

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Advancing Innovation Through Scholarship: Launching the Inaugural Special Editorial Issue

The Journal of Innovations in Education & Human Development: Research and Practice (JIEHD) is founded on the belief that rigorous scholarship has the power to inform practice, influence policy, and inspire meaningful change across educational and human development contexts. As a peer-reviewed, open-access journal, JIEHD is committed to disseminating high-quality, interdisciplinary research that advances knowledge, fosters innovation, and promotes evidence-based solutions to contemporary challenges facing educators, leaders, researchers, and practitioners. The journal serves as a scholarly forum for original research, theoretical and conceptual contributions, innovative practices, literature reviews, and case studies that bridge the gap between research and professional practice.

This inaugural Special Editorial Issue marks an important milestone in the establishment of JIEHD and reflects the journal's commitment to scholarly excellence. To commemorate the launch of the journal, members of the Editorial Board and Advisory Board were invited to contribute manuscripts representing their areas of expertise and current scholarly work. These invited contributions establish the intellectual foundation of the journal while demonstrating the breadth, quality, and interdisciplinary nature of scholarship that JIEHD seeks to promote. Collectively, the manuscripts exemplify the collaborative leadership and academic rigor that will continue to shape the journal's identity and future direction.

The educational landscape continues to evolve in response to technological advancement, demographic shifts, changing policy environments, and increasingly complex societal needs. Addressing these challenges requires interdisciplinary collaboration that extends beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. Educational innovation is strengthened through the integration of leadership, instructional practice, organizational development, technology, equity, human development, and policy research. The manuscripts featured in this Special Editorial Issue reflect these interconnected perspectives, illustrating how diverse methodological approaches and disciplinary lenses contribute to a deeper understanding of educational improvement and organizational effectiveness.

Guided by the theme, **Leading Innovation Through Research and Practice: Perspectives on Educational Leadership, Learning, and Human Development**, this Special Editorial Issue is organized to reflect the progression of educational leadership from preparation and professional development to instructional innovation, equity-centered leadership, and systems-level decision-making.

The issue opens with **Designing the Future of Leadership Preparation**, featuring *Redesigning Educational Leadership Preparation Programs in New Mexico: One University's Perspective*. This conceptual article examines the redesign of a university educational leadership program in response to newly adopted state standards and demonstrates how leadership preparation programs can intentionally prepare aspiring leaders to meet the evolving demands of contemporary educational systems.

The second section, **Developing and Sustaining Educational Leaders**, focuses on the structures and relationships that support leadership development throughout advanced graduate study. *Assistant Principals in Doctoral Programs: Engaging Sources of Support* explores the experiences of assistant principals enrolled in doctoral programs and highlights the importance of faculty mentorship, cohort models, and institutional support. Complementing this work, *Online Doctoral Persistence: Students' Perceptions of Dissertation Success Factors* examines the experiences of graduates of online doctoral programs and identifies key factors associated with persistence and dissertation completion. Together, these studies underscore the importance of relational, organizational, and academic supports in cultivating future educational leaders.

The third section, **Transforming Teaching, Learning, and Leadership**, examines innovation within instructional and organizational contexts. *Hands-On, Minds-On: Strategies for Teachers and Educational Leaders to Enhance Student Learning* synthesizes current research to present evidence-based instructional strategies that promote meaningful student learning through intentional instructional design. Accompanying this contribution, *Digital Resilience in Teacher Education: The Role of School Leadership in Strengthening Work-Integrated Learning Across Contexts* explores how distributed leadership, professional learning communities, and organizational resilience facilitate sustainable digital transformation across educational settings. Together, these articles demonstrate how leadership and instructional innovation work collaboratively to improve educational practice.

The fourth section, **Equity, Identity, and Inclusive Leadership**, features *Baila Connigo: Reimagining Leadership Development Through Latina-Centered Mentoring*. Drawing upon culturally sustaining perspectives, community cultural wealth, and Mujerista scholarship, this conceptual framework offers an innovative approach to mentoring Latina educational leaders through identity development, community engagement, advocacy, and leadership empowerment. The article broadens traditional conceptions of leadership development by emphasizing the critical role of culture, representation, and belonging in fostering equitable educational leadership.

The issue concludes with **Leadership for Policy and System Change**, featuring *Stakeholder Perceptions of Four-Day School Weeks: Leadership and Policy Implications in K–12 Education*. Employing a convergent mixed-methods design, this study investigates the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and school board members regarding four-day school week models. The findings illuminate the complexity of educational decision-making by examining stakeholder

perspectives related to instructional quality, educator well-being, equity, childcare, and organizational sustainability. The article reinforces the importance of evidence-informed leadership and inclusive policy development when implementing systemic educational change.

Although each manuscript addresses a distinct area of inquiry, collectively these contributions illustrate that educational innovation is strengthened through intentional leadership, collaborative partnerships, interdisciplinary inquiry, and a sustained commitment to continuous improvement. Across diverse educational contexts, the authors emphasize that effective leadership is developed through rigorous preparation, meaningful mentoring, instructional excellence, culturally responsive practice, organizational resilience, and informed policy decisions. Together, these themes reflect the multifaceted nature of educational leadership and underscore the importance of integrating research with practice to address contemporary educational challenges.

As the inaugural Special Editorial Issue of JIEHD, this collection establishes the journal's commitment to publishing scholarship that is methodologically rigorous, practically relevant, and socially responsive. The Editorial Team extends its sincere appreciation to the members of the Editorial Board and Advisory Board whose scholarly contributions have made this inaugural issue possible. Their leadership and dedication exemplify the collaborative spirit upon which the journal is founded and provide a strong foundation for future volumes.

It is our hope that the scholarship presented in this issue will stimulate meaningful dialogue, inspire future research, and encourage innovative practices that advance education and human development across diverse local, national, and international contexts. We invite scholars, practitioners, and educational leaders to engage with the ideas presented herein and to contribute to the continued growth of JIEHD as a scholarly forum dedicated to advancing research, informing practice, and promoting transformative change.

—Kathryn Washington, *Editor-in-Chief*

Journal of Innovations in Education & Human Development: Research and Practice

REDESIGNING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PREPARATION PROGRAMS IN NEW MEXICO: ONE UNIVERSITY'S PERSPECTIVE

Pamela L. Gray
New Mexico State University

Kristin Kew
New Mexico State University

Antoinette Howard
New Mexico State University

Abstract

New Mexico Governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham, signed House Bill 157 in April of 2025 with the goal of adding robust standards to the state's educational leadership preparation programs. These standards seek to transform and update PK-12 educational leadership master's programs to ensure that aspiring school leaders are prepared with current research-based skills and competencies. This conceptual paper describes how the PK-12 educational leadership program faculty at New Mexico State University (NMSU) addressed the new programmatic mandates. Updates to the NMSU educational leadership PK-12 program structure seeks to develop aspiring school leaders with the capacity to lead culturally diverse school communities in New Mexico.

Keywords: educational change, educational leadership, residency programs, principalship

Research has confirmed the importance of effective school leadership for a safe and inclusive environment that focuses on student learning, teacher development, and community involvement (Gooden, 2012; Khalifa, 2012; Noguera, 2011; Scriber & Crow, 2012; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2026). Educational administrators are key in establishing the culture and climate of their schools, serving as instructional leaders, hiring, and developing effective teachers, and initiating meaningful community engagement. On a daily basis, more than 47 million PK-12 students attend public schools across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). From rural to urban, large to small school districts, educators tirelessly work to meet the needs of a variety of learners. The frequent disconnect with students, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, English learners, students with mental health issues and special learning needs often leads to students performing poorly on state standardized assessments, dropping out at higher rates and leaving high school ill-prepared for college or careers. Large, impersonal schools often lead students to become passive and disengaged. Today's schools need what Rosa Rivera McCutchen (2021) has coined "radical care." As described in her book, *Radical Care: Leading for Justice in Urban Schools*, radical care is "a way of leading that moves beyond the individual circumstances and conditions of schooling and works to create structural change" (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021, p. 14). Radical care aims to address systemic injustices within communities and improve the conditions of schooling for students by building on existing community assets and strengths.

The radical care framework includes five components: 1) adopting an antiracist stance; 2) cultivating authentic relationships; 3) believing in students' and teachers' capacity for excellence; 4) leveraging power strategically; and 5) embracing a spirit of radical hope (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). A lack of radical care is evidenced in the educational inequities across the national but overwhelmingly in New Mexico. As three PK-12 faculty members in the Educational Leadership and Administration Program (ELAD) at New Mexico State University, we are collaborating with our cohort universities to implement "radical care" - transformative changes to our educational leadership programs that will address the long-standing needs of New Mexico.

New Mexico has ranked at or near the bottom on education, economics and "family and community" based on the annual Kids Count report that tracks sixteen metrics of children's access to education, health, economic and social stability at home (2024). Seventy-nine percent of fourth grade students are not proficient in reading while 87% are not proficient in 8th grade mathematics (Kids Count, 2024). With a long history of low accountability scores and graduation rates with high student absenteeism, school districts in the state have struggled to meet the needs of students despite attempts to implement various education reform initiatives. In addition, New Mexico is one of the 10 lowest states for principal retention (Think New Mexico, 2025). A strong motivator for educational leadership reform derived from the 2018 Yazzie/Martinez vs. New Mexico lawsuit which asserted that the state failed to provide an equitable education to low-income, Native American, English language learners and students with disabilities (NM Center on Law and Poverty, 2022). The ruling from the lawsuit established that the state had failed to provide services and programs such as dual language, social services, small class sizes, extended learning and funding for teacher retention. In light of the Yazzie/Martinez decision, school districts in New Mexico are working to address the long standing academic inequities. This paper describes how the PK-12 educational leadership program faculty at New Mexico State University (NMSU) addressed the new programmatic mandates. Updates to the NMSU educational leadership PK-12 program structure seeks to develop aspiring school leaders with the capacity to lead culturally diverse school communities in New Mexico.

Revisiting School Leadership Development

Students need equity-oriented leaders who wish to provide equal educational opportunities and a high quality education to all students regardless of socioeconomic and cultural background (Cooper, 2009). School leaders with the capacity to lead culturally diverse school communities are critical to the future of public education, especially in New Mexico.

On April 10, 2025, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed New Mexico House Bill 157 to develop and support school and district leaders. University education preparation programs were tasked with applying for the new SAPP (Site Administrator Preparation Program). This state-funded program seeks to boast candidate quality, preparation and retention of graduate students interested in pursuing the masters degree in educational leadership in New Mexico. The New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) must approve each university SAPP to include:

- Comprehensive curriculum aligned to national and state standards
- Deliberate candidate recruitment and selection

- Robust clinical experiences; and
- Formal partnerships between university programs, districts and charter schools (NMPED, 2026).

The Current NMSU Principal Preparation Program

The Division of Educational Leadership and Administration in the School of Teacher Preparation, Administration and Leadership at New Mexico State University has a goal of graduating proficient, competent and social justice minded leaders to serve the southern New Mexico borderland communities.

The NMSU Master of Arts (M.A.) plus Licensure Program in Educational Leadership and Administration emphasizes school administration and organization, effective leadership strategies, campus business management, and federal, state, and local school regulations. Students in this program cultivate skills necessary to evaluate programs for overall school improvement, implement research to improve instruction and curricula and understand how diverse populations and special programs affect a school and its community. Our program consists of 11 courses, two of which are clinical based, for a total of 33 credit hours. Courses focus on instructional leadership, strategy and operations, policies and regulations, curriculum development, evaluation methods, sustainable change, pedagogical theory, and the application of data for school improvement. Our program consists of 11 courses, two of which are clinical based, for a total of 33 credit hours.

The Department of Educational Leadership and Administration Principal Preparation Program boasts the following:

- **Hybrid Coursework:** Coursework is online except for the residency in a student-friendly format that is interactive, engaging, and practical. This is helpful to students with full-time work in schools and districts. With a total of 450 hours in the field throughout the two years of coursework and four hours a month, per course synchronous online professor-led instruction; students get practical support and learning in a school leadership environment and practical and theoretical support from coaches and faculty in a hybrid environment.
- **Time Efficient:** This two-year program begins in the fall and ends the following spring.
- **Nationally Recognized:** Our program is a member of the University Council for Educational Administration, a collective of top research institutions specializing in advancing educational leadership and policy.
- **Highly Effective:** Prepare for Principal certification while you satisfy program requirements (you will need a level 3B teaching license in the state of NM, pass the state certification test, pay the fee for the state certification test, and pay the fee for the NM administrator's license). Our pass rate in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 for the NM Assessment for School Leaders exam was 100%.
- **Hands-on Learning:** Due to our hybrid format, students can apply the knowledge they learn in class to their principal residencies as well as apply their experiences during their NMPED required 450 hours in the field to the coaching and theory provided in their coursework.

- **Supportive Faculty:** Students benefit from engaged and dedicated faculty who offer career guidance and personalized assistance and have real-world experience in school administration.
- **Affordable:** Students can advance their career in a top-rated program at a fraction of the cost compared to similar institutions.
- **Social Justice:** Our program has a continuous focus on social justice and equity for southwest borderland communities and responds and acts upon the requirements provided by the state of NM, CAEP, and the mandates from Yazzie v. Martinez court case.

Overall, ELAD provides high-quality instruction, direction, and support for students in a hybrid format allowing a combination of practice and theory. Our online classes are facilitated using updated and appropriate technologies and platforms to allow for engagement in discussions, and online and face-to-face group activities, promoting active learning. Timely feedback and guidance are provided to students on their coursework, discussions, and assessments. Assignments and syllabi are linked directly to the new NMPED standards for aspiring principals.

Fall 2026 Proposed Changes to Our Program: Principal Residencies

The New Mexico Public Education Department will fund full year residencies for aspiring principals through university leadership preparation programs. The goal of the residencies is to provide authentic, field-based opportunities to practice competencies that will prepare graduates for future administrator roles in the state. With more intensely prepared school leaders, the hope is to retain campus leaders who have become transformative administrators who have increased student achievement, tackled chronic absenteeism, increased family and community engagement and increased graduation rates in New Mexico.

The NMSU educational leadership program will pilot three full-time residencies in the fall of 2026. The principal residency grant opportunity will allow us to better prepare all our students and pilot full-time, full-year residencies alongside our regular cohort-based program. The three chosen students will be able to move directly into a leadership role having been coached and working alongside their mentor principals at two different levels of schools. Through the SAPP, we will further partnerships with our participating district(s) and assist them to “grow their own” well trained school leaders. The new Fall 2026 cohort will benefit from 450 hours of field experiences between their residency courses and practical time built into the newly revamped coursework.

The 2026 aspiring principals’ residency grant application encompasses the following to align with the characteristics of high-quality residencies as defined in the NMPED RFA:

- Full-year release time paid residency experience (candidates should retain current salary and benefits or be paid the equivalent to a level 2 or 3 teacher salary/benefits);
- Authentic field-based opportunities to practice competencies aligned to the New Mexico performance evaluation system for site administrators;
- Common performance assessment tasks that demonstrate competencies;

- Experiences in multiple school environments (early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school);
- Candidates receive at least 8 hours of individualized coaching from program staff (including faculty or other staff that includes feedback on practice);
- Program selected residency sites with mentor(s) who have at least three years of experience and demonstrated effectiveness;
- Training for mentors, coaches, and faculty supervisors;
- Strong partnerships with districts;
- Ongoing self-evaluation and improvement of the residency program.

The goal will be to continue this practice with 100% of our graduate students in the future, with funding and support from the NMPED, partnering districts, and external organizations. Continuing to build partnerships with NM districts, especially our local school district (Las Cruces Public Schools) and rural southwestern NM districts with a shortage of school leaders, will be a priority. Ongoing support will be provided to the coaches and mentor principals as they give much of their time and energy to aspiring principals. Future full-time residencies will allow districts to have a cadre of well prepared and socially just minded aspiring school leaders to hire during this time of school leader shortage.

Through principal residency coursework and practical field experience, students will develop advanced competencies in:

- Establishing and implementing a shared vision and culture of excellence among students, staff, parents, and the community.
- Partnering with fellow administrators, teachers, and parents to support student learning.
- Developing and executing high-quality instruction through collaboration.
- Supervising and evaluating classroom instruction.
- Providing feedback and professional development to educators and staff.
- Hiring and retaining effective teachers.
- Improving student outcomes.
- Strategic operations for a school setting.
- Promoting ethics and support for all learners within the school organization.

Conclusion

All students have the right to a rigorous education that prepares them for careers and college. As the instructional leader, the principal must set the tone for high expectations, high standards and a rigorous curriculum. With the best instructional practices, positive relationships and effective leadership, students can succeed. As former public school administrators, we have direct experience with the skills and competencies necessary to become a successful school leader. By investing in research-based changes to the principal leadership programs across the state of New Mexico, we hope to develop more competent school leaders who can transform schools. We want to see students with literacy and mathematical grade level skills, culturally responsive teachers developing curious minds and actively engaged communities. The well-being of New Mexico children is at stake. Real change often requires risk. As the instructional leader, the principal must set the tone for high expectations, high standards, a rigorous curriculum and best

leadership practices including instructional pedagogy, relationship development, and effective leadership. As former public school administrators, we have direct experience with the skills and competencies necessary to become a successful school leader. By investing in positive and productive changes to the principal leadership programs across the state of New Mexico, we hope to develop school leaders who can transform schools beyond rhetoric. We want to see competent students with literacy and mathematical grade level skills, culturally responsive teachers, and school leaders within actively engaged communities. There is no limit to the success of students in New Mexico when schools provide the vision and opportunities to make their hopes and dreams a reality.

REFERENCES

- Cooper, C. W. (2009). Performing cultural work in demographically changing schools: implications for expanding transformative leadership frameworks. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 45(5), 694-724. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X09341639>
- Gooden, M. (2012, Winter/Spring). What does racism have to do with leadership? Countering the idea of color-blind leadership: A reflection on race and the growing pressures of the urban principalship. *Educational Foundations*, 26(1-2), 67-84. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ968818.pdf>
- Khalifa, M. (2012). A renewed paradigm in successful urban school leadership: principal as community leader, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48, 424-464.
- Kids count data book online*. (2024). Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2024). *Digest of educational statistics*. Washington, DC: Government Publications Office.
- New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty. (2022). <https://www.nmpovertylaw.org/issues/education/>
- New Mexico Department. (2026). <https://web.ped.nm.gov/bureaus/educator-quality/school-and-district-leaders/>
- Noguera, P. (2011). A broader and bolder approach uses education to break the cycle of poverty. *Kappan*, Nov 2011, 8-14.
- Rivera-McCutchen, R. (2021). *Radical care: Leading for justice in urban schools*. Teachers College Press.
- Theoharis, G., & Scanlan, M. (Eds.). (2025). *Leadership for increasingly diverse schools* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS IN DOCTORAL PROGRAMS: ENGAGING SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Bobbie Faith Garcia
University of Texas San Antonio

Mariela Rodriguez
University of Texas San Antonio

Abstract

This qualitative research study focused on 10 assistant principals currently enrolled or recent graduates of doctoral programs was the focus of this article. The perceptions and experiences of school leaders from Texas and North Carolina were shared with the authors through individual interviews and focus groups conducted over Zoom. Three key findings emerged from the data analysis: 1) faculty advisor role; 2) cohort model; and 3) programmatic initiatives. The discussion centered on the value that each of these findings played in the participants doctoral journeys. The article concludes with recommendations that faculty and staff in other doctoral programs could emulate to support student retention and completion of the dissertation.

This qualitative research study sought perspectives and reflections from 10 assistant principals who were currently enrolled or had recently graduated from doctoral programs. The data discussed in this article focuses specifically on the experiences of ten assistant principals who were enrolled in doctoral programs or were recent graduates of less than five years. The primary concept that we will emphasize is the type of support that the assistant principals found most helpful within their departments and universities. We will incorporate relevant literature, the methodological approach, and key findings. The latter sections of this article will then elaborate on what this means for the support of school leaders in doctoral programs and recommendations for doctoral program support systems.

Keywords: assistant principals, cohort model, dissertation completion, doctoral education, educational leadership, faculty advising, qualitative research, student persistence.

ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS AND DOCTORAL EDUCATION

In the following section, we make literature connection to the focus of this article which was to learn from the experiences of ten assistant principals in doctoral programs and the support systems they found to be effective.

Assistant Principals

The work that assistant principals conduct in schools includes a myriad of responsibilities ranging from instructional supervision to student discipline (Barnett et al., 2017; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Assistant principals have traditionally held duties that are secondary to the work of school principals. Assistant principals often engage in conducting teacher observations and classroom walkthroughs as part of supervisory feedback (Moyer & Goldring, 2023). Assistant

principals also traditionally have been considered as the disciplinarians in the school as a duty relegated to them by the principals that they work with (Barnett et al, 2012).

Assistant principals support the work of the principals they serve through opportunities for shadowing and to help grow them as instructional leaders (Bartanen et al., 2021). It is helpful for the leadership development of assistant principals to learn from their principals so that they can “hit the ground running” when they are assigned their own schools to lead as principals. Adversely, if assistant principals do not receive effective mentoring from the principals that they serve with then the assistant principals will have to learn new responsibilities and skills while “on the job.”

Educational Leadership Doctoral Programs

Doctoral programs in educational leadership include both Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees. The former is traditionally focused on the application of research for practice and/or policy that the candidates can apply to the school districts where they work. The latter degree has a strong focus on research that gives candidates opportunities for scholarly approaches to solving research problems. Both degrees offer coursework that supports leadership development, engagement with academic literature, and methodological approaches (Smith et al, 2021; Sverdik et al, 2018).

Traditional doctoral programs follow coursework with dissertation research that includes data collection and analysis. Doctoral candidates then submit their dissertations to their dissertation committee for review and feedback that culminates in an oral dissertation defense. This lengthy and rigorous process gives doctoral candidates opportunities to share what they have learned through their foray into the scholarly process of academic writing. Such processes are not only challenging regarding the work required, but also balancing dissertation requirements with full-time work responsibilities like that of assistant principals (Peters et al., 2016).

Cohort Models in Doctoral Programs

The use of cohort models in doctoral programs in educational leadership is the traditional type of modality that students participate in. Cohort models offer students opportunities to take sequenced courses together. This helps students to develop friendships and partnerships to support them through their dissertation journeys (Leland et al, 2020). Learning side by side and sharing successes and vulnerabilities enhances relationship building (Jackman et al, 2023). Working through a new and challenging process like doctoral education with a close-knit group can make a positive impact on all involved.

The authors of this article both participated in cohort models in their respective doctoral programs. The first author is a doctoral candidate who maintains a close bond with her fellow cohort members. They are often in communication with each other to encourage each other and to share opportunities within academic organizations. The second author graduated from an educational leadership doctoral program that also emphasized a cohort model. The second author has sustained relationships with her cohort members across the over twenty years that have passed since the cohort graduated. They continue to present together at conferences and support each other both professionally and emotionally.

Faculty Advisor Roles

Faculty members in universities have various work responsibilities rooted in the three areas of research, teaching, and service. When it comes to advising and mentoring doctoral students, faculty members integrate all three areas of their work responsibilities (Wollast et al., 2023). They engage in research support and development of the doctoral students that they advise. They teach their doctoral students about scholarly literature and context related to their dissertation work. Then they serve as dissertation chairs to support doctoral students through all phases of the dissertation process through final defense.

The importance of faculty advisors and dissertation chairs is critical when it comes to student retention in doctoral programs (Singe et al., 2021). The professional relationship between advisors and students is built on trust, respect, and aligned research vision (Santa-Ramirez, 2022). Thus, advisors can serve as role models for doctoral students by helping guide them with research and writing. They can also encourage and motivate doctoral students through the various phases from coursework through dissertation defense. Another element of support that faculty advisors can engage in is to support the academic socialization of doctoral students by co-authoring publications with them and co-presenting with them at professional conferences (Rodriguez, 2024).

In this section we made connections to scholarly literature around key areas of doctoral programs support for school leaders. We introduced literature related to assistant principals in doctoral program and key areas of support that included the role of the faculty advisor and the cohort model. In the following section we will briefly discuss the methodological approach that we employed for this study.

