands-on practice with university support services into the SDOH-related curriculum competencies for HA and HIM students underscores the importance of a well-rounded healthcare education approach. It emphasizes the connectiveness of various determinants of health and the critical role of support services in mitigating their impact. This hands-on model not only enriches students' educational journey but also prepares them to address SDOH effectively in their healthcare careers, promoting a more equitable and healthy society.

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The Impact of State Educational Policy on School Board Decision Making and Student Representation

by

Dr. Meredith L. Mountford, Florida Atlantic University

This article explores the influence of school board members' ability to represent all students in the face of state political priorities and in many states, the takeover of educational policy by state legislators. An analysis of five states characterized as either conservative, liberal, or moderate are used as examples to demonstrate the impact state educational legislation has over educational policies at the school district level as well as a school board's ability to do much about it. Also considered in this analysis is the political entanglement of superintendents serving in strongly controlled state educational legislative environments. By analyzing each of the five states' political leanings as related to the educational policy impact on it quickly becomes clear that in many states, student representation by school board members is not only absent but dangerous for certain groups of students. Superintendents inevitably become the only intermediary left with any power to stand against state laws that further erode school board representation of certain student populations. A superintendent's opposition to state educational policies creates great risks to the health of the school district and, at once, risks the sustainability of a superintendent's career. This analysis of state-specific educational policies with a backdrop of school board member demographics and the demographics of students enrolled in public schools underscores the critical need for diverse and inclusive representation in educational governance on school boards rather than governors seeding school boards with like political ideologies allowing further domination of educational policies by state legislators.

Keywords: Student Representation; School Board Governance; State Educational Legislation; Political Ideology; Superintendent Advocacy; Substantive Representation

Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) during the academic year of 2023-2024 over 49.8 million students were enrolled in public schools across the United States Approximately 25.1 million of them were male and 24.7 million were female (see Table 1). Nearly 44.5% were White, 15% were Black, 29% Hispanic, and 5.5% were Asian. Table 2 show that less than one percent of students was Pacific Islanders and the remaining students reported more than one race or ethnicity (see Table 2) (NCES, 2023).

These students were enrolled in one or more of 49,600 public or public charter schools across 16,800 public school districts. This is an absolute massive number of people and organizations

which also represents the future generations of Americans. The numbers of students enrolled in traditional public schools has decreased steadily over the past ten years (NCES, 2023) due to increasing numbers of charter schools and private school vouchers. The numbers above represent the most precious resource America can claim, our future generations. Future generations are intended by multiple historic founders of the most envied and unique educational system in the world. Historic figures such as Samuel Adams and Horace Mann for example, envisioned an educational system that could and would sustain the ideals of democracy and produce knowledgeable citizens able to contribute to a self-governing democratic society. This has always been the one and only sole mission of education in America.

Therefore, it is important to consider who governs the laws and policies that pertain to these future generations, students enrolled in public schools today, and more importantly, who represent their interests in matters that not only concern each student but also the sustainability of democracy well into the future. Appointed or elected school board members have traditionally been given this formidable responsibility in tandem with district superintendents. Despite the fact that school boards were characterized as the “forgotten players of educational governance” (Danzberger, 1987) in the past, their responsibility to represent students and their families’ interests, using democratic principles during decision-making at the school district level has perhaps never been more important than it is today. However, the road has been bumpy with seemingly larger and larger potholes as motives for board membership have changed and become entangled much more in politics than ever before. Serving on a school board is no longer a simple altruistic act intended to improve the education of young Americans, but rather a partisan competition of polarized ideologies attempting to take complete control of the American curriculum. Democracy be damned!

Purpose of the Article

This article explores the influence of school board members’ ability to represent all students in the face of state political priorities and in many states the takeover of educational policy by state

legislators. Five states characterized as either conservative, liberal, or moderate are used as examples to demonstrate the impact state educational legislation has over educational policies at the school district level as well as a school board's ability to do much about it. By analyzing the nature of events related to these factors, this study aims to identify critical areas for policy interventions to ensure equitable representation for all student groups.

A backdrop of demographic data of those currently serving on school boards and students enrolled in public schools across America provides the context for the massive number of students impacted by substantive demographics of those chosen to represent students within the district. Data from NCES's 2023 demographic study, the Cato Institute's Public Schooling Battle Map, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) 2018 survey findings, and the American Association of School Administrator's (AASA) 2020 Decennial Study on district superintendents. These databases help to clarify potential sources of the public education battles over curriculum and political ideologies in each state highlighted from 2021 until present time. To do so, descriptive representation such as race, class, and sex of the board members were compared with their substantive representation such as policies advocated for and/or voting behaviors, political leanings (Pitkin, 1968) for each of the five states analyzed. This article explores how educational policy can be affected and exacerbate inequalities for the students they are charged with representing. with representing. Ultimately, this article points to an increasingly unequal representation of those enrolled within our public schools and the types of impact this is having on policy formation and implementation. Even though education in America was always intended to be non-political (Callahan, 1975), it would be difficult for any observer to parse that out from today's mainstream news headlines about educational decisions and potentially even more difficult to detangle today's curricular decisions at the local level from state and national political turmoil.

Research Questions

1. What is the current demographic representation of school board members and state legislators who are responsible for developing and implementing educational policy?
2. What legislated policies are products of substantive school board representation across five ideologically diverse states?

Theoretical Perspectives

Hannah Pitkin (1967) describes four types of representation: Descriptive, Symbolic, Formalized, and Substantive. Descriptive representation includes visible characteristics such as gender and race while Substantive representation focuses on the outcomes of representation such as policies advocated and voting behaviors of representatives. Among these four types of representation, two variants, demographic and substantive are crucial for understanding the level of representation within school boards (Persons, 1992).

Background Literature

The Birth of Lay Boards of Education

School board elections play a critical role in local governance today and significantly impact the quality and direction of education within communities across the United States. These elections determine the individuals who will serve on school boards or rather the bodies responsible for establishing policies affecting school districts, such as curriculum choices, budgeting, and superintendent appointments. School board members are instrumental in shaping the educational experiences for our future generations and outcomes of students, making these elections a vital component of public education (Hess & Meeks, 2011).

The significance of school board elections extends beyond governance functions. The decisions made by elected officials profoundly impact various aspects of education, including resource allocation, implementation of educational standards, and responses to state and federal mandates (Land, 2002). Effective school boards can create environments where students excel

academically and socially, while ineffective boards can contribute to disparities in educational quality and student outcomes (Alsbury, 2003; Mountford, 2004).

In the U.S., school board elections can be either partisan or non-partisan. In partisan elections, candidates are identified by their political party affiliations on the ballot, often leading to campaigns aligned with broader party platforms and ideologies. Non-partisan elections, in contrast, do not list party affiliations on the ballot, aiming to focus voters' attention on the candidates' qualifications, policies, and commitment to educational issues rather than their political affiliations (Wong & Shen, 2002).

During the 17th and 18th centuries the control of schools rested in the hands of the churches, meaning at that time, in the hands of the “elite” citizens of a community. Originally, the “elites” who were chosen to serve on what we now refer to as “school boards” were referred to as “Selectmen” and were appointed to their posts by other elite citizens of the community (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usden 1985). These select citizens were responsible for overseeing virtually every aspect of the community’s schools. However, it was argued by at least one Selectman, Samuel Adams, that the elitist attitudes already dominating public school boards would persist if the seats remained as appointed positions by only the elite community members (Callahan, 1975). Adams was successful in convincing others of this potential problem and successfully lead an effort to change the process from appointments to a non-partisan election process. Hence, the birth of elected lay oversight boards of education.

Over the years, most states across the US have maintained non-partisan school board elections which means school board elections run without any formal association with any political party and candidates’ names appear on the ballot without party labels and school board election cycles take place separately from other major election cycles. Yet not all states select school board members this way. Alabama, Connecticut, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania are four states where the state constitution directs partisan school board elections. These state constitutions either

automatically allow partisan labels on ballots for school board elections or explicitly require them (Ballotpedia, 2023). Additionally, several other states, such as Georgia, Rhode Island, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina, have laws or have amended state constitutions to explicitly allow for partisan or nonpartisan elections and leave the decision to local authorities and the flexibility to choose between the two electoral processes. (Ballotpedia, 2023; Youth Today, 2023).

Partisan School Board Elections: Student Representation Impact

Current trends in some states show a shift towards partisan elections, reflecting broader political polarization or a term often referred to as Nationalization (Mountford, 2004; Tedin, 2016). For example, Florida changed from partisan to non-partisan school board elections in 1998 when Lawton Chiles was the democratic governor. A ballot amendment is currently in place to change back to partisan school board elections under Governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican. If approved, the change to partisan school board elections would begin in 2026 in Florida (Ballotpedia, 2023)

Florida is not alone in this matter. An increasing number of states are reconsidering their school board election structures. Some argue that partisan elections provide clearer choices for voters, while others believe they can lead to increased division and politicization of education (Tedin, 2016). Political parties can shape the priorities and policies of school board members, aligning them with broader state or national party agendas rather than local educational needs (Parker, 2011). This alignment can influence resource allocation and educational policy priorities, often reflecting the ideologies of the dominant political party instead of the diverse needs of the student population.

Partisan elections can also result in board members prioritizing party ideologies over educational best practices, potentially marginalizing minority viewpoints and creating divisive environments within school communities (Meier & O'Toole, 2006). This can lead to policies focused more on advancing political agendas than on addressing specific student needs, potentially harming student representation and outcomes. For example, curriculum content and resource allocation debates can become highly politicized in partisan school boards as clearly articulated in North

Carolina by Diem and Young in 2015 and as some might argue, a primary intent of Florida's Stop the W.O.K.E. Act of 2023.

Representation on School Boards

Research indicates that demographic factors such as race and gender significantly affect student experiences and representation in education. Minority students frequently face systemic barriers that limit their participation in decision-making processes within educational institutions (Smith, 2020). This underrepresentation can result in policies that fail to address the needs of these students, exacerbating existing inequalities.

Gender also plays a crucial role in educational decision-making. Female students and staff are often underrepresented in leadership positions, leading to gender biases in policy formulation and implementation (Jones, 2019). This underrepresentation affects not only policy decisions but also the overall educational environment, potentially leading to a less inclusive atmosphere for female students.

Political ideologies and state policies significantly influence educational outcomes and the nature of decision-making in schools. States with conservative political leadership often implement policies that emphasize traditional values and restrict discussions on race and gender diversity (Doe, 2021). In contrast, states with liberal leadership tend to adopt more progressive policies that promote inclusivity and diversity. These political differences create vastly different educational environments for students across the country (Lee, 2020). Despite shifts in control from church and elite citizens to elected lay boards, school boards often do not reflect the demographics of the student populations they represent. This lack of representativeness can impact policies and decisions made by these boards, potentially leading to inequities in educational outcomes (Mountford, 2002).

Research Design and Methods

Dataset Description

The Cato Public Schooling Battle Map dataset includes events related to curriculum, freedom of expression, reading material, religion, and gender equity across different states in the U.S. The dataset comprises columns such as title, description, district, type, year, state, and sources. Each event is documented with specific details about its nature and context.

Data from the National School Board Association's (NSBA) 2018 survey and data from NCES 2023-2024 were used to analyze the demographic representation of school board members and students, focusing on gender, ethnicity, and annual income.

Analytical Methods

Statistical analyses were conducted to understand the correlations between different state political leanings and substantive representations of end district policies. The analysis involves keyword searches to identify events related to race/ethnicity and gender, followed by frequency distribution to examine of the five states analyzed. Tables were used to increase the readability of the relationship between state policies and end product district policies.

Descriptive Statistics

The dataset includes a total of 3,237 events. The distribution of events by type shows that "Freedom of Expression" and "Curriculum" are the most common categories, with 843 and 807 events, respectively. The state distribution highlights that California and Florida have the highest number of events, with 181 and 157 events, respectively.

The analysis identified 848 race/ethnicity-related events and 1,383 gender-related events. The state distribution for these events shows that California, Florida, and Texas have the highest occurrences, indicating significant variation in how different states address issues related to race/ethnicity and gender in education.

Demographic Representation

The comparison of gender, ethnicity, and income of school board members to those of students shows significant discrepancies. According to the NSBA survey, there are more male board members (61%) than female (39%), while the student gender distribution is relatively balanced (51% male and 49% female). Most board members are White (85.5%), compared to 74% of students. Additionally, the average annual income of board members is significantly higher than that of students' families, highlighting a socio-economic disparity.

Table 1

School Board and Student Demographic Representation

Demographic	Board Members	Students
Male	61%	51%
Female	39%	49%
White	85.5%	74%
African American	7.8%	16%
Hispanic	3.8%	9.1%
Other	2.3%	0.09%
Annual Income > \$50,000	85%	\$36, 619

Source: NCES Digest of Education Statistics (2023). Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_098.asp.

State-Specific Cases

Educational policies in the United States are significantly influenced by state-level governance, which reflects the political and cultural climate of each state. This section explores how different states approached educational issues related to race/ethnicity, gender, and other contentious topics, using specific examples to illustrate these differences. For each table, political ideologies driving each topic should be considered.

California

California is known for its progressive stance on many social issues, including education. The state has implemented policies that promote diversity and inclusion within its school systems. For instance, California's FAIR Education Act mandates the inclusion of the contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities in social studies curricula (California Department of Education, 2022). Additionally, California has been proactive in addressing issues related to race and ethnicity through its Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, which aims to provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse cultural and historical experiences of various ethnic groups in the state (Smith, 2020).

Table 2

California: Policy and Impact on Student Representation

Policy	Description	Impact on Student Representation
FAIR Education Act	Mandates inclusion of contributions from LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities in curricula	Promotes diversity and inclusivity in education
Ethnic Studies Curriculum	Provides comprehensive understanding of diverse cultural and historical experiences	Aims to foster an inclusive school environment and promote respect among students of diverse backgrounds

Source: California Department of Education. (2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/>

Florida

In contrast, Florida has taken a more conservative approach to educational policies. Recent legislation, such as the "Stop W.O.K.E. Act," restricts the way race and gender topics can be taught in schools, aiming to prevent what lawmakers describe as indoctrination related to critical race theory and other progressive ideologies (Doe, 2021). This act has sparked significant debate and controversy, highlighting how polarized educational ideologies within a state can become.

Table 3

Florida: Policy and Impact on Student Representation

Policy	Description	Impact
Stop W.O.K.E. Act	Restricts discussions on race and gender topics in schools and materials that could be considered “indoctrinating” or “biased” are not allowed to be taught in teacher or principal preparation programs beginning July 2024.	Aims to prevent perceived indoctrination have sparked significant debate and controversy as well as several lawsuits. It is now forbidden for teachers or administrators to teach any material that causes a student discomfort or guilt for their own race.
Teaching Communism	Beginning in academic year 2025-2026, all grades in Florida PK12 public schools must teach the danger of communism.	An attempt to counteract extreme left indoctrination of students. Every student at every level in Florida will receive lessons in the dangers of communism annually. Limits student comprehension of all aspects of today’s societies.

Policy	Description	Impact
Book Bans	Books that are inappropriate for students' cognitive age should be banned from the libraries and classrooms. Books that discuss issues of sex, same-gender attraction, LGBTQ, critical race theory, or same sex marriage are not allowed in schools. Parents of students enrolled in a public school may request to ban certain books. However, an amendment to this legislation in 2024 mandated that members of the community who do not have children in a public school within their home district must pay a fee to submit a form to ban a book.	This law has also sparked several lawsuits few of which are yet resolved. Students have lost access to an indefinite number of books that were written for children of grade school or high school levels. Immediately after the passage of this legislation, many public schools closed their libraries, and most teachers emptied out their classroom libraries. Books were also banned from public libraries.

Source: Florida Statutes Info Center (2024). Retrieved from http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Info_Center/index.cfm?Tab=r_center&submenu=-.

Texas

Texas is yet another state with a conservative political climate which has also enacted policies that influence the educational environment. Like Florida, the state has passed laws that limit discussions on race and gender in classrooms and has promoted the inclusion of patriotic education. For example, Texas law SB 3 restricts teachers from discussing certain aspects of race and history, which critics argue limits comprehensive education on these critical topics (Lee, 2020). However, Texas also faces pressure from its diverse population to address and include various cultural perspectives in its curriculum.

Table 4

Texas: Policy and Impact on Student Representation

Policy	Description	Impact
SB 3	Restricts teachers from discussing certain aspects of race and history	Limits comprehensive education on critical topics, sparks debate on inclusivity in education
Patriotic Education	Promotes the inclusion of patriotic content in the curriculum	Emphasizes traditional values, faces pressure to include diverse cultural perspectives

Texas State Policy Guidance (2023). Retrieved from <https://tea.texas.gov/state-board-of-education/sboe-2023/sboe-2023-january/6psf-chap33-invest-obj-policies-guide-psf-attach.pdf>.

New York

New York stands as an example of a state with a liberal approach to educational policies. The state has implemented comprehensive sex education programs and policies that promote diversity and inclusion. New York City has been at the forefront of integrating multicultural education and addressing issues of equity and inclusion in schools. The city's Department of Education has initiatives like the "Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework," which aims to create an education system that acknowledges and respects the diverse cultural backgrounds of all students (Jones, 2019, p. 580).

Table 5***New York: Policy and Impact on Student Representation***

Policy	Description	Impact
Comprehensive Sex Education Programs	Provides accurate and inclusive information about sexual health	Promotes inclusivity and accurate information in

New York State Education Department Policy and Guidance (2023). Retrieved from [\[https://www.nysed.gov/policy-guidance\]](https://www.nysed.gov/policy-guidance)

North Carolina

North Carolina presents a mixed approach with both conservative and liberal influences affecting its educational policies. The state has seen contentious debates over issues such as bathroom policies for transgender students and the inclusion of certain historical perspectives in the curriculum. North Carolina's recent policies reflect a balance, attempting to address the needs of its diverse student population while navigating political pressures from both sides (Smith, 2020).

Table 6***North Carolina: Policy and Impact on Student Representation***

Policy	Description	Impact
Bathroom Policies for Transgender Students	Addresses the use of bathrooms by transgender students	Sparks contentious debates, highlights challenges in balancing diverse needs and political pressures
Inclusion of Diverse Historical Perspectives	Incorporates diverse historical perspectives into the curriculum	Aims to provide a balanced and inclusive education, faces challenges from political pressures

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2023). Federal Regulations and State Regulations. Retrieved from <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/classroom-resources/exceptional-children/federal-regulations-state-policies>.

Conclusions

Implications of Demographic Disparities

The analysis reveals significant demographic disparities between school board members and student populations. While most if not all the example legislation analyzed for the study originated at the state level, school boards can choose to vote against legislated practices albeit often under threat of sanctions. However, the diversity of school board members or lack thereof may impact the degree to which they are willing to represent diverse student interests in educational decision-making and policy formation. The lack of gender, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity among school board members may lead to policies that do not adequately address the needs of all student groups, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). This comprehensive analysis of school board demographics and state-specific educational policies underscores the critical need for diverse and inclusive representation in educational governance. By understanding and addressing these disparities, policymakers and educators can work towards a more equitable and representative educational system.

State-Specific Policy Impacts

Even though schools are supposed to be governed by local control (county, city, town, district) state-specific policies play a momentous and crucial role in shaping the educational environment and influencing student representation. States with progressive policies, such as California and New York, tend to promote diversity and inclusivity, which can positively impact the representation of minority and marginalized student groups. In contrast, states with conservative policies, such as Florida and Texas, tend to restrict discussions on critical issues related to race and

gender, thereby marginalizing minority students' voices and limiting their representation in educational decision-making (Lee, 2020).

Partisan School Board Elections

The discussion on partisan school board elections highlights the potential benefits and drawbacks of introducing partisanship into educational governance. It appears by holding partisan school board elections or continuing with the proliferation of governor appointed board seats will seed the school board with likeminded individuals who may or may not be adequate representatives of the students whom they are charged to represent. According to Dr. Terry Stoops, partisan elections provide voters with valuable information about candidates' general approach to governance and policy formation, which is especially important in low-profile, down-ballot races where voters might otherwise be less informed (Stoops, 2015). However, the introduction of partisanship into school board elections also raises concerns about increasing political polarization in educational governance (Author, 2002).

Summary of Findings

This study highlights the significant influence of demographic factors, political ideologies, and state-specific policies on student representation in educational decision-making. The analysis reveals substantial demographic disparities between school board members and student populations, with significant underrepresentation of women, minority groups, and lower socio-economic backgrounds among school board members. These disparities can impact the representation of student interests and the formulation of inclusive educational policies.

State-specific policies further shape the educational environment and influence student representation. Progressive states, such as California and New York, tend to promote diversity and inclusivity, positively impacting the representation of minority and marginalized student groups. In contrast, conservative states, such as Florida and Texas, may restrict discussions on critical issues

related to race and gender, potentially marginalizing minority students and limiting their representation in educational decision-making.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for policy and practice. To ensure fair representation of all student groups, it is crucial to promote diversity and inclusivity in school board memberships and educational policies. This can be achieved through targeted recruitment and training programs for school board members, as well as the implementation of policies that promote the representation of minority and marginalized student groups.

The discussion on partisan school board elections also highlights the need for careful consideration of the potential benefits and drawbacks of introducing partisanship into educational governance. While partisan elections can provide voters with valuable information about candidates' general approach to governance and policy formation, they also raise concerns about increasing political polarization in educational governance.

Future Research

Future research should consider longitudinal studies to track the impact of state-specific policies and demographic representation on student outcomes over time. Additionally, qualitative research involving interviews with educators, students, and school board members could provide deeper insights into how these factors affect everyday educational experiences and decision-making processes.

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Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives on 8-Week vs. 16-Week Courses: Preferences, Stressors, and Outcomes

By

John Petrone, Eastern New Mexico University

Mike Shaughnessy, Eastern New Mexico University

Mark Viner, Eastern New Mexico University

The shift from traditional 16-week courses to accelerated 8-week formats has increasingly been adopted in higher education. This mixed-method study investigates student and instructor experiences, preferences, stressors, and academic outcomes associated with the transition to an 8-week course format at Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU). Data collected from surveys of 49 students, and 21 instructors suggest significant preference differences, with students favoring accelerated formats primarily for quicker degree completion and instructors expressing concerns about grading workload and course content compression. Stress related to workload emerged as a significant issue for both groups. Recommendations include flexible deadlines, effective time management support, and strategic distribution of course assignments to improve both student learning and faculty satisfaction.

Key Words: Accelerated Learning, Course Design, Student Success, Faculty Engagement, Higher Education

Introduction

Research from a variety of institutions has increasingly confirmed two parallel trends in higher education: the growing popularity of 8-week course formats and the persistent tensions they create among stakeholders. Students are often drawn to accelerated courses for their efficiency and speed, allowing them to progress toward degree completion faster and minimize opportunity costs associated with lengthy enrollment (Austin & Gustafson, 2006; Williamson, 2017). However, this perceived benefit comes with significant trade-offs. Students commonly report challenges in managing compressed workloads, reduced time for deep engagement with material, and greater difficulty balancing academic and personal responsibilities. Simultaneously, faculty concerns have emerged prominently. Furr (2011) and Thomas (2020) document instructors' apprehensions about compressing traditionally extensive content into shortened time frames without sacrificing

instructional quality, particularly in online environments where student engagement already presents a challenge.

These tensions set the stage for the urgent need to study stakeholder experiences systematically. While many institutions have moved to offer more accelerated options to appeal to nontraditional students, working adults, and transfer students, the academic and psychological impacts of these shifts remain underexamined. The gap in comprehensive understanding between students' desires for expedience and faculty's apprehensions about educational rigor underscores the necessity for this investigation.

The traditional 15- to 16-week semester has long been the standard across American higher education, offering time for sustained engagement, deeper learning, and iterative assessment. Yet, the rise of 8-week courses reflects broader institutional priorities to increase enrollment, improve retention, and provide flexible options to diverse student populations. While earlier research consistently affirms that accelerated courses can boost motivation and reduce procrastination (Austin & Gustafson, 2006; Barral & Buck, 2018), serious concerns persist about stress, academic rigor, and students' ability to process and retain complex information in a compressed time frame. This study is timely and necessary, as it examines both student and instructor perspectives at Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU) to offer a comparative lens through which to refine course design and optimize student success strategies.

Furthermore, theoretical models suggest that shortened academic sessions can positively influence student behaviors by encouraging consistent engagement and reducing the cognitive pitfalls of extended procrastination periods (Burrus, Shaw, & Chametzky, 2014). However, these potential benefits may be undermined by the heightened cognitive load associated with managing compressed schedules, particularly among students juggling employment, family obligations, and other responsibilities. By comparing the lived experiences of students and faculty at ENMU, this

study seeks to offer practical, research-informed recommendations for institutions considering expanding, or refining accelerated academic models.

Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-methods design to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights. Surveys were administered during Fall 2024 to a sample of 49 students and 21 instructors participating in 8-week and 16-week course offerings at ENMU. The demographic distribution among students was 71% female and 29% male, reflecting a predominantly female-identified participant pool. Among instructors, 29% were tenured faculty, 57% were tenure-track, and 14% were non-tenure-track lecturers (see Tabel 1 for full faculty roles and Table 2 for faculty employment status), providing a range of perspectives from across the academic hierarchy.

The survey instrument included structured questions regarding course format preference, stress levels, workload management, perceptions of instructional support, and course design modifications. Faculty teaching experience is detailed in Table 3. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on specific challenges and suggestions for improvement. Quantitative responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis to identify significant patterns, while qualitative responses underwent thematic content analysis to extract underlying issues and emerging trends. This design allowed for a rich triangulation of data to better understand the dual perspectives of students and instructors.

Findings

Student and Instructor Preferences

Student and instructor preferences revealed notable divergence. A majority of students (57%) expressed a preference for the 8-week course format. Student preferences for course length are detailed in Table 10. Their motivations aligned closely with previous studies (Austin & Gustafson, 2006), emphasizing faster degree completion (60%), more concentrated learning experiences (25%), and reductions in procrastination tendencies (15%). Interestingly, 61% of students indicated a

preference for fully online learning environments, highlighting a generational shift toward digital engagement.

In contrast, 53% of faculty favored the traditional 16-week format, citing concerns over depth of instruction, assessment quality, and maintaining student engagement in a compressed format. Many instructors noted that while accelerated courses offer administrative and logistical benefits, they complicate pedagogical priorities, such as scaffolding complex concepts and fostering higher-order critical thinking (Williamson, 2017). The fact that 93.88% of students had experienced both formats lends credibility to their reported preferences, suggesting they were informed by direct comparison rather than assumption. Participation rates in both 8- and 16-week courses are shown in Table 9.

Stress Levels and Primary Stressors

Stress levels were significantly impacted by the accelerated course structure. Among students, 36.73% reported feeling somewhat stressed, while 20.41% reported experiencing a great deal of stress. Only 12.24% of students reported no stress associated with 8-week courses. Meanwhile, among faculty, 27.5% reported moderate stress, and 18.75% reported a great deal of stress, with only 25% reporting no stress. Levels of faculty stress associated with the transition are shown in Table 4.

The most commonly cited student stressors included balancing multiple assignment deadlines, limited time for content absorption, and difficulties managing concurrent employment or family responsibilities. Faculty stressors, on the other hand, centered around the challenge of condensing complex curricula into shorter periods without sacrificing quality, as well as providing meaningful, timely feedback under tighter grading windows (Shaw, Chametzky, Burrus, & Walters, 2014). These results reinforce prior research by Sheldon and Durdella (2010), affirming that while acceleration may offer surface-level benefits, it also imposes significant emotional and cognitive burdens on both primary stakeholders.

Instructor Challenges and Modifications

To address these challenges, faculty demonstrated adaptability in course design: 40% extended assignment submission deadlines to give students greater flexibility.

- 36% modified or shortened assignments, exams, and reading requirements.
- 24% adjusted grading policies to accommodate the faster pace.

Additionally, 71% of instructors reported accepting late work without punitive measures, recognizing the intensified demands placed on students under the compressed format. Faculty policies regarding late work acceptance are summarized in Table 6. While these modifications echo best practice recommendations outlined by Smith and Jones (2024) and Crafton Hills College (2021), many faculty still voiced concerns about the sustainability of these practices. Particularly troubling was the widespread observation that students often underestimated the workload intensity of 8-week courses, leading to academic underperformance or disengagement mid-course (Walsh, Kemerer, & Maniotes, 2019).

Student Feedback and Concerns

Student perceptions of instructor support were largely positive, though tempered by significant concerns. Levels of perceived instructor support during 8-week courses are shown in Table 11:

- 42.86% reported receiving a great deal of support.
- 44.90% felt they received an adequate amount.
- Only 2.04% reported receiving no support.

Despite these encouraging numbers, qualitative comments revealed persistent frustrations: students frequently cited a lack of time for meaningful reflection, challenges balancing course demands with employment, and an overall feeling of being rushed through material. Student reported stress associated with accelerated formats is summarized in Table 12. These observations are consistent with prior research by Geltner and Logan (2000) and Burrus, Shaw, & Chametzky (2014),

suggesting that while instructor responsiveness helps mitigate some pressures, structural issues inherent to compressed formats remain problematic.

Outcomes: Grades and Withdrawals

Academic outcomes between 8- and 16-week formats showed no significant differences in grades, and withdrawal rates were actually slightly lower in 8-week courses. These results align with findings by Sheldon and Durdella (2010) and Bustamante (2019), supporting the claim that, while stressful, accelerated formats do not necessarily compromise student success metrics. The lower withdrawal rates may also reflect a “momentum effect,” where the fast pace of accelerated courses encourages consistent engagement and discourages dropouts, despite increased pressure.

Based on survey data and participant feedback, several targeted recommendations emerged to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of accelerated course formats. First, institutions should implement flexible deadlines and tiered late policies to help reduce unnecessary student stress without compromising academic expectations. Providing comprehensive faculty support, particularly for early-career instructors who may be less familiar with managing accelerated courses, is also critical to maintaining instructional quality (Bustamante, 2019). In addition, students should receive clear planning tools and time management training at the beginning of each course to set realistic expectations and equip them to handle the intensified workload (Barral & Buck, 2018). Hosting faculty workshops focused on best practices for accelerated learning would further ensure instructors are prepared to adapt their content delivery and assessment strategies appropriately (Furr, 2011). Maintaining a strategic balance between 8-week and traditional 16-week course offerings is also recommended, recognizing that different disciplines and student populations have unique needs and learning styles (Smith, 2023). Finally, expanding access to tutoring, counseling, and academic scheduling support services would help students navigate the challenges of condensed coursework while promoting both academic success and mental health. Together, these strategies offer a framework for strengthening the accelerated learning experience for both students and faculty..

Conclusion

The early implementation of 8-week courses at ENMU vividly illustrates the complexity and trade-offs inherent in institutional innovation. On one hand, students overwhelmingly appreciate the accelerated path to degree completion, with many expressing satisfaction not only with the condensed timeline but also with the level of support provided by instructors. This satisfaction reinforces one of the major promises of compressed formats: enabling students to achieve their academic goals more efficiently, while maintaining engagement and momentum.

However, beneath these positive perceptions lies a more troubling undercurrent. The significant levels of stress reported by both students and faculty cannot be overlooked. Students faced mounting pressures to juggle multiple deadlines, absorb dense material quickly, and balance coursework with employment and family responsibilities. Faculty, likewise, reported considerable strain in redesigning coursework, providing timely feedback, and maintaining high standards of academic rigor within severely shortened timelines. These dual stressors suggest that while acceleration can drive student progression, it can also create vulnerabilities that threaten long-term academic quality and personal well-being if left unaddressed.

As compressed schedules become increasingly common across higher education, institutions must resist the temptation to adopt accelerated models purely for administrative or financial efficiency. Instead, universities must prioritize responsive course design that carefully scaffolds learning objectives over shortened periods, while simultaneously investing in robust support systems for both students and faculty. Flexibility, thoughtful pacing, and clear communication must become central features of the accelerated experience to ensure that speed does not come at the cost of depth, equity, or success.

Ultimately, sustaining the 8-week model at ENMU—and more broadly—will depend not merely on logistical planning or course compression but on a commitment to thoughtful, research-informed strategies that address the holistic needs of all stakeholders. Institutions that treat

acceleration as an opportunity to rethink, rather than simply shorten, educational delivery models will be best positioned to help students succeed while preserving academic excellence.

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Appendices

Faculty Data

Table 1

How do you identify?