METHODS

This qualitative research study began with the purpose of learning the experiences of school leader assistant principals currently enrolled in doctoral programs or who were recent graduates of doctoral programs since 2020. Our goal was to learn the most support practices that supported school leaders' retention in graduate programs. To this end, we sent a recruitment flyer through our social media outlets (LinkedIn and Facebook). Casting a wide net helped recruit 10 assistant principals for this research study. Participant selection criteria required participants to have been or currently be principals or assistant principals. Participants just have also been currently enrolled in a doc program or have graduated from a program after 2020. We were happy to receive participants' interests in participating in the study and confirmed 10 assistant principals to participate. Of the 10 assistant principals in the study, 6 were women and 4 were men. Overall, they shared a commitment to serving students in Title I schools with participants representing elementary, middle, and high schools in Central Texas, East Texas, and the East Coast.

The study was conducted through two individual interviews with each participant followed by three separate focus groups for the ten assistant principals with about 3 assistant principals participating in each group. All of these research sessions were conducted via Zoom to accommodate participants from various regions of the US. Interviews were transcribed using Zoom functions and all meetings were recorded with the permission of participants.

Data was analyzed using the transcripts and researcher notes through the literature connections that were previously discussed. Reference to the transcripts as well as re-watching interviews and focus groups helped the authors to internalize the data. Both authors engaged in weekly discussions and reflections based on the data to formulate the key findings that will be presented in the following section. The voices of the 10 assistant principals will be highlighted as a priority of their research study was to understand their supportive experiences in doctoral programs. Participants selected their own pseudonyms and those will be used in the presentation of key findings.

KEY FINDINGS

In this section we will focus our presentation of the key findings specifically related to the programmatic support found within the participants' departments and universities. The first theme that will be presented is the important role of the faculty advisor. This will be followed by cohort support that the assistant principals in the study identified. Lastly, programmatic support systems within the department and university that proved helpful to the study participants will be presented.

Faculty Advisor Roles

During our first interview with Acy, an elementary school assistant principal, she remarked that "Making sure they [faculty members] are available to us" as important for her to feel supported during her doctoral program. This reflects the need for faculty advisors to connect with doctoral students consistently. Clear communication could help to avail anxieties that students may have during their doctoral coursework and dissertation research phases.

Another example of faculty member availability was a comment made by Belen, a high school assistant principal, when she stated that she and her advisor were "best friends." She mentioned that her advisor had been supportive and accessible throughout her program. He was only "a text away" anytime that she needed assistance. Such a strong relationship between Belen and her faculty advisor could be because the same professor was her faculty advisor when Belen was in the master's degree program at her university. Thus, the years of study within the master's degree program and now into her last year of coursework in the doctoral program helped to cement the bond with her faculty advisor.

In the same vein, Dan, a middle school assistant principal, described his relationship with his faculty advisor as "vital" for his progress in the doctoral program. He called the guidance that his advisor offered as "stretching my thinking." They both co-presented on a panel that Dan found a rewarding experience.

Milo, a middle school assistant principal, also spoke about the value of the relationship with his faculty advisor. He described the ways that she supported him in his coursework and had recently invited him to co-author a publication with her. Milo emphasized that "she is always there when I need her." This comment reflects the important role of faculty advisors in supporting and motivating doctoral students.

Another aspect of faculty advisor support for doctoral students is through academic socialization. During an assistant principal focus group with three assistant principals, Dr. Salas, an assistant principal in an elementary school, explained that her dissertation chair has “absolutely been supportive” post-degree completion. They will be publishing two book chapters together and by participating in academic conferences together.

Cohort Support

Dr. Wayne, who was an assistant principal at the time that he earned his Ph.D., made sure to mention various ways that the cohort that he was a member of helped him during his academic path. During his second interview with us, Dr. Wayne explained how the cohort helped him to create friendships and professional networks. He remarked that the benefits of the cohort model extended beyond the program as he continues to remain in contact with other members of his cohort.

Trinidad, an elementary school assistant principal, expressed that “the cohort is there to uplift you” during a focus group with three other assistant principals in the study. She explained this sentiment because the cohort model has brought her close to other school leaders in the program and they rely on each other. They began sitting together during classes and were able to extend course context into their school leadership roles by debriefing and reflecting together.

Other assistant principals in the study also referred to the value of the connections made with cohort members. Milo, who is in his last year of coursework, called his cohort members his extended family. Specifically, he said that “I couldn’t have done it without them” as he reflected on the impact that the cohort had on his academic journey. This is certainly another example of the benefits of doctoral students learning together within their respective university programs.

Likewise, another middle school assistant principal named Jack reflected “I hit on the right cohort.” He explained that he made good friendships and described the ways that his cohort of twelve Ph.D. students remained in constant communication through a group chat. He mentioned how they keep each other informed about upcoming assignments and cheer each other on when taking on new professional positions or winning awards. This showed that they care about each other, and that they respect the stages where everyone in the cohort is on their journeys.

Arely, an elementary school assistant principal who is currently in the coursework stage of her doctoral program, told us that she found a “sister” in the cohort. They bonded instantly based on similar professional backgrounds and goals. In this way, they act as support systems for each other. Meeting likeminded individuals and those with similar research interests through a cohort model enhances the value that such learning models have on doctoral students.

Programmatic Initiatives

Several of the assistant principals in the study referred to university library staff who provided assistance during literature review searches. Milo, a middle school assistant principal in his last year of coursework, called the dedicated university librarian “a lifesaver” for the time that the librarian has given to assist him. Then, Trinidad, an elementary assistant principal, also referred to the dedicated content librarian as providing invaluable assistance during her coursework. Having individuals that they could turn to for support was helpful in reducing some anxiety. This

also shows the ways that university staff can collaborate with faculty members to offer seamless resources for doctoral students.

Another supportive program that some of the assistant principals in the study mentioned were workshops dedicated to dissertation writing sponsored by their respective departments or graduate schools at their institutions. Acy, an elementary school principal who was a doctoral candidate when she participated in the study, informed us about a dissertation writing camp that her university sponsored on weekends. Andrea lives about 90 minutes away from the university, but made time to join the writing camp that other students had told her was very helpful. A few assistant principals in the study observed that most of the workshops were offered during the workday. Thus, as assistant principals, they were not able to take advantage of these opportunities given their busy schedules.

Then a few of the assistant principals described writing circles as extremely helpful in keeping them accountable with their dissertation writing. Elise, an elementary school assistant principal, mentioned how writing circles have helped her to find dedicated time for writing. Similarly, Dr. Salas who is also an elementary school assistant principal, mentioned how writing circles proved to be a supportive resource when she was writing her dissertation. Bringing students together in-person or virtually to focus on writing was a good motivator.

DISCUSSION

The three themes presented under key findings elaborated on strategies and activities that the assistant principals in the study found helpful. See Figure 1 below for a visual representation of the three themes: 1) faculty advisor; 2) cohort model; and 3) programmatic initiatives. Each of the themes reflects value-added activities to help sustain the assistant principals during their doctoral student journeys.

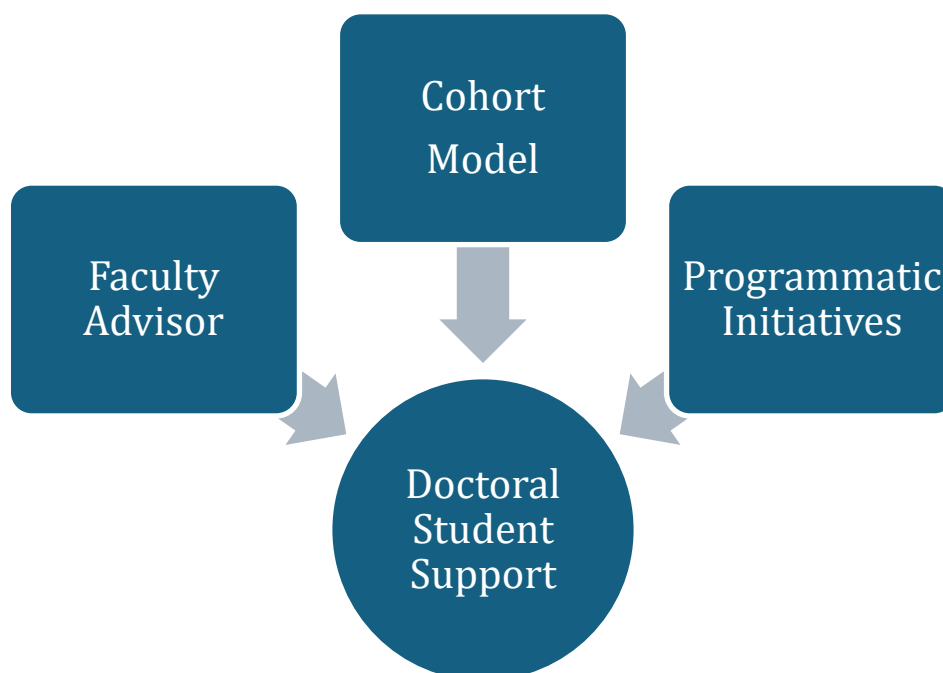


Figure 1: Sources of support for doctoral students

The findings confirmed the important role that faculty advisors serve in supporting doctoral students. All ten of the participants in the study referred effusively to the critical ways that their faculty advisors/dissertation committee chairs mentored them. The participants referred to specific examples and instances when their mentors provided emotional and academic support. It was evident from the ways that the assistant principals so caringly referred to their dissertation supervisors that the bond that unites them will continue post-graduation (Rodriguez, 2016). Faculty mentors for doctoral students provide writing support, research support, and career enhancement through activities like co-publishing manuscripts and co-presenting with students at conferences. Thus, they contribute to the academic socialization of doctoral students.

Each of the ten assistant principals in the study referred to the critical ways that members of their respective cohorts had played in helping the participants to remain in the program and to feel motivated. Cohort models emphasize ways that students find support, motivation, and encouragement with classmates in the same doctoral program. This team approach to the learning process offers students opportunities to not only take courses together, but to build professional networks. Cohorts of doctoral students provide engagement experiences that foster a community-building approach (Roberts, 2021).

A few programmatic initiatives sponsored by the participants' departments, colleges of education, and/or graduate colleges were mentioned by the participants as helpful to their growth in academic writing and dissertation preparation. A few of the participants mentioned writing circles as an important component that helped them to grow in their academic writing. Engaging in the writing process with other students (in-person or virtually) helped the doctoral students in the study to find structured time to dedicate to their writing. It was also a way to have accountability partners in the writing process.

In the following section we will offer recommendations for doctoral programs based on the aforementioned discussion of findings from the perspectives and experiences shared by ten assistant principals enrolled or recent graduates of doctoral programs. The recommendations are presented in the spirit of service for students, especially those who work full-time and are part-time doctoral students. The recommendations could also be helpful to faculty members and university staff members responsible for developing professional growth initiatives for doctoral students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

Now we get to the traditional “so what?” question. What can faculty advisors, dissertation committee members, mentors, and professors learn from the key findings presented in this study? One item that resonated across all of ten of the assistant principals in the study was the mentoring relationship with their faculty advisors and dissertation committee chairs. A recommendation is for departments to invite faculty advisors who have an extended and successful record of student completion to graduation to serve on panels and/or webinars. These faculty members could share tips and strategies with university colleagues based on how they work with doctoral students effectively, especially those who are school leaders with extremely

busy schedules like the assistant principals in this study. Likewise, the faculty members and their doctoral student mentees could all participate in an informational session where they would share the foundation of their mentor/mentee relationship and how such a relationship remains steady through the doctoral program process.

Cohort models proved very helpful to the participants in this study. Therefore, doctoral programs that currently offer a cohort model could conduct a needs assessment with their students to identify strengths and areas for growth within the cohort model to continue to sustain it as an effective tool for student motivation. Then doctoral programs who do not offer cohort models need to begin learning about ways to generate such helpful groups. They could visit (physically or virtually) with program faculty at other universities to determine the next steps for implementing their own cohort models within their doctoral programs.

Most of the assistant principals in the study affirmed helpful programmatic initiatives like writing support, library research support, and dissertation writing support. Institutions of higher education could bring together staff members from the graduate college and faculty members from various departments to conduct webinars and/or in-person workshops about topics that could help doctoral students continue to pave a path to degree completion. Given that assistant principals work during the workday, universities should plan writing activities and learning events after 5pm so that the part-time students who are full-time school leaders can participate in the trainings and webinars.

CONCLUSIONS

This article shared the voices of 10 assistant principals in doctoral programs, currently enrolled or who were recent graduates. Through individual interviews and a focus group, data was gleaned that focused on areas of support for students in doctoral programs. The discussion and recommendations sections following the presentation of findings elaborated on the myriad ways that university programs could develop or strengthen mentoring relationships between students and faculty advisors, the benefits of cohort models in doctoral education, and programmatic initiatives that serve to meet student needs in helping to get them to the next level. Approaches and actions to support doctoral students to dissertation completion were offered so that other doctoral students, especially those who are school leaders like the assistant principals in the study, could benefit from what was discussed in this article. This work could also benefit faculty advisors and those who develop programmatic initiatives to identify ways that can best support the students that they serve.

REFERENCES

- Barnett, B. G., Shoho, A. R., & Oleszewski, A. M. (2012). The job realities of beginning and experienced assistant principals. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 11*(1), 92–128.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2011.611924>
- Barnett, B. G., Shoho, A. R., & Okilwa, N. S. A. (2017). Assistant principals' perceptions of meaningful mentoring and professional development opportunities. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 6*(4), 285–301.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-02-2017-0013>

- Bartanen, B., Rogers, L. K., & Woo, D. S. (2021). Assistant principal mobility and its relationship with principal turnover. *Educational Researcher*, 50(6), 368–380. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X21993105>
- Jackman, P. C., Slater, M. J., Carter, E. E., Sisson, K., & Bird, M. D. (2023). Social support, social identification, mental wellbeing, and psychological distress in doctoral students: A person-centered analysis. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47(1), 45-58.
- Leland, A. S., Firestone, W. A., Perry, J. A., & McKeon, R. T. (2020). Examining cohort models in the education doctorate. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 11(3), 249-262.
- Moyer, A., & Goldring, E. (2023). Match or mismatch? Assistant principals' roles and their perceptions of the evaluation system. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 59(1), 40–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X221137047>
- Oleszewski, A., Shoho, A., & Barnett, B. (2012). The development of assistant principals: A literature review. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 50(3), 264–286. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231211223301>
- Peters, G. B., Gurley, D. K., Fifolt, M., Collins, L., & McNeese, R. (2016). Assistant principals' perceptions regarding the role and the effectiveness of an educational leadership program. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 5(1), 183.
- Roberts, L. (2021). “This is just what we do”: PhD students on becoming scholars in a community of practice. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 15(1), 75-94.
- Rodríguez, M. A. (2016). *Con todo mi corazón*: Mentoring Latinas in educational leadership doctoral programs. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal*, 10(3), 30-46.
- Rodríguez, M. A. (2024). Mentoring doctoral students to thrive. In B. Kutsyuruba & F. Kochan (Eds.), *Mentoring for wellbeing in higher education*. Information Age Publishing.
- Santa-Ramirez, S. (2022). Sink or swim: The mentoring experiences of Latinx PhD students with faculty of color. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 15(1), 124-134.
- Singe, S.M., Sheldon, L.N., Rynkiewicz, K.M., Manning, C.N., Filep, E.M., Zuk, E.F., & Hargrave, C. (2021). Mentorship experiences of doctoral students: Understanding desired attributes of doctoral student mentors. *Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences and Practice*.
- Smith, R. A., Gowen, G. H., Perez, R. J., Tipton, J. A., Ogilvie, C. A., & Brooks, T. R. (2024). Is it any better? A comparison of PhD students' experiences and degree completion plans between the summers of 2020 and 2021. *AERA Open*, 10(1), 1-18.
- Sverdik, A., Hall, N. C., McAlpine, L., & Hubbard, K. (2018). The PhD experience: A review of the factors influencing doctoral students' completion, achievement, and well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13, 361-388.
- Wollast, R., Aelenei, C., Chevalère, J., Van der Linden, N., Galand, B., Azzi, A., Frenay, M., & Klein, O. (2023). Facing the dropout crisis among PhD candidates: The role of supervisor support in emotional well-being and intended doctoral persistence among men and women. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(6), 813-828.

ONLINE DOCTORAL PERSISTENCE: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DISSERTATION SUCCESS FACTORS

Jennifer Teal
Texas State University

Kaye Shelton
Lamar University

Kelly Brown
Texas A&M Corpus Christi

Abstract

This phenomenological study sought to identify success factors for online EdD doctoral students that may improve student satisfaction, retention, and successful dissertation completion. This study explored students' experiences and perceptions of factors that contribute to the successful completion of a dissertation in an online professional doctoral degree program in the United States. Study participants included a purposeful sample of 11 students who previously completed online EdD degree programs representing two public and six private universities. Overall, findings suggest there are factors contributing to the successful completion of an online EdD program, such as relationships with the dissertation chair and fellow students, support systems, time management, and a balance between school and life events. By recognizing the challenges online EdD students face and identifying best practices that can help students overcome such challenges, online doctoral program administrators can foster learning environments that promote positive student-faculty and student-student relationships aimed at helping doctoral students overcome common obstacles faced during the dissertation phase.

Keywords: educational leadership, distance education, doctoral dissertation, EdD, online learning, professional practice doctorate, online student attrition, online student perceptions

Online learning has increased in popularity, continued to grow, and is now commonplace in higher education (Burrus et al., 2019; NCES, 2024; Palvia et al., 2018; Shard et al., 2024), due in part to the increased use of emerging technology (Mehta et al., 2017), the Covid Pandemic (Garrett et al., 2022) and its usefulness and perceived ease of use (Shard et al., 2024). Programs now being offered fully online include doctoral programs where students are not required to come to campus. However, attrition rates among doctoral students in both face-to-face and online have remained a concern (Berry, 2017; Breitenbach, 2019; Fiore et al., 2019; Lake et al., 2018; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021; Young et al., 2019). In fact, Craft et al. (2016) approximated that almost half of all enrolled doctoral students in American programs do not finish their degree while Baltes and Brown (2018) observed 40% of online doctoral students did not complete the dissertation or capstone project.

Because doctoral programs have been offered online for just a little more than two decades and the continued concern for student attrition, more research is needed to support online doctoral students in professional doctoral programs, e.g., Doctor of Education (EdD) (Ames et al., 2018). In addition, according to Deshpande (2016) and Akojie et al. (2019), further research is needed to examine obstacles to degree completion online professional doctoral students face. Similarly, Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014b) noted a gap in qualitative research related to doctoral persistence. To address these calls for research, this study was designed to explore students' experiences and perceptions of factors that contribute to the successful completion of a dissertation in an online EdD program in the United States. Recommendations are made to assist online doctoral program administrators with supporting student and faculty dissertation chair success through the online dissertation process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online learning in higher education continues to increase (Moloney & Oakley, 2019; NCES, 2024; Olesova, 2023). In fact, Allen and Seaman (2016, 2017) recognized the significance of this in the face of an overall decline in higher education enrollment over the past few years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, data indicated nearly 30% of higher education students were taking at least one distance education course (Allen & Seaman, 2017). After the COVID-19 pandemic, more students than ever enrolled online with the growth continuing still. The NCES Trends Report (2024) showed in Fall 2024, 53.8% of all college students were taking online classes. Overall, more than 7 million college students completed all of their coursework through distance education in the fall of 2024 (NCES, 2024).

Student Attrition

Attrition rates among doctoral students are concerning (Ames et al., 2018; Berry, 2017; Craft et al., 2016; Deshpande, 2016; Nuuyoma & Sing, 2025; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014a; Santicola, 2013). Factors influencing attrition include financial burden, family obligations, feelings of isolation, personality, and motivational factors (Santicola, 2013). Additionally, Berry (2017) and Melián et al. (2023) recognized online doctoral students were at a high risk of attrition as a result of not having social connections with both fellow students and faculty, while Dzubinski and Sanchez (2022) found doctoral students valued the socialization process into higher education. Research conducted by Su and Waugh (2018) concluded with a recommendation to ensure prospective students are given realistic expectations of the time commitment and level of effort necessary to succeed in an online program.

Challenges to Online Learning

According to Clinefelter and Aslanian (2015), online programs reflect a diverse student population as well as learning preferences, which are at times contradictory. A review of the literature identified many challenges as factors that can contribute to online students' success or failure such as feelings of isolation (Ames et al., 2018; Berry, 2017; Brill et al., 2014; Erichsen et al., 2014), competing priorities (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Brill et al., 2014; Su & Waugh, 2018; Thompson et al., 2013), and social presence (Berry, 2017; Lambert & Fisher, 2013; Tekiner Tolu, 2013). Furthermore, Thompson et al. (2013) determined students' self-regulation was a major factor in whether or not they succeeded, while Lambert and Fisher (2013) suggested

further research to determine whether technical skill proficiency impacts collaboration, communication, and an overall sense of community in distance education courses.

Factors Influencing Success and Persistence

Research has also shown factors that may influence online students' success include grit (Cross, 2014; Kebritchi et al., 2023), student engagement (Benedetti, 2015; Berry, 2017; Britt, 2015; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Thompson et al., 2013; Underdown & Martin, 2016), fostering a sense of community (Berry, 2017, 2019; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021), differences in student learning styles (Benedetti, 2015), commitment and discipline (Santicola, 2013), mentoring (Bartlett & Bartlett II, 2021; Black, 2017; Brill et al., 2014, Mullen, 2021), and students' perceived sense of connectedness (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014a). Research by Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) concluded one of the greatest factors influencing degree completion was financial aid and more specifically research assistantships.

Similarly, many factors contribute to student attrition or persistence in distance education. Kauffman (2015) described the successful online student as possessing characteristics such as self-motivation and self-regulation, and also noted variances in learning styles recognizing not every student is well equipped for online learning. After conducting a thorough review of the literature, the following were identified as contributors to student success in online learning: instructional design (Mehta et al., 2017), student engagement (Benedetti, 2015; Berry, 2017; Britt, 2015; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Thompson et al., 2013; Underdown & Martin, 2016), building a sense of community (Berry, 2017, 2019; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021), adapting a cohort model (Berry, 2017; Provident et al., 2015; Santicola, 2013), connectedness (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014a), student grit (Cross, 2014; Kebritchi et al., 2023), self-regulation (Gomez, 2013; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016; Thompson et al., 2013), supervision and collaboration (Augustsson & Jaldemark, 2014; Brill et al., 2014), and authentic learning experiences (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Britt, 2015; Holzweiss et al., 2014).

Measures of Student Success

Earning a doctoral degree is an immense achievement, as a doctoral degree is the highest postgraduate academic degree culminating in original research and a dissertation defense; however, it is difficult to predict who will succeed in a doctoral program. While Cross (2014) used student GPA as a predictor of success, Gomez (2013) indicated student GPA from their Master's program had no bearing on their ability to persevere in a doctoral program. Research conducted by Gomez (2013) identified another potential method of predicting student success and concluded a concept referred to as Modeling the Way was the best predictor of perseverance and successful online doctoral leadership program completion. Once all required coursework has been completed, the final culminating step for a doctoral student is writing and defending a dissertation, the final measure of success for doctoral students, which merits investigation of factors impacting completion. This study explored students' experiences and perceptions of factors that contribute to the successful completion of a dissertation in an online professional doctoral degree program in the United States.

METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study focused on online EdD doctoral students' experiences with

dissertation completion. Creswell (2013) described a phenomenological study as one that, “describes the common meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 76), while van Manen (2016) reiterated the main purpose was to, “explore examples and varieties of lived experiences, especially in the form of anecdotes, narratives, stories, and other lived experience accounts” (pp. 312-313). A phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the phenomenon students experienced and perceptions of factors that contribute to the successful completion of a dissertation in an online professional doctoral degree program.

Through one-on-one interviews, participants shared insights into their experiences, including thoughts, feelings, lived experiences, and perceptions of the dissertation process. Participants described their successes and challenges, as well as specific factors that helped or hindered completing their final dissertation. The complexities of factors presenting challenges and influencing success could only be evaluated through individuals who had encountered them.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify success factors for online EdD doctoral students that may lead to improved student satisfaction, retention, and successful dissertation completion. The following questions guided the study:

RQ 1: What factors do students believe contribute to the successful completion of an online doctoral degree?