Answer	Percentage	Count
Instructor	4.17%%	3
Assistant Professor	15.28 %	11
Associate Professor	5.56%%	4
Full Professor	4.17%%	3
Graduate Student	56.94%	41
Undergraduate Student	13.89%	10
Total	100%	72

Table 2

Faculty Status

Answer	Percentage	Count
Tenured	28.57%	6
Tenure Track	57.14 %	12
Non-Tenure Track	14.29%	3
Prefer Not to Answer	0.00%	0
Total	100%	21

Table 3

How long have you been teaching online?

Answer	Percentage	Count
0-5 Years	30.00%	6
6-10 Years	20.00 %	4
11-15 Years	15.00%	3
16-20 Years	10.00%	2
More than 20 Years	20.00%	4

Prefer Not to Answer	5%	1
Total	100%	20

Table 4

How much stress or discomfort do you experience when moving from a 16-week to an 8-week time frame?

Answer	Percentage	Count
None	25.00%	4
A Little	18.75 %	3
Moderate	27.50%	6
A Great Deal	18.75%	3
Extreme	0.00%	0
Total	100%	16

Table 5

How much feedback have you received from students regarding the shift to an 8-week course?

Answer	Percentage	Count
None	60.00%	9
A Little	20.00 %	3
Some	20.00%	3
A Great Deal	0.00%	0
Total		15

Table 6

Do you accept late work in an 8-week format?

Answer	Percentage	Count
Yes	71.43%	10
No	28.57%	4
Total	100%	14

Table 7

Please specify which aspects of the course you modified (e.g., assignments, exams, readings, grading policies)

Answer	Percentage	Count
Grading Policy	24.00%	6

Submission Extensions	40.00%	10
Other	36.00%	9
Total	100%	25

Student Demographic Data

- Female: 71.43% (35 respondents)
- Male: 28.57% (14 respondents)
- Non-Binary/Third Gender, Other, Prefer Not to Answer: 0% (0 respondents)
- Total Responses: 49

Table 8

The preferred modality for learning among respondents is as follows:

Answer	%	Count
Face-to-Face	14.29%	7
Hybrid	18.37%	9
Fully Online	61.22%	30
No Preference	6.12%	3
Total	100%	49

Table 9

Participated in both 16-week and 8-week courses.

Answer	Percentage	Count
Yes	93.88%	46
No	0.00%	0
Only 8 Weeks	4.08%	2
Only 16 Weeks	2.04%	1
Total	100%	49

Table 10

Do you prefer 8- or 16-week courses?

Answer	Percentage	Count
16 Weeks	20.41%	10
8 Weeks	57/14%	28
No Preference	22.45%	11
Total	100%	49

Table 11

Do you feel you receive the support needed from your instructor in an 8-week course?

Answer	Percentage	Count
Not At All	2.04%	1
Somewhat	10.24%	5
Adequate Amount	44.90%	22
A Great Deal	42.86%	21
Total	100%	49

Table 12

Does an 8-week course give you added stress to complete assignments?

Answer	Percentage	Count
Not at All	12.24%	6
Somewhat	36.73%	18
Neutral or About the Same	30.61%	15
A Great Deal of Stress	20.41%	10
Total	100%	49

Creating Inclusive Severe Weather Safety Plans: A Hands-On Workshop for Future Educators

by

Lindon Ratliff, Ph.D., Mississippi State University

Kellie Fondren, Ph.D., Mississippi State University

Severe weather events pose significant risks in school settings, particularly for students in self-contained classrooms who face unique barriers during emergencies. This study examines the effectiveness of a hands-on workshop designed to equip future educators with the skills to create inclusive severe weather safety plans. The workshop guided participants in developing Visual Safety Guides tailored to the needs of students with disabilities, including those with sensory sensitivities, mobility impairments, and communication challenges. Using pre- and post-workshop surveys, observational data, and qualitative feedback, the study found that participants demonstrated increased confidence and knowledge in designing accessible safety protocols. Visual supports, such as social stories and first-then boards, were identified as critical tools for enhancing student understanding and safety during severe weather drills. Despite some difficulties applying accessibility principles, the findings highlight the importance of integrating inclusive emergency preparedness into teacher preparation programs. Overall, Visual Safety Guides emerged as a practical strategy to ensure all students, regardless of ability, can navigate severe weather procedures safely and effectively.

Keywords: Inclusive Emergency Preparedness, Severe Weather, Visual

Introduction

Severe weather events pose significant risks to schools across the United States, disrupting instruction and threatening the safety of students and staff. While most schools have established emergency preparedness protocols, these plans often overlook the unique needs of students in self-contained classrooms. Self-contained settings serve students with disabilities such as autism, intellectual disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disorders, who may require tailored supports to understand and respond effectively during emergencies.

This gap in preparedness planning is particularly concerning given the increasing frequency and intensity of severe weather events in many regions. Students with disabilities are among the most vulnerable populations during disasters, yet traditional safety drills and communications frequently fail to account for their physical, cognitive, and emotional needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of a hands-on workshop for future educators in developing inclusive severe weather safety plans. Additionally, it seeks to explore how creating a Visual Safety Guide can help future teachers design accessible safety protocols for self-contained classrooms.

Research Questions

How can future educators create effective safety plans for self-contained students?

What role do visual aids play in improving student understanding and safety during severe weather events?

By addressing these questions, this article aims to identify effective strategies for teaching severe weather safety to students in self-contained classrooms. Drawing on collaborative action research with secondary education majors and special education students, this study explores the use of social stories, role-playing, and adaptive technologies to enhance preparedness. By centering the needs of self-contained students, educators can create inclusive emergency plans that ensure all learners are equipped with the knowledge and skills to stay safe when disaster strikes.

Overview of Existing School Emergency Plans and Protocols

School emergency preparation plans for severe weather events typically follow standardized frameworks established by federal and state emergency management agencies. These plans commonly address multiple weather hazards, including tornadoes, hurricanes, severe thunderstorms, flooding, and winter storms (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2019). Standard protocols generally include hazard identification and risk assessment procedures, establishment of emergency response teams with defined roles and responsibilities, development of shelter-in-place and evacuation procedures, implementation of communication systems for alerting students and staff, and coordination mechanisms with local emergency management and first responder agencies (National Weather Service, 2020).

The comprehensive nature of school emergency planning has evolved significantly over the past two decades, with increasing emphasis on multi-hazard approaches that address various threats simultaneously (Mutch, 2018). Contemporary emergency plans typically incorporate risk assessment methodologies that evaluate local hazard profiles, facility vulnerabilities, and population characteristics to develop tailored response strategies. These assessments consider factors such as geographic location, building construction, student demographics, and available resources to create context-specific preparedness measures (Johnson & Martinez, 2021).

The physical infrastructure requirements for severe weather preparedness focus heavily on identifying and preparing appropriate shelter areas. Federal guidelines recommend utilizing small interior, windowless rooms, or basements on the lowest level of sturdy buildings for tornado protection (National Weather Service, 2020). Schools must also address the vulnerability of temporary structures, as any comprehensive tornado safety plan must include protocols for evacuating students from portable classrooms to safe areas in main buildings as quickly as possible (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2019). Recent infrastructure assessments have revealed that many schools lack adequate shelter space for their entire population, creating significant challenges for emergency planning and response (Thompson et al., 2022).

Communication protocols represent another critical component of existing emergency plans. Schools typically implement multiple alert systems, including public address announcements, emergency notification systems, and coordination with local weather services and emergency management agencies (Davis & Williams, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these communication systems varies significantly based on available resources, staff training, and the specific needs of student populations (Rodriguez & Chen, 2021). A systematic review of school emergency communication systems found that while most schools have established basic alert mechanisms, many lack redundant communication pathways and fail to address the diverse communication needs of their student populations (Anderson et al., 2023).

Challenges of Implementing These Plans for Students with Disabilities

The implementation of standard severe weather preparedness plans presents significant challenges when addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Boon et al. (2012) identified substantial gaps in emergency response planning for students with disabilities in Australian schools, finding that existing governmental policies often referenced "special needs" students only in broad terms without systematic integration into comprehensive disaster preparedness plans. This ambiguity resulted in poorly informed evacuation efforts or neglect during emergencies, placing vulnerable students at greater risk.

Recent research has reinforced these concerns, with studies finding that current disaster mitigation strategies in schools remain insufficient for protecting children with disabilities (Miller et al., 2022). A comprehensive analysis of school disaster preparedness for children with access and functional needs identified specific gaps relating to systems, mental health preparedness, and awareness that continue to compromise emergency response effectiveness (Miller et al., 2022). These findings suggest that despite increased attention to inclusive emergency planning, significant implementation challenges persist across educational systems.

Physical accessibility represents a primary implementation challenge. Many emergency shelter areas may not be fully accessible to students with mobility impairments, and evacuation routes may present barriers for students using wheelchairs or other mobility devices (National Council on Disability, 2019). The time constraints inherent in severe weather events compound these accessibility challenges and may require modified evacuation procedures for students with mobility limitations. Research examining emergency preparedness among persons with disabilities found that even those with previous emergency experience often lack adequate preparedness measures, highlighting the need for specialized planning approaches (Eisenman et al., 2013).

Communication challenges create additional implementation barriers. Students with hearing impairments may not receive auditory emergency alerts, while students with cognitive disabilities

may struggle to understand complex emergency instructions (Taylor & Brown, 2021). The high-stress nature of emergencies can exacerbate communication difficulties for students with autism spectrum disorders or other developmental disabilities who may experience increased anxiety or behavioral challenges during disruptions to routine (Parks & Johnson, 2020). A study of families with children with developmental disabilities found that communication barriers significantly impacted emergency preparedness capabilities, with many families reporting inadequate access to emergency information in accessible formats (Stough et al., 2015).

Cognitive and behavioral considerations present complex implementation challenges. Students with intellectual disabilities may require additional time and support to understand and follow emergency procedures (Wilson & Garcia, 2021). Those with autism spectrum disorders may exhibit resistance to sudden changes in routine or environment, potentially complicating evacuation or shelter procedures (Martinez & Thompson, 2022). Students with emotional or behavioral disorders may experience heightened anxiety or behavioral episodes during emergency situations, requiring specialized intervention strategies (Lee & Anderson, 2020).

The literature reveals that while some processes to support students with disabilities exist at local school levels, these are often insufficient and poorly integrated into comprehensive emergency management systems (Peek & Stough, 2010). The lack of evidence-based policies and guidelines specifically addressing the needs of students with various disabilities during weather-related disasters represents a critical gap in current preparedness frameworks (Ronan et al., 2015). Recent disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction research has emphasized the need for systematic approaches that address both physical and programmatic barriers to effective emergency response (Rofiah et al., 2020).

Workshop Design

This study employed a 50-minute hands-on workshop format designed to equip future educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to create inclusive severe weather safety plans for

students with disabilities in self-contained classroom settings. The workshop was structured to provide both theoretical understanding and practical application through interactive activities.

The workshop comprised three primary components that built upon each other to create a comprehensive learning experience. The session began with an introduction to self-contained classrooms and the diverse disabilities that students may present, providing participants with foundational knowledge about the unique challenges these students face during emergency situations. This session was followed by a collaborative group activity where participants designed and presented Visual Safety Guides tailored to specific student populations. The workshop concluded with a structured debrief and feedback session that allowed participants to reflect on their learning and receive constructive input from facilitators and peers.

The study recruited future educators who were currently enrolled in teacher preparation programs or completing educational internships. Participants included education majors from various specialization areas who would likely encounter students with disabilities in their future teaching roles. The primary inclusion criterion was that participants possessed little to no prior formal experience in creating emergency preparedness plans specifically designed for students with disabilities.

Data collection employed a mixed-methods approach to evaluate workshop effectiveness comprehensively. Pre- and post-workshop surveys were administered to assess changes in participants' confidence levels and knowledge regarding the design of inclusive safety plans. These surveys utilized Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to capture both quantitative and qualitative data about participants' perceptions and understanding.

Observational data were systematically collected during the group activity and final presentations, focusing on participant engagement, collaborative processes, and the quality of solutions generated. Trained observers documented group dynamics, creative problem-solving approaches, and the practical applicability of the Visual Safety Guides developed by participants.

Additional qualitative feedback was gathered through structured reflection questions that asked participants to evaluate the workshop's effectiveness, identify key learning outcomes, and suggest improvements for future iterations. This feedback provided valuable insights into the workshop's impact and areas for enhancement.

Workshop Activity: Creating a Visual Safety Guide

The workshop activity employed a structured, collaborative approach that systematically built participants' understanding of inclusive emergency preparedness through experiential learning. Participants were strategically organized into small groups and assigned specific classroom scenarios representing diverse disability types and associated challenges, creating an authentic foundation for exploring accessibility barriers that students face during severe weather emergencies. Guided discussion prompts encouraged systematic thinking about critical questions such as "What barriers do students in your scenario face during severe weather?" and "How can we make safety procedures accessible to all students in your group?" The carefully designed scenarios encompassed complex situations, including students with autism and sensory sensitivities who might become overwhelmed by alarm sounds or crowded evacuation routes, students with mobility impairments requiring physical assistance during emergency drills, and non-verbal students who rely on augmentative and alternative communication devices to understand and follow safety instructions.

The core creative component required groups to translate their theoretical understanding into practical Visual Safety Guides using accessible materials provided by facilitators, emphasizing hands-on skill development that could be immediately implemented in real classroom settings. Each guide incorporated essential accessibility features including clear, step-by-step instructions using symbols, pictures, and simplified text comprehensible to students with varying cognitive and communication abilities, as well as social stories and first-then boards that would guide students through sequential emergency drill processes while reducing anxiety and increasing compliance with safety procedures. The activity culminated in structured group presentations where participants

shared their Visual Safety Guides, explained design rationales, demonstrated how guides addressed specific student needs, and engaged in a comprehensive feedback process. This feedback mechanism provided dual-layered support through expert facilitator guidance on visual communication best practices and disability accommodation strategies, complemented by diverse peer perspectives and collaborative improvement suggestions that enhanced both the accessibility features and overall clarity of each guide.

Results

A comprehensive needs assessment conducted before the workshop exposed critical gaps in emergency preparedness practices for students with disabilities. Students participating in field experiences across various school settings, as part of their special education methods, completed the evaluation process by reviewing and submitting their placement schools' existing severe weather emergency plans two weeks before the workshop. The assessment revealed a troubling universal finding: every single severe weather plan completely ignored special education classrooms and failed to address the unique needs of students with disabilities. These plans consisted entirely of generic procedures that required students to physically relocate to safer areas, with no consideration for students facing mobility, sensory, cognitive, or communication challenges during emergencies. Beyond procedural gaps, the assessment identified fundamental knowledge deficits, as two participating teachers demonstrated limited understanding of severe weather phenomena, particularly tornadoes, underscoring the need for both foundational meteorological education and specialized accommodation strategies.

The workshop effectively bridged the gap between problem identification and solution development through a structured focus group methodology that engaged participants in meaningful discussions, identifying critical areas requiring attention in inclusive emergency preparedness planning. Participants gained crucial insights into the unique learning needs of students with disabilities during emergency situations, recognizing that emergency drills must be conducted

repeatedly to ensure student familiarity and comfort with procedures. They understood that students with disabilities often require extensive practice and repetition to master new routines effectively. The collaborative process illuminated the evolving nature of student needs throughout the academic year, as participants discovered that handouts and visual guides require continuous modification and updates as students' individual needs change. This insight demonstrated their developing understanding of disability accommodation as a dynamic process requiring flexible, individualized approaches rather than static solutions.

Participants demonstrated remarkable creativity and practical thinking in addressing identified challenges, generating several innovative approaches ready for immediate classroom implementation. One particularly sophisticated insight involved recognizing the necessity of substitute-friendly emergency guides, understanding that emergency situations might occur during regular staff absences and require comprehensive documentation that any temporary instructor could follow effectively. Role-playing emerged as a highly recommended preparatory strategy, with participants recognizing that experiential learning through simulated emergency scenarios could build student confidence and familiarity with procedures within controlled, supportive environments. This approach acknowledges the importance of reducing anxiety and building competence before actual emergencies occur. Additionally, the development of tailored severe weather lesson plans was identified as fundamental to comprehensive preparedness, as participants understood that students with disabilities might require additional instruction and contextual information to fully comprehend the purpose and importance of emergency procedures, moving beyond mere compliance to genuine understanding and engagement.