RQ 2: What common challenges do online doctoral students face with dissertations?

RQ 3: How do students perceive the value of the student and chair/advisor relationship?

RQ 4: What practices of the dissertation chair/advisor do students believe were most helpful?

RQ 5: How do students believe student-faculty interactions affect dissertation completion in online doctoral programs?

Setting

The setting for this study included eight universities (two public and six private) located throughout the United States. The population for this study targeted online doctoral degree students who completed online professional practice doctoral (EdD) programs throughout the United States. For the study, one-on-one interviews were conducted via WebEx online video conferencing software with individual participants who previously completed various online EdD degree programs. All research participants were assigned pseudonyms and the findings and emerging themes are discussed using those pseudonyms.

Participants

The study utilized a purposeful sample of 11 students who previously completed online EdD degree programs. Inclusion criteria were (a) 18 years of age or older, and (b) completion of an online EdD degree program in the United States. Purposeful sampling allowed the intentional selection of participants who had experienced and could provide a detailed understanding of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2015). The goal of purposeful sampling was to gain examples of experientially rich descriptions of the central phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). Additional participants were invited based on snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013).

Study participants included one male and 10 females who completed online EdD programs at

eight different universities around the United States, both public and private universities. Study participants ranged in age from 28-70 years old at the time of graduation. Seven participants were married and four were single, and five participants had minor children at home during their doctoral program.

Data Collection and Treatment of the Data

Data collection methods followed Creswell's (2013) recommendations for phenomenological studies, which included utilizing interview protocols containing questions designed to seek detailed descriptions of experiences, to reflect on meaning and perspectives, and to identify common themes (Moustakas, 1994). All interviews were recorded using WebEx online web conferencing software to preserve the discussions, allowing reference back to the recordings frequently during the transcription process and as data were analyzed. Data were collected using interview protocols. Participants were asked open-ended questions during interviews, prompting participants to describe their experiences with an online doctoral degree program, their dissertation chair, and factors contributing to the success of dissertation completion.

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to analyze narrative descriptions of personal experiences, develop a list of significant statements, group the statements into themes, and provide a written description of the findings. Data analysis followed recommended protocols by Creswell (2013) to identify the essence of what participants experienced (textural description) and how they experienced it (structural description). Significant statements and emerging themes (clusters of meaning) were documented to describe what the participants experienced.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Analysis of the data collected from the 11 participants revealed three overarching themes: (1) the dissertation chair relationship, (2) structural and community factors, and (3) navigating the dissertation.

Theme One: Dissertation Chair Relationship

Research question one centered on the dissertation student and chair relationship. Analysis of the data revealed all study participants valued the relationship they developed with their chair. Although some participants had been assigned more than one chair during their doctoral program, it became evident finding the right match was instrumental to study participants' success. The three subthemes that emerged were gratitude and appreciation, they make or break you, and a lasting bond. Study participants described their chair as their champion, their cheerleader, and even their Oracle. Many of the study participants reflected positively on the relationship with their dissertation chair and in some cases attributed their overall success to that relationship.

Several research participants expressed gratitude toward the value of the relationship with their dissertation chair and the critical role the chair played in their success. One participant noted, "I owe a debt of gratitude for the guidance that he provided because it was instrumental to my success." Another described the relational stakes directly: "That relationship piece that your adviser gives you really makes or breaks your experience in a doctoral program." For some, the bond formed with their chair carried deep emotional weight: "I just started crying because of the impact that he had on my success and helped me to make sure that he believed in me therefore, I

knew I could achieve my goal in life.”

In terms of facilitating dissertation completion identified by research question three, study participants described their appreciation of their respective chairs for keeping them on track, managing expectations, and providing guidance and resources. Many participants described how helpful their chair was in managing expectations of their study, timelines, and the technical aspects of the dissertation such as formatting and overall study design. One participant captured the importance of managing scope: “Making sure that we understood that this was a part of the process to get you finished, not that we are trying to cure cancer with this.” Another described the value of timely follow-up: “Constant follow-ups that he had with us via email and making sure that we’re following the dates. That’s what helped me to be successful.” Chairs also provided helpful guidance on the work itself: “Guidance in constructing my dissertation because there were times when I took a first stab at composing a section and I was way off base.” Beyond the technical, moral support also emerged as a valued practice: “Sometimes he would reach out, you know, through email, whatever, or text, just to say, hey, how’s everything going.”

Research participants expressed both positive and negative impacts faculty interactions had on their degree completion. Timeliness and responsiveness were seen as both positive and negative. Some participants reflected frustration with the amount of time it took for responses from their chair, while others indicated their chair was readily available and provided timely, constructive feedback. One participant reflected, “I definitely think we could have had a greater level of interaction. I think it could be much greater, I think it would have improved my work, and it would have lessened her work, had we interacted a little more.” Some participants who did not receive timely feedback felt their chairs had too many dissertation students assigned to them. One participant offered a vivid contrast, comparing an effective chair to a familiar cultural reference: “I’ve compared him to the Oracle, the one that told Neo what he needed to hear, not always what he wanted to hear, but what he needed to hear in order to succeed. My chair was my Oracle.”

Theme Two: Structural and Community Factors

Research question four examined students’ perceptions of factors contributing to the successful completion of an online doctoral degree. The research revealed four emerging themes: program structure, support systems, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and commitment and determination.

Program structure emerged as a significant contributing factor. As one participant reflected, “The flexibility of being able to take the classes when I had time for them was tremendous, made all the difference in the world. That flexibility is just, I don’t think I could have dealt with it if I’d have gone through a brick-and-mortar school.” Several participants recognized their cohort members as a key component to their success: “My fellow classmates were absolutely fantastic. We were able, like, emotional support, through that process.”

Several intrinsic motivating factors emerged throughout the interviews, including passion and the desire to achieve a personal goal. As one participant shared, “Intrinsic motivation really kind of helped me when I was feeling like, is this ever going to end?” Some participants also described external factors such as promotion potential and the financial impact of not finishing on time.

Personal characteristics such as tenacity, self-discipline, persistence, dedication, and commitment emerged as success factors contributing to the successful completion of an online doctoral program. One participant captured this directly: “It actually takes a great deal of discipline to be able to complete an online program because you’re pretty much left to your own devices.”

Theme Three: Navigating the Dissertation

Research question two examined practices of the dissertation chair students perceived to be most helpful to their success. Many participants described how helpful their chair was in terms of managing expectations like the scope of their study, timelines, and the technical aspects of the dissertation such as formatting and overall study design. In terms of facilitating the completion of the dissertation, study participants described their appreciation of their respective chairs for keeping them on track, managing expectations, and providing moral support.

Research question five explored common challenges online doctoral students faced with dissertation completion. Six subthemes were identified: challenges with dissertation chair and committee members, managing the scope, the mechanics of the dissertation, feelings of isolation, time management, and balancing life. Findings from research question one indicated the relationship with a dissertation chair has the ability to help or hinder a student’s success. When there are challenges with the chair or committee members, this leads to frustration and in some cases impacts the student’s ability to complete their dissertation. More than half of the study participants discussed the challenge of having to switch chairs during their doctoral programs. One participant noted, “My chair was an issue because she wasn’t giving me good feedback, and she wasn’t giving me timely feedback.”

Managing the scope and format of the dissertation presented another obstacle: “Trying to figure out the exact topic that was interesting enough, but also narrow enough, to where I know I could get finished.” The mechanics of the dissertation itself also posed challenges: “You can look at a thousand other dissertations and still not know how you want to produce your own.” Another participant remarked how their chair helped as they struggled with, “narrowing the scope as I was writing, and not trying to save the world, as my chair would say.”

As in the dissertation advisor relation, feelings of isolation also emerged as a significant challenge, particularly as students transitioned from coursework to the dissertation phase. As one participant described, “When I started writing a dissertation, again it was kind of like you’re on a lone island because I had finished the coursework and I didn’t communicate with my classmates.”

Time management and balancing life emerged as interconnected challenges. One participant described the constant negotiation: “The challenge was, how do you balance full-time work, the class that you’re in at the moment, and still finding time to write your dissertation.” Another reflected on the personal cost: “Anyone beyond my immediate family did not get any of my time for that year because I simply didn’t have the resource of time to give.”

Study participants expressed both positive and negative impacts faculty had on their degree completion. Again, as in the dissertation advisor relationship, responsiveness was seen as both

positive and negative impacts. Some participants reflected frustration with the amount of time it took for responses from their chair, while others indicated their chair was readily available and provided timely, constructive feedback. Some of the participants who did not receive timely feedback felt their chairs had too many dissertation students assigned to them.

DISCUSSION

The three themes that emerged from this study, the dissertation chair relationship, structural and community factors, and navigating the dissertation, are not isolated factors but interdependent forces that collectively shape doctoral student success. When the chair relationship falters, feelings of isolation intensify; when program structure fails to build community, students are left without the scaffolding needed to manage competing life demands. Understanding these connections, rather than treating each factor independently, is essential for designing programs that genuinely support doctoral completion.

Theme One: The Dissertation Chair Relationship as a Foundation for Success

Research has shown supervision and collaboration contribute to student success in online learning (Augustsson & Jaldemark, 2014; Brill et al., 2014). Similarly, research has indicated mentoring is important in online learning (Black, 2017; Brill et al., 2014) and is critical to the success of doctoral students (Brill et al., 2014; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2015; Melián et al., 2023; Mullen, 2021). In addition, the relationship between the student and their dissertation chair/advisor is noted throughout the literature as an influence on completing the doctoral degree (Craft et al., 2016; Melián et al., 2023). Although Erichsen et al. (2014) noted challenges exist with supervising online doctoral students, they recognized most participants found value in receiving encouragement and support from their chair. According to findings by Akojie et al. (2019), Craft et al. (2016), Friesen et al. (2022) and Lively et al. (2021), relationships between students and their dissertation chair are a critical element in completing a doctoral degree.

Because of the more unstructured nature of the dissertation process in comparison to previous coursework, participants described their chairs as instrumental in helping them stay on track while navigating the dissertation process, and in helping them manage expectations. Additionally, chairs provided helpful guidance and resources to the doctoral students and offered moral support. Similarly, research by Erichsen et al. (2014) found helpful practices identified by their study participants included:

Timely, effective, and proactive communication on the part of the supervisor; outlining the process and a timeline with accountability measures; clarification of roles in the supervision relationship; critical questioning and probing; clear, substantive, and timely feedback; goal setting; providing encouragement, praise, and support; and providing examples and clear guidelines for the research process (p. 331).

Although students reported satisfaction with supervision, Erichsen et al. (2014) and Fiore et al. (2019) concluded there was room for additional improvement considering many students also reported feelings of isolation. More recently, Rost and Krahenbuhl (2023) found “helping shift online graduate students towards a sense of belonging is something that can make a notable difference in their experience and in their ultimate success” (p. 47).

Considering research by Clinefelter and Aslanian (2015) reported, nearly 30% of online students were concerned with their ability to remain focused and motivated. Many researchers identified student engagement as one of the main success factors for online students (Benedetti, 2015; Berry, 2017; Britt, 2015; Radda & Mandernach, 2012; Thompson et al., 2013; Underdown & Martin, 2016), while Berry (2017) suggested there is a connection between student engagement and a sense of community. Additionally, Lowery et al. (2018) found mentor-to-mentee communications can foster a sense of connectedness. It must be noted, according to the CPED (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate)(n.d.), mentoring and advising is one of the key elements of program design for the professional doctorate in education, however mentoring and advising should be guided by principles of equity and justice, mutual respect, dynamic learning, flexibility, intellectual space, supportive and safe learning environments, cohort and individual attention, rigorous practices, and integration.

Theme Two: Structural and Community Factors

Research has shown doctoral students experienced feelings of anxiety and depression as well as feeling alone and disconnected (Berry, 2017). Several of the participants in this study recognized their cohort members as a key component to their success, which was recognized as factors influencing success in studies by Berry (2017) and Santicola (2013). Research findings suggest feeling connected with fellow students and the instructor is one of the key elements of creating a successful learning atmosphere. In the present study, several participants reflected on the importance of support from cohort members as being important to their success. This finding coincides with research that found cohort models foster a sense of community (Berry, 2017, 2019; Kumar et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014b) and can contribute to the success of doctoral students (Brill et al., 2014).

In addition, Berry (2017) recognized online doctoral students to be at a high risk of attrition as a result of not having social connections with both fellow students and faculty, while Lambert and Fisher (2013) contended building a sense of community in online education could improve student retention and engagement. Managing roles and expectations of both the doctoral student and the advisor can help foster relationships potentially leading to positive impacts on the overall doctoral experience (Craft et al., 2016; Lively et al., 2021).

Regarding intrinsic motivations noted by participants, Kauffman (2015) described the successful online student as possessing characteristics such as self-motivation and self-regulation. Similarly, Thompson et al. (2013) determined students' self-regulation was a major factor in whether or not they succeeded. These characteristics are similar to what Duckworth et al. (2007) described as grit, or "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087). Furthermore, according to McClendon et al. (2017), "gritty learners persevere in spite of obstacles, determined to succeed no matter the hurdle" (p. 12).

Theme Three: Navigating the Dissertation

Completion of a dissertation is a challenging yet rewarding endeavor (Burkard et al., 2014; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2015). Craft et al. (2016) identified constraints with allowing students to either select or change chairs as needed and found there was more emphasis on holding doctoral students accountable than holding the faculty advisors accountable. Research

shows encouraging students to select dissertation topics that hold their interest and provide intrinsic value to them, which in turn would promote self-regulated learning (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2015).

Feelings of isolation were among the most consistently reported challenges, particularly as students transitioned from coursework to the dissertation phase (Ames et al., 2018; Berry, 2017; Brill et al., 2014; Erichsen et al., 2014). In addition, managing competing priorities (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Brill et al., 2014; Su & Waugh, 2018; Thompson et al., 2013), and social presence (Berry, 2017; Lambert & Fisher, 2013; Tekiner Tolu, 2013) present obstacles for dissertation completion. In fact, a systematic review of the online doctoral experience found that isolation, juggling work and family roles, and financial pressures are the main challenges facing online doctoral students, and that pursuing a doctorate online is more isolating than in face-to-face programs, with students encountering additional challenges around supervision and study-life balance (Melián et al., 2023).

The mechanics of writing the dissertation with guidance from the advisor was also noted. This is supported by the literature as a systematic review of doctoral dissertation writing covering 2000–2024 identified supervisor-student communication and research skill development as central concerns across institutions, suggesting that struggles with scope and mechanics are not individual problems but reflect the need for more structured disciplinary writing support built into program design (Dardour & Bouyahya, 2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS

By recognizing challenges online EdD students face and identifying best practices that can help students overcome such challenges, program administrators can effectively foster learning environments that promote positive student-faculty and student-student relationships aimed at helping doctoral students overcome common obstacles faced during the dissertation phase. For many, this begins with the dissertation chair and the critical role they play in a student's success. Online doctoral program administrators must strive to facilitate mutually beneficial relationships and take care to ensure chairs have adequate time and are committed to helping students succeed through the dissertation process.

While much of the research focuses on the relationship between the dissertation chair and the doctoral student, program administration and resources can also support student success by providing resources, training, and guidelines for success. For example, creating clear processes for selecting/matching and/or changing dissertation chairs/advisors are recommended (Roumell & Bolliger, 2017). The literature also suggests developing guidelines that outline clear expectations for both the doctoral students and chairs to adhere to during the dissertation phase, including timely feedback (Burrington et al., 2022; Craft et al., 2016; Erichsen et al., 2014; Lively et al., 2021) and frequent communication (Akojie et al., 2019; Burrington et al., 2022; Byrnes et al., 2019). In addition, Russell (2021) suggested templates for dissertation writing and data collection should be provided.

Additional recommendation center on the dissertation faculty advisor. Many researchers suggest providing models and best practices for mentoring online doctoral students, exploring

opportunities for co-mentoring and student alumni mentors (Byrnes et al., 2019; Melián et al., 2023; Pollard & Kumar, 2021; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017), and providing faculty advisor training (Frazer et al. 2017; Pollard & Kumar, 2021; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017). Program administrators should ensure faculty taking on the role of dissertation chair have adequate time and resources to mentor their doctoral students effectively (Erichsen et al., 2014). In addition, providing scheduled opportunities for student engagement with faculty and fellow students can create and foster a sense of community (Britt et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014b).

Finally, providing multiple methods or communication channel (Crosta et al., 2018) and encouraging students to use social media channels like WhatsApp or GroupMe to facilitate students connecting to peers can help with feelings of isolation (Akojie et al., 2019; Crosta et al., 2018). Assisting students with managing expectations and creating a positive dissertation experience can potentially decrease student attrition and foster rewarding, lasting relationships between doctoral students and their chair/advisor while supporting overall student success.

Recommendations for Future Research

More research is needed in the area specific to online doctoral students and success during the dissertation phase. While this study focused specifically on online students' perceptions of dissertation success factors, there is an opportunity for additional research to look more closely at the process of assigning students with a dissertation chair. Since the relationship between the online doctoral student and chair was found to have both positive and negative impacts on dissertation completion, how to facilitate a relationship that is productive and rewarding for both student and chair warrants further investigation. Additional research should be conducted in the area of managing communication and expectations during the dissertation process, exploring effective strategies used by online faculty advisors to support doctoral students with dissertations, and further investigating best practices for helping doctoral students overcome common obstacles faced during the dissertation phase. Future research should explore how programs structure communication and expectations throughout the dissertation phase. A deeper understanding of these mechanisms will further equip institutions to reduce attrition, support doctoral completion, and strengthen the overall integrity of online doctoral education.

CONCLUSION

This study centered the voices of EdD students who successfully navigated one of the most demanding phases of doctoral education, and in doing so, revealed consistent findings that: completion is rarely the product of individual effort alone. Rather, it emerges from an ecosystem of relational, structural, and personal factors that must work in concert. The dissertation chair is not merely an academic supervisor but often a cornerstone keeping students connected to the program during its most isolating phase. Program structure and community, particularly the cohort model, serve as the connection that sustains motivation when intrinsic drive wavers. While students must bring considerable self-discipline and resilience, they cannot be expected to compensate for institutional gaps in support.

These findings carry a direct charge for program administrators: intentional design is not optional. Matching students with well-prepared, adequately resourced chairs, building structured

opportunities for peer connection, and establishing clear expectations for communication throughout the dissertation phase are not just enhancements, they are foundational. Online doctoral programs that treat these elements as secondary risk losing students not because they lacked ability, but because the environment failed them. Closing that gap is both an institutional responsibility and an imperative.

REFERENCES

- Akojie, P., Entrekin, F., Bacon, D., & Kanai, T. (2019). Qualitative meta-data analysis: Perceptions and experiences of online doctoral students. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, June 2019 3(1), 117-135. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/5814>
- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2016). *Online report card: Tracking online education in the United States*. Retrieved from Babson Survey Research Group website: <http://www.babson.edu/Academics/centers/blank-center/global-research/Pages/babson-survey-research-group.aspx>
- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2017). *Digital compass learning: Distance education enrollment report 2017*. Babson Survey Research Group, e-Literate, and WCET. Retrieved from <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org>
- Ames, C., Berman, R., & Casteel, A. (2018). A preliminary examination of doctoral student retention factors in private online workspaces. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13, 79-107. <https://doi.org/10.28945/3958>
- Ampaw, F. D., & Jaeger, A. J. (2012). Completing the three stages of doctoral education: An event history analysis. *Research in Higher Education*, 53(6), 640-660. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-011-9250-3>
- Augustsson, G., & Jaldemark, J. (2014). Online supervision: A theory of supervisors' strategic communicative influence on student dissertations. *Higher Education*, 67(1), 19-33. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9638-4>
- Baltes, B., & Brown, M. (2018). Impact of additional early feedback on doctoral capstone proposal approval. *International Journal of Online Graduate Education*, 1(2), 2-11. <https://ijoge.org/index.php/IJOGE/article/view/21>
- Bartlett, M. E., & Bartlett II, J. E. (2021). Online doctoral students' viewpoints on faculty dissertation mentoring. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administrators*, 28(1). Available: <https://ojdla.com/articles/online-doctoral-students-viewpoints-on-faculty-dissertation-mentoring>
- Benedetti, C. (2015). Online instructors as thinking advisors: A model for online learner adaptation. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 12(3), 171-176. <https://doi.org/10.19030/tlc.v12i3.9308>
- Berry, S. (2017). Student support networks in online doctoral programs: Exploring nested communities. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 12, 33-48. Retrieved from <https://www.informingscience.org/Publications/3676>
- Berry, S. (2019). Teaching to connect: Community-building strategies for the virtual classroom. *Online Learning*, 23(1), 164-183. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i1.1425>
- Black, R. (2017). E-mentoring the online doctoral student from the dissertation prospectus through dissertation completion. *Journal of Learning in Higher Education*, 13(1), 1-8. Retrieved from <http://jwpress.com/JLHE/JLHE.htm>
- Boton, E. C., & Gregory, S. (2015). Minimizing attrition in online degree courses. *Journal of*

- Educators Online*, 12(1), 62-90. Retrieved from <http://www.thejeo.com>
- Brill, J. L., Balcanoff, K. K., Land, D., Gogarty, M., & Turner, F. (2014). Best practices in doctoral retention: Mentoring. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 4(2), 26-37. <https://doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v2i2.66>
- Breitenbach, E. (2019). Evaluating a model to increase doctorate program completion rates: A focus on social connectedness and structure. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 14, 217–236. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.113824>
- Britt, D. M. (2015). How to better engage online students with online strategies. *College Student Journal*, 49(3), 399-404. Retrieved from <http://www.projectinnovation.com/college-student-journal.html>
- Burkard, A. W., Knox, S., DeWalt, T., Fuller, S., Hill, C., & Schlosser, L. Z. (2014). Dissertation experiences of doctoral graduates from professional psychology programs. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 27(1), 19-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2013.821596>
- Burrington, D., Madison, R. D., Schmitt, A., & Howell, D. (2022). Student perspectives on dissertation chairs' mentoring practices in an online practitioner doctoral program. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 25(4). <https://ojdla.com/articles/student-perspectives-on-dissertation-chairs-mentoring-practices-in-an-online-practitioner-doctoral-program>
- Burrus, S. W. M., Fiore, T. D., Shaw, M. E., & Stein, I. F. (2019). Predictors of online doctoral student success: A quantitative study. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 22(4), 61-66. <https://www.westga.edu/~distance/dla/pdf/2019-dla-proceedings.pdf#page=61>
- Byrnes, D., Uribe-Flórez, L. J., Trespalacios, J., & Chilson, J. (2019). Doctoral e-mentoring: Current practices and effective strategies. *Online Learning*, 23(1), 236-248. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i1.1446>
- Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED]. (n.d.). *The framework*. Retrieved from <https://www.cpedinitiative.org/page/framework>
- Clinefelter, D. L., & Aslanian, C. B. (2015). *Online college students 2015: Comprehensive data on demands and preferences*. The Learning House, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.learninghouse.com/ocs2015-report/>
- Craft, C. M., Augustine-Shaw, D., Fairbanks, A., & Adams-Wright, G. (2016). Advising doctoral students in education programs. *NACADA Journal*, 36(1), 54-65. <https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-15-013>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches (Third edition)*. Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (Fifth ed.). Pearson Education, Inc.
- Cross, T. M. (2014). The gritty: Grit and non-traditional doctoral student success. *Journal of Educators Online*, 11(3). <http://www.thejeo.com>
- Crosta, L., Edwards, A., Wang, R., Reis-Jorge, J., & Mudaliar, M. (2018). How international online students from a professional doctorate in education are using social media and artificial intelligence tools into the thesis stage? *Proceedings of EduLearn78 Conference 2078*, (pp. 1461-1469), Palma, Mallorca, Spain. <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3178520/1/Full%20paper%20EDULEARN%202018%20conference%20proceedings%20July%202018.pdf>
- Dardour, M., & Bouyahya, D.(2025). Doctoral dissertation writing: A systematic review of