Environmental and Sensory Considerations

A significant finding from the workshop was participants' enhanced awareness of environmental factors that could impact students with disabilities during emergencies. The focus

group discussions revealed sophisticated understanding of sensory processing challenges and their implications for emergency response.

Participants identified that noise from sirens and emergency alerts could be overwhelming for students with sensory sensitivities, leading to increased anxiety or behavioral challenges during actual emergency situations. This recognition prompted discussions about alternative alert systems and preparation strategies to help students cope with auditory stimuli during emergencies.

The environmental considerations extended beyond immediate sensory concerns to include broader accessibility issues such as evacuation route planning, assistive technology considerations, and communication needs during high-stress situations.

Family Engagement and Community Integration

Workshop participants demonstrated understanding of the importance of family involvement in emergency preparedness planning. The focus group discussions identified the need for parental handouts and family communication strategies to ensure consistency between school and home emergency preparedness approaches.

Participants recognized that families possess valuable insights about their children's specific needs, triggers, and effective strategies that could inform school-based emergency planning. This insight reflected a collaborative approach to emergency preparedness that extends beyond the classroom to include the broader support network surrounding students with disabilities.

Post-Workshop Follow-up Results

Two weeks following the workshop implementation, a follow-up focus discussion was conducted to assess the sustained impact of the training and gather additional insights about participants' experiences applying their new knowledge. This follow-up session revealed several important outcomes that demonstrated the workshop's lasting effectiveness.

Participants reported that they had created lessons on severe weather for their classes, indicating the immediate practical application of workshop concepts. The process of implementation

included the development of Visual Safety Guides with step-by-step instructions, creation of social stories and first-then boards, and design of substitute-friendly emergency guides.

Key outcomes from the follow-up discussion demonstrated significant knowledge gains and attitudinal changes among participants. They reported feeling more aware of tornadoes and severe weather phenomena, representing measurable knowledge acquisition. Participants also expressed feeling "empowered" and indicated they understood not to be afraid of emergency situations, suggesting improved confidence and self-efficacy.

Importantly, participants expressed a desire to continue working on quality handouts for students, indicating sustained motivation and commitment to inclusive emergency preparedness. They also recognized the need for multiple drill practices due to students' unique learning needs, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the accommodation requirements for students with disabilities.

Discussion

The workshop successfully achieved its primary objective of introducing future educators to the concepts and practices of inclusive severe weather preparedness, with participants demonstrating measurable gains in both confidence and knowledge through hands-on, collaborative learning. Visual supports emerged as a particularly powerful tool for making safety plans more accessible to students with diverse needs, as the Visual Safety Guides created by participants demonstrated creative problem-solving and practical applicability. However, the needs assessment findings revealed a critical gap in current emergency preparedness practices, with all reviewed school plans failing to address the needs of students with disabilities, underscoring the urgent need for systematic improvements in emergency planning policies and practices at both school and district levels. Despite overall success, several challenges emerged during implementation, including participants' initial struggles with applying accessibility principles, time constraints limiting exploration of

complex accommodation strategies, and the need for more extensive instruction on universal design principles and accessible communication strategies.

The findings highlight the critical need for teacher preparation programs to incorporate comprehensive training on inclusive emergency preparedness strategies as a standard component of professional preparation, including both theoretical foundations in disability studies and practical skill development in accommodation strategies. Educational institutions should conduct systematic reviews of their existing emergency plans to identify gaps in addressing the needs of students with disabilities and implement professional development programs for current educators to build capacity in inclusive emergency preparedness. Future research should explore long-term impacts of visual aids and accommodation strategies, investigate sustained effects of workshop-based training on teacher confidence and competency, examine the effectiveness of different types of visual supports for various disability populations, and study the integration of inclusive emergency preparedness training into teacher preparation curricula across different institutions and geographic regions. The ultimate goal is creating educational environments where all students, regardless of disability status, can participate safely and meaningfully in emergency preparedness activities through comprehensive policy-level commitment and practical training for all educational staff.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that future educators can be effectively prepared to create inclusive, accessible safety plans for self-contained classrooms through targeted, hands-on training experiences. The workshop model proved successful in building both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, with participants showing significant improvements in confidence and competence. Visual safety guides represent a practical and effective tool for ensuring that students with disabilities can meaningfully participate in severe weather drills and emergency procedures. The creative solutions developed by workshop participants indicate that with appropriate training and support, educators can successfully address the diverse needs of students with disabilities in emergency

situations. The critical gap identified in current emergency planning practices – with all reviewed plans failing to address special education needs – underscores the urgent need for systematic improvements in educational emergency preparedness policies and practices.

The findings provide strong evidence for integrating comprehensive, inclusive emergency preparedness training into teacher preparation curricula as a standard component of professional preparation. This training should emphasize both theoretical understanding of disability accommodation needs and practical skill development in creating accessible emergency resources. Educational institutions should prioritize the development and implementation of comprehensive emergency plans that specifically address the needs of students with disabilities. This requires commitment at multiple levels, from individual educators to district and state policy makers. The ultimate goal of this work is to create educational environments where all students, regardless of disability status, can participate safely and meaningfully in emergency preparedness activities. By equipping future educators with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to create inclusive emergency plans, we can work toward this vision of truly inclusive educational emergency preparedness.

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Using "The Eyes on the Prize" Series as a Teaching Tool

By

Jeffrey T. Schulz, Central Community College

This paper is the last in a series of previous papers presented at the National Social Science Association Conference. It discusses innovative assignments for teaching the Civil Rights Movement in the Community College setting. It also focuses on the retention of information learned from the assignments using a combination of "The Eyes on the Prize" video series and recommended content from the Southern Poverty Law Center's Civil Rights rubric. A discussion of incorporating pre-tests and post-tests to ensure student retention of the material is also considered.

Keywords: Civil Rights Movement, key events, assignments, pre-tests, and post-tests.

Introduction

According to Dixon (2017), scholarly research on student activism on community college campuses during the Civil Rights Movement and presently remains scarce. The bulk of the research on the Civil Rights Movement and student activism, according to Dixon (2017), has focused either on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or four-year, predominantly white universities; therefore, a gap in the literature exists.

There are two primary goals of the paper. The first objective is to develop and implement practical assignments that teach community college students about the Civil Rights Movement, utilizing content from the Southern Poverty Law Center's Civil Rights Rubric and the Eyes on the Prize video series from the late 1970s to early 1990s. Second, pre-tests and post-tests will be created in the future to ensure retention of content. Sample assignments will be provided at the end of the paper. A review of the literature follows.

Review of Literature

The Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, updated its 2011 rubric on what content should be considered when teaching students about the Civil Rights Movement in 2014. Six categories to the rubric: key events; key leaders; key groups; causes of the movement; opposition

to its successes; and tactics (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014). Under each of the six categories, specific content was recommended for effective teaching of the Civil Rights Movement.

For example, under the "key events" category of the SPLC, it is recommended, as a minimum, that students be able to identify the causes and consequences of several key events including: Brown vs. Board of Education; Little Rock 9; Freedom Rides; Montgomery Bus Boycott; 24th Amendment; Selma-to Montgomery-March; 1965 Voting Rights Act; 1968 Civil Rights Act; and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther king, Jr. (SPLC, 2014). While this is not an exhaustive list, it conveys the point that there is much to be learned (and taught) under each of the six categories of the SLPC's rubric. The Civil Rights Movement assignments this author has created are in alignment with both The Southern Poverty Law Center's 2014 rubric recommendations and content from The Eyes on the Prize video series.

The Eyes on the Prize series is a 14-part American documentary series from PBS and the Blackside film production company. The documentary series includes key events, leaders, groups, and tactics used during the 20th-century American Civil Rights Movement. Part I includes six videos, beginning with the Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954. Part I was released on January 27, 1987. Part II concluded with eight videos. The eight videos in Part II were available on March 5, 1990. Part II concluded with Harold Washington winning the Mayoral election of 1983 (Veccione, Hampton, Bond, Fayer, Lacy, and DeVinney, 1987-1995). Each of the 14 video episodes is between 55 minutes and an hour and five minutes in length.

According to PBS.org (April 4, 2021), there are 14 documentaries in the Eyes on the Prize series. They are listed in order below by date:

Awakenings (1954-1956)

Fighting Back (1957-1962)

Ain't Scared of Your Jails (1960-1961)

No Easy Walk (1961-1963)

Mississippi: Is This America? (1963-1964)

Bridge to Freedom (1965)

The Time Has Come (1964-1966)

Two Societies (1965-1968)

Power! (1966-1968)

The Promised Land (1967-1968)

Ain't Gonna Shuffle No More (1964-1972)

A Nation of Law? (1968-1971)

The Keys to the Kingdom (1974-1980)

Back to the Movement (1979-mid 80s)

Applying Eyes on the Prize assignments in the classroom

As mentioned in a previous section of this paper, the Civil Rights Movement and student activism are rarely discussed in the community college setting. Oftentimes, students come to college with very little knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement (Dudley, 2000). The author of this paper has attempted to increase the knowledge of community college students' understanding of the Civil Rights Movement

For more than 15 years, both the discussion questions and several fill-in-the-blank assignments related to the "Eyes on the Prize" video series have been administered to students in sociology classes at a rural, Midwestern community college. Prior to viewing one of the 1-hour videos, 5-10 key discussion points are distributed to each student in the class. The discussion points serve as a guide for students in terms of things to be aware of as they are viewing a particular episode of Eyes on the Prize. As a class, we discuss these key discussion points. It may include significant leaders in the video, such as clergy, a politician, a community leader, a person in law enforcement, and/or key events.

Next, a fill-in-the-blank assignment related to a specific episode of "Eyes on the Prize" is administered to students to complete as they view the one-hour documentary. After the documentary concludes, the class and the instructor engage in discussion over the fill-in-the-blank assignment and the discussion questions. The fill-in-the-blank assignment has a specific point value for the students. Students must complete the fill-in-the-blank assignment on their own while viewing the video in class. Administering the in-class assignment in this manner encourages students to have a personal stake in the assignment, while simultaneously gaining a stronger understanding of the Civil Rights Movement.

The objective is to provide the students with an enriching experience as we learn about the Civil Rights Movement in class. This is achieved through three prompts throughout the assignment process, preparing the student to critically discuss the important information related to the Civil Rights Movement. The first prompt is to (as a class) read over the discussion points prior to viewing the documentary. The second prompt is to stop the documentary at random times to discuss a key event that occurred. The third prompt occurs after the video or the portions we view from it. As a class, we discussed the content provided in both the fill-in-the-blank document and discussion points, with the instructor facilitating the discussion on the Civil Rights Movement.

The students will take turns reading a question from the fill-in-the-blank assignment and providing the answer to the question. The discussion points provided to the students prior to the video align with the content of the fill-in-the-blank assignment. As we cover both items, an instructor-led discussion ensues about key events, leaders, and tactics related to that specific episode of Eyes on the Prize. The ultimate objective is for the students to gain a deeper understanding of the Civil Rights Movement than what they had prior to taking the class.

Pre-Test/Post-Test

The next phase for building on this work will be to create a pre-test for each episode of the "Eyes on the Prize" series. The plan is to take the questions already created by the author for each

assignment and put them into a multiple-choice format. Next, the essay-driven discussion questions provided to the students before each video will be added to each episode's pre-test. Finally, a comprehensive post-exam bank will be created for students at the end of the course. Since there will not be time to watch all 14 episodes of the "Eyes on the Prize" series, I will not be able to evaluate my students over all of the episodes. The large test bank will have the items for each episode we view in class. The class may have two or three videos or more to show, at the instructor's discretion. The ultimate aim is to enhance student retention of Civil Rights Movement content based on key events, leaders, groups, tactics, causes of the movement, and opposition to its successes. The ultimate goal is to have students achieve a minimum score of 80% on the post-test.

Conclusion

Most community college systems have fallen short in teaching about the Civil Rights Movement. The responsibility of teaching about this significant era now lies with faculty members at two-year institutions who are genuinely committed. It is up to them to bridge this gap in knowledge. Social science faculty and higher education faculty in various fields will serve as the primary point of reference for many college students' exposure to and understanding of the Civil Rights Movement.

Presently, there are two significant resources available to faculty for bridging this gap in knowledge. First, the rubric presented by the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, in 2014. Second, "The Eyes on the Prize" series, which ran on PBS from January 21, 1987, through March 5, 1990. There are 14 videos covering significant events during the Civil Rights Movement. Lastly, the assignments offered in this paper are guided by the content of the "Eyes on the Prize" video series and the content recommended by the SPLC. The author created the assignments mentioned in this paper in an attempt to merge these two resources and offer community college students a comprehensive experience for studying and learning about the Civil Rights Movement.

This will be the last paper in the "Eyes on the Prize" series. I greatly appreciated the ideas and feedback generated on this topic at the three conferences where the papers were presented. The two primary goals at this point will include: 1. create the pre-test banks and one large post-test bank; and 2. Keep a running tally of how my future students perform on the post-test. The ultimate goal is that students will achieve at least an 80% on the post-test at the end of the semester.

Two-sample assignments

Discussion Points for: "Eyes on the Prize: The Time Has Come 1964-1966"

What was the percentage of black people living in Harlem participating in the Civil Rights Movement?

Allah and Elijah Muhammad

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s stance on violence versus Malcolm X's

Bloody Lowndes

What was the emblem of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization?

Stokely Carmichael vs. John Lewis's style of leadership

What was James Meredith's march called? From where and to where?

How was Black Power received by the media? By the citizens of the U.S. at the time?

Eyes on the Prize

The Time Has Come

1964-1966

Directions: This is an assignment you are to complete independently during the documentary. You should fill in the answers to the best of your ability. Most of the answers are one to three words long. Do not share answers or collaborate with your fellow students. If cheating is suspected by the instructor, a grade of "0" may be given to the entire class. Each assignment is worth .5 (or ½) of a point. For example, 14 questions would equal 7 points.

At the beginning of the documentary, what percentage of black people living in Harlem did James Haughton say participated in the Civil Rights Movement? ____less than 2%____

Members of the Nation of Islam were sometimes referred to as ____Black Muslims____. Their God is named ____Allah____ and his messenger was ____Elijah Muhammad____.

What did Elijah Muhammad say he taught his followers? ____Truth____

Martin Luther King, Jr. said the best weapon against violence is nonviolence. Malcolm X said: "We're ____nonviolent____ people who are nonviolent to us. However, we are not nonviolent with anyone violent with us."

What was Malcolm X's new policy called? ____Black Nationalism____

Malcolm X said Black people's problem was not a problem of Civil Rights but ____human____ rights.

What was Lowndes County, Alabama, known as? ____Bloody Lowndes____

What percentage of Lowndes County, Alabama, was black? ____80%____

What was the official emblem of the Alabama Democratic Party? ____White Rooster with White Supremacy____

What was the official symbol of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization? ____Black Panther____

____Stokely Carmichael____, representing the new militancy within SNCC, defeated ____John Lewis____ as National Chairman.

James Meredith, the first Black student to be admitted to The University of Mississippi, called his march from Memphis to Jackson: ____The March against Fear____

The media saw the idea of ____Black Power____ as a significant shift in the Civil Rights Movement.

Stokely Carmichael said his group needed to build a _____powerbase_____ so strong that it will bring them to their knees every time people mess with Black people.

***Upon completion of the documentary and fill-in-the-blank assignment, we go over the answers to this assignment and then have a robust discussion about the 5 to 10 discussion points.

Discussion Points for: "Eyes on the Prize: The Promised Land 1967-1968"

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s point about the money spent on the Vietnam War versus America's poor.

Lyndon B. Johnson and his stance on Civil Rights Legislation.

Marian Wright Edelman and RFK see how poor Mississippi truly is

Sanitation Workers' Revolt in Memphis, TN

Young African man in Harlem questioning Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s approach in New York vs. the South

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN in 1968 by James Earl Ray.

Resurrection City on the National Mall.

RFK assassination

Eyes on the Prize

The Promised Land

1967-1968

Directions: This is an assignment you are to complete independently during the documentary. You should fill in the answers to the best of your ability. Most of the answers are one to three words long. Do not share answers or collaborate with your fellow students. If cheating is suspected by the instructor, a grade of "0" may be given to the entire class. Each assignment is worth .5 (or ½) of a point. For example, 14 questions would equal 7 points.

How much money did Martin Luther King, Jr. say the United States spent on the killed enemies, per person in Vietnam? __\$322,00_____dollars. How much money did he say the United States spent on each poor person classified as poor living in the United States? ____\$53_____dollars.