- challenges, characteristics, and scholarly processes. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 7, 391-401. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i5.2367>
- Deshpande, A. (2016). A qualitative examination of challenges influencing doctoral students in an online doctoral program. *International Education Studies*, 9(6), 139-149. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v9n6p139>
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087–1101. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087>
- Dzubinski, L. M., & Sanchez, J. N. (2022). Newly minted: How recent doctoral graduates perceive their relationship with their supervisor. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 16(4), 275–291. https://drive.google.com/file/d/14dpL1sKzh_HW1NZ7vzFqh7VhHE2s0Ji3/view
- Erichsen, E. A., Bolliger, D. U., & Halupa, C. (2014). Student satisfaction with graduate supervision in doctoral programs primarily delivered in distance education settings. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(2), 321-338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.709496>
- Fiore, T. D., Heitner, K. L., & Shaw, M. (2019). Academic advising and online doctoral student persistence from coursework to independent research. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 22(3). https://ojdla.com/archive/fall223/fiore_heitner_shaw223.pdf
- Frazer, C., Sullivan, D. H., Weatherspoon, D., & Hussey, L. (2017). Faculty perceptions of online teaching effectiveness and indicators of quality. *Nursing Research and Practice*, 2017. <https://doi-org/10.1155/2017/9374189>
- Friesen, S., Becker, S., & Jacobsen, M. (2022). Online doctoral student-supervisory relationships: Exploring relational trust. In Jacobsen, M. & Smith, C. (Eds.) *Online learning and teaching from Kindergarten to Graduate School* (pp. 282-306). Canadian Association for Teacher Education. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11575/PRISM/40509>
- Garrett, R., Simunich, B., Legon, R., & Fredericksen, E. E. (2022). *CHLOE 7: Tracking online learning from mainstream acceptance to universal adoption, The changing landscape of online education, 2022*. <https://www.qualitymatters.org/qa-resources/resourcecenter/articles-resources/CHLOE-project>
- Gomez, D. (2013). Leadership behavior and its impact on student success and retention in online graduate education. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 17(2), 13-37. <http://www.abacademies.org/journals/academy-of-educational-leadership-journal-home.html>
- Holzweiss, P. C., Joyner, S. A., Fuller, M. B., Henderson, S., & Young, R. (2014). Online graduate students' perceptions of best learning experiences. *Distance Education*, 35(3), 311–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2015.955262>
- Kauffman, H. (2015). A review of predictive factors of student success in and satisfaction with online learning. *Research in Learning Technology*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.3402/rlt.v23.26507>
- Kebritchi, M., Rominger, R., & McCaslin, M. (2023). Contributing factors for success of nontraditional students at online doctoral programs. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251231155488>
- Kelley, M., & Salisbury-Glennon, J. (2016). The role of self-regulation in doctoral students'

- status of all but dissertation (ABD). *Innovative Higher Education*, 41(1), 87–100.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-015-9336-5>
- Kumar, S., & Antonenko, P. (2014). Connecting practice, theory and method: Supporting professional doctoral students in developing conceptual frameworks. *Techtrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning*, 58(4), 54-61. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-014-0769-y>
- Kumar, S., Dawson, K., Black, E. W., Cavanaugh, C., & Sessums, C. D. (2011). Applying the Community of Inquiry framework to an online professional practice doctoral program. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12(6), 126-142.
<https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v12i6.978>
- Lake, E. D., Koper, J., Balaya, A., & Lynch, L. (2018). Cohorts and connections: Doctoral retention at a mid-atlantic comprehensive institution. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 20(2), 197–214.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025116656386>
- Lambert, J. L., & Fisher, J. L. (2013). Community of inquiry framework: Establishing community in an online course. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 12(1), 1-16.
<https://www.ncolr.org/jiol>
- Lively, C. L., Blevins, B., Talbert, S., & Cooper, S. (2021). Building community in online professional practice doctoral programs. *Impacting Education: Journal on Transforming Professional Practice*, 6(3), 21-29. <https://doi.org/10.5195/ie.2021.187>
- Lowery, K., Geesa, R., & McConnell, K. (2018). Designing a peer-mentoring program for education doctorate (EdD) students: A literature review. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 8(1), 30–50. <https://doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v8i1.408>
- McClendon, C., Neugebauer, M., & King, A. (2017). Grit, growth mindset, and deliberate practice in online learning. *Journal of Instructional Research*, 6, 8-17.
<http://www.instructionalresearch.com>
- Mehta, R., Makani-Lim, B., Rajan, M. N., & Easter, M. K. (2017). Creating online learning spaces for emerging markets: An investigation of the link between course design and student engagement. *Journal of Business & Behavioral Sciences*, 29(1), 116-133.
<http://asbbs.org/jsbbs.html>
- Melián, E., Reyes, J. I., & Meneses, J. (2023). The online PhD experience: A qualitative systematic review. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 24(1). <https://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/6780/>
- Moloney, J. F., & Oakley, B. (2019). Scaling online education: Increasing access to higher education. *Online Learning*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v14i1.1639>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications.
- Mullen, C. A. (2021). Online doctoral mentoring in a pandemic: Help or hindrance to academic progress on dissertations? [Online doctoral mentoring in a pandemic] *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 10(2), 139-157.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-06-2020-0029>
- National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES]. (2024). *IPEDS Trend Generator: Student enrollment: What is the percent of students enrolled in distance education courses in postsecondary institutions in the fall?* National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Available: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/app/build-table/2/42?rid=6&cid=85>
- Nuuyoma, Dr. E., & Sing, Dr. N. (2025). Revisiting Tinto's Student Integration Theory: A

- framework for understanding doctoral student attrition and enhancing retention strategies. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, IX(V), 4095–4109. <https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2025.905000313>
- Olesova, L., Sadaf, A., Kumar, S., Martin, F., Ritzhaupt, A. D., Bonk, C. J., Lowenthal, P., Snelson, C., Westine, C., & Sun, T. (2023). Reviews of research on online learners. In M. Simonson & D. Seepersaud (Eds.), *45th Annual Proceedings of AECT 2022 Convention, Selected Research and Development Papers* (Volume 1, pp. 250-258). Las Vegas, NV. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED652114.pdf>
- Palvia, S., Aeron, P., Gupta, P., Mahapatra, D., Parida, R., Rosner, R., & Sindhi, S. (2018). Online education: Worldwide status, challenges, trends, and implications. *Journal of Global Information Technology Management*, 21(4), 233–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1097198x.2018.1542262>
- Pollard, R., & Kumar, S. (2021). Mentoring graduate students online: Strategies and challenges. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 22(2), 267–284. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v22i2.5093>
- Provident, I., Salls, J., Dolhi, C., Schreiber, J., Mattila, A., & Eckel, E. (2015). Design of an online curriculum promoting transformative learning in post professional doctoral students. *Online Learning*, 79(3), 128-143. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v19i3.526>
- Radda, H., & Mandernach, B. J. (2012). Doctoral education online: Challenging the paradigm. *Journal of Educational Technology*, 9(3), 1-8. <http://www.imanagerpublications.com>
- Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., Heuvelman-Hutchinson, L., & Spaulding, L. (2014a). Connecting online: Can social networking and other technology support doctoral connectedness? *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 11(3), 1-13. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp>
- Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., Spaulding, L. S., & Bade, B. (2014b). Completion of educational doctorates: How universities can foster persistence. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 9, 293–308. <https://doi.org/10.28945/2072>
- Rost, J., & Krahenbuhl, K. (2023). Improving social belonging to increase success in an online doctorate program. *Impacting Education*, 8(1), 44-48. <https://doi.org/10.5195/ie.2023.283>
- Roumell, E. A. L., & Bolliger, D. U. (2017) Experiences of faculty with doctoral student supervision in programs delivered via distance. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 65(2), 82-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2017.1320179>
- Russell, D. L. (2021). Design, development, implementation, and support (DDIS): Supporting online nontraditional doctoral candidates. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 11(1), 14-26. <https://ojdla.com/assets/pdf/russell233.pdf>
- Santicola, L. (2013). Pressing on: Persistence through a doctoral cohort program in education. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 6(2), 253-264. <https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v6i2.7736>
- Shard, Kumar, D., & Koul, S. (2024). Digital transformation in higher education: A comprehensive review of e-learning adoption. *Human Systems Management*, 43(4), 433–454. <https://doi.org/10.3233/hsm-230190>
- Studebaker, B., & Curtis, H. (2021) Building community in an online doctoral program. *Christian Higher Education*, 20(1-2), 15-27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2020.1852133>
- Su, J., & Waugh, M. L. (2018). Online student persistence or attrition: Observations related to expectations, preferences, and outcomes. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 16(1),

- 63-79. www.ncolr.org/jiol
- Tekiner Tolu, A. (2013). Creating effective communities of inquiry in online courses. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 70, 1049–1055.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.01.157>
- Thompson, N. L., Miller, N. C., & Franz, D. P. (2013). Comparing online and face-to-face learning experiences for nontraditional students: A case study of three online teacher education candidates. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 14(4), 233-251.
<http://www.infoagepub.com>
- Underdown, K., & Martin, J. (2016). Engaging the online student: Instructor-created video content for the online classroom. *Journal of Instructional Research*, 5, 8-12.
<https://doi.org/10.9743/JIR.2016.2>
- van Manen, M. (2016). *Phenomenology of practice*. Routledge.
- Young, S. N., Vanwe, W. R., Schafer, M. A., Robertson, T. A., & Poore, A. V. (2019, January). Factors affecting PhD student success. *International Journal of Exercise Science*, 12(1), 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.70252/CEJT2520>

HANDS-ON, MINDS-ON: STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERS TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

Julia Yoo
Lamar University

Abstract

The growing emphasis on hands-on learning in contemporary education reflects a broader shift toward active, student-centered instruction designed to increase engagement and relevance. However, this expansion also underscores a critical need to examine how such approaches can be implemented effectively to ensure they lead to meaningful learning rather than surface-level participation. This research review synthesizes theoretical and empirical literature to provide a framework for effective hands-on learning, research-informed instructional strategies, and a practical checklist for educators and instructional leaders. The literature consistently indicates that while hands-on activities enhance engagement, engagement alone is insufficient for deep conceptual understanding. Effective learning occurs when experiences are intentionally structured to promote reflection, conceptual development, and collaborative meaning-making. Across instructional contexts, teachers play a central role as facilitators who design, scaffold, and guide learning aligned with clear objectives and students' prior knowledge. Strategies such as guided inquiry, structured problem-solving, and purposeful questioning are identified as essential for translating active participation into cognitive growth. The review further highlights the importance of sustained professional support, including coaching and collaborative planning, to strengthen instructional implementation. Overall, the proposed framework and research-based checklist emphasize that hands-on learning must be deliberately designed to move beyond engagement toward rigorous understanding. With such intentional design and support in place, hands-on learning has strong potential to foster deep conceptual understanding and meaningful, lasting learning outcomes.

Keywords: hand-on learning, student engagement, instructional practices, educational leadership

In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement and constant change, students face an increasing array of distractions that may hinder the development and preservation of curiosity within educational settings. Moreover, as students progress through the educational system, many begin to lose the spark that once fueled their curiosity and enthusiasm for learning. While early childhood education often emphasizes play-based, sensory-rich experiences, later stages tend to shift toward abstract, decontextualized instruction. This transition can lead to a decline in intrinsic motivation, as students are increasingly distanced from the kinds of learning that feel meaningful and engaging. The question arises: How can educational leaders create and support learning environments that tap into learners' natural curiosity and sustain this innate drive throughout their academic journey?

One promising answer lies in the application of active, hands-on learning approaches. Students possess an innate curiosity, and the role of education is to cultivate this disposition by fostering

active engagement in the learning process. John Dewey, one of the most influential American philosophers of education, articulated the concept of “learning by doing” as a foundational principle for meaningful learning (Dewey, 1938). His philosophy positions learners as active agents who construct understanding through inquiry, reflection, and direct experience. The growing popularity of hands-on learning, especially in technology-rich classrooms, underscores the need for educational leaders to critically examine these approaches from an instructional perspective to ensure they effectively promote meaningful learning. In this context, educational leaders should move beyond the “if you build it, they will come” assumption by recognizing that the mere implementation of learning activities does not guarantee authentic student engagement or meaningful learning outcomes.

Hands-on learning activities are commonly associated with broader models of active learning, which encompass a range of pedagogical approaches that emphasize learner engagement through direct participation in the learning process. These approaches are grounded in the premise that knowledge is constructed through meaningful activities that provide learners with concrete experiences. Several instructional models position learners at the center of the learning process by encouraging them to explore, investigate, and develop an understanding of key concepts, including discovery learning, problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, experiential learning theory, and constructivist learning theory. Although these models differ in their theoretical foundations and instructional practices, they share the underlying assumption that learners develop deeper understanding through active engagement in constructing, exploring, and applying knowledge within authentic contexts. Accordingly, the central principle of hands-on learning is the active engagement of students in meaningful learning experiences.

Within the broader tradition of active learning, several theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding the effectiveness of hands-on activities. Experiential learning theory conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Meaningful learning requires learners not only to engage in concrete experiences but also to reflect on those experiences, as experiential engagement alone does not ensure learning. Experiential learning theory has been widely applied in STEM education, where active and hands-on instructional strategies have consistently been shown to improve student performance compared with traditional lecture-based approaches (Prince, 2004). Constructivist learning theory provides a complementary perspective by emphasizing that learners actively construct knowledge by connecting new information to their existing understandings. This perspective, articulated by Piaget (1973) and Bruner (1966), has become a foundational framework in educational research.

Constructivist learning theory views learners as active participants in the learning process who construct knowledge through engagement with ideas, experiences, and prior understanding rather than through the passive reception of information. This perspective is further extended by social constructivism, as articulated by Vygotsky (1978), which emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning. Collaboration with peers, more knowledgeable others, and instructors supports cognitive development by enabling learners to extend their understanding beyond what they could achieve independently through interaction, dialogue, and instructional scaffolding.

Within this framework, instructors play an important role as facilitators who guide students toward deeper conceptual understanding. Although learners are central to the process of constructing meaning, effective learning also depends on the instructor's ability to structure and scaffold learning experiences. This highlights the importance of pedagogical content knowledge, a concept introduced by Shulman (1986), which refers to a specialized understanding of how subject matter can be organized, represented, and taught in ways that make it accessible and meaningful for learners. In hands-on learning activities involving problem solving, effective instructors facilitate learning by monitoring students' progress and guiding their thinking through timely coaching and questioning (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that effective hands-on learning activities require more than physical engagement. They must also promote reflection, conceptual development, and collaborative meaning-making. Consequently, teachers and educational leaders should critically examine whether hands-on and active learning approaches are intentionally designed and implemented to promote meaningful learning outcomes, particularly students' ability to develop conceptual understanding from their experiences rather than simply participate in engaging but conceptually superficial activities.

Not All Hands-On Learnings are Created Equal

When designed and implemented well, hands-on learning can be powerful because it allows learners to acquire knowledge through direct experience by being engaged with authentic problems, where both the processes and procedures of a given discipline are an essential part of the learning, not just the final outcome. However, not all hands-on learning activities are equally effective. While many aim to actively engage students, some are criticized as mere busy work due to poor design. Moreover, the possible ineffectiveness of minimal guidance during instruction has been highlighted in the scholarly article *Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work* (Kirschner et al., 2006). These concerns raise important questions for educational leaders: What distinguishes meaningful, cognitively engaging hands-on learning from superficial activity? How much guidance is necessary to support deep understanding without stifling exploration?

Several factors distinguish effective hands-on learning activities from less effective ones. Designing impactful experiences requires careful planning, including aligning activities with learning standards, ensuring key concepts are addressed, calibrating instructional scaffolding, monitoring peer interactions, and assessing both processes and outcomes. Effectively orchestrating these elements is a complex endeavor. Some constructs, such as scaffolding, are context-dependent (van de Pol et al., 2015), and supporting students through adaptive teaching requires substantial knowledge and experience (Hardy et al., 2022), which poses a particular challenge for novice teachers. Marzano (2011) highlights the complexity of discovery learning, noting that, in some cases, teachers may need to rely on direct instruction to ensure learning effectiveness.

For novice learners with limited prior knowledge, fully guided or direct instruction is generally more effective than inquiry- or discovery-based approaches. Novices often lack the foundational knowledge necessary to generate accurate solutions through exploration alone, particularly within constrained instructional time. Cognitive load research supports this, showing that

minimally guided methods can overload working memory and hinder learning (Clark et al., 2012). Learners also tend to retain information more effectively when instruction follows a coherent, logically structured sequence rather than primarily open-ended activities. Consistent with this evidence, a large-scale randomized controlled trial in primary classrooms found that teacher-centered lesson sequences produced stronger learning outcomes than student-centered or hands-on instructional variants (Buchan et al., 2020).

Framework for Effective Hands-on Learning: A Research-Informed Practices

Hands-on learning has often been discussed in broad or polarized terms, yet large-scale research offers more precise guidance when findings are examined by student level, subject area, and instructional conditions. Across the literature, both strong positive effects and mixed or negative findings are reported, suggesting that the effectiveness of hands-on learning is contingent rather than inherent. Syntheses of research indicate that hands-on approaches can support meaningful gains in student learning when they are sufficiently structured, sustained, and aligned with instructional goals, whereas weaker outcomes tend to emerge when activities are brief, minimally guided, or poorly integrated into the curriculum (Kirschner et al., 2006; Buchan et al., 2020; Chen & Yang, 2019).

Both elementary and secondary students demonstrate positive learning outcomes when engaged in learning formats that involve complex and real-world tasks, which is a form of hands-on learning, according to a meta-analysis of 30 studies (Chen & Yang, 2019). These findings challenge assumptions that younger students are not developmentally ready for inquiry-oriented learning. In fact, research suggests that elementary learners benefit most when hands-on instruction incorporates clear goals, structured scaffolding, guidance on inquiry processes, opportunities for reflection, and sufficient instructional time (Kleickmann et al., 2016; Skene et al., 2022). Moreover, outcomes are enhanced when hands-on learning is preceded by a preparatory unit that equips teachers and students with an understanding of inquiry processes, expectations, and procedures before engaging in the main learning activities (Heindl, 2019).

Gains from hands-on learning have been documented across a range of subject areas, including the social sciences, such as language arts and geography, as well as STEM disciplines. However, variation by subject area highlights the conditions under which such approaches are most effective. The strongest effects are found in social studies and language-based subjects, where instruction emphasizes interpretation, synthesis, and application in authentic contexts (Chen & Yang, 2019). In contrast, effects in science and mathematics tend to be more modest and are contingent on structured scaffolding and careful sequencing of instruction. Evidence indicates that hands-on activities in these domains are most effective when they complement, rather than replace, conventional instruction, aligning with research cautioning against minimally guided approaches for novice learners. Across contexts, instructional time and support structures further moderate outcomes with sustained implementation and the deliberate integration of instructional technology to facilitate inquiry and collaboration are associated with stronger effects, whereas brief interventions, limited guidance, or misalignment with instructional objectives are linked to weaker results (Buchan et al., 2020; Chen & Yang, 2019; Kirschner et al., 2006).

Based on a synthesis of P–12 research, a role-based, evidence-informed framework was developed to support teachers and educational leaders in translating research into effective

hands-on learning practices. Responsibilities are organized by phase and role, and the key theoretical and evidence-based concepts underpinning each responsibility are presented in Table 1. The framework provides guidance to enhance student engagement, support conceptual understanding, and ensure sustainable implementation.

Table 1

A Role-Based, Evidence-Informed Framework for Effective Hands-On Learning in P-12 Education

Phase and Role	Key Responsibilities	Key Theoretical and Evidence-Based Concepts
Planning Stage before Instruction		
For Teachers	- Clarify instructional purpose, learning objectives, and standards to guide lesson design. - Determine whether tasks introduce new concepts or apply knowledge to authentic problems. - Assess students' prior knowledge and readiness to guide scaffolding and manage cognitive demand. - Specify anticipated evidence of learning to maintain coherence between instructional intent, student activities, and assessment.	Constructivism (Dewey, 1938; Prince, 2004); Cognitive Load Theory (Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020; Sweller et al., 2011); Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984)
For Educational Leaders	- Support the availability of flexible learning spaces, materials, and schedules that facilitate hands-on learning. - Provide professional development to build teacher capacity in designing and facilitating hands-on learning experiences.	Student-Centered Learning Environments (Fredricks et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2021); Teacher Professional Development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)
Implementation Stage during Instruction		
For Teachers	- Select and adapt hands-on learning tasks responsive to developmental and contextual factors. - Scaffold thinking, provide formative feedback, and use authentic assessment capturing processes and outcomes. - Facilitate structured collaboration and reflection.	Active Learning (Prince, 2004); Formative Assessment (Hattie & Timperley, 2007); Reflective Practice (Kolb, 1984)
For Educational Leaders	- Monitor instructional conditions and provide support to maintain high-quality implementation. - Facilitate coordination among leaders and teachers to share best practices and to maintain consistency.	System-Level Support (Gibbons et al., 2019); Collaborative Learning Communities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)

This role-based framework organizes hands-on learning into complementary responsibilities for teachers, instructional leaders and administrators, providing guidance intended to support engagement, conceptual understanding, and long-term sustainability. For teachers, the framework emphasizes lesson-level planning and classroom implementation. Effective hands-on learning begins with clarifying instructional purpose, aligning activities with intended cognitive demand, and determining whether a task introduces new concepts or supports the application of existing knowledge to authentic problems (Henze & Shaw, 2020). Teachers are expected to assess learners' prior knowledge and readiness to provide appropriate scaffolding and to reduce the risk of cognitive overload for students unfamiliar with the material (Ploetzner & Fillisch, 2017; Stull & Mayer, 2007). Clearly specifying anticipated learning outcomes and evidence of learning further supports coherence among instructional intent, student activity, and assessment practices (Shernoff et al., 2018).

Following the planning phase, teachers draw on pedagogical judgement to make ongoing, context-sensitive decisions about selecting and adapting hands-on learning tasks that actively engage students while remaining responsive to developmental and contextual considerations (Leskinen et al., 2023). In the course of instruction, teachers deliberately scaffold student thinking, provide formative feedback, and use authentic and performance-based assessments to make both learning processes and learning outcomes or products visible (Henze & Shaw, 2020; Leskinen et al., 2023). They can further orchestrate structured collaboration and guide intentional reflection to deepen sense-making, continuously calibrating instruction in relation to learning contexts and curricular pacing constraints (Kumpulainen et al., 2020).

During planning and implementation stages, educational leaders play interdependent roles in shaping the conditions that enable hands-on learning to become embedded in everyday instructional practice. Rather than functioning as isolated supports, these conditions operate as a coherent system that includes flexible, well-equipped learning environments such as laboratories, and sustained professional learning that builds teachers' capacity for project-based and design-oriented pedagogies while positioning hands-on learning as central to instructional practice rather than peripheral enrichment (Rouse & Rouse, 2022; Shernoff et al.; Voogt et al., 2023, 2018). Together, these conditions share responsibility across instructional levels and strengthen coherence between system structures and pedagogical practice, thereby positioning experiential learning as a structurally supported and sustained dimension of education.

A Checklist for Effective Hands-On Learning

Building on this body of evidence, a practical checklist was developed to support educational leaders in systematically examining the conditions under which hands-on learning is most likely to be effective on their campuses. Rather than serving as a prescriptive script, the checklist translates research-based design principles into observable indicators related to lesson design, classroom implementation, and organizational support, thereby operationalizing the proposed framework. Table 2 summarizes this checklist and illustrates how the framework can be used to guide instructional observation, professional learning, and schoolwide improvement efforts.

Table 2

A Checklist for Effective Hands-On Learning

Phase 1: Foundational and Guided Learning Phase		Phase 2: Independent and Deep Learning Phase		
Learning Goals		Yes	No	NA
1.1	Set clear learning objectives that are aligned with curriculum standards.	☐	☐	☐
1.2	Break learning goals into manageable steps to support novice learners in achieving success and building confidence.	☐	☐	☐
Instructional Materials		Yes	No	NA
2.1	Prepare all necessary learning tools for students.	☐	☐	☐
2.2	Provide structured tools, such as step-by-step guides, worked examples, checklists or visual aids that scaffold exploration without overwhelming learners.	☐	☐	☐
Learning Activity and Instruction		Yes	No	NA
3.1	Incorporate structured exploration tasks that allow students to safely experiment within defined boundaries.	☐	☐	☐
3.2	Embed scaffolded supports such as examples, checklists, or guiding questions to support problem-solving and reflection.	☐	☐	☐
3.3	Use modeling and demonstrations of key skills, strategies, or expected behaviors and skills prior to independent student work.	☐	☐	☐
Feedback, Assessment, and Reflection		Yes	No	NA
4.1	Provide immediate, specific, and actionable feedback focused on effort and process.	☐	☐	☐

		teachers, peers, and self-assessment to guide growth.			
4.2	Use formative assessments (e.g., observations, checklists, exit tickets) to monitor learning progress.	Use teacher, peer, and self-assessment feedback in peer critique and problem-solving activities to promote reflection and higher-order thinking.	☐	☐	☐
4.3	Provide clear criteria or rubrics to help students understand expectations, with teacher guidance to support self-monitoring.	Prompt students to reflect and self-assess against rubrics or personal learning targets.	☐	☐	☐

The checklist elements related to learning purpose and instructional guidance reflect longstanding findings that hands-on learning is most effective when cognitive demands are aligned with students' prior knowledge and readiness. Research grounded in cognitive load theory demonstrates that novice learners benefit from explicit goals, modeling, and structured supports, whereas minimally guided exploration often leads to inefficiency or misconceptions (Kirschner et al., 2006; Stull & Mayer, 2007). Emphasizing clarity of instructional intent and early scaffolding addresses a common source of negative findings associated with poorly guided hands-on activities and reinforces the importance of intentional instructional design.

A second set of checklist indicators emphasizes task quality and instructional sequencing, reflecting evidence that hands-on learning yields stronger outcomes when embedded within coherent, sustained instructional sequences rather than implemented as isolated activities. Large-scale classroom studies and meta-analytic findings show that brief or episodic experiential tasks tend to produce weaker effects than projects or investigations that unfold over multiple lessons and build cumulatively toward learning goals (Buchan et al., 2020; Chen & Yang, 2019). Accordingly, the checklist directs leaders to consider not only what students are doing in a given lesson, but how hands-on activities are positioned within broader units and trajectories of learning.

The emphasis on formative assessment, feedback, and reflection aligns with research showing that learning in hands-on environments develops through iterative cycles of action, feedback, and revision. Studies of project-based and inquiry-oriented instruction suggest that conceptual understanding deepens when students receive timely, specific feedback and opportunities to reflect on both learning processes and outcomes rather than focusing solely on task completion (Kumpulainen et al., 2020; Shernoff et al., 2018). By foregrounding clear criteria and performance-based evidence, the checklist reinforces assessment practices that make learning visible and support metacognitive engagement.

Finally, the checklist incorporates leadership and organizational conditions, reflecting evidence that hands-on learning functions as a system-level practice rather than an isolated classroom strategy. Research on implementation and sustainability indicates that instructional approaches such as hands-on or project-based learning are unlikely to persist or scale without adequate instructional time, professional learning, material resources, and supportive scheduling structures

(Rouse & Rouse, 2022; Voogt et al., 2023). By including indicators related to leadership support and learning environments, the checklist aligns with the framework's emphasis on the interdependence of classroom practice and organizational context in promoting high-quality, sustainable hands-on learning.

Collectively, this work brings coherence to a fragmented body of research by integrating lesson design, instructional practice, and organizational conditions within a single analytic structure. Rather than treating hands-on learning as an isolated instructional technique, the framework highlights the interdependence of guidance, sequencing, assessment, and leadership supports in shaping learning outcomes. By offering both a conceptual framework and a research-informed checklist, the study contributes a practical yet theoretically grounded resource for instructional leaders and administrators seeking to promote purposeful, high-quality, and sustainable hands-on learning across educational contexts.

Conclusion

Any form of hands-on learning places students at the center in the process of learning, emphasizing knowledge construction through active participation and the manipulation of learning tools, whether digital or non-digital. Although these experiences often appear simple, fun, or engaging, they are, in fact, cognitively complex and demanding. Teachers navigating this terrain benefit from thoughtful support, such as professional resources, collaborative planning opportunities, and encouragement from educational leaders, which can help them balance learner autonomy with guidance, scaffolding, and clear learning objectives. Without such intentional preparation and support, students may not fully benefit from peer collaboration or meaningful interaction with learning materials, diminishing the impact of hands-on learning.

REFERENCES

- Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction*. Harvard University Press.
- Buchan, L., Hejmadi, M., Abrahams, L., & Hurst, L. (2020). A RCT for assessment of active human-centred learning finds teacher-centric non-human teaching of evolution optimal. *npj Science of Learning*, 5, Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41539-020-00078-0>
- Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction*. Harvard University Press.
- Chen, C.-H., & Yang, Y.-C. (2019). Revisiting the effects of project-based learning on students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis investigating moderators. *Educational Research Review*, 26, 71-81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.11.001>
- Clark, R., E., Kirschner, P. A., & Sweller, J. (2012). Putting students on the path to learning. *American Educator*, 36(1). 6-11.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_REPORT.pdf
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. Macmillan.
- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59-109. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654307400105>

- Gibbons, L. K., Wilhelm, A. G., & Cobb, P. (2019). Coordinating leadership supports for teachers' instructional improvement. *Journal of School Leadership*, 29(3), 248–268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619836824>
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>
- Hardy, I., Meschede, N., & Mannel, S. (2022). Measuring adaptive teaching in classroom discourse: Effects on student learning in elementary science education. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, Article 1041316. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1041316>
- Heindl, M. (2019). Inquiry-based learning and the pre-requisite for its use in science at school: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 3(2), 52–61.
- Hmelo-Silver, C. E., & Barrows, H. S. (2006). Goals and strategies of a problem-based learning facilitator. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-based Learning*, 1, 21–39.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Kirschner, P. A., Sweller, J., & Clark, R. E. (2006). Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: An analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. *Educational Psychologist*, 41(2), 75–86.
- Kleickmann, T., Tröbst, S., Jonen, A., Vehmeyer, J., & Möller, K. (2016). The effects of expert scaffolding in elementary science professional development on teachers' beliefs and motivations, instructional practices, and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(1), 21–42. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000041>
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice Hall.
- Kumpulainen, K., Kajamaa, A., Leskinen, J., Byman, J., & Renlund, J. (2020). Mapping digital competence: Students' maker literacies in a school's makerspace. *Frontiers in Education*, 5, Article 69. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00069>
- Marzano, R. J. (2011). The perils and promises of discovery learning. *Educational Leadership*, 69(1), 86–87.
- Paas, F., & van Merriënboer, J. J. G. (2020). Cognitive-load theory: Methods to manage working memory load in the learning of complex tasks. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 29(4), 394–400. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721420922183>
- Piaget, J. (1973). *To understand is to invent: The future of education*. Grossman.
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223–231.
- Skene, K., O'Farrelly, C. M., Byrne, E. M., Kirby, N., Stevens, E. C., & Ramchandani, P. G. (2022). Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and development in educational contexts? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Development*, 93, 1162–1180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13730>
- Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X015002004>
- Sweller, J., Ayres, P., & Kalyuga, S. (2011). *Cognitive load theory*. Springer.
- van de Pol, J., Volman, M., Oort, F., & Beishuizen, J. (2015). The effects of scaffolding in the classroom: Support contingency and student independent working time in relation to student achievement, task effort and appreciation of support. *Instructional Science*, 43, 615–641. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11251-015-9351-z>

- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Zhang, L., Basham, J. D., Carter, R. A., Jr., & Zhang, J. (2021). Exploring Factors associated with the implementation of student-centered instructional practices in U.S. classrooms. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 99, Article 103273.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103273>

DIGITAL RESILIENCE IN TEACHER EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN STRENGTHENING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING ACROSS CONTEXTS

Loyiso Jita

University of the Free State, South Africa

Thuthukile Jita

University of the Free State, South Africa

L.S. Spencer

Prairie View A & M University

Abstract

Digital transformation has emerged as a significant challenge for educational institutions worldwide, particularly in contexts marked by increasing inequality and recurring crises. This study examines how institutional digital resilience is shaped by leadership practices, professional learning cultures, and policy environments in schools and teacher education programs. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the research employs a comparative qualitative case study design, analyzing institutional documents and annual reports from two contrasting educational contexts to explore how digital strategies are conceptualized, implemented, and sustained.

The findings identify several factors that strengthen institutional digital resilience. First, distributed leadership fosters shared responsibility for digital transformation across multiple organizational levels, promoting collaboration and collective ownership. Second, communities of practice provide essential structures for peer learning and the development of collective digital competence. Third, a clear leadership vision translates policy into practice by aligning institutional strategies with teaching and learning. Fourth, crises serve as both catalysts for digital innovation and sources of persistent digital inequities, highlighting the need for equitable and sustainable approaches. Finally, policy coherence across institutional, school, and national levels enhances preparedness by supporting consistent, long-term digital practices.

This study contributes to the growing scholarship on digital resilience by demonstrating how leadership, collaboration, and policy interact to strengthen institutional capacity for digital transformation. The findings suggest that resilient digital ecosystems depend not only on technological investment but also on enabling leadership, supportive professional learning communities, and coherent policies that prioritize equity and sustainability. Implications include strengthening leadership development, expanding capacity-building initiatives, and conducting comparative research across diverse educational systems.

Keywords: digital resilience, work-integrated learning, school leadership, teacher education, distributed leadership, comparative education

Teacher education programs across the globe are experiencing remarkable and unprecedented changes resulting from global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturns, and the rapidly evolving nature of technology (Arendse et al., 2024; Goodwin, Madalińska-Michalak, & Flores, 2023; Rwodzi & De Jager, 2021). These changes have underscored the importance of developing digital resilience, which refers to the ability to adapt and sustain learning through digital platforms under a variety of circumstances (Boh et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2022). Within teacher education, concerns have also emerged regarding the vulnerability of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), as this component depends heavily on collaboration and interaction between universities and partner schools (Aprile & Knight, 2020; Cooper et al., 2010; Gamage, 2022). These emerging vulnerabilities highlight a critical gap in understanding how teacher education systems can develop the digital resilience necessary to sustain WIL in rapidly changing educational environments.

For institutions to navigate challenging periods successfully, digital resilience in teacher education enables teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and partner schools to provide teaching and learning through flexible, technology-enhanced approaches. This approach allows educators to adapt their instructional strategies and learning platforms to sustain Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), even when traditional teaching placements are disrupted (Rwodzi & De Jager, 2021). Research has shown that teachers who possess digital resilience are better equipped to deliver effective instruction during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and to develop innovative solutions in response to challenging circumstances (Eri et al., 2021; Nyathi & Joseph, 2024). This paper examines leadership practices that enhance digital resilience in WIL across two distinct learning contexts.

Based on prevailing concerns regarding how teacher education programs are coping with and responding to digital disruption, this paper examines the role of school leaders in enhancing the digital resilience of pre-service teachers through Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). It also analyzes the similarities and differences in the strategies implemented by school leaders in South Africa and the United States to promote digital resilience among pre-service teachers. By presenting a comparative perspective, the paper highlights points of convergence and divergence across these two educational contexts. Ultimately, the study identifies strategies employed by school leaders that can strengthen the digital resilience of pre-service teachers participating in WIL across diverse educational settings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is grounded in the **Community of Practice (CoP)** framework and **Distributed Leadership Theory**. These complementary theoretical perspectives provide the foundation for examining the role of school leaders in fostering the digital resilience of pre-service teachers through Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). The relevance and application of each framework are discussed throughout the paper to demonstrate how they inform the study's analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Community of Practice Theory

Community of Practice (CoP) Theory provides a foundation for understanding the development of pre-service teachers' digital competence and professional identity within Work-Integrated

Learning (WIL) contexts. The theory serves as a framework for examining learning development and identity formation within the collaborative social environment that characterizes WIL. According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice develops through shared practice, mutual engagement, and the creation of a shared repertoire of resources, tools, and practices. These collaborative learning experiences are essential to the professional growth of pre-service teachers, who draw upon the expertise of mentor teachers, school leaders, and other educational professionals to develop and demonstrate effective digital teaching practices.

The application of CoP Theory has been widely examined in research on digital learning and teaching practices (Garrison et al., 2010; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). The theory provides a valuable lens for exploring how digital readiness is co-constructed through collaboration, shared participation, and authentic learning experiences during teaching practice. In the context of digital resilience, CoP Theory conceptualizes the development of pre-service teachers' competencies through participation in professional learning communities and collaborative networks within educational settings in both the United States and South Africa. The present study employs Community of Practice Theory to explain how pre-service teachers develop digital readiness through active participation in supportive learning environments where digital knowledge, skills, and instructional practices are collaboratively shared and refined. This theoretical framework directly informs Research Question 1, which examines how leadership practices within Work-Integrated Learning influence the digital readiness of pre-service teachers.

Distributed Leadership Theory

Distributed Leadership Theory supports and complements the Community of Practice (CoP) Theory by emphasizing that leadership for digital resilience is enacted through collective processes within school systems. As a complementary theoretical perspective, Distributed Leadership Theory provides an additional lens for understanding how leadership practices foster digital resilience across educational ecosystems. Based on the work of Spillane (2006), leadership is conceptualized as a distributed practice in which expertise, decision-making, and responsibility are shared among multiple individuals rather than residing with a single leader.

This perspective aligns with the view that digital resilience and the successful digital transformation of teaching and learning cannot be achieved through isolated efforts but instead require collaborative processes that address the challenges associated with technological innovation and change (Harris, 2014; Harris & Spillane, 2008).

Within the work-integrated learning (WIL) context, Distributed Leadership Theory underscores the importance of collaborative actions among school principals, information and communication technology (ICT) coordinators, mentor teachers, teacher educators, university administrators, and other educational stakeholders in preparing preservice teachers with the digital competencies needed for professional practice. Leadership during periods of technological disruption highlights the necessity of shared responsibility, collaborative decision-making, and organizational adaptability to sustain effective teaching and learning environments (Fullan, 2021; Spillane et al., 2020). The integration of Community of Practice Theory and Distributed Leadership Theory emphasizes the interconnected social and organizational dimensions that contribute to the development of digital resilience in teacher education.

Distributed Leadership Theory is aligned with Research Question 2 because it examines the similarities and differences in leadership practices that support digital resilience within learning environments in South Africa and the United States. The theory provides a framework for comparing how leadership structures, collaborative processes, and shared responsibilities differ across the two countries while influencing the development of digital resilience among preservice teachers.

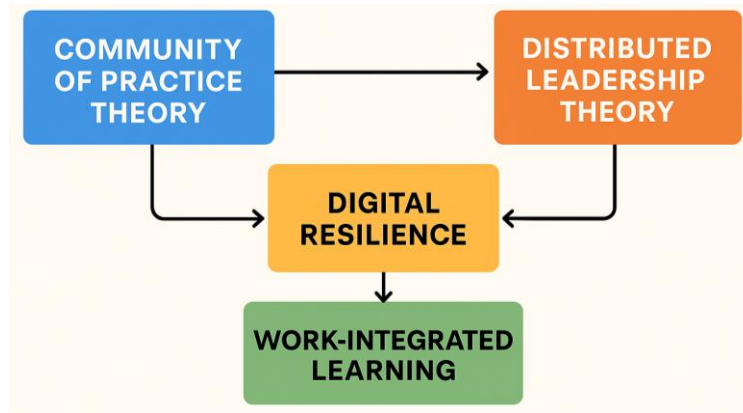
Integrating the Frameworks

The Community of Practice (CoP) and Distributed Leadership frameworks are integrated through the concept of digital resilience, as both emphasize the importance of resilience as a collaborative and collective process. The CoP framework highlights the development of resilience through active participation in supportive professional communities, where knowledge, skills, and experiences are shared among members (Wenger, 1998). In contrast, Distributed Leadership Theory emphasizes the role of shared leadership structures in enabling schools to respond effectively and adaptively to digital challenges by distributing expertise and decision-making across multiple stakeholders (Spillane, 2006). Together, these frameworks provide complementary perspectives for understanding how digital resilience is developed and sustained within teacher education and work-integrated learning (WIL) environments.

Research Question 3 draws upon both theoretical frameworks and the digital resilience literature to investigate the strategies that strengthen collective digital resilience in WIL settings. Digital resilience refers to the capacity of individuals and institutions to adapt, recover, and continue learning effectively in response to digital disruptions and technological challenges (Sun et al., 2022; Weller & Anderson, 2013; Wright, 2016). For pre-service teachers, digital resilience encompasses the confidence, knowledge, and adaptive capacity to effectively use a range of digital technologies while navigating uncertainty and responding to disruptions such as power outages, pandemics, connectivity issues, and learning platform failures (Livingstone, 2018). Developing digital resilience therefore requires intentional leadership practices, equitable access to technology, ongoing professional learning, and flexible institutional structures that support adaptation and innovation.

By integrating social learning processes, shared leadership practices, and the principles of digital resilience, this conceptual framework provides a comprehensive foundation for examining how leadership influences the digital experiences of pre-service teachers during WIL across diverse educational contexts. The integration of these perspectives recognizes that digital resilience is not solely an individual competency but also an organizational capability that emerges through collaboration, shared expertise, and supportive leadership practices. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship and interconnectedness among the theoretical frameworks and the concept of digital resilience that underpins this study.

Figure 1
Conceptual Diagram



The conceptual diagram in Figure 1 shows the role that CoP Theory and Distributed Leadership Theory complementarily play, together with Digital Resilience, in informing and developing an optimal WIL experience. CoP Theory has a practice in making a structure for collaboration and learning processes for participants as students. Lave and Wenger (1991), explains the CoP theory follows a phenomenon that describes how members, within a certain community, learn by developing as they practice. Spillane (2006); Harris (2013), argue that Distributed Leadership Theory supports skills within an organizational structure as members are capable of sharing skills. Thus, these two theories; Distributed Leadership Theory, together with CoP Theory, supports organizational digital resilience with regard to peer collaboration, problem-solving, and responsibility in dealing with technological changes (Panadero et al. 2023). It is therefore important to note that, according to the CoP Theory, learning within an organization occurs through collaborative knowledge-sharing structures. In contrast, Distributed Leadership Theory promotes an organizational framework characterized by shared responsibility and supportive interactions, thereby contributing to the development and expansion of leadership capacity throughout the organization.

METHODOLOGY

This study is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through the meaning's individuals attribute to their experiences. This paradigm is appropriate for the current study because it emphasizes understanding how educational institutions conceptualize and implement digital transformation within their unique sociocultural contexts (Schwandt, 1994; Willis, 2007). Rather than seeking objective or universal truths, interpretivist research focuses on exploring participants' perspectives, beliefs, and lived experiences.

According to Merriam (2009), interpretive research seeks to understand the meanings that participants assign to their experiences, assumptions, and practices within their natural settings. Consistent with this perspective, the interpretivist paradigm provides the analytical lens through which this study examines how institutional stakeholders perceive and enact leadership strategies, allocate resources, and foster digital resilience within work-integrated learning (WIL)

environments. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the complex social processes that influence digital transformation in teacher education.

Comparative Qualitative Case Study Design

This study employs a comparative qualitative case study design to facilitate an in-depth investigation of the contextual complexities and richness of two educational institutions. Case study research is particularly appropriate for examining complex organizational phenomena in which the boundaries between the phenomenon being studied and its contextual environment are not clearly delineated (Yin, 2018). A comparative case study approach strengthens the analytical depth of the research by enabling systematic examination of similarities, differences, and contextual factors across cases (Goodrick, 2014).

Through this design, the study explores how each institution's governance structures, historical development, and strategic priorities interact to shape their approaches to digital transformation and the cultivation of digital resilience. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how institutional contexts influence the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of digital practices within educational settings.

Locale of the Research Site

The digital contexts of Mangaung, South Africa, and Houston, United States of America, reflect distinct socioeconomic and infrastructural environments that influence the digital readiness of pre-service teachers within work-integrated learning (WIL) contexts. These differing environments provide an important comparative foundation for examining how institutional conditions shape access to digital resources, technology integration, and digital resilience in teacher preparation.

Digital Context of the Research Sites

The Mangaung digital environment is characterized by limited technological infrastructure, with variations in internet connectivity across schools that influence the consistency of work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences for pre-service teachers. Although internet penetration in South Africa has increased, with approximately 74.7% of the population having internet access in 2024, the availability, reliability, and quality of connectivity remain unevenly distributed. Many communities continue to rely heavily on cellular networks due to limited access to stable broadband infrastructure (DataReportal, 2024; Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2024). At the provincial level, the Free State has made progress in expanding digital connectivity; however, these improvements remain limited to a subset of schools targeted through recent connectivity initiatives (Free State Province, 2023).

Research within the Mangaung context has also identified persistent challenges related to access to digital devices and teachers' capacity to effectively integrate information and communication technologies (ICTs) into teaching and learning practices. These limitations require mentor teachers and pre-service teachers to rely on collaborative networks and supportive peers to complete digitally mediated tasks associated with the WIL process (Stats SA, 2024). Consequently, digital engagement within the Mangaung educational context remains influenced by institutional capacity, teacher digital competence, and the availability of external support structures.

In contrast, the Houston educational context reflects a comparatively advanced digital environment characterized by stronger technological infrastructure, greater institutional investment, and broader access to digital learning platforms. However, digital equity challenges continue to exist within the district and surrounding communities. Nationally, most school districts in the United States have achieved the minimum connectivity standards established by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), with approximately 74% of districts meeting the benchmark of one megabit per second per student in 2023 (Connect K12, 2023). These developments have contributed to a more stable technological foundation for in-school access and digital learning opportunities.

Despite this progress, digital inequities remain evident in Houston, particularly among economically disadvantaged households. A post-pandemic survey conducted within the Houston area identified continued disparities in home-based digital access, with many low-income families experiencing challenges obtaining reliable internet connectivity and computers necessary for students to complete academic work. Additionally, a significant number of teachers reported that some students lacked access to functional digital devices outside of school settings (Kinder Institute, 2022).

The comparison of these two contexts suggests that while Houston benefits from stronger institutional infrastructure, learning management system (LMS) availability, and district-supported digital initiatives, challenges related to equitable access beyond the school environment remain unresolved. Similarly, Mangaung faces more foundational challenges involving infrastructure, connectivity, and digital capacity. These contextual differences are significant for understanding how pre-service teachers experience and develop digital resilience during WIL placements. The availability of technological resources, institutional support, and opportunities for digital engagement collectively shape the extent to which pre-service teachers can participate effectively in digitally mediated teaching and learning practices.

The comparative digital landscapes of Mangaung and Houston highlight how socioeconomic contexts, infrastructure availability, and institutional leadership influence the digital readiness of pre-service teachers within work-integrated learning (WIL) environments. While Houston benefits from a more mature digital ecosystem supported by established district initiatives, structured digital leadership practices, and greater access to learning technologies, Mangaung continues to encounter challenges related to inconsistent connectivity, limited availability of digital devices, and variations in teachers' digital competencies.

These contrasting contexts demonstrate that the central issue extends beyond technological access alone and involves the development of equitable digital infrastructure, effective leadership practices, and collaborative systems that support meaningful WIL experiences. Enhancing digital readiness in both settings, although from different points of departure, requires context-specific investments, sustained professional capacity building, and the strengthening of Communities of Practice (CoPs). Such collaborative structures can support pre-service teachers' engagement with digitally mediated teaching and learning practices while promoting greater equity, resilience, and preparedness across diverse educational environments.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The primary data source for this study is document analysis, which Bowen (2009) describes as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents” to generate insights into organizational intentions, priorities, and practices. Document analysis is particularly appropriate for studies examining institutional policies, strategic planning, and organizational practices because documents represent formal expressions of institutional commitments, priorities, and narratives. This study analyzes three categories of documents: policy documents, strategic plans, and institutional reports. These sources serve as key comparative data sets for examining how digital resilience within work-integrated learning (WIL) contexts is conceptualized and enacted through leadership practices across South African and United States teacher education environments.