What was the name of the President of the United States who fought strongly for Civil Rights Legislation? __Lyndon B. Johnson_____.

True or False (circle the correct answer). Martin Luther King, Jr. stated that the war in Vietnam was most burdensome to both poor Whites and Blacks.

In 1967, 1 out of every __7__ Americans lived below the poverty line.

What was the name of the African American woman who worked for the NAACP and tried to get senators from Washington, D.C., to go down to Mississippi so she could show them just how poor people were who lived there? ____Marian Wright Edelman_____

Which Senator visited Mississippi to observe the poverty in Mississippi? __Robert F. Kennedy_____

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that when he and his counsel were planning their strategy, he did not want to go after President Johnson to make him look bad. He wanted to focus his attention on ____Congress_____ instead.

In Memphis, Tennessee, there was a strike of 1,300 black men on the job. What was their profession? ____Sanitation workers_____

The young African American male in Harlem said that Dr. King's approach of nonviolence was __outdated_____. Moreover, that it did not apply well to young African Americans in Harlem as it did in the South.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., "We have the resources to get rid of poverty, but the real question is whether we have ____the will_____."

What was the name of the Memphis, Tennessee, motel in which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated? _____ Lorraine Motel _____

What did Black leaders from "The Poor People's Movement" name their "city" on the strip of land on the National Mall where they brought poor Americans to live? _____ Resurrection City _____

On June _4th_, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was shot in a California Hotel after winning the California Primary.

What song was played at Robert F. Kennedy's funeral in Washington, D.C.? ____ Battle Hymn of the Republic _____

***Upon completion of the documentary and fill-in-the-blank assignment, we go over the answers to this assignment and then have a robust discussion about the 5 to 10 discussion points.

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Bilingual Aphasia Assessment: Beyond Monolingual Paradigms in Post-Stroke Language Assessment - A Comprehensive Review

by

Lorraine Vassallo, University of Malta

Post-stroke aphasia assessment in bilingual populations presents unique challenges that cannot be adequately addressed through monolingual evaluation approaches. This comprehensive review synthesizes current research on bilingual aphasia assessment, examining the limitations of single-language testing and the complexities inherent in evaluating language impairment across multiple linguistic systems. The evidence demonstrates that monolingual assessments may lead to significant clinical oversight, including inaccurate diagnosis and suboptimal treatment recommendations. Current bilingual assessment tools, while advancing the field, face limitations in availability, cultural adaptation, and psychometric validation across diverse language pairs. The development of culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment tools, exemplified by adaptations such as the author's ongoing research on the adaptation of the Brisbane Evidence-Based Language Test (B-EBLT) to the Maltese language, creating the Maltese-English Aphasia Assessment (MEAA), represents a critical advancement in ensuring equitable and accurate diagnosis for bilingual stroke survivors. This review identifies critical gaps in current knowledge and proposes directions for future research to improve clinical outcomes for bilingual individuals with aphasia.

The Importance of Aphasia Assessment

Aphasia, an acquired language disorder primarily caused by brain damage from events like stroke in the language dominant hemisphere (Papathanasiou & Coppens, 2022), impairs an individual's ability to produce and/or comprehend spoken, written, or signed language, with anomia being a common deficit (Cargnelutti et al., 2019; Richardson & Dalton, 2022). Beyond linguistic challenges, people with aphasia often face severe psychosocial consequences, including anxiety, depression, unemployment, and reduced quality of life due to compromised communication (Richardson & Dalton, 2022; Zakariás & Lukács, 2022). Consequently, comprehensive aphasia assessment is crucial for detecting the presence and severity of the condition, informing prognosis, guiding treatment planning, and educating patients and their families (Hallowell, 2019). For speech-language pathologists (SLPs), a thorough assessment of an individual's strengths, weaknesses, and functional communication abilities is vital (Richardson & Dalton, 2022), as undiagnosed or misdiagnosed aphasia can lead to “avoidable disability,” increased costs, and affect eligibility for essential services.

Requisite Characteristics of Aphasia Assessment Instruments

Effective aphasia assessments, grounded in the ICF framework (WHO, 2001), must quantitatively measure expressive and receptive language impairments across oral and written modalities to facilitate systematic evaluation of “Loss of Body Functions and Structures.” Standardized, psychometrically robust tools are crucial for generating reliable and valid data, enabling meaningful comparisons across individuals and groups, and ensuring timely diagnosis and intervention (Ivanova & Hallowell, 2013). These instruments should also prioritize administrative efficiency and temporal economy (Wilson et al., 2018) and be designed for systematic clinical observation to detect nuanced differences in language performance, acknowledging that aphasia typically involves multiple, interacting language subsystems rather than discrete subtypes (Spreen & Risser, 2003).

Overview of Aphasia Assessment Tools (primarily monolingual contexts)

Evaluating post-stroke aphasia in monolingual contexts relies on several established instruments. Key English-language tools include the Boston Diagnostic Aphasia Examination (BDAE), created by Goodglass & Kaplan (1972), which diagnoses aphasia syndromes based on localization theory through over 40 subtests across various language modalities (Pineda et al., 1999; Goodglass et al., 2001; Bruce & Edmundson, 2010). The Western Aphasia Battery-Revised (WAB-R) developed by Kertesz in the late 70s (Kertesz, 2007), also employs a syndrome approach, classifying aphasia types and yielding Aphasia, Language, and Cortical Quotients, though its administration can be lengthy (Hallowell, 2019; Norvik & Goral, 2022; Richardson & Dalton, 2022).

The Comprehensive Aphasia Test (CAT) (Swinburn, Porter & Howard, 2005) is a robust tool examining linguistic skills within a cognitive neuropsychological framework, controlling for psycholinguistic variables, and offering insights into patient perspective and severity tracking (Bruce & Edmundson, 2010; Zakariás & Lukács, 2022; Jensen et al., 2024). For a more efficient

assessment, the Quick Aphasia Battery (QAB) (Wilson et al., 2018) provides a multidimensional language evaluation in about 15 minutes, demonstrating high reliability and sensitivity. A more recent development, the Brisbane Evidence-Based Language Test (B-EBLT) (Rohde et al., 2020), offers a modular design with exceptional diagnostic accuracy (80.8% sensitivity, 92.6% specificity) in identifying post-stroke aphasia (Rohde et al., 2022). It is designed to minimize the influence of non-language deficits like hemiparesis or apraxia of speech on test scores by allowing adapted scores. The B-EBLT is gaining widespread adoption with 78.63% of surveyed speech-language therapists reporting its use as their most frequently employed standardized measure (Hounslow et al., 2023). The B-EBLT offers significant advantages in psychometric properties and clinical utility and was selected for the ongoing MEAA research project (The Adaptation of an Aphasia Test for Maltese-English Bilingual Adults) to create a culturally and linguistically responsive aphasia evaluation in Maltese and English for the bilingual Maltese population.

This comprehensive review of these tools aims to highlight why monolingual assessment approaches are often insufficient for bilingual populations, informing best practices in bilingual aphasia evaluation.

Theoretical Foundations of Bilingual Language Processing

Theoretical foundations for bilingual aphasia assessment are rooted in neurolinguistic theories of multilingual brain processing. Paradis's (2004) theory differentiates implicit linguistic competence from explicit metalinguistic knowledge, explaining varied impairment patterns in bilingual individuals. Contemporary research emphasizes dynamic, interactive bilingual language systems (Jessner & Herdina, 2002), highlighting continuous flux and cross-linguistic transfer effects. Furthermore, bilingual processing relies on cognitive control mechanisms for language selection and inhibition, as demonstrated by Green's (1998) Inhibitory Control Model. Damage to these executive control processes, often extending beyond traditional language areas to include prefrontal and

anterior cingulate cortices, can lead to unique aphasia symptoms like impaired language switching and inappropriate mixing (Abutalebi & Green, 2007; Luk et al., 2011).

Critical Oversight and Clinical Implications of Monolingual Assessment for Bilingual Individuals

Assessing multilingual individuals presents significant challenges distinct from monolingual evaluation. Unlike monolingual individuals who navigate through a single linguistic system, bilingual persons with aphasia (BPwA) exhibit complex patterns of language impairment and recovery that manifest differently across languages. Since bilingual individuals are not merely the sum of two monolinguals (Grosjean, 1989), monolingual assessment procedures inadequately capture the full scope of linguistic abilities and deficits (Cargnelutti et al., 2019; Norvik & Goral, 2022).

This issue is particularly pressing given that over half the world's population speaks multiple languages, yet aphasia assessment remains dominated by monolingual paradigms, creating significant clinical and research gaps (Paradis, 2011; Goral & Hejazi, 2021). When assessment occurs in only one language, critical clinical oversights emerge that significantly impact patient care, as bilingual individuals frequently exhibit differential language impairment patterns with varying proficiency and impairment levels across languages, following stroke.

This heterogeneity stems from complex interactions between age of acquisition, premorbid proficiency, frequency of use, and lesion characteristics. Bilingual aphasia recovery follows distinct patterns affecting assessment outcomes (Lorenzen & Murray, 2008): parallel recovery (similar impairment and recovery rates maintaining relative proficiency), differential recovery (different impairment and recovery patterns across languages), selective recovery (complete loss of one language while another remains intact), mixed recovery (various pattern combinations changing over time), and successive recovery (sequential rather than simultaneous language

recovery). Furthermore, a monolingual approach to aphasia assessment of a bilingual individual can lead to several critical oversights and biases:

Inadequate evaluation of true impairment

A rough evaluation in only one language can bias the understanding of the actual impairment (Cargnelutti et al., 2019). A systematic assessment of all languages known by the patient is an essential prerequisite for clinical diagnosis, rehabilitation programs, and research. It is no longer considered ethically acceptable to assess BPwA in only one of their languages (Fabbro, 2001).

Lack of Comparable Tools and Cultural Appropriateness

Most aphasia assessment tools are developed for monolingual speakers and are not readily applicable or comparable across different languages (Norvik & Goral, 2022; Grasso et al., 2023; Matić et al., 2023). Extending their findings, Matić et al. (2023) report that simple translation of tests is insufficient because stimuli may be inappropriate, linguistic constructions can differ in complexity, and psychometric properties (e.g., reliability, validity) are often not documented for translated versions, making cross-linguistic comparisons of impairment difficult (Kiran et al., 2012; Goral et al., 2012). Test items might refer to culturally uncommon or improper objects or concepts, and the very format of formal testing (e.g., using two-dimensional pictures) may be culturally unfamiliar (Cargnelutti et al., 2019).

Misinterpretation of Pre-morbid Proficiency

As noted by Norvik and Goral (2022), pre-stroke proficiency levels significantly influence post-stroke language patterns. Without understanding a patient's pre-stroke language history (acquisition, use, and proficiency), any decreased performance on an assessment could be misinterpreted as an acquired deficit rather than reflecting a pre-existing lower proficiency in that language (Cargnelutti et al., 2019). Furthermore, the authors reported that self-ratings of proficiency can be unreliable, as patients might overestimate or underestimate their pre-stroke

abilities, and family reports can also be uncertain, especially if they do not share all languages. Norvik and Goral (2022) propose that focusing on a subjective assessment of communication abilities, rather than language proficiency, by family members and caregivers of a person with aphasia following a stroke, can be a more viable approach to avoid potential misjudgments. In addition, because a self-rating score is subjective, creating a statistical dependency that is intrinsic to the individual, a recommendation would be to calculate a *subtraction score* between a patient's self-rating proficiency in both languages to remove the statistical dependency (Vassallo, 2025).

Inaccurate Baseline Establishment

Without comprehensive assessment across both languages of a bilingual, clinicians cannot establish accurate pre-morbid baselines for comparison, compromising the validity of diagnostic conclusions and progress monitoring. Monolingual assessment fails to take into consideration proficiency asymmetries. Highly proficient languages may show better preservation, but this relationship is not always straightforward. Sometimes, a less proficient language may show better recovery due to the specific neural networks involved or the types of learning strategies originally used to acquire that language. Domain-specific proficiency should also be acknowledged. Bilingual individuals often develop specialized vocabulary and skills in different domains across their languages (Olson, 2023). A person might use one language primarily for professional contexts and another for family interactions, leading to domain-specific proficiency patterns that must be considered in assessment and treatment planning.

Usage Patterns

Daily language use should also be taken into consideration in assessing bilingual individuals with aphasia. Frequency and context of language use before stroke influence both impairment severity and recovery potential. Languages used primarily in formal contexts may show different vulnerability patterns compared to those used in intimate, emotional contexts (Kuzmina et al., 2019).

Neglect of One Language and Identity

Assessing multilingual individuals in only one language provides an incomplete picture of their abilities and can lead to significant clinical errors. Since a multilingual person's languages are integral to their identity and culture, limiting assessment to just the majority language may obscure true abilities and result in services being provided in a less optimal language (Cargnelutti et al., 2019; Norvik & Goral, 2022). Testing only the non-dominant language may miss preserved communicative abilities, while assessing only the better-preserved language can overlook significant impairments in the other language, leading to inadequate rehabilitation planning (Peña & Bedore, 2011; Kuzmina et al., 2019). This selective assessment approach can result in either underestimation or overestimation of abilities, inappropriate care placement, and missed opportunities for leveraging preserved language skills. The complexity is further compounded by the fact that certain linguistic features may be impaired in one language but preserved in another due to differences in grammatical structures, phonological systems, and semantic organization across languages (Ning et al., 2020; Bice et al., 2020).

Factors Influencing Bilingual Aphasia Assessment

Pre-morbid Language Proficiency

The assessment of bilingual individuals requires careful consideration of pre-stroke language abilities across all languages. Kuzmina et al. (2019) underscore that multilingual language systems exhibit diversity due to a complex interplay of factors influencing their structure. These factors include the age at which languages are learned, how frequently they are used, prior language proficiency, and how similar the languages are to each other. The level of competence in each language before any potential language impairment (like aphasia) will impact how the languages are affected.

Age of Acquisition Effects

Research identifies age of acquisition as the strongest predictor of differential language impairment patterns in bilingual aphasia. Languages acquired early in life (typically before age 7) often show different vulnerability patterns compared to those acquired later, necessitating assessment approaches that account for these developmental factors. Although further research is needed, according to Brysbaert & Ellis (2016), early-acquired languages may be more resistant to certain types of aphasia due to their deeper neural entrenchment, while late-acquired languages may be more vulnerable to disruption but also more amenable to explicit relearning strategies.

Cultural and Linguistic Considerations

Developing effective bilingual assessment tools requires comprehensive adaptation rather than simple translation to maintain cultural appropriateness and clinical validity. Direct translations often produce culturally inappropriate or meaningless stimuli that fail to preserve critical psychometric properties, as they neglect the specific linguistic and psycholinguistic parameters of target languages (Fyndanis et al., 2017; Kiran et al., 2013). Since linguistic structures vary in phonological complexity, morphological density, and syntactic demands, adaptations must incorporate comparable linguistic properties rather than mere lexical translations, while accounting for how linguistic distance between languages affects impairment patterns and cross-linguistic transfer during recovery (Lauterbach et al., 2008). Cultural variations in conceptual familiarity, gender-based language use patterns, formality levels, and communicative conventions further complicate direct translation approaches. Therefore, comprehensive adaptation protocols must incorporate systematic linguistic analysis, cultural appropriateness evaluation, bidirectional (forward and backward) translation verification, expert consultation, pilot validation, and rigorous psychometric testing to ensure that adapted instruments maintain their clinical utility and diagnostic accuracy across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts while remaining comprehensive, clinically relevant, and user-friendly.

Challenges with Language Mixing and Switching

Bilingual individuals naturally mix or switch languages in everyday conversation (Fabbro, 2001; Goral & Hejazi, 2021). In aphasia, patients may pathologically mix or switch languages. Monolingual assessment settings, even with interpreters, struggle to ensure a “monolingual mode,” making it difficult to differentiate pathological mixing from typical bilingual use or compensatory strategies (Norvik & Goral, 2022; Cargnelutti et al., 2019). Scoring mixed-language production is also a significant challenge.

Inadequate Clinician Training

Many speech-language therapists report lacking sufficient professional preparation to assess and work with multilingual speakers with aphasia (Grasso et al., 2023).