Purposive sampling was used to select relevant documents at global, national, and institutional levels within both South Africa and the United States. The selection criteria focused on documents that provided insight into teacher education policies, digital transformation initiatives, leadership practices, and institutional responses to technological change. Policy documents examined in this study included the *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (MRTEQ) in South Africa and the standards and requirements established by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) in the United States. These documents were selected because they provide regulatory and professional frameworks that shape expectations for teacher preparation and institutional accountability.

Strategic plans were selected based on their relevance to digital resilience, institutional transformation, and leadership priorities over time. These documents were considered important sources for understanding how educational institutions articulate strategic responses to technological change, resource allocation, and digital readiness. Institutional reports provided additional evidence regarding how strategic intentions related to digital transformation and WIL implementation were operationalized within teacher education programs. These reports included WIL reports, institutional self-evaluation reports, and other relevant organizational documents that demonstrated institutional practices and responses to emerging challenges.

The selected documents also supported methodological triangulation by enabling comparison between stated institutional intentions, strategic priorities, and evidence of implementation. Through the analysis of multiple document types across two national contexts, the study sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of how leadership structures, institutional strategies, and collaborative practices contribute to the development of digital resilience in WIL environments.

Data Analysis

The document analysis process was guided by two primary analytical focus: (a) leadership strategies and frameworks and (b) digital infrastructure and resource deployment. The first analytical focus examined how leadership articulates priorities related to digital transformation through governance structures, strategic planning models, and capacity-building initiatives. Attention was given to the principles commonly associated with effective digital transformation leadership, including distributed decision-making, strategic visioning, collaborative leadership practices, and the alignment of institutional resources with digital priorities.

The second analytical focus examined the role of digital infrastructure and resource deployment in shaping institutional capacity for digital transformation. This included analysis of institutional investments in information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, learning management systems, connectivity, digital platforms, and support structures. Existing research suggests that robust digital ecosystems provide the foundation necessary for fostering pedagogical innovation, institutional adaptability, and digital resilience within educational contexts (Jeladze & Pata, 2018; Marchese et al., 2025; Tondeur et al., 2017).

Together, these analytical foci enabled a comprehensive examination of how leadership intentions and material conditions interact to influence digital transformation within teacher education. By analyzing both leadership frameworks and digital infrastructure, the study moved beyond policy rhetoric to investigate the extent to which strategic visions are translated into sustainable, context-responsive practices. This analytical approach supported an examination of how institutions develop the conditions necessary to promote pedagogical innovation, digital resilience, and effective work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences across diverse educational environments.

Drawing on Distributed Leadership Theory, this study employed an analytical approach that examined how responsibility for digital learning initiatives and work-integrated learning (WIL) support is distributed among various leadership actors within educational institutions. In addition, Communities of Practice (CoP) Theory informed the analysis by providing a lens for understanding how pre-service teachers develop professional identities and become legitimate participants in digitally enabled teaching and learning practices.

Data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which enhanced analytical rigor through systematic coding, categorization, and identification of emerging themes. Following the coding process, cross-case synthesis was conducted to compare patterns, similarities, and differences in leadership practices and institutional responses across the two contexts. This comparative analytical approach enabled a deeper understanding of how distributed leadership practices, collaborative learning structures, and contextual conditions influence the development of digital resilience within WIL environments.

Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection. Because this study relied on publicly available policy documents, strategic plans, and institution-level reports, there was no direct engagement with human participants. The documents were analyzed objectively and ethically, with care taken to avoid making evaluative judgments about specific institutions, individuals, or leadership teams. Findings were presented at a broader institutional and contextual level to maintain analytical neutrality and respect for the organizations represented in the study.

Attention was given to ethical considerations associated with cross-contextual comparison. The analysis sought to avoid deficit-based interpretations, particularly when examining differences in technological infrastructure, socioeconomic conditions, and policy environments between South Africa and the United States. Instead, the study approached each context as a unique educational ecosystem shaped by historical, institutional, and structural factors. This approach supported a

balanced interpretation of how leadership practices, digital resources, and collaborative structures contribute to digital resilience and work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences across diverse educational settings.

FINDINGS

Analysis of policy documents, strategic plans, and institutional reports revealed how digital resilience in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is constructed, enabled, and constrained through leadership practices across South African and United States contexts. Four interrelated themes emerged from the cross-document and cross-context analysis.

1. Leadership Framing of Digital Transformation in Work-Integrated Learning

Across both the South African and United States contexts, national and institutional policy documents positioned digital transformation as a strategic priority, although they differed in the extent to which they explicitly addressed Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and the preparation of pre-service teachers. In the South African policy documents, digitalization was primarily framed as a long-term systemic objective, with limited reference to how digital technologies should be enacted during WIL placements in schools. For example, the Department of Education (2004) stated that “*All pre-service teacher training in higher education institutions includes basic ICT literacy and basic ICT integration into teaching and learning*” (p. xx). While this policy emphasizes the importance of developing foundational digital competencies, it does not provide explicit guidance or structured opportunities for pre-service teachers to apply digital technologies during their WIL experiences.

In contrast, strategic plans and accreditation-related documents from the United States more explicitly connected digital learning with clinical practice and professional preparation. One institutional strategic plan emphasized the need to “*train and build faculty capacity to expand the utilization of technology to reach millennial generation students*” (University Strategic Plan, USA, p. xx). This framing positioned digital competence as an integral component of teacher preparation rather than an additional skill, highlighting the expectation that technology integration should be embedded throughout WIL experiences.

The cross-context analysis suggests that leadership framing plays a significant role in shaping how digital resilience is conceptualized and enacted within teacher education. While both countries recognize the importance of digital transformation, the United States policy documents provide clearer strategic direction for integrating technology into WIL practices. Conversely, South African policies establish a strong commitment to digital literacy but provide less explicit guidance on how institutional leaders, mentor teachers, and pre-service teachers should collaboratively implement digital practices during school-based learning. These findings indicate that effective leadership for digital resilience requires not only policy commitment but also practical frameworks that support the integration of digital technologies into authentic WIL contexts.

2. Distributed Leadership and Responsibility for Digital Support

Leadership responsibilities for digital learning during WIL were unevenly articulated across documents. School leadership standards in both contexts recognised the role of principals in

enabling teaching and learning; however, responsibility for digital mentoring of pre-service teachers was often implied rather than explicitly assigned. A South African institutional report noted that *“support for student teachers’ use of digital tools varied significantly across placement schools, depending on local leadership priorities and available expertise”* (Teaching Practice Report, SA).

In contrast, several U.S. institutional and district-level documents reflected a more distributed leadership approach. One report described how *“mentor teachers, instructional coaches, and school leaders collaboratively support teacher candidates’ integration of digital tools during practicum”* (College of Education Annual Report, USA). This suggests a clearer distribution of leadership roles across actors, aligning with a distributed leadership model that supports digital resilience through shared responsibility.

3. Positioning of Pre-Service Teachers within Communities of Practice

The extent to which pre-service teachers were positioned as legitimate participants in digitally mediated communities of practice differed across contexts and document types. In South African policy texts, pre-service teachers were often referred to generically as “student teachers” within WIL, with limited attention to their participation in digital practices. One institutional report reflected that *“student teachers largely adapted to existing school practices, including available technologies, rather than actively shaping digital teaching approaches”* (WIL Evaluation Report, SA).

Conversely, several U.S.-based documents explicitly positioned pre-service teachers as active contributors. A practicum handbook stated that *“teacher candidates are expected to engage fully in the school’s digital learning environment, including learning management systems, assessment platforms, and online communication tools”* (Practicum Handbook, USA). This language reflects a stronger alignment with Communities of Practice theory, where participation, access, and legitimacy are central to learning.

4. Digital Resilience, Crisis Response, and Continuity of Work-Integrated Learning

Policy documents and institutional reports across both contexts highlighted how digital resilience was challenged and reconfigured during periods of crisis and educational disruption. The findings demonstrate that the continuity of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) depended not only on access to digital technologies but also on leadership capacity, institutional preparedness, and the effectiveness of policy implementation.

In the South African context, institutional reports revealed considerable variability in schools’ capacity to sustain WIL through digital modalities during periods of disruption. One faculty report observed that *“the continuation of teaching practice during periods of disruption depended largely on individual schools’ access to devices, connectivity, and leadership support”* (Faculty Teaching and Learning Report, South Africa, p. xx). This finding suggests that digital resilience was unevenly distributed across institutions and schools, reflecting disparities in technological infrastructure, digital resources, and leadership support. Consequently, pre-service teachers experienced varying levels of access to meaningful WIL opportunities, depending on the capacity of their placement schools to adapt to changing circumstances.

By comparison, institutional documents from the United States reflected more formalized approaches to ensuring continuity during crises. A district-level report stated that “*established digital platforms and leadership protocols enabled teacher candidates to continue clinical practice through hybrid and remote models*” (District Continuity Report, USA, p. xx). These documents indicate that institutional leaders had implemented structured contingency plans, supported by established digital systems and coordinated leadership practices, to minimize disruptions to teacher preparation.

The cross-context analysis demonstrates that digital resilience extends beyond the availability of technological infrastructure. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of strategic leadership, coherent institutional policies, organizational preparedness, and collaborative learning practices. Institutions with clearly defined leadership structures and established digital continuity plans were better positioned to sustain WIL during periods of disruption, whereas institutions with limited infrastructure and less coordinated leadership encountered greater challenges in maintaining quality clinical experiences. These findings underscore the importance of leadership in fostering digital resilience by developing adaptive systems, promoting institutional learning, and ensuring that pre-service teachers can continue meaningful professional practice despite changing educational conditions.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital resilience in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is shaped by the distribution of leadership responsibilities, the positioning of pre-service teachers within digital communities of practice, and the extent to which policy intentions are translated into institutional practice. Across both the South African and United States contexts, policy documents consistently identified digital transformation as a strategic priority for teacher education. However, notable differences emerged in the ways leadership was enacted, the clarity of leadership roles and responsibilities, and the degree to which digital technologies were intentionally integrated into WIL experiences.

The analysis further revealed that leadership practices influenced the development of digital resilience by shaping institutional preparedness, collaboration among stakeholders, and the continuity of learning during periods of disruption. Institutions that articulated clear leadership structures, supported collaborative decision-making, and implemented coordinated digital strategies were better positioned to sustain meaningful WIL experiences. In contrast, contexts where leadership expectations and implementation strategies were less explicit experienced greater variability in the integration of digital technologies and the continuity of professional practice.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of leadership-informed approaches to digital resilience in teacher education. They suggest that strengthening digital resilience requires not only strategic policy commitments but also coherent institutional leadership, collaborative professional learning, and the effective integration of digital technologies into WIL. These findings provide the foundation for the discussion presented in the next chapter, where the results are interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual framework, existing literature, and implications for policy and practice.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications for Policy and Practice

The main implications of this study for policy development and institutional practice in the strengthening of digital resilience are manifold. These relate to the structural, leadership, and cultural conditions that underpin the sustainable digital transformation of educational institutions.

Enhancing Distributed and Strategic Leadership Capacity

The findings indicate that the centrality of distributed leadership requires policies and institutional strategies to prioritize the development of leadership capacity across multiple levels of the organization rather than concentrating responsibility for digital transformation solely within senior leadership positions. Strengthening leadership capacity at all organizational levels enables institutions to respond more effectively to technological change, fosters collaborative decision-making, and enhances the sustainability of digital initiatives.

Professional development programs should therefore extend beyond technical digital competencies to include the knowledge, skills, and practices associated with digital leadership. Such programs should promote collaboration across academic and administrative units, encourage shared responsibility for digital innovation, and empower middle leaders to initiate and implement contextually appropriate technological improvements. By cultivating leadership expertise throughout the institution, organizations can strengthen their capacity to adapt to emerging digital challenges while promoting collective ownership of transformation initiatives.

At the policy level, educational authorities should reinforce these institutional efforts by embedding expectations for distributed leadership within information and communication technology (ICT) and digital transformation policy frameworks. Clearly articulated leadership responsibilities at departmental, faculty, and institutional levels can promote consistency in implementation, strengthen accountability, and facilitate coordinated decision-making. Integrating distributed leadership principles into policy frameworks can therefore support coherent and sustainable digital transformation while enhancing institutional digital resilience.

Embedding Communities of Practice in Institutional Professional Learning Models

This involves a call to formally embed the structures of collaborative professional learning within the staff development models of institutions and to make time, resources, and digital platforms available to facilitate teachers sharing tools, exchanging pedagogical strategies, and reflecting on practice. Institutional policies should position CoPs as one of the core professional learning mechanisms and provide ongoing support, facilitation, and recognition for these networks. This is a part of investing in long-term organizational capacity, as well as a culture of learning.

Remedying Digital Inequalities through Strategic, Long-Term Investment

The revelation of a lack of digital equities within a crisis brings with it the need for, and emphasis on, deliberate, non-crisis-oriented investment in digital space. Equity in accessing devices, internet, and developing the necessary digital skills for both staff and students would need to become a priority at an institutional level. The needs of such policies ought to include a set of provisions that make it possible to support the distribution of resources to underserved

departments, campuses, or communities. The digital equity situation within a country might also need improvement regarding supporting universal access, subsidized data initiatives, and technology procurement.

Achieving Greater Policy Coherence Among Institutional Levels

Findings show that policy coherence is a factor that leads to improved preparedness and implementation capacity within institutions. The alignment of strategic plans, e-transform models, ICT policies, and strategies for teaching and learning should thus be considered by policymakers. Good policy vision, together with a participatory approach in developing a policy, may reduce fragmentation while cultivating a common vision for e-transformation. The senior management at the institutions should thus set frameworks that enable alignment and consistent interpretation of policy within the faculties.

Turning Crises into Opportunities for Structured Innovations

Although crises should not be a central force in adapting to developments in digital technology, they provide a very compelling environment to facilitate reflection and innovation. It is necessary that institutions make use of post-crisis learning practices such as after-action reviews, which enable learning from experiences, identifying impediments, as well as reflecting on and adapting to innovations that are created during a situation of a crisis. Policymakers need to facilitate learning by making resilience planning a central force for adaptation.

Framing a Digital Resilience Structure

It is evident that a comprehensive approach is necessary for digital resilience that links leadership, professional development, infrastructure, and policy alignment from this research. It is therefore essential that institutions develop comprehensive frameworks for digital resilience that clarify goals, roles, and evidence-informed approaches to preparedness, as well as innovation in a digital setting. Such frameworks can be linked to quality assurance and planning cycles to make progress.

CONCLUSION

The research explores how educational institutions navigate digital transformation, though, and across leadership practices, learning cultures, policy contexts, and responses to disruptions. This research concluded that the concept of digital resilience is a complex phenomenon that is shaped by human and structural factors. The themes that cut across, from this research, are leadership practices that are distributed, communities of practice, visionary leadership, innovation in times of crisis, and policy coherence, which layer on top of one another to enable the necessary conditions for a positive adaptation into digital capacity within institutions.

The implications of the findings are that digital transformation is not a technological issue but, on the contrary, a highly social process. This is because, with distributive leadership, there is shared ownership that helps several members within an institution take part in developing an improved form of education through digitization. Communities of practice are infrastructural in ensuring that learning takes place within the peer group, which is a way for teachers to gain more confidence and tackle challenges that come along the way. In all these, visionary leadership is the only component that ensures that digitization is rooted in the organizational goals.

In relation to that, it emphasizes the challenges that would require constant attention. The potential that crises revealed for innovation in institutions might never have been revealed, but alongside that, certain discrepancies, especially regarding inequality, might have been revealed as well. In this regard, policy coherence is a necessary condition within a situation where a certain inequality must be remedied.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the overall conversation on digital resilience in education, and they are meant to affirm that the emergence of resilient development is a result of the interrelationship of leadership, policy, shared sense of culture, and equity in infrastructure. This research has demonstrated that the development of digital resilience in students is not merely the result of a short-term solution but a long-term commitment.

Future studies might follow on from this work by including perspectives from educators, students, and administrators via interviews or even an ethnographic setting, which would enable a far more thorough understanding of the experiences of digital transformation. Comparison within a different geographical setting might shed further light on the factors influencing digital resilience, for instance.

Lastly, the research clearly indicates that for institutions which aim at developing a competitive digital environment, they need to create a setting that is conducive to technological readiness as well as human Readiness to Change.

REFERENCES

- Ainscow, M. (2020). *Promoting inclusion and equity in education: Lessons from international experiences*. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 6(1), 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2020.1729587>
- Aprile, K. T., & Knight, B. A. (2020). The WIL to learn: Students' perspectives on the impact of work-integrated learning placements on their professional readiness. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(5), 869–882.
- Arendse, B., Phillips, H. N., & Waghid, Z. (2024). Leadership dynamics: Managing and leading continuous professional teacher development in schools to enhance learner performance. *Perspectives in Education*, 42(4), 305–319. <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v42i4.7044>
- Bates, T. (2019). *Teaching in a digital age: Guidelines for designing teaching and learning*. Tony Bates Associates.
- Boh, W., Constantinides, P., Padmanabhan, B. and Viswanathan, S. (2023). Building digital resilience against major shocks. *MIS quarterly*, 47(1), pp.343–360.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Connect K12. (2023). *Connect K–12: 2023 national connectivity report*. Education Superhighway. <https://connectk12.org>
- Cooper, L., Orrell, J., & Bowden, M., 2010. *Work integrated learning: A guide to effective practice*. Routledge.
- DataReportal. (2024). *Digital 2024: South Africa*. DataReportal. <https://datareportal.com>

- Department of Education. (2004). *White Paper on E-education: Transforming Learning and Teaching Through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)*. Department of Education.
- Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2013). *White paper for post-school education and training. Building an expanded, effective, and integrated post-school system*. Pretoria, South Africa: DHET.
- Dexter, S. (2018). The role of leadership for information technology in education. *Educational Technology & Society*, 21(2), 234–245.
- Eri, R., Gudimetla, P., Star, S., Rowlands, J., Girgla, A., To, L., Li, F., Sochea, N., Bindal, U., & Dogan, H. (2021). Digital resilience in higher education in response to COVID-19 pandemic: Student perceptions from Asia and Australia. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 18(5), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.18.5.7>
- Free State Provincial Government. (2023). *Free State ICT connectivity rollout progress report*. Department of Education.
- Fullan, M. (2016). *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Fullan, M. (2021). *The right drivers for whole system success*. Centre for Strategic Education.
- Gamage, A. (2022). An inclusive multifaceted approach for the development of electronic work-integrated learning (eWIL) curriculum. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(7), 1357-1371.
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2010). The first decade of the Community of Inquiry framework: A retrospective. *Internet and Higher Education*, 13(1–2), 5–9.
- Goodrick, D. (2014). *Comparative case studies*. UNICEF Office of Research.
- Goodwin, A.L., Madalińska-Michalak, J. and Flores, M.A., (2023). Rethinking teacher education in/for challenging times: Reconciling enduring tensions, imagining new possibilities. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(5), 840-855.
- Hallinger, P. (2011). Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(2), 125–142.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. Teachers College Press.
- Harris, A. (2013). Distributed leadership: Friend or foe? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(5), 545–554.
- Harris, A. (2014). Distributed leadership matters: Perspectives, practicalities, and potential. *School Leadership & Management*, 34(5), 393–395.
- Harris, A., & Spillane, J. (2008). Distributed leadership through the looking glass. *Management in Education*, 22(1), 31–34.
- Jeladze, E., & Pata, K. (2018). Smart, digitally enhanced learning ecosystems: Bottlenecks to sustainability in Georgia. *Sustainability*, 10(8), 2672.
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2015). Teacher agency, positioning, and English language learners: Voices of pre-service teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 45, 94–103.
- Kinder Institute for Urban Research. (2022). *Houston's digital divide: Findings from the COVID-19 education access survey*. Rice University. <https://kinder.rice.edu>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Livingstone, S. (2018). *Digital skills for digital natives?* Oxford Internet Institute.

- Marchese, S., Gastaldi, L., & Corso, M. (2025). Orchestrating innovation ecosystems and digital technologies for dynamic capabilities development: the case of EdTech industry. *European Journal of Innovation Management*, 29(2), 429-463
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Nyathi, T., & Joseph, R. M. (2024). Empowering South African educators: Navigating the challenges of digital teaching and learning competencies. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 22, 1–10.
- OECD. (2021). *The state of school education: One year into the COVID crisis*. OECD Publishing.
- Panadero, E., et al. (2023). Understanding digital competence and digital resilience in education. *Educational Research Review*, 38, 100505.
- Rwodzi, C., & De Jager, L. (2021). Resilient English teachers' use of remote teaching and learning strategies in Gauteng resource-constrained township secondary schools. *Perspectives in Education*, 39(3), 62–78.
- Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane, J. P., Harris, A., Jones, M., & Mertz, K. (2020). Policy, practice, and leadership in schools in disruptive times. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 58(6), 585–598.
- Stats SA. (2024). *General household survey 2023: ICT access and use in South Africa*. Statistics South Africa. <https://statssa.gov.za>
- Sun, H., Yuan, C., Qian, Q., He, S., & Luo, Q. (2022). Digital resilience among individuals in school education settings: a concept analysis based on a scoping review. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 13, 858515.
- Tondeur, J., van Braak, J., Ertmer, P., & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, A. (2017). Understanding the relationship between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and technology use in education. *Computers & Education*, 65, 134–148.
- Trust, T., & Prestridge, S. (2021). The interplay of teachers' professional learning networks and the digital transformation of teaching. *Teachers and Teaching*, 27(1–4), 1–18.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action*. UNESCO.
- Veletsianos, G., & Houlden, S. (2019). An analysis of digital learning during pandemic disruptions. *Online Learning*, 23(4), 109–121.
- Weller, M., & Anderson, T. (2013). Digital resilience in higher education. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 16(1), 53-66.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2020). *Learning to make a difference: Value creation in social learning spaces*. Cambridge University Press.
- White, G. K. (2013). Digital literacy skills for teachers in the early years. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(9), 1–11.
- Williamson, B., & Hogan, A. (2020). *Commercialisation and privatisation in/of education in the context of COVID-19*. Education International.
- Wright, D. J. (2016). Toward a digital resilience. *Elementa*, 4, 000082.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.

BAILA CONMIGO: REIMAGINING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LATINA-CENTERED MENTORING

**Sonia Rodriguez
National University**

Abstract

Despite their growing presence in schools and universities, Latina educators remain underrepresented in educational leadership. Traditional leadership development often overlooks the cultural, relational, and identity-driven strengths Latinas bring to their roles. This article introduces the *Baila Conmigo* framework, a dance-based, culturally sustaining mentoring model designed to support Latina leaders through six interconnected stages: *Calentamiento* (warming up the identity and the story), *Ritmo* (discovering leadership rhythm), *Pareja & Rueda* (community and partnership), *Coreografía* (leadership planning), *Spotlight & Escenario* (visibility and advocacy), and *Celebración* (reflection and legacy). Grounded in lived experience, community cultural wealth, Mujerista thought, and activist scholarship, *Baila Conmigo* offers practical guidance for mentors, leadership programs, and school organizations seeking to foster representation, opportunity, and supportive leadership development. The framework provides a much needed tool for empowerment, connection, and leadership growth at a time when many Latina leaders continue to navigate isolation, underrepresentation, and challenges to advancement. By honoring ancestral wisdom and the collective strength of comunidad, *Baila Conmigo* reimagines leadership development as both a personal and communal journey. *Baila Conmigo* serves as an invitation for Latina leaders to lead with authenticity, purpose, and courage.

Keywords: Latina leadership, mentoring, leadership development, cultural wealth, educational leadership

Across PK–20 educational settings, Latina educators serve in vital roles as teachers, counselors, faculty, and administrators. However, despite their increasing presence, Latinas remain underrepresented in formal leadership positions. Traditional leadership and mentoring programs often emphasize technical skills while insufficiently addressing the cultural, relational, and identity-driven experiences that shape Latina leadership journeys.

In my work as a bilingual classroom teacher, school counselor, educational leader, professor, and mentor, I have witnessed the transformative impact of culturally affirming mentoring relationships. Latina leaders consistently describe leadership as deeply intertwined with family, community, culture, language, and collective responsibility, demonstrating that leadership development is inseparable from identity development.