Looking at Selected Adapted Aphasia Assessment Tools for Bilinguals

While many aphasia assessment tools are designed for monolingual English speakers, a significant advancement in neuropsychology has been the development of bilingual assessment instruments (Fyndanis et al., 2017; Arslan & Peñaloza, 2025). Simple translation is often insufficient, necessitating culturally and linguistically appropriate adaptations (Paradis, 2011; Kiran et al., 2012; Ivanova & Hallowell, 2013; Jensen et al., 2024). The Bilingual Aphasia Test (BAT), developed by Paradis and Libben (1987), is the most comprehensive, available in over 70 languages and 160 language pairs, using a tripartite structure to assess multilingual history, language-specific functions, and translation abilities based on functional equivalence (Fabbro, 2001; Paradis, 2011; Martinez Ferreiro et al., 2024). However, the BAT has limitations, including extensive administration time, examiner requirements, and incomplete psychometric validation (Koumanidi Knoph, 2011; Norvik & Goral, 2022). Adaptations of the Boston Diagnostic Aphasia Examination (BDAE) and the Western Aphasia Battery-Revised (WAB-R) into other languages often face challenges with cultural and linguistic appropriateness and psychometric documentation, limiting their validity and ecological relevance for bilingual individuals (Pineda et al., 1999;

Tsapkini et al., 2010; Muñoz et al., 2012; Matić Škorić et al., 2023; Martinez Ferreiro et al., 2024; Richardson & Dalton, 2022; Zakariás & Lukács, 2023). In contrast, the Comprehensive Aphasia Test (CAT) has undergone rigorous psycholinguistic and cultural adaptation through the Collaboration of Aphasia Trialists (CATs) network, demonstrating robust psychometric properties and cross-linguistic comparability in various languages despite its lengthy administration (Fyndanis et al., 2017; Maviş et al., 2021; Zakariás & Lukács, 2022; Matić Škorić et al., 2023; Jensen et al., 2024; Arslan & Peñaloza, 2025; Martinez Ferreiro et al., 2024). The Quick Aphasia Battery (QAB), though efficient and multidimensional, has limited assessment of reading and writing, potentially missing deficits in these areas (Wilson et al., 2018; Parlak & Köse, 2024).

Conclusions

Assessing bilingual individuals with aphasia requires a fundamental shift from monolingual-based approaches to comprehensive, culturally, and linguistically adapted evaluation protocols. Reliance on monolingual assessments or poorly translated standardized tests can lead to diagnostic inaccuracies and inappropriate therapeutic interventions that fail to address the complex linguistic profiles of multilingual speakers. The unique neuropsychological presentation of bilingualism—including varied premorbid language proficiencies, cross-linguistic phenomena such as code-switching, and distinct structural properties of different linguistic systems—necessitates rigorously adapted assessment tools that ensure both psychometric validity and cultural relevance. While specialized instruments like the BAT and adapted versions of established measures represent significant progress, the field continues to face methodological challenges, including cross-linguistic validity concerns, heterogeneous bilingual profiles, standardization difficulties, and complex interactions between premorbid competencies and post-stroke recovery trajectories. The development of the MEAA from the B-EBLT exemplifies this comprehensive adaptation process, involving extensive linguistic analysis, cultural consultation, and expert review to ensure equivalent difficulty and construct validity while maintaining linguistic and cultural

appropriateness for the Maltese context. These ongoing challenges underscore the critical need for continued development of evidence-based bilingual assessment protocols and the ethical imperative to evaluate all languages within a multilingual individual's repertoire to ensure accurate diagnosis, appropriate rehabilitation planning, and equitable clinical care for increasingly diverse populations served by clinicians and speech-language pathologists worldwide.

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Elementary School Classroom Physical and Social Environment Effect on Students' Affective Performance

By

Yan Yan, Lamar University

Ashlin Stinson, Lamar University

Thomas Harvey, Lamar University

This study examined the impact of the classroom environment on the affective performance in elementary schools, focusing specifically on second, fourth, and fifth-grade classrooms. The researchers investigated four key indicators of a successful classroom environment: 1) physical environment, 2) social climate, 3) accommodations and advocacy for diversity, and 4) classroom expectations and routines. Through a combination of classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, this research explored the nuances of how these physical and social environmental factors influenced students' emotional and academic engagement. Observational data provided insights into the real-time dynamics of classroom interactions, while interviews offered depth, revealing teachers' perspectives and strategies in shaping these environments. The findings from this study highlighted significant correlations between the classroom environment and student affective performance, offering actionable insights into optimizing educational settings to enhance student outcomes. This comprehensive analysis contributed to the broader discourse on educational best practices, with the potential to inform future policy and classroom management strategies aimed at fostering more effective and supportive learning atmospheres.

Keywords: elementary classroom, physical and social environment, students' affective performance

Introduction

Elementary school classrooms are far more than mere spaces where education takes place; they are environments where young students spend a significant portion of their formative years, shaping not only their academic trajectories but also their emotional and psychological development. The classroom environment, which includes both physical and social elements, profoundly influences students' academic success as well as their emotional and psychological well-being (Tanić, et al., 2020). The physical layout of the classroom, the availability of resources, and even factors such as cleanliness play critical roles in determining how students interact with the material and each other (Falkner & Payne, 2020). Furthermore, the social dynamics within the classroom, including peer interactions and the supportiveness of teachers, are crucial in shaping a child's overall school experience (Havik & Westergård, 2020). These environments can either inspire or inhibit, engage, or alienate, empower, or discourage students in subtle yet profound ways. This nuanced interplay between the environment and students' emotional responses is the focus of this research,

aiming to explore and understand the impact of these factors on young learners (Valiente et al., 2020).

The affective performance of students—which includes aspects such as self-concept, attitudes toward peers and teachers, self-efficacy in learning, and emotional responses to academic pressures—is deeply intertwined with the qualities of their immediate educational environment. Research by Valiente et al. (2020) has highlighted various dimensions of students' affective performance, offering a framework for investigating how these aspects are influenced by the physical and social settings of the classroom. However, some research underscores the critical need for educators and school administrators to prioritize the cultivation of both physically and socially supportive classrooms (Ferreira, et al., 2020). Recognizing the profound impact that classroom environments can have on both emotional and educational outcomes, this research aims to thoroughly investigate how different settings influence young learners, as well as advocates for a more holistic approach to education—one that values and nurtures the emotional well-being of students as much as their academic success.

Literature Review

The classroom environment, encompassing both physical and social dimensions, plays a pivotal role in shaping students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and overall school experience. Extensive research has examined how various aspects of the classroom environment influence learning outcomes, emphasizing the need for classrooms that are not only physically conducive but also socially supportive and inclusive.

Physical Environment of the Classroom

The physical environment of a classroom significantly impacts students' engagement, learning, and overall academic success. According to Tanić, et al. (2020), the spatial organization of classrooms, including the arrangement of furniture, lighting, and decor, directly influences how students interact with their surroundings and engage with the curriculum. Their research emphasized that classrooms designed with varied and flexible learning spaces promote better student engagement and foster an environment conducive to active learning. The condition of classroom facilities, including cleanliness and maintenance, is another crucial factor that affects students' attitudes toward learning. Wang et al. (2020) and Falkner and Payne (2020) found that well-maintained and aesthetically pleasing classrooms positively influence students' self-concept in literacy and mathematics, suggesting that the physical state of the learning environment plays a critical role in shaping students' academic identities. Ferreira, et al. (2020) further explored the role of the physical environment in promoting social-emotional learning (SEL) within schools. They argued that

classrooms designed to facilitate positive interactions and provide a safe, supportive atmosphere are essential for fostering students' emotional resilience and academic growth (Lin and Hsia, 2019; Rausch, et al., 2021).

Social Climate of the Classroom

The social climate within a classroom is equally vital to students' academic success and emotional well-being. The emotional and social dynamics among students, and between students and teachers, have profound effects on how students perceive their educational experience. Havik and Westergård (2020) highlighted the importance of the social climate, noting that students' perceptions of their interactions with teachers and peers are crucial in shaping their engagement and learning outcomes. Their findings indicated that students who perceive their classroom environment as supportive and inclusive are more likely to participate actively in class and achieve higher academic performance. This aligns with the work of Bailey, et al. (2019), who argued that integrating SEL strategies into the classroom climate can enhance both academic outcomes and students' emotional resilience. The need for culturally responsive teaching (CRT) within the classroom environment is another critical aspect of fostering a positive social climate. Cruz, et al. (2020) found that teachers who are confident in their ability to adapt their teaching methods to meet the diverse cultural and linguistic needs of their students are more successful in creating inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Accommodation of Diversity in the Classroom

Accommodating diversity within the classroom is essential for creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment that meets the needs of all students. Donahue-Keegan, et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of integrating SEL and CRT into teacher education programs. Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2019) also discussed the role of intrinsic motivation in culturally responsive teaching, arguing that when teachers create a classroom climate that values students' diverse backgrounds and experiences, they can enhance students' intrinsic motivation to learn. Fuentes, et al. (2021) further explored the implications of promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in the classroom. Their study highlighted the importance of revising course syllabi and instructional practices to accommodate diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed. The authors argued that by creating a classroom environment that is equitable and inclusive, teachers can support the academic and emotional development of all students, regardless of their backgrounds. The accommodation of diversity also extends to the implementation of differentiated instruction tailored to individual student needs. Cruz et al. (2020) and Ferreira et al. (2020) found that teachers who adapt assignments and instructional strategies to

meet the diverse needs of their students, including modifications for special populations and alternative formats for understanding, are more successful in fostering student engagement and academic achievement.

Classroom Management and Routines

Effective classroom management and the establishment of consistent routines are crucial for creating an environment conducive to learning. Gentrup, et al. (2020) discussed the impact of teacher expectations and feedback on student achievement, highlighting the importance of maintaining high yet realistic expectations for students. The role of classroom management was further explored by Holland and Ohle (2020), who advocated behavior management strategies that are responsive to students' individual needs. Their study suggested that by implementing flexible and student-centered behavior management practices, teachers can create a classroom environment that reduces anxiety and promotes positive social interactions. This approach is supported by Lin and Hsia (2019), who found that structured routines and clear expectations help students feel secure and focused, leading to improved academic performance and behavior. Jackson and Miller (2020) suggested that teacher education programs need to prioritize classroom management skills to better prepare future educators for the challenges of diverse classroom settings.

The Role of Teacher Expectations

Teacher expectations play a critical role in shaping students' academic outcomes, self-concept, and overall engagement with the curriculum. Brandmiller, et al. (2020) explored the role of teacher perceptions in student motivation and classroom behavior, finding that students who perceive their teachers as supportive and encouraging are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their learning. This aligns with the work of Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2019), who argued that teachers who hold high expectations for all students, regardless of their backgrounds, can foster a classroom environment that promotes both academic success and emotional resilience. Havik and Westergård (2020) emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationships in shaping students' perceptions of their academic abilities and overall school experience. Their research suggested that when teachers establish strong, trusting relationships with their students, they create an environment where students feel valued and supported, which is crucial for their academic motivation and engagement. This is consistent with the findings of Fuentes et al. (2021) who argued that teacher expectations and feedback play a significant role in promoting equity and inclusion within the classroom, ultimately supporting the academic and emotional development of all students.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

The findings from this research have significant implications for educators, school administrators, and policymakers. The Aspen Institute (2021) emphasized the importance of creating conditions that support student success, advocating for policies that prioritize the development of positive school climates and equitable learning environments. D’Emidio-Caston (2019) also discussed the importance of addressing social-emotional development and resilience at the heart of teacher education, arguing that policies should support the integration of SEL and CRT into teacher preparation programs. In conclusion, the classroom environment—encompassing its physical setup, social climate, accommodation of diversity, and management practices—plays a critical role in shaping students' affective performance. The extensive body of research reviewed in this study underscores the importance of creating classrooms that are both physically conducive and socially supportive, ultimately fostering the holistic development of students. By prioritizing these elements, educators and policymakers can create learning environments that not only enhance academic performance but also support the emotional and psychological well-being of students.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a comprehensive qualitative research design to investigate the impact of physical and social environments within elementary school classrooms on students’ affective performance. The qualitative methodology was specifically chosen to capture the rich, detailed insights into the perceptions and experiences of elementary school teachers regarding their classroom settings. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the nuanced ways in which the environment influences student engagement, learning attitudes, and overall emotional well-being. There are several factors that contribute to a beneficial classroom setting, and since each class is unique, it is vital to understand how to maintain a healthy classroom environment. The major goal of this research project is to observe classrooms and interview teachers to investigate how the classroom environment influences students' affective performance. The research will concentrate on four primary factors that make up or influence a classroom environment: physical environment, social climate, accommodation and advocacy for diversity, and classroom expectations and routines. The research questions (RQs) are following:

RQ #1: How does the physical environment in the classroom impact students’ affective performance?

RQ #2: How can the social climate of the classroom impact students’ affective performance?

RQ #3: How can accommodating students and advocating diversity in the classroom impact the students' affective performance?

RQ #4: How do classroom expectations and routines impact the students' affective performance?

Participants

The study involved a carefully selected group of eight elementary school teachers ($n = 8$), chosen through simple random sampling from two public schools located in Southeast Texas. The selection of these schools was strategic, based on their representation of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of different classroom dynamics influenced by varied demographic factors. The participants comprised exclusively female teachers, reflecting a common demographic trend in elementary education. These educators were experienced in teaching lower elementary grades, specifically 2nd, 4th, and 5th grades, which are critical years for foundational learning and emotional development in children. The distribution of teachers across grades was as follows: four teachers instructed 2nd grade ($n = 4$), two teachers taught 4th grade ($n = 2$), and the remaining two taught 5th grade ($n = 2$). This composition was intentionally chosen to ensure a balanced insight into the early and more advanced stages of elementary education.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight elementary school teachers, each hailing from varied educational backgrounds and experiences. The interviews comprised a total of 16 questions designed to delve into the complexities of the physical and social environments within elementary classrooms and their impact on students' affective performance. The open-ended nature of the questions facilitated a rich dialogue, encouraging teachers to share insightful anecdotes and professional observations that highlighted diverse aspects of educational dynamics. Sample interview questions such as: *How could the physical environment of the classroom be described? How is the cleanliness of the classroom maintained? What is the average noise level?*

Complementing the interviews, direct observations of classroom interactions and environments were conducted. Detailed field notes were taken during each observation, focusing on aspects such as the organization of the physical space, the nature of the activities facilitated, the engagement level of students, and the incorporation of educational technology and resources.

Data Analytic Techniques

Data from interviews and observations were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis by NVivo. This involved coding the data iteratively to identify themes related to the effects of the physical and social environments on student affective performance. Particular attention was given to

recurring patterns that aligned with increased or decreased student motivation, emotional engagement, and interactions within the classroom.

Findings

The findings detail the synthesized outcomes derived from comprehensive interviews with eight teachers and meticulous observations of their classroom settings. The analysis illuminates how physical and social aspects of classroom environments contribute to shaping students' emotional engagement and learning behaviors. Themes appearing from the data underscore the significant role of teacher-student interactions, classroom layout, and the availability of resources, all of which collectively influence the affective domain of student education. These findings not only reflect the complex interplay between environment and student affect but also provide a foundational understanding necessary for proposing actionable strategies aimed at enhancing educational outcomes.

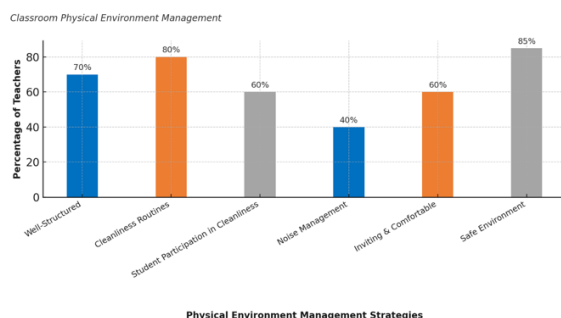
Research Question #1: How does the physical environment in the classroom impact students' affective performance?

Researchers found that about 80% of the classrooms emphasized group settings conducive to collaborative learning, while others maintained traditional arrangements to support individual study. This diversity in physical setup appears to facilitate different learning preferences and social interactions. The decor and resources in these classrooms, noted in approximately 90% of observations, were well-equipped with both educational and motivational materials. Technologies such as smart boards and Chromebooks were commonplace, enhancing interactive learning experiences. Additionally, the celebration of diversity was universal; every classroom proudly displayed multicultural books and posters, reflecting a commitment to inclusivity.