Drawing from these insights and directly informed by my research, I developed *Baila Conmigo* as a novel framework for Latina leadership development. This model reimagines leadership mentoring through the metaphor of dance, a culturally resonant and relational practice that

embodies tradition, movement, rhythm, partnership, and growth. Latina leadership, much like dance, is not performed in isolation; rather, it is cultivated through guidance, coaching, observation, reflection, community, and spirit.

This practitioner article introduces the *Baila Conmigo* Latina mentoring framework and demonstrates how my research has contributed to its development and application. It offers guidance for educational leadership programs, universities, school districts, and professional organizations seeking to support Latina leaders. The framework provides a culturally responsive approach to mentoring that centers identity, community, voice, and legacy while presenting actionable strategies for effective Latina leadership development.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Power often shapes social norms that constrain women's access to leadership roles, particularly in fields historically construed as masculine. In education, for example, White men have traditionally occupied the highest leadership positions in schools. The conventional vertical and patriarchal structure has consistently positioned White men at the top and minoritized groups, particularly women of color, at the margins of leadership (Brunner, 1999, 2000, 2002; Blount, 1996; Grogan, 1996, 2005; Tallerico, 2005). Although research increasingly demonstrates that women's leadership styles can advance equity and inclusion, women remain substantially underrepresented in the superintendency. More specifically, the superintendent role continues to be among the slowest PK–12 administrative positions to integrate women of color (Tallerico, 2002).

A particularly significant concern is the persistent underrepresentation of Latinas in educational leadership roles, especially superintendent positions. Although the Hispanic student population continues to grow rapidly, Latina superintendents remain markedly underrepresented. In Texas, as of 2018, there were only 14 Latina superintendents out of 1,144; in California, there were 17 out of 948 (Texas State Data Center, 2018; California Department of Education, 2018). Recent qualitative studies (Alvarez, 2025; De La Cruz, 2025; Espinoza, 2025; Castillo et al., 2021; Martinez, 2024) suggest that progress has been limited, underscoring the continued underrepresentation of Latinas in key decision-making roles.

This underrepresentation is especially consequential given the rapidly shifting demographic landscape of U.S. students. The 2020 U.S. Census indicates that Hispanic or Latino people comprise 18.7% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). In California and Texas, that proportion approaches 40%, making Hispanics the largest ethnic group in both states. Hispanic students also account for more than half of public-school enrollment in both states (California Department of Education, 2022; Texas Education Agency, 2022). As these demographic trends continue, the need for representative leadership becomes increasingly urgent. As Ortiz (2001, p. 58) notes, districts “benefit from leaders who are representative of their community's population.” Therefore, given the continued shortage of Latinas in superintendent roles, it is essential to examine and learn from the experiences of those who have reached this level of leadership. Their stories and insights can illuminate pathways and strategies for others who aspire to lead (Alvarez, 2025; Castillo et al., 2021; Espinoza, 2025).

When I began this research, I focused on Mexican American women. This focus reflected my identity and my family's Tejano heritage in Texas, where the Latinx population is predominantly Mexican and Tejano. For clarity, "Tejano" refers to people of Mexican descent whose families lived in Tejas, now Texas, before it became U.S. territory after the Texas Revolution and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. I use "Mexican American" to denote Americans of Mexican descent, distinguishing this group from broader terms such as "Latinx" or "Hispanic." While "Hispanic" generally refers to Spanish-speaking populations and "Latinx/Latino/Latina" includes communities from across Latin America, each subgroup brings distinct histories, cultures, and identities. Scholars have argued that many Latinx communities primarily identify with specific national or regional identities, such as Mexican, Cuban, or Puerto Rican; therefore, these distinctions should be clarified rather than obscured by broad labels.

As my work has evolved, so has my commitment to uplifting Latinas in leadership while honoring the specific cultural and historical perspectives rooted in my Tejana background. My research and my experience co-editing the *Baila Conmigo* series (*Baila Conmigo: Mentoring Latinas for Leadership* and *Baila Conmigo Dos: Mentoring Latina y Hispana Leaders in Higher Education*) inspired the development of a mentoring framework that is intentionally inclusive and deeply attentive to the richness and complexity of Latina identities.

Within the field of mentoring, educational leadership research consistently identifies mentorship as critical to leadership development and advancement. However, many existing mentoring models ground themselves in individualistic assumptions and often overlook the cultural assets that Latina leaders contribute. Latina educators are frequently expected to conform to dominant leadership norms, which can require them to suppress or minimize aspects of their cultural identity to be perceived as fitting within conventional leadership spaces.

Notably, much of the educational leadership and mentoring literature has been shaped by Western organizational traditions that privilege individual achievement, autonomy, and career advancement (Hofstede, 2001; Kram, 1985). Although these models have contributed substantially to leadership development, they often conceptualize mentoring as a dyadic relationship focused primarily on the professional growth of the individual. In contrast, Latina leadership traditions emphasize *familismo*, *comunidad*, reciprocity, and collective responsibility, viewing leadership as relational and deeply embedded within social and cultural networks (Bordas, 2013; Yosso, 2005). Rather than positioning leadership as an individual pursuit, the *Baila Conmigo* mentoring framework recognizes mentoring as a communal process through which cultural knowledge, identity, advocacy, and leadership are cultivated across generations. This culturally grounded orientation extends traditional mentoring models by centering the social, relational, and collective dimensions of Latina leadership development.

Many emerging Latina leaders I have spoken with describe feeling isolated, invisible, or uncertain about whether they belong in leadership spaces. Although these experiences are often described as "impostor syndrome"; I resist that framing because it locates the problem within the individual rather than within the organizational and systemic barriers that have historically excluded Latinas from positions of influence. The challenge is not a lack of capability, talent, or readiness; rather, it is the persistent absence of equitable opportunities, representation, and affirmation.

Access to influential sponsorship and leadership networks remains limited for many Latinas, creating additional barriers to advancement. Although mentoring programs exist within some educational organizations, few are intentionally designed with Latinas in mind or grounded in the cultural values, lived experiences, and strengths they bring to leadership. Too often, these programs overlook the rich community cultural wealth Latinas possess such as familial, aspirational, social, navigational, linguistic, and resistant forms of capital that serve as powerful assets for leadership development. We should not see Latina leaders as lacking in skills; instead, we should see and build on these strengths as important building blocks for leadership growth and advancement.

Thus, the central challenge is not a lack of talent or potential among Latinas. Rather, educational systems often lack mentoring structures that reflect and support the unique experiences, strengths, and aspirations of Latina leaders. Mentoring models must move beyond professional advancement alone by nurturing leadership identity, cultural pride, critical consciousness, and collective empowerment. In response to this gap, the *Baila Conmigo* framework was developed and is designed to help Latina leaders thrive, rather than merely persist, in educational leadership.

THE BAILA CONMIGO FRAMWORK

Baila Conmigo (Dance with Me) was conceptualized as a dance-based mentoring framework grounded in the belief that leadership development is embodied, relational, and culturally situated. Drawing upon the rich traditions of the quinceañera, the framework recognizes that the leadership journeys of Latinas are rarely solitary. Instead, they are enlivened and sustained by a network of comadres, mentors, family members, and community members who guide, encourage, and accompany them every step of the way.

Traditional leadership development models have largely emerged from Western organizational contexts that privilege individual achievement, autonomy, and personal advancement (Hofstede, 2001). These assumptions often contrast with the collectivist orientations reflected in many Latina/o/x communities, where leadership is understood through relationships, reciprocity, and community responsibility. At its core, the mentoring framework draws from Mujerista thought by centering the lived experiences, testimonios, and ancestral wisdom of Latinas. It resists individualistic and Eurocentric notions of leadership, instead affirming that growth emerges through comunidad, relational accountability, collective care, and the moral agency of Latinas as sources of theological and leadership knowledge (Isasi-Díaz, 2004). Within this framework, leadership development is not solely personal; it is embodied, relational, and rooted in culture. The *Baila Conmigo* concept is fundamentally informed by the Mujerista thought, which honors the lived experiences, testimonios, and ancestral wisdom of Latinas. This approach actively resists individualistic and Eurocentric paradigms of leadership, instead arguing that authentic growth flourishes within comunidad, sustained by relational accountability, collective care, and the moral agency of Latinas as central sources of both theological and leadership knowledge (Isasi-Díaz, 2004). Within this epistemological orientation, leadership development transcends individual achievement and focuses on community care, becoming an embodied, relational process deeply rooted in cultural context.

Anchored in *mujerista* scholarship, the *Baila Conmigo* mentoring framework conceptualizes leadership as an inherently culturally affirming, relational, and liberatory endeavor. Drawing upon Comas-Díaz's (2016) theorization of *mujerista* psychospirituality, the framework acknowledges that effective mentoring must encompass not only professional competencies, but also the cultivation of cultural identity, spirituality, collective healing, and resilience in response to systemic inequities. Similarly, Bryant-Davis and Comas-Díaz (2016) emphasize that *mujerista* psychology foregrounds the lived realities, cultural assets, and voices of Latinas as reservoirs of knowledge and empowerment. This scholarship provides a robust foundation for *Baila Conmigo*'s intentional use of storytelling, community engagement, and reciprocal mentoring as mechanisms to foster culturally responsive leadership.

The *Baila Conmigo* framework honors mentoring as a communal and spiritual practice, where Latinas are continually accompanied by *comadres*, elders, and community networks who collectively nurture leadership potential. Leadership is seen not as a solitary ascent but as a relational dance, sustained by guardianship, reciprocity, and the affirmation of cultural identity. This philosophy is deeply connected to the ancestral practices of dance as a source of energy, empowerment, and community among women.

For example, in pre-Columbian Maya civilization, ceremonial dance was central to spiritual and communal life. Through ritual movement and trance, Mayan women embodied their "wayob" or soul companions, bridging human and divine realms and drawing strength from ancestral connections (Houston, 2023; Maya Dance, n.d.). Dance represents an embodied form of relational leadership in which leadership and followership are co-constructed through trust, reciprocity, movement, and mutual responsiveness (Matzdorf & Sen, 2015).

Contextually, across cultures, dance has long served as an embodied practice through which communities preserve cultural knowledge, strengthen collective identity, and cultivate resilience (Ehrenreich, 2006; Hanna, 1987). Within Chicana and Latina traditions, dance extends beyond artistic expression to become a celebration of heritage, intergenerational connection, and cultural resistance. Whether expressed through *danza folklórica*, *matachines*, Aztec/Conchero dance, Tejano dance halls, or family celebrations such as *quinceañeras*, dance reinforces *comunidad*, affirms cultural identity, and creates spaces where women exercise agency, leadership, and belonging (Bordas, 2013; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Hurtado, 2003). It is this understanding of dance as a relational, cultural, and empowering practice that serves as the foundation for the *Baila Conmigo* mentoring framework.

This reverence for dance as a spiritual and communal force is echoed across the world. In the Balkan women's circle dances, for instance, movement becomes a shared language of healing, celebration, and empowerment, preserving cultural memory and fostering solidarity, even within patriarchal contexts (Gimbutas, 2019). Symbolizing the graceful progression of a dance, The *Baila Conmigo* framework unfolds through six interconnected stages that nurture leadership development, identity formation, and transformational growth. Yet, before stepping onto this vibrant leadership dance floor, it is essential to pause and embrace the wisdom drawn from both cultural heritage and lived experience, that will guide each movement.

BAILA CONSEJOS: WORDS OF WISDOM FOR LATINA LEADERS

Over time, I have examined how many Latina leaders draw strength from simple yet powerful *consejos*, or timeless words of wisdom that celebrate both cultural heritage and leadership potential. These *Baila Consejos* are more than guiding principles; as they function as affirmations and reminders that every Latina leader carries a unique rhythm, a story worth sharing, and a source of strength that should be recognized.

Each *consejo* aligns with a letter in “Baila” (“Dance”), underscoring that leadership, much like dance, is both a personal expression and a collective celebration:

- B — Believe in yourself. Trust that you belong at the table and in every room you enter. Your voice, your story, and your presence matter.
- A — Access your currency. Recognize the skills, knowledge, and relationships you already possess. Strengthen your currency by establishing interpersonal networks. These are the keys to opening doors not just for yourself, but for others who will follow.
- I — Incorporate your cultural wealth. Embrace and draw deeply from your heritage, your traditions, and your ancestors. Let your origins ground and elevate your vision as a leader.
- L — Listen to your “gut.” Trust your intuition and honor your lived experiences. True leadership means having the courage to believe in yourself, especially when the path forward is unclear.
- A — Accept change. Embrace transitions and new opportunities with resilience and hope. Leadership development means stepping into the unknown and opening new doors but remember you never dance alone.

These *consejos* are woven throughout every stage of the *Baila Conmigo* framework, infusing each step with empowerment, wisdom, values, and the lived realities of Latina leaders. By centering these affirmations, the model encourages Latinas to embrace both the challenges and triumphs of leadership with pride, dignity, agency, and a deep sense of unity. Therefore, these *Baila Consejos* provide the spirit and foundation for the mentoring journey. They are not merely words of encouragement but guiding principles that accompany Latina leaders as they navigate opportunities, challenges, and moments of transformation. The *Baila Conmigo* Mentoring Framework is based on *Mujerista* thought and shaped by the lived experiences of Latinas, and it unfolds through a series of interconnected stages. Like a dance, leadership development is not linear; it is dynamic, relational, and shaped by reflection, movement, and community. I offer these *Baila Consejos* as a heartfelt gift from my *corazón* (heart), words of encouragement, wisdom, and affirmation for every Latina leader preparing to step boldly onto the leadership dance floor. May they serve as a reminder that you carry within you the strength of your ancestors, the support of your *comunidad*, and the courage to lead with authenticity, purpose, and grace.

THE SIX STAGES OF THE BAILA CONMIGO MENTORING FRAMEWORK

The six stages that follow invite Latina leaders to honor their stories, embrace their cultural wealth, and step into leadership with confidence and authenticity.

Calentamiento: Warming Up the Soul

With these guiding words in mind, the mentoring process begins with the Calentamiento (warm-up), the first stage of the leadership dance. Just as dancers warm-up before performing, leaders must cultivate self-awareness by examining their identities and the experiences that have shaped them. This stage invites participants to explore personal identity, family histories and traditions, cultural norms and values, community influences, and personal testimonios. Another, aspect of the Calentamiento, is identity and the story. Mentors are a part of both and create supportive spaces for critical dialogue about origin stories, influential role models, and cultural strengths such as familismo (family), respeto (respect), perseverance, and service. Leaders are encouraged to craft identity statements that connect their personal journeys to their professional aspirations. Through Calentamiento, Latina leaders are reminded that their cultural identities are powerful assets and sources of resilience, wisdom, and inspiration for the leadership journey ahead.

Ritmo: Discovering Leadership Tempo

Every dancer has a rhythm, and every leader has a distinctive leadership style. During the Ritmo (rhythm) stage, participants examine their natural leadership tendencies and learn to embrace authentic approaches to leadership. Using dance metaphors rooted in Tejano and Latina traditions such as cumbia, salsa, bachata, merengue, Tejano two-step, conjunto polka, ranchera, and norteño waltz, participants discover how they engage with others, make decisions, and respond to challenges. In turn, these discussions focus on emotional intelligence, resilience, and self-awareness. It is important to note that rather than encouraging Latina leaders to imitate dominant leadership styles, the framework encourages them to identify and leverage their own cultural attributes and strengths. Participants learn that effective leadership does not require abandoning cultural identity or authenticity.

Pareja and Rueda: Mentoring Through Relationship and Community

At the heart of *Baila Conmigo* is the belief that leadership develops through relationships, reflecting the communal spirit of the quinceañera tradition. The *Pareja* (partner) and *Rueda* (circle) stages emphasize mentoring partnerships and collective learning communities rooted in *comadrazgo*. For example, participants engage in one-on-one mentoring relationships while also participating in peer mentoring circles. These circles create opportunities to exchange diverse perspectives, engage in collective problem-solving, share lived experiences, and transmit wisdom across generations. Therefore, an important feature of this stage is sponsorship. Participants are encouraged not only to mentor others but also to actively advocate for emerging Latina leaders by creating opportunities, making introductions, empowering others, and amplifying voices. Through this process, mentoring becomes a reciprocal practice that benefits both mentors and mentees.

Coreografía: Designing the Leadership Journey

The fourth stage, Coreografía, turns vision into action as participants set leadership goals and create personalized plans that define clear pathways for growth. In this stage, mentors support participants in identifying leadership competencies, addressing barriers, and establishing milestones. Leadership development is viewed as choreography, an intentional sequence of steps that requires practice, adjustment, and persistence. Through this stage, participants develop action plans related to leadership roles, professional learning opportunities, networking goals,

and advocacy efforts. Progress is reviewed regularly, allowing leaders to reflect, revise, and continue moving forward.

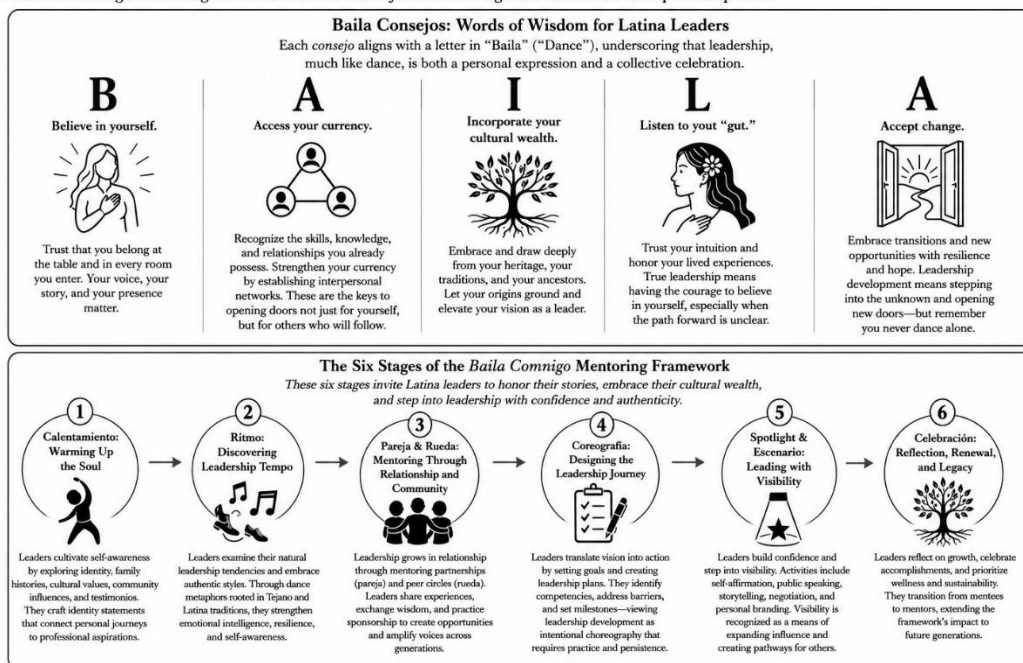
Spotlight and Escenario: Leading with Visibility

Many Latina leaders bring deep talent, knowledge, and expertise to their work, yet cultural and organizational influences can sometimes make visibility difficult. The Spotlight stage supports participants in moving beyond their comfort zones and entering leadership spaces with confidence and presence. Activities may include self-affirmation, public speaking practice, presentation development, storytelling, salary negotiation preparation, and personal branding. Participants learn strategies for advocating for themselves and their communities while maintaining authenticity and cultural grounding. This stage encourages Latina leaders to recognize that visibility is not self-promotion for its own sake; rather, it is a means of expanding influence and creating pathways for others. As participants embrace their leadership voice, they become better prepared to serve as advocates, change agents, and role models.

Celebración: Reflection, Renewal, and Legacy

The final stage, Celebración, recognizes that leadership development is ongoing. Participants reflect on their growth, celebrate accomplishments, and consider how they will support future leaders. In this stage, reflection activities encourage participants to examine how their leadership identities have evolved throughout the mentoring experience. Discussions also emphasize wellness, sustainability, and the importance of rest as a leadership practice. Most importantly, participants are invited to transition from mentees to mentors, extending the framework's impact to future generations. The dance continues as each leader contributes to a broader community of support and empowerment.

Figure 1.
The *Baila Conmigo* Mentoring Framework: *Baila Consejos* and Six Stages for Latina Leadership Development



Note. *Baila* (Dance) is an acronym representing core *consejos* that ground the framework in cultural values and leadership wisdom. The six stages are iterative and cyclical, reflecting the ongoing nature of leadership growth and community.

EVIDENCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACT

While the *Baila Connmigo* mentoring framework remains in the developmental phase, initial applications in mentoring, professional development, workshops, webinars, and leadership preparation have produced several promising outcomes. In the absence of formal evaluation data, practitioner testimonios and reflective perspectives provide valuable qualitative evidence regarding the framework's value for Latina leadership development.

Participants frequently report:

- Increased confidence in their leadership abilities
- Enhanced connection to cultural identity
- A stronger sense of belonging within leadership communities.

The framework's focus on shared live experiences, storytelling, and identity affirmation is frequently cited as empowering. As one Professor Emeritus described,

Baila Connmigo is cultural dance that enables us to take a peek at the complexities of navigating the labyrinth of educational leadership intertwined with culture, language, and ethnicity.

Moreover, *Baila Connmigo* has contributed to the development of sustained professional networks. Mentoring relationships and peer support systems often persist beyond the formal boundaries of programming, cultivating ongoing communities of practice. An Executive Director of an Educational Leadership Professional Organization reflected:

In the journeys of strength, solidarity, and Resistencia, shared here (*Baila Connmigo*), there is hope for Latina women, and those who identify as women, who are ready and eager to add their beautiful songs to ours.

Within leadership preparation programs, the framework provides a practical structure for integrating leadership theory with culturally responsive practice. Rather than positioning diversity and equity as discrete topics, *Baila Connmigo* embeds these principles across all stages of leadership development. As articulated by a Community College Chancellor,

Baila Connmigo highlights how mentoring remains one of the most critical tools in Latina educator success! It is sure to influence how you approach and understand educational leadership.

The framework is especially relevant for Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and organizations seeking to strengthen leadership pipelines for historically underrepresented groups. Given the growing demographic presence of Latina/o/x students, culturally grounded leadership development models are increasingly essential. A Director of Professional Leadership Programs with the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities commented:

Your work hits right at the center of what drives me. Also, this program isn't about me, so moving past my fan girl moment, you absolutely hit the target with your framework. They speak directly to what PK–12 leaders, especially Latinas, need to thrive.”

Collectively, these participant reflections serve as early indicators of the framework's potential impact. As implementation expands, ongoing collection and analysis of participant feedback will be critical for future evaluation and refinement of *Baila Conmigo* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yosso, 2005).

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As indicated below, several lessons have emerged through the development of the framework.

1. First, identity matters. Leadership development is most effective when participants are encouraged to explore and affirm their cultural identities rather than suppress them.
2. Second, mentoring should be relational rather than transactional. Trust, vulnerability, and mutual learning create conditions that support meaningful growth.
3. Third, leadership development must be grounded in community. While individual mentoring is valuable, peer networks and shared learning opportunities strengthen its impact.
4. Fourth, visibility is a leadership skill. Many talented leaders require intentional support in developing confidence, voice, and advocacy strategies.
5. Finally, sustainability matters. Effective leadership development includes attention to wellness, reflection, and legacy.

Organizations interested in implementing *Baila Conmigo* should consider creating cohort-based mentoring experiences, leadership circles, facilitator training programs, and opportunities for participants to transition into mentoring roles.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As the *Baila Conmigo* framework continues to evolve, the next stage is to finalize our co-edited book *Baila Conmigo Tres: Resisting Erasure Mentoring Latinx Activist Scholarship in the Academy*. This forthcoming work explores and supports activist scholarship and strategies for resisting erasure among traditionally marginalized groups within academic spaces and will provide additional relevant research for the framework.

Building on the established foundations, the subsequent project will involve co-authoring a practical “how-to” handbook and implementation guide. Designed for use in workshops, leadership programs, and school or community organizations, this resource will translate the core principles of *Baila Conmigo* into actionable steps, tools, and activities for practitioners and facilitators. The handbook aims to make the framework accessible for hands-on training, professional development, and ongoing program development.

The ongoing application of the *Baila Conmigo* mentoring framework in workshops and conference presentations will provide opportunities for constructive feedback, allowing the framework and its resources to be refined based on practitioner experience and participant outcomes. These efforts will further support the cultivation of culturally responsive leadership practices at multiple levels which include local, regional, national, and international.

While the *Baila Conmigo* concept remains unapologetically centered on the lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and leadership journeys of Latinas, the framework contains elements such as identity affirmation, relational mentoring, and community-building that may hold transferable value for mentoring initiatives in other disciplines or among other historically underrepresented groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Practitioners outside of education, or those working with diverse populations, may thoughtfully adapt select practices while respecting the cultural specificity and epistemological foundations of the original model.

Future research should investigate the impact of the *Baila Conmigo* concept across varied educational and professional contexts and explore how principles of the framework might inform or inspire culturally grounded mentoring in other fields, always with an emphasis on adaptation rather than generalization (Yosso, 2005). Through these next steps, *Baila Conmigo* seeks to advance leadership development that affirms identity, resists erasure, and centers Latina and Latinx voices, while offering insights that others may thoughtfully consider for their own communities.

CONCLUSION

The *Baila Conmigo* framework offers educational leaders a culturally grounded approach to Latina leadership development, honoring identity, community, and collective growth. *Baila Conmigo* was intentionally developed from Mujerista thought, which recognizes the lived experiences, testimonios, and cultural knowledge of Latinas as legitimate sources of theory and practice (Isasi-Díaz, 2004). Expanding the framework to encompass all marginalized populations would risk diminishing the very epistemological foundations from which it emerged.

Through six interconnected stages; Calentamiento, Ritmo, Pareja and Rueda, Coreografía, Spotlight, and Celebración, the framework supports leaders in developing confidence, voice, purpose, and legacy. As educational institutions continue to seek more inclusive approaches to leadership development, mentoring models that affirm culture, identity, and community become increasingly important. *Baila Conmigo* invites Latina leaders to step onto the leadership dance floor with courage, authenticity, and connection. More importantly, it reminds us that leadership is not a solo performance; it is a dance we learn, practice, and share together.

REFERENCES

- Alvarez, M. (2025). *Latina triunfadoras: Testimonios and consejos of Latina superintendents in California* (Doctoral dissertation, Loyola Marymount University).
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Blount, J. M. (1996). *Destined to rule the schools: Women and the superintendency*. State University of New York Press.

- Bordas, J. (2013). *The power of Latino leadership: Culture, inclusion, and contribution*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Brunner, C. C. (1999). *Sacred dreams: Women and the superintendency*. State University of New York Press.
- Bryant-Davis, T., & Comas-Díaz, L. (2016). Introduction: Womanist and mujerista psychologies. In T. Bryant-Davis & L. Comas-Díaz (Eds.), *Womanist and mujerista psychologies: Voices of fire, acts of courage* (pp. 3–25). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14937-001>
- California Department of Education. (2018). *Enrollment in California public schools by ethnic designation, 2017–18*. DataQuest. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>
- California Department of Education, Dataquest. (2017). *Enrollment in California public schools, 2017–18*. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>
- Carrión-Méndez, J. M. (2009). *Latinas as school superintendents in Arizona: Voices from the field, hope for the future* (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (UMI No. 3353673)
- Castillo, I., Menchaca, V. D., & Lopez-Estrada, V. (2021). Latina female superintendents securing positions in small rural school districts. *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice*, 17(4), 7–23.
- Comas-Díaz, L. (2016). Mujerista psychospirituality. In T. Bryant-Davis & L. Comas-Díaz (Eds.), *Womanist and mujerista psychologies: Voices of fire, acts of courage* (pp. 149–169). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14937-007>
- Delgado Bernal, D. (1998). Using a Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68(4), 555–582. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.68.4.5wv1034973g22q48>
- De La Cruz, M. (2025). *Exploring factors that contribute to the success of Latina superintendents in South Texas* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley).
- Ehrenreich, B. (2006). *Dancing in the streets: A history of collective joy*. Metropolitan Books.
- Espinoza, L. (2025). *Las Jefas: Latina leadership on the US-Mexico Border Region* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at El Paso).
- Flores, R. (1975). The new Chicana and machismo. In A. M. Garcia (Ed.), *Chicana feminist thought: The basic historical writings* (pp. 95–100). Routledge.
- Gallardo, S. (1996). *Making face, making soul: A Chicana feminist website*. <http://chicanas.com/intro.htm>
- Gonzalez, A., Lara, I., Prado, C., Lujan Rivera, S., & Rodriguez, C. (2015). Passing the sage: Our sacred testimonio as curandera scholar activists in academia. *Chicana/Latina Studies*, 15(1), 110–155.
- Grogan, M. (1996). *Voices of women aspiring to the superintendency*. State University of New York Press.
- Gimbutas, M. (2019). Women, ritual, and rower: Placing Balkan Circle Dance in historical context. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(4), 391–405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735019859470>
- Hanna, J. L. (1987). *To dance is human: A theory of nonverbal communication*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hare-Mustin, R. T., & Marecek, J. (1988). The meaning of difference: Gender theory, postmodernism, and psychology. *American Psychologist*, 43(6), 455–464.

- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Cultural consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Sage.
- Hord, S., & Estes, N. (1993). Superintendent selection and success. In D. Carter, T. Glass, & S. Hord (Eds.), *Selecting, preparing, and developing the school district superintendent* (pp. 71–84). Falmer Press.
- Houston, S. (2023). Maya Dance. In *the Encyclopedia of Ancient Mesoamerica*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_dance
- Hurtado, A. (2003). *Voicing Chicana feminisms: Young women speak out on sexuality and identity*. New York University Press.
- Isasi-Díaz, A. M. (2004). *En la lucha / In the struggle: Elaborating a mujerista theology*. Fortress Press.
- Isasi-Díaz, A. M. (2004). *Mujerista theology: A theology for the Twenty-First Century*. Orbis Books.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage.
- Martínez, G. J. (2016). *La fortaleza de la mujer latina: A superintendent's testimonio* (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Martinez, R. (2024). Why are so few Latinas serving as superintendents? A call to action Following a Decade of Minimal Progress. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 23(2), 115-132.
- Méndez-Morse, S. E. (1997). *The meaning of becoming a superintendent: A phenomenological study of Mexican American female superintendents* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Mendoza-Reis, N., & Rodriguez, S. (2025). *Baila conmigo dos: Mentoring Latina y Hispana leaders in higher education*. ICPEL Publishing.
- Mexican Folk Dance. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican_folk_dance
- Maya Dance. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_dance
- Nestor-Baker, N. S., & Hoy, W. K. (2001). Tacit knowledge of school superintendents: Its nature, meaning, and content. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 37(1), 86–129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00131610121969253>
- Nieto, C. (1974). The Chicana and the women's rights movement. In A. M. Garcia (Ed.), *Chicana feminist thought: The basic historical writings* (pp. 206–211). Routledge.
- Nieves, N. L. (2016). *A study of Latina superintendents in New Jersey: "Cumpliendo metas"* (Doctoral dissertation, Seton Hall University). <http://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/2175/>
- Ortiz, F. I. (1999). Seeking and selecting Hispanic female superintendents. In C. C. Brunner (Ed.), *Sacred dreams: Women and the superintendency* (pp. 91–101). State University of New York Press.
- Rodriguez, S. (2014). *Extraordinary women in Texas: A phenomenological study of Mexican American female superintendents* (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Rodriguez, S., & Mendoza-Reis, N. (2023). *Baila conmigo: Mentoring Latinas as school leaders*. ICPEL Publishing.
- Sandoval, A. (1973). Chicana liberation. In A. M. Garcia (Ed.), *Chicana feminist thought: The basic historical writings* (pp. 204–205). Routledge.
- Tallerico, M. (2000). *Accessing the superintendency: The unwritten rules*. Corwin Press.

- Texas Demographic Center. (2018). 2018 Population estimates and projections. <https://www.demographics.texas.gov/Visualizations/2019/PopEstimates/>
- Texas Education Agency, Department of Assessment and Accountability, Division of Research and Analysis. (2017). *Enrollment in Texas public schools, 2017–18* (Document No. GE12 601 01). http://www.tea.state.tx.us/acctres/Enroll_2017.18.pdf
- Tooms, A. K., Lugg, C. A., & Bogotch, I. (2010). Rethinking the politics of fit and educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(1), 9–44.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>

STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF FOUR-DAY SCHOOL WEEKS: LEADERSHIP AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS IN K–12 EDUCATION

Kathryn Washington
Lamar University

Janice L. Taylor
Lamar University

Frances Martinez-Perez
Lamar University

Abstract

As school districts increasingly consider four-day school weeks to address staffing shortages and educator burnout, educational leaders must weigh potential benefits against instructional, equity, and community implications. This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to explore the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and school board members regarding a four-day school week, drawing from diverse school districts throughout the United States. Quantitative survey data were analyzed to identify differences across stakeholder groups, while qualitative data from surveys, focus groups, and interviews were thematically analyzed to provide contextualized explanations. Findings indicate administrators and school board members more strongly perceived benefits related to recruitment and retention, whereas teachers emphasized improvements in work–life balance and sustainability. Teachers also expressed greater concern regarding instructional quality, student fatigue, childcare access, and equity for families with limited resources. Integrated findings suggest stakeholder support for a four-day schedule is conditional and shaped by role, proximity to practice, and perceived mitigation strategies. Implications for school leadership highlight the importance of inclusive decision-making, equity-centered planning, and ongoing evaluation when considering alternative scheduling models.

Keywords: four-day school week, teacher recruitment and retention, teacher burnout, educational leadership, school scheduling policy, educational equity, mixed methods research

School calendar reform has emerged as one of the most visible leadership strategies for addressing structural pressures in K–12 education. Over the past decade, more than 1,600 school districts across the United States have adopted a four-day school week (4DSW), most often in rural and economically constrained communities (Morton et al., 2024). Although initially justified as a cost-saving measure, the four-day school week has increasingly been positioned as a response to teacher shortages, educator burnout, and persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff (Morton & DeWitt, 2024). Districts frequently cite savings in transportation and operations, as well as improved staff morale, as central motivations for the shift (Anderson & Walker, 2015).

Despite its rapid expansion, the four-day school week remains a contested reform. Quantitative studies have examined its effects on student achievement, attendance, and staffing, often reporting modest or mixed outcomes (Anderson & Walker, 2015; Morton, 2022; Morton et al.,

2024; Thompson, 2019). These findings have fueled debate about whether reducing instructional days compromises academic quality. However, far less is known about how those responsible for implementing and governing the four-day week experience this reform in practice. This gap is especially consequential for educational leadership because calendar reform reshapes instructional rhythms, labor expectations, and family–school relationships in ways that extend beyond test scores.

From a leadership perspective, the four-day school week represents far more than a scheduling adjustment. It requires administrators, teachers, school boards, and community partners to renegotiate responsibilities for learning, supervision, meals, transportation, and student support. These shifts raise serious equity concerns, particularly for families who rely on schools for childcare, nutrition, and structured daily supervision (Day et al., 2025). For these families, the non-instructional day may represent not only flexibility but also increased financial, logistical, and safety risks. Consequently, the four-day school week offers a powerful case for examining how leadership, policy implementation, and equity intersect in real-world school reform. The purpose of this study is to examine how key professional stakeholders perceive the four-day school week and how those perceptions shape leadership and implementation dynamics.

Specifically, this study addresses three research questions:

1. How do teachers, administrators, and school board members differ in their perceptions of the benefits of a four-day school week?
2. What themes emerge from stakeholder narratives regarding equity, well-being, and community impact?
3. How do these perceptions inform leadership and implementation strategies for calendar reform?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The four-day school week (4DSW) has transitioned from a marginal innovation to a widely adopted calendar reform across the United States. More than 1,600 districts, serving hundreds of thousands of students, have implemented four-day schedules, with the highest concentration in rural and economically constrained regions (Morton et al., 2024). Early adopters frequently cited transportation, energy, and food-service savings as primary motivations (Anderson & Walker, 2015). However, in recent years the rationale for adoption has shifted toward addressing chronic workforce instability, teacher shortages, and educator burnout (Morton & DeWitt, 2024).

The post-pandemic educational landscape has intensified these pressures. Districts now face historically high teacher attrition, difficulties filling specialized positions, and increasing demands for mental health and social-emotional supports. Within this context, the 4DSW has emerged as a labor policy as much as an instructional one, offering districts a non-monetary incentive to attract and retain staff (Camp et al., 2025). While the fiscal savings associated with four-day schedules are often modest, their symbolic and practical value as a quality-of-life improvement for educators has driven renewed interest (Morton & DeWitt, 2024).

Yet the growth of the four-day school week has not been uniform. Morton et al. (2024) found adoption patterns vary by state policy environments, labor market conditions, and community

demographics. Rural districts with limited tax bases and fewer employment alternatives have been particularly likely to adopt compressed schedules. These patterns suggest calendar reform is shaped by structural inequality and resource constraints, raising important leadership and equity questions that extend beyond efficiency.

Four-Day School Weeks and Student Outcomes

A substantial body of research has examined the academic consequences of four-day school weeks, often with mixed or modest findings. Anderson and Walker (2015) discovered small negative effects on student achievement in some contexts, particularly in mathematics, while Thompson (2019) reported little systematic difference in test scores between four-day and five-day schedules in Oregon. More recent multi-state analyses similarly suggest achievement effects are heterogeneous and dependent on local implementation conditions (Morton et al., 2024).

One explanation for these mixed results lies in how instructional time is reallocated. Most four-day schedules lengthen the remaining school days, attempting to preserve total weekly instructional minutes. However, Day et al. (2025) noted extended days may disproportionately tax younger students' attention and stamina, potentially undermining instructional quality even when time requirements are technically met. Moreover, longer days can complicate participation in extracurricular activities and special education services.

Equity concerns also emerge in this literature. Morton et al. (2024) ascertained achievement effects varied across student subgroups, with economically disadvantaged students sometimes experiencing larger declines. These patterns suggest calendar reform may interact with family resources and community capacity in ways that widen existing gaps. Despite these risks, achievement-focused studies rarely incorporate leadership or implementation variables, leaving unanswered questions about how local governance and stakeholder engagement shape academic outcomes.

Teacher Labor, Burnout, and Retention

One of the most consistent findings in the 4DSW literature is its relationship to teacher labor conditions. Camp et al. (2025) found districts adopting four-day schedules experienced improved recruitment and retention, particularly in hard-to-staff rural areas. Similarly, Morton and DeWitt (2024) reported Colorado districts using four-day schedules saw reductions in teacher turnover and increases in applicant pools.

These patterns align with broader research on teacher burnout and working conditions. Johnson et al. (2012) demonstrated that workload, time pressure, and emotional exhaustion are key drivers of attrition, particularly in high-need schools. By offering an additional non-instructional day, four-day schedules may alleviate some of these pressures by creating space for planning, recovery, and family responsibilities.

From a leadership perspective, these findings position calendar reform as a workforce policy. Ingersoll and Collins (2017) argued organizational conditions, not individual deficits, are the primary drivers of teacher turnover. Leaders who adopt four-day schedules may therefore be attempting to restructure the organization in ways that make teaching more sustainable.

However, focusing primarily on teacher labor risks obscuring the broader system impacts of calendar change, particularly for students and families.

Equity, Childcare, and Family Capacity

Schools function not only as instructional institutions but also as pillars of the social safety net. They provide meals, supervision, transportation, and stability for millions of children, particularly those from low-income families (Rothstein, 2014). The four-day school week disrupts this infrastructure by shifting responsibility for care and supervision onto families and communities.

Day et al. (2025) identified childcare access as one of the most significant challenges associated with four-day schedules. Families with flexible work arrangements or financial resources may view the non-instructional day as an opportunity for enrichment or rest. In contrast, families working hourly or multiple jobs often struggle to secure affordable childcare, leaving students unsupervised or in unstable arrangements.

Food insecurity is another critical concern. Many students rely on school meals for daily nutrition, and a non-instructional day can exacerbate hunger and stress for vulnerable families. Cooper et al. (2021) emphasized the role of schools in supporting student mental health, noting instability in routines and basic needs undermines emotional well-being and learning. Steinberg and Lacoë (2018) further demonstrated access to childcare is linked to academic outcomes, suggesting calendar reforms that reduce school-provided supervision may have indirect effects on achievement. These findings underscore the four-day school week is an equity-sensitive policy whose consequences depend heavily on family and community capacity.

Community Impacts and Cross-Sector Burden

Calendar reform also redistributes responsibility beyond families to community organizations, including nonprofits, faith-based groups, and youth-serving agencies. Stone et al. (2001) argued successful education reform requires civic capacity, the ability of institutions across sectors to coordinate and share responsibility for children's well-being. Four-day schedules test this capacity by increasing demand for community-based supervision, meals, and enrichment. Day et al. (2025) found in many districts, local organizations became de facto providers of fifth-day programming, often without stable funding or coordination. Honig (2006) warned such policy drift occurs when reforms shift burdens onto actors who lack the resources or authority to meet new expectations. From a leadership standpoint, failing to engage community partners in calendar reform risks overloading already strained systems.

Policy Implementation in Education Reform

The four-day school week exemplifies the complexity of policy implementation in education. Honig (2006) argued reforms succeed or fail based on how they are interpreted and enacted by local actors. Calendar change requires adjustments to transportation, instruction, food service, special education, and family communication, making it a deeply embedded organizational reform.

Coburn (2001) demonstrated educators engage in collective sensemaking when interpreting new policies, negotiating meaning through professional interaction. Similarly, Lipsky's (1980)

concept of street-level bureaucracy highlights how frontline workers adapt policy to fit daily realities. In the context of four-day schedules, teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria staff, and administrators must reconcile policy intent with practical constraints. These frameworks suggest leadership must attend not only to formal policy adoption but also to how reforms are experienced and enacted across the system. Without this attention, well-intentioned calendar changes can produce unintended consequences.

Distributed Leadership and Large-Scale Change

Distributed leadership theory provides a useful lens for understanding how calendar reform unfolds. Spillane (2006) conceptualized leadership as a practice distributed across people and situations, rather than confined to formal roles. Harris (2008) found distributed leadership is particularly important in periods of organizational change, when expertise and influence must be mobilized across the system.

Leithwood et al. (2020) identified shared vision, relational trust, and collaborative problem-solving as core elements of successful leadership. Sun and Leithwood (2015) further emphasized the role of direction-setting and stakeholder engagement in sustaining reform. These insights suggest four-day school weeks require leaders to engage teachers, school boards, and communities in ongoing sensemaking and adaptation.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite a growing body of research on four-day school weeks, significant gaps remain. Most studies focus narrowly on achievement or staffing, with limited attention to leadership, equity, or governance (Anderson & Walker, 2015; Thompson, 2019; Morton & DeWitt, 2024). School board perspectives are rarely included, and few studies use mixed-methods designs to integrate quantitative patterns with stakeholder experiences. Moreover, community impacts and implementation processes remain under-theorized.

By examining stakeholder perceptions through the lenses of distributed leadership and policy implementation, this study addresses these gaps and contributes a more holistic understanding of calendar reform.

Scientific and Scholarly Significance

This study addresses critical gaps in the literature on school calendar reform by centering leadership, equity, and policy implementation. While the four-day school week has become a prominent feature of the contemporary educational landscape, relatively little research has examined how distributed leadership and stakeholder sensemaking shape its adoption and effects.

By combining robust theoretical frameworks with a rigorous mixed-methods design, this study contributes to scholarship on educational leadership, organizational change, and policy implementation. It advances understanding of how leaders and stakeholders negotiate reforms redistribute time, labor, and responsibility in ways that can either mitigate or exacerbate inequality.

Practically, the findings offer district leaders and school boards evidence-based guidance for navigating calendar reform while balancing competing demands for efficiency, equity, and instructional quality. The study also informs leadership preparation programs by illustrating how complex policy changes unfold in real organizational and community contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and policy implementation theory (Honig, 2006). Together, these perspectives provide a lens for understanding how the four-day school week is interpreted, enacted, and sustained within school systems.

Distributed leadership theory conceptualizes leadership as an organizational practice rather than a function of formal authority (Spillane, 2006). Leadership emerges through interactions among administrators, teachers, school boards, and community members as they collectively make sense of problems and coordinate action. In the context of a four-day school week, leadership involves negotiating competing priorities such as workforce sustainability, instructional quality, family needs, and fiscal responsibility. Rather than viewing calendar reform as a top-down administrative decision, distributed leadership highlights how multiple actors shape how the policy is understood and operationalized.

Policy implementation theory emphasizes educational reforms do not move from policy to practice in linear or predictable ways. Instead, reforms are filtered through local contexts, organizational routines, and stakeholder beliefs (Honig, 2006). Calendar reforms must be translated into daily practices governing transportation, instructional pacing, meal provision, childcare, and supervision. These processes involve both formal rules and informal negotiations. Whether a four-day school week succeeds or fails depends largely on how well leaders align the policy with community capacity, professional norms, and student needs.

By integrating these frameworks, this study positions stakeholder perceptions as central to understanding how the four-day school week functions in practice. Leadership effectiveness depends on how well district and school leaders align policy goals with the lived realities of educators, families, and communities.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and integrated during analysis. This approach allowed statistical patterns in stakeholder perceptions to be interpreted through the lived experiences and contextual insights of participants.

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study comprised 120 individuals, including teachers, school administrators, and school board members. These individuals were drawn from various types of K-12 districts throughout the United States, all of which were either currently implementing or

contemplating the adoption of a four-day school week. A combination of purposive and stratified sampling was used to ensure representation across professional roles (teacher, administrator, board member) and school levels (elementary, middle, and high school).

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Survey instruments measured stakeholder perceptions across three domains:

- (a) staff recruitment and retention,
- (b) staff work–life balance, and
- (c) family flexibility.

Likert-scale items were adapted from prior studies of stakeholder perceptions of calendar change (Patterson et al., 2020). One-way ANOVA was used to test for statistically significant differences among teachers, administrators, and school board members. See Appendix A for the full survey instrument.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Focus groups were conducted with teachers to explore how the four-day week affected instruction, workload, and relationships with students and families. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators and school board members to examine leadership perspectives on policy development, communication strategies, and implementation challenges. All sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol is included in Appendix B.

Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic approach. Coding focused on perceived benefits, equity concerns, community impact, and implementation conditions.

Integration

Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to identify convergence, divergence, and complementarity across data sources, providing a multidimensional understanding of how stakeholders experience calendar reform.

FINDINGS

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to examine stakeholder perceptions of a four-day school week among teachers, administrators, and school board members. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of perceived benefits, challenges, and factors influencing support or resistance. In accordance with established mixed-methods reporting conventions, the results are presented by research question and reflect explicit integration of quantitative and qualitative survey findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Stakeholder Perceptions of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Four-Day School Weeks

Quantitative analyses revealed significant differences among stakeholder groups regarding the perceived advantages and disadvantages of four-day school weeks. Administrators were more likely to view the model favorably because of its potential to improve recruitment and retention,

while teachers placed greater emphasis on work–life balance and reduced burnout. School board members tended to focus on family flexibility and district competitiveness.

While the quantitative findings identified statistically significant differences among stakeholder groups, the qualitative data provided important context for understanding the reasons behind these differences. Participants' narratives illustrated how professional roles and daily responsibilities shaped perceptions of the four-day school week. Teachers frequently described the value of an additional day for rest, planning, and personal responsibilities. One teacher explained, *“Having that extra day would help teachers recharge and be more effective during the week.”* Administrators similarly viewed the schedule as a strategy for attracting and retaining educators, noting *“We have to stay competitive if we want to attract teachers.”*

Together, these findings suggest perceived benefits and drawbacks are closely tied to stakeholders' professional responsibilities and lived experiences. (See Appendix C, Table C1)

Differences Across Stakeholder Groups

The quantitative results indicated statistically significant differences across stakeholder groups on all measured items. Stakeholders varied considerably in how they viewed staffing benefits, family flexibility, and potential challenges associated with implementation.

To better understand the patterns observed in the survey data, qualitative responses were examined to explore the experiences and perspectives that influenced stakeholder perceptions. The qualitative findings revealed stakeholders approached the issue through different lenses shaped by their roles within the educational system. Teachers emphasized workload