Teachers recognized that the layout and upkeep of the classroom significantly impact student engagement, and they are meticulous in designing spaces that foster effective learning. A substantial majority of educators, approximately 70%, described their classrooms as well-structured and conducive to learning (see Figure 1). These teachers made the decor both aesthetically pleasing and functional, enhancing the environment without clutter or distraction. Effective organization is a cornerstone of these classroom designs, with strategic placement of furniture and materials to optimize student interaction and facilitate ease of movement. This careful arrangement supports a dynamic learning process, enabling students to engage fully with the instructional material and each other.

Figure 1

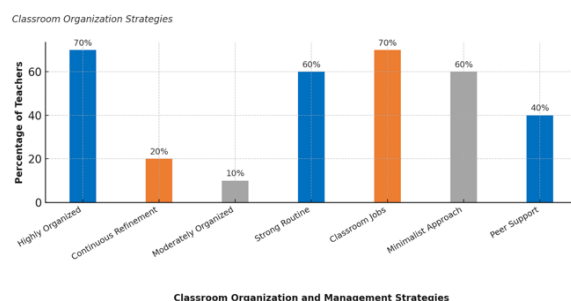
Physical Environment Management Strategies



Note. Data represents the percentage of teachers observing or implementing each strategy.

Figure 2

Classroom Organization and Management Strategies



Note. Data represents the percentage of teachers observing or implementing each strategy.

Cleanliness in the classroom was another critical aspect, maintained predominantly through routines that involved student participation, fostering a sense of responsibility and independence. Around 60% of teachers implemented student-assigned jobs, such as "clean-up crews" or tasks like wiping down desks and organizing learning materials. This approach keeps the classroom tidy while teaching students valuable life skills in maintaining order. Teachers emphasized the importance of instilling these habits early, as they contribute to a clean, organized, and functional classroom conducive to effective learning.

Managing noise levels was a challenge that educators addressed with creative and strategic solutions. While noise levels naturally fluctuate with different activities throughout the day, about 40% of teachers reported maintaining control over the classroom's auditory environment (see Figure 1). Noise is typically louder during collaborative group activities and quieter during focused individual tasks. Techniques such as background music, attention grabbers like rhythmic clapping, and direct instructions helped manage and moderate noise, ensuring it enhances rather than disrupts the learning process.

Overall, classrooms were described as inviting, comfortable, and safe—qualities fundamental to fostering an effective learning environment. The physical setup, including the layout and noise management strategies, was thoughtfully tailored to enhance both educational experiences and social interactions among students. This balance between structured activities and opportunities for expression was key to creating a dynamic and responsive learning environment. As one teacher mentioned,

“When students walk into a clean, organized, and thoughtfully arranged classroom, they feel more at ease and ready to learn. It’s not just about the aesthetics—it’s about creating a space where they feel valued and focused.”

Additionally, for elementary education, classroom organization is far more than an aesthetic choice; it is a cornerstone of effective teaching and learning. About 70% of teachers described their classrooms as highly organized, attributing this to several key strategies tailored to meet the diverse needs of their students (see Figure 2). These teachers ensured that every element of the classroom served a functional purpose, with some drawing on experiences from structured backgrounds, such as military service, to implement disciplined and regimented classroom management techniques. The use of clear routines and designated areas for materials helped students understand where everything belongs, reducing the time spent on managing logistics and allowing more focus on learning. Approximately 20% of teachers viewed classroom organization as a dynamic process, continuously refining their methods to adapt to evolving educational demands and classroom dynamics. This approach ensured that their organizational strategies were not static but evolved alongside their teaching practices, allowing for greater flexibility and responsiveness to students' needs (see Figure 2). While the degree of organization varies among teachers, the consensus was clear: maintaining an organized classroom is essential for maximizing teaching efficacy and optimizing student learning experiences. Educators who consistently adapted and refined their organizational strategies often observed the most sustainable and positive effects on student behavior and academic performance. As one teacher noted,

"An organized classroom is the foundation for a successful day of learning where students can feel secure, focused, and ready to engage."

Research Question #2: How can the social climate of the classroom impact students' affective performance?

Research findings underscored the profound influence of students' emotional well-being on their educational experience. Interviews with teachers revealed that about 90% implement practices such as wellness checks and continuous SEL assessments, which not only monitor but actively

enhance students' emotional and physical well-being. These strategies were crucial for cultivating a supportive learning environment where students can thrive.

In Figure 3, approximately 80% of teachers emphasized the importance of trust and emotional support in their classrooms. They observed that without positive reinforcement, students tended to disengage and withdraw from learning activities. Conversely, creating a nurturing environment where students felt genuinely cared for significantly boosted their motivation and participation, as noted by 70% of respondents.

This approach fostered a sense of belonging and security among students, enhancing their engagement and eagerness to contribute to class. Moreover, about 60% of educators reported that external factors such as challenging home conditions or emotional distress can adversely affect students' classroom behavior and academic performance. In response, approximately 60% of teachers adopted strategies like establishing calm-down areas or providing personalized interventions tailored to individual needs. These measures have proven effective in mitigating disruptive behaviors and improving focus and attentiveness during lessons. Additionally, 75% of teachers emphasized the value of building personal connections with students, acknowledging that remembering personal details can lead to more impactful and personalized teaching interactions. As one teacher shared,

"When students know you care about them, not just as learners but as individuals, their whole attitude toward school changes—they become more open, more engaged, and more willing to take risks in their learning."

The consensus among teachers is clear: acknowledging and addressing students' emotional states is not merely a classroom management tactic but a fundamental component of effective teaching that fosters long-term educational benefits for students' ongoing academic and personal growth.

Figure 3

Social and Emotional Learning Strategies

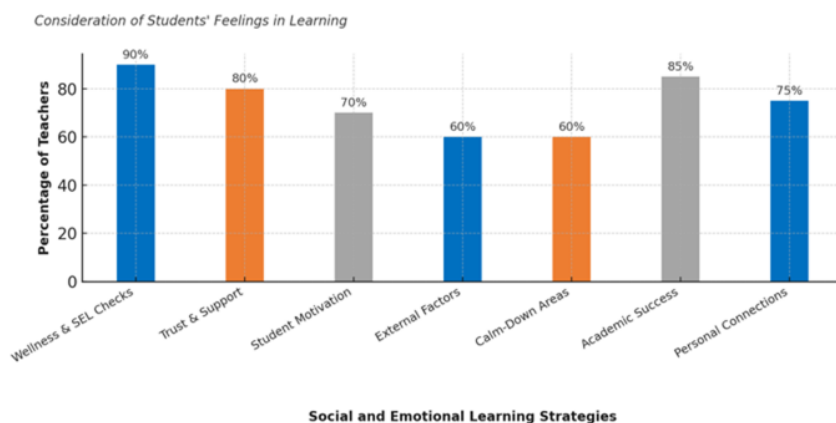
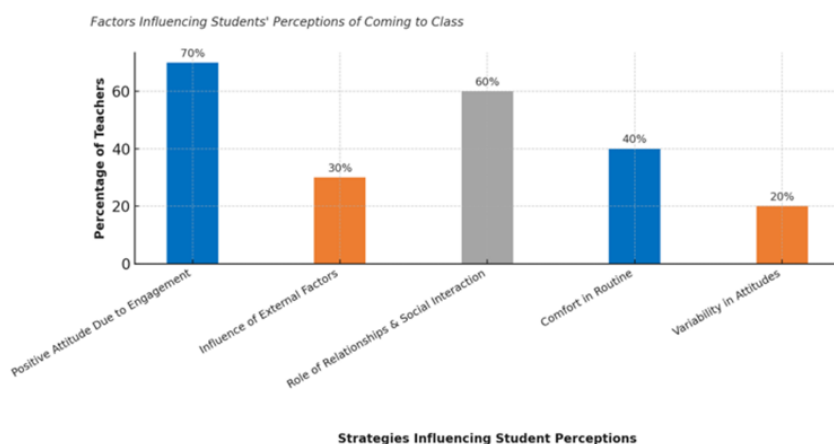


Figure 4

Strategies Influencing Student Perception



The Role of Relationships and Social Interaction

Social dynamics within the classroom also played a crucial role, as noted by approximately 60% of educators (see Figure 4). The relationships students form with their teachers and peers can greatly enhance their desire to attend class. Positive interactions and the opportunity to work and socialize with friends can turn the classroom into a welcoming space where students are eager to participate.

"Building strong relationships is key," one educator mentioned.

"When students feel connected to their peers and teachers, they are more motivated to come to class and engage with the material."

Comfort in Routine

The structure of the school day contributes to students' comfort and readiness to engage, with about 40% of teachers highlighting the importance of a predictable routine (see Figure 4). This structured approach helps students, particularly those who may start the day disengaged or reluctant, to settle into a familiar pattern of activities that gradually draw them into the learning process. Routine not only provides stability but also helps students understand what is expected of them, making the classroom environment feel more manageable and less intimidating.

Variability in Student Attitudes

Despite the overall positive outlook, educators also acknowledged that not all students share the same enthusiasm for classroom attendance. Approximately 20% of teachers reported occasional reluctance among students who might prefer leisure activities at home over school (see Figure 4). Such preferences, however, tended to be an exception rather than the norm. Teachers often worked to identify the root causes of this reluctance and address them through tailored support and interventions.

In essence, perceiving the classroom as a dynamic, engaging, and supportive environment was crucial for fostering students' positive attitudes toward attending class. Educators' efforts to create such environments were crucial in shaping not just academic outcomes but also students' overall school experience, highlighting the importance of teaching strategies that prioritize engagement, relationship building, and responsive structuring of classroom activities.

Research Question #3: How can accommodating students and advocating diversity in the classroom impact the students' affective performance?

In contemporary educational environments, recognizing and addressing the varied learning needs of students is paramount. Educators are increasingly committed to implementing differentiated instruction strategies that cater to the unique academic profiles of each student, ensuring that all learners receive the support they need to thrive.

Tailored Instructional Strategies

A significant 80% of teachers actively adapted their instructional approaches based on individual student needs. This differentiation might include modifying assignments for students requiring additional support, providing extension activities for advanced learners, or offering alternative methods for students to demonstrate their understanding, such as through written, typed, or verbal responses (see Figure 5). One teacher noted,

"I always strive to meet my students where they are. By adjusting tasks to their abilities, I can challenge them appropriately without overwhelming them."

This tailored approach ensures that all students are engaged and challenged appropriately, fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment.

Leveraging Technology and Grouping for Personalized Learning

With the integration of technology in education, about 40% of educators utilized digital tools that automatically adjust the difficulty level of tasks based on real-time student performance. These adaptive technologies enabled a highly personalized learning experience, allowing students to work at a pace and level that is optimal for their individual development. In Figure 5, nearly 90% of teachers placed a strong emphasis on small group or one-on-one interactions, which are crucial for providing targeted instruction and intervention. These personalized sessions were especially beneficial for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or those facing specific learning challenges, ensuring that they receive the precise support they need to succeed. To further enrich the classroom experience, approximately 70% of teachers employed learning stations and rotation models. This method allowed students to interact with various educational materials and activities that resonate with their distinct learning styles and academic levels. It also provided opportunities for direct instruction in a dynamic, engaging format that accommodates diverse learner needs. In classrooms characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity, around 30% of educators incorporated peer teaching and support strategies.

Building Skills with Scaffolding Instruction

Scaffolding, employed by 60% of teachers, involves gradually building upon students' existing knowledge and skills (see Figure 5). This method often included breaking tasks into smaller, more manageable components and providing ongoing support until students achieve mastery of the concepts. This incremental support was crucial for helping all students progress at their own pace without feeling overwhelmed. Differentiated instruction significantly enhanced student engagement by aligning tasks with individual learning preferences and needs. It also increased students' mastery of subject matter by providing appropriate challenges and support, thereby reducing frustration, and boosting confidence. Moreover, such strategies were indispensable in classrooms with diverse populations, ensuring that every student, regardless of their background or learning profile, can access and engage with the curriculum effectively. This commitment was reflected in various structured activities and teaching approaches that encouraged students to express themselves and

share their cultural backgrounds, significantly enhancing the learning experience for everyone involved.

Figure 5

Classroom Differentiation Strategies

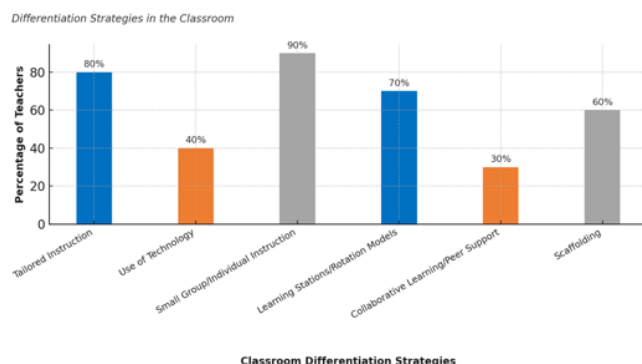
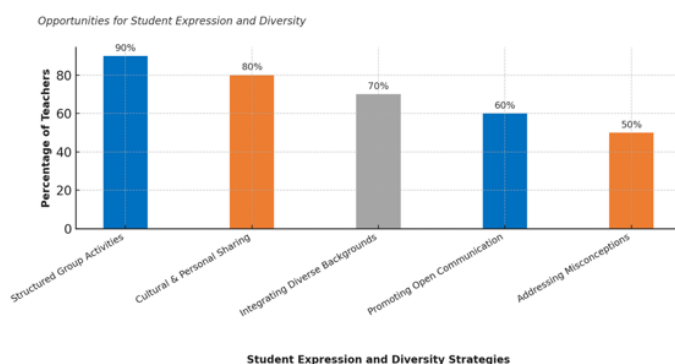


Figure 6

Student Expressions and Diversity Strategies



Facilitating Expression through Structured Activities

A prominent strategy among nearly 90% of educators involved integrating structured group activities that facilitate open expression (see Figure 6). Methods such as group challenges, collaborative corners, and think-pair-share sessions were commonplace. These activities served as vibrant platforms for students to voice their opinions and share insights related to the curriculum, allowing them to contribute actively to classroom dialogue. One educator remarked,

"When students are given the space to share their thoughts, they not only learn more deeply, but they also teach each other, which is incredibly powerful."

Integrating Diverse Backgrounds into Learning

Approximately 80% of teachers created spaces for students to bring elements of their personal and cultural lives into the classroom (see Figure 6). This manifested in discussions about

family traditions, favorite meals from various cultures, or personal stories that are connected with lesson themes. Such discussions not only enriched the classroom experience but also fostered a sense of community and mutual respect among students. Teachers observed that these conversations often lead to greater empathy and understanding among students, as they see the world through each other's eyes. About 70% of educators consciously incorporated elements of students' cultural and personal backgrounds into their teaching strategies. For instance, in a grammar lesson, students were encouraged to form sentences that reflected their own experiences or cultural norms. This approach not only personalized learning but also respected and honored the diversity present within the classroom. One teacher noted,

"By weaving students' backgrounds into lessons, we make learning relevant and give them a sense of belonging."

Promoting Open Communication and Clarifying Misconceptions

In many classrooms, roughly 60% according to surveys, teachers maintained an open dialogue where students are encouraged to speak up with thoughts or questions as they arise. This openness ensured that all students felt valued and heard, contributing to a dynamic and responsive learning environment. It also helped in creating a classroom culture where every voice is important, and diverse perspectives are celebrated. A significant portion of educators, about 50%, focused on actively understanding the diverse backgrounds of their students and clarifying any misconceptions that may arise (see Figure 6). Through respectful dialogue and deep listening, these teachers helped students navigate complex social dynamics, fostering an understanding that enhanced peer relationships and classroom cohesion. Teachers emphasized the importance of addressing misconceptions promptly to prevent the formation of biases or misunderstandings.

Research Question #4: How do classroom expectations and routines impact the students' affective performance?

In the educational journey of a student, the expectations set within the classroom environment play a pivotal role in shaping behavior, engagement, and overall academic performance. Educators recognized the profound impact of clear and consistent expectations, and they meticulously crafted these standards to foster a conducive learning atmosphere from the very start of the school year.

Setting the Foundation with Clear Expectations

A significant majority of educators, around 70%, prioritized establishing clear rules and routines at the onset of the school year (see Figure 7). These guidelines were not merely about

maintaining order but are designed to streamline daily activities such as unpacking, initiating work promptly, and adhering to procedures for submitting assignments. This structured approach helped students acclimate quickly to the learning environment and understand what is expected of them each day.

Behavioral and Academic Standards

Nearly all teachers, with an overwhelming consensus of 90%, expected students to exhibit respect towards one another. This expectation extended beyond mere politeness to include being prepared both mentally and physically for the day's learning—carrying the right materials and maintaining a readiness to engage in classroom activities. Furthermore, about 80% of teachers have high academic expectations, urging students to consistently give their best effort. When these standards are not met, educators convey disappointment and encourage better performance in the future, fostering a sense of responsibility and commitment to quality work (see Figure 7).

Encouraging a Supportive and Interactive Environment

Some educators, about 30%, emphasized the importance of attempting work even when it proves challenging. They advocated for a supportive environment where students are encouraged to seek help, whether from the teacher directly or through collaborative efforts with peers. This supportive framework ensured that no student feels left behind and that help is always available, thereby enhancing collective learning (see Figure 7).

The Impact of Reinforcement and Routines

The reinforcement of positive behaviors and the setting of incremental academic goals throughout the year were crucial strategies employed by educators to boost motivation and engagement. This methodical goal setting helped students visualize their progress and align their efforts with clear, attainable targets. Regular reinforcement of routines not only contributed to developing independence among students but also reduced the need for constant reminders as students grow accustomed to the classroom's expectations and begin taking initiatives on their own.

Behavior Management and Feedback Mechanisms

To effectively manage classroom behavior, around 20% of teachers utilized tools such as buzzers or timers. These devices helped minimize disruptions and maintain a focus on learning activities, significantly enhancing the classroom environment's conduciveness to education. Additionally, when educators' expressed disappointment in a student's efforts, it often catalyzed an

improved performance in subsequent tasks, as students are motivated to align their efforts with their teachers' expectations (see Figure 7). In sum, the careful setting and maintenance of clear classroom expectations were fundamental to fostering both behavioral and academic success. These standards, diligently reinforced through various strategies, profoundly impacted students' affective performance. By creating a structured, supportive environment that promoted respect, diligence, and continuous improvement, educators enabled students to thrive academically and develop the personal responsibility essential for lifelong success. As one teacher noted,

"When students understand the expectations and see their progress, they not only meet but often exceed those expectations, growing in confidence and capability."

Figure 7

Classroom Expectations and Behavioral Strategies

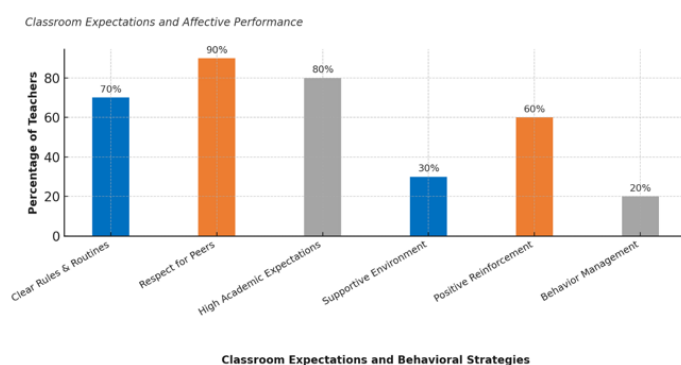
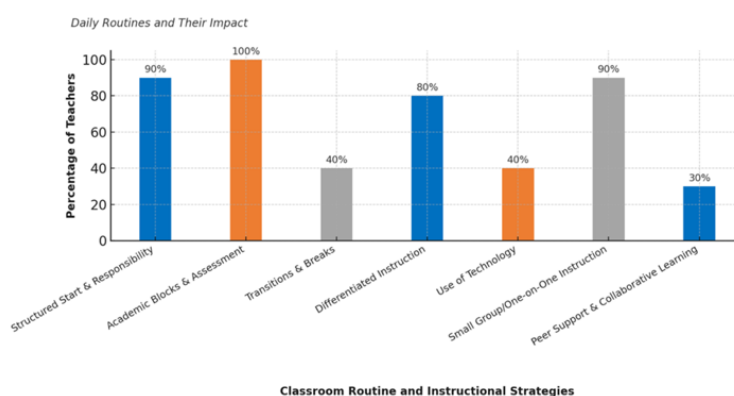


Figure 8

Classroom Routine and Instructional Strategies



Harnessing Daily Routines for Enhanced Student Performance

In elementary classrooms, the structure of daily routines played an indispensable role in shaping students' learning experiences. Educators emphasized the importance of establishing a predictable environment through well-defined routines, which not only enhances educational outcomes but also supports behavioral and emotional development. Most educators, about 90%, begin the day with structured activities such as affirmations, focus statements, or bell ringers (see Figure 8). These activities are designed to set a tone of focus and preparation, priming students for the day's learning challenges. A significant portion of the routine also involves promoting student responsibility, with tasks ranging from specific classroom jobs to general expectations like organizing personal spaces and materials. Employed by roughly 80% of teachers, these practices inculcate a sense of responsibility and self-management, fostering students' independence and accountability.

Academic Blocks and Assessment

The core of the day is dedicated to structured academic blocks, encompassing phonics, reading, grammar, writing, and other subject-specific lessons. These blocks are interspersed with assessments and reflective activities, allowing both students and teachers to gauge understanding and progress. This consistent sequence, maintained by all educators, supported a smooth transition between different learning activities, minimizing downtime and maximizing instructional efficacy.

Flexibility in Completion Times

Flexibility in handling task completion times was a common theme, cited by about 80% of teachers. This approach was particularly beneficial for students who face challenges in keeping pace with the standard classroom timeline due to various learning difficulties. By extending the time allowed for certain tasks, educators ensured that these students do not feel rushed or overlooked, fostering a more equitable learning environment.

Transitions and Breaks

To effectively manage energy levels and maintain engagement throughout the day, about 40% of teachers integrated transitional activities or brain breaks. These short, timed breaks allow students to relax momentarily after completing certain tasks, helping them to recharge and refocus for subsequent activities. The predictability offered by these routines provides a secure and focused environment, reducing anxiety and confusion over daily expectations. Students learned to manage their time effectively, enhancing their engagement and ability to transition smoothly between tasks. This structured approach was linked directly to improved academic performance and growth, demonstrating that a well-organized day significantly supports learning retention and student

independence. During break, technology played a crucial role, with around 40% of educators using adaptive educational tools that automatically adjust task difficulty based on student performance. This allowed for a highly personalized learning experience that meets students at their level (see Figure 8).

Targeted Instructional Approaches and Collaborative Learning

Small group and one-on-one instruction are pivotal, utilized by nearly 90% of teachers to provide targeted support and intervention. Learning stations and rotational models, used by about 70% of teachers, offer diverse educational experiences and cater to various learning styles within the classroom. Furthermore, approximately 30% of teachers incorporated peer teaching, particularly beneficial in linguistically diverse classrooms. This strategy promoted a collaborative learning environment where students can learn from and support each other (see Figure 8). The combination of well-defined daily routines and strategic instructional differentiation is essential for managing effective classrooms. By fostering an environment that supports both behavioral and academic development, educators enabled students to thrive in a structured yet flexible learning atmosphere.

Discussions

The findings from this research provided compelling insights into how the classroom environment—comprising the physical setup, social climate, accommodation of diversity, and established routines—affects students' affective performance. The significance of the physical environment, as highlighted in existing literature, was reaffirmed by the observations and interviews conducted during this study. According to Tanić, et al. (2020), the physical setup of a classroom, including factors such as layout, lighting, and decor, played a crucial role in shaping students' academic engagement and overall emotional well-being. One teacher remarked, "When the classroom is bright and organized, students seem more at ease and ready to learn."

This study found that 70% of classrooms with well-organized and aesthetically pleasing setups fostered positive attitudes and enhanced emotional well-being among students. This aligned with Falkner and Payne's (2020) findings that the physical condition of classroom spaces significantly impacts students' attitudes towards learning and their civic engagement.

In terms of social climate, the importance of a supportive and inclusive environment in promoting academic achievement and emotional development was well-documented. Havik and Westergård (2020) emphasized that students' perceptions of their interactions with teachers and peers are critical in shaping their overall school experience. This study corroborated their findings, with approximately 60% of educators emphasizing the establishment of norms for respectful interactions to create a safe and supportive atmosphere. One educator noted, "Setting clear expectations for

respect from day one changes the whole dynamic in the classroom. Students know they are valued, and that makes a huge difference."

In classrooms where students felt respected and valued, higher levels of engagement and positive behavior were observed. This observation was consistent with the findings of Valiente et al. (2020), who noted that strong interpersonal relationships within the classroom significantly enhance student motivation and engagement, leading to improved academic outcomes. The accommodation of diversity emerged as a crucial element in creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Ferreira, et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of cultural awareness and responsive teaching in fostering an environment where all students feel included and valued. One teacher emphasized, "You have to meet students where they are and make sure they see themselves in what we're learning. That's when they really start to engage."

This research found that 80% of teachers adapted assignments to meet diverse needs, including modifications for special populations and alternative formats for understanding. Another educator shared, "I make sure to incorporate elements from students' cultures in lessons. It not only makes the learning more relevant but also makes students feel seen."

This aligned with the findings of Cruz, et al. (2020) on the efficacy of culturally responsive teaching. Approximately 70% of educators integrated elements of students' cultural backgrounds into their teaching, making lessons more relevant and engaging. By celebrating diversity and providing tailored support, teachers positively impacted students' affective performance, fostering a sense of belonging and emotional well-being. Classroom expectations and routines also significantly influenced affective performance. Havik and Westergård (2020) argued that consistent routines and clear expectations are essential in maintaining student focus and enhancing academic performance. This study supported their findings, with 90% of educators maintaining clear expectations for behavior and academic performance, leading to better behavior and outcomes. One teacher mentioned, Consistency is key. When students know what to expect every day, they can focus better and are less anxious."

The use of structured routines, such as buzzers and timers to manage behavior and maintain order, was observed to provide predictability and reduce anxiety. This structured environment fostered a positive atmosphere that was conducive to higher levels of engagement, motivation, and success. Moreover, the role of teacher expectations cannot be understated. Gentrup, et al. (2020) discussed how teacher expectations and feedback can significantly impact student academic performance and self-concept, often creating self-fulfilling prophecies. This study observed that educators who held high yet realistic expectations saw improved academic and behavioral outcomes

in their students. One teacher remarked, "I always tell my students that I believe in them. When they know you expect the best from them, they start expecting it from themselves."

This reinforced the critical influence of teacher perceptions and feedback on student success, highlighting the need for teachers to maintain high expectations while providing the necessary support to help students achieve these goals. The role of classroom climate in students' psychological well-being is further supported by Wang et al. (2020), who conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis demonstrating that a positive classroom climate is associated with better academic and psychological outcomes. This research aligned with their findings, showing that classrooms with a supportive and inclusive climate contributed significantly to students' emotional resilience and academic motivation. Additionally, the work of Valiente et al. (2020) highlighted how strong interpersonal relationships within the classroom can significantly boost student motivation and engagement, leading to improved academic achievement.

When comparing these findings to existing research, it was evident that the physical and social environments of the classroom are critical determinants of students' affective performance. The structured, inclusive, and supportive environments observed in this study resulted in enhanced emotional and academic experiences for students, similar to the positive outcomes reported in the studies by Ferreira, Martinsone, and Talić (2020), Cruz et al. (2020), and Wang et al. (2020). This research contributed to the broader understanding of how classroom environments can be optimized to support the holistic development of students, affirming the necessity for educators to focus on both the physical setup and the social climate of their classrooms to achieve the best educational outcomes.

In conclusion, the profound impact of the classroom environment on students' affective performance is evident. Educators who created organized, inclusive, and supportive environments, while maintaining clear expectations and routines, significantly enhance students' emotional and academic experiences. This study not only confirms the findings of existing literature but also provided new insights into the practical application of these principles in diverse classroom settings, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to student development.

Implications

The findings of this study held significant implications for educators, school administrators, policymakers, and stakeholders within the education sector. By understanding how the physical and social environments of a classroom impact students' affective performance, more effective educational strategies and policies can be developed to foster both academic and emotional growth in students.

Educational Practices

Educators are encouraged to prioritize the creation of well-organized and aesthetically pleasing classrooms that enhance student engagement and emotional well-being. The physical setup of a classroom, including seating arrangements, cleanliness, and the availability of resources, plays a critical role in shaping students' attitudes toward learning. As supported by Tanić, et al. (2020), a conducive physical environment can significantly improve academic outcomes. Teachers should be mindful of incorporating diverse and culturally responsive teaching methods that celebrate and respect students' backgrounds, as highlighted by Cruz, et al. (2020). Implementing differentiated instruction tailored to individual student needs can help reduce frustration and boost confidence, ultimately enhancing affective performance.

Social Climate

A positive social climate, characterized by respectful interactions and supportive relationships, was essential for fostering a conducive learning environment. Teachers must establish clear norms and expectations at the beginning of the school year to promote respectful interactions and reduce conflicts. The findings aligned with Havik and Westergård (2020), emphasizing that a supportive classroom climate leads to better academic and emotional outcomes. Teachers should also facilitate opportunities for students to express their opinions and share their cultural experiences, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity. By promoting an inclusive environment where students feel valued and respected, teachers can enhance both the social and academic aspects of students' school experiences.

Classroom Management and Routines

The importance of consistent routines and clear expectations cannot be overstated. As observed in this study and supported by Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2019), structured routines help students feel secure and focused, enhancing their academic performance and behavior. Educators should implement tools such as timers, buzzers, and structured schedules to maintain order and predictability in the classroom. These strategies not only reduced anxiety but also helped students develop essential time management skills. By establishing a well-structured classroom environment, teachers can create a setting that supports both academic success and emotional well-being.

Policy Implications

Policymakers should consider these findings when designing educational policies and making funding allocations. Investment in classroom infrastructure, including modern furniture, technological resources, and maintenance, can significantly impact student learning environments

and outcomes. As highlighted by Ferreira, Martinsone, and Talić (2020), the integration of SEL and CRT into educational practices is crucial. Policies should support professional development programs that train teachers in culturally responsive and differentiated instruction methods, ensuring that educators are equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students. Additionally, standardized testing frameworks should be revisited to accommodate diverse learning styles and provide a more holistic assessment of student performance, moving beyond traditional metrics to include measures of social and emotional growth.

Future Direction

This study opened avenues for further research into the specific elements of classroom environments that most significantly impact affective performance. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how sustained changes in physical and social environments influence student outcomes over time. Moreover, research focusing on the integration of technology in classroom management and its effects on student engagement and learning could offer valuable guidance for educators in the digital age. In conclusion, the implications of this study underscored the need for a holistic approach to education that considers both the physical and social aspects of the classroom environment. By fostering inclusive, supportive, and well-organized learning spaces, educators can significantly enhance students' affective performance, leading to improved academic achievements and overall well-being.

Conclusion

This research illuminated the profound impact that the classroom environment—comprising both physical and social elements—had on students' affective performance. Through detailed observations and insightful interviews with educators, the study demonstrated that the nuances of the classroom environment played a critical role in shaping not only academic outcomes but also the emotional and psychological well-being of students. The findings confirmed that a well-organized, inclusive, and supportive classroom fostered a positive learning atmosphere, where students felt motivated, engaged, and emotionally secure.

The physical environment, including the arrangement of desks, the cleanliness of the space, and the availability of resources, has been shown to significantly influence students' attitudes toward learning. Classrooms that are thoughtfully designed and maintained create an environment conducive to focus, collaboration, and creativity, ultimately enhancing both academic performance and emotional well-being. Equally important was the social climate of the classroom. The study has shown that a positive, respectful, and supportive social environment, where diversity is celebrated and students are encouraged to express themselves, leads to higher levels of student engagement and better emotional outcomes. Teachers who establish clear expectations and routines, while remaining

responsive to the diverse needs of their students, create a stable and predictable environment that supports learning and fosters a sense of belonging. The implications of these findings are far-reaching, suggesting that educators, administrators, and policymakers must prioritize the development of classroom environments that address the holistic needs of students. By focusing on creating spaces that are not only academically rigorous but also emotionally supportive, we can better prepare students for both academic success and personal growth.

In conclusion, this research underscored the importance of viewing the classroom environment as a dynamic and multifaceted space that plays a crucial role in the educational experience. As educators continue to navigate the complexities of teaching diverse student populations, the insights gained from this study can inform the development of more effective and supportive learning environments, ultimately leading to enhanced educational outcomes and the overall well-being of students.

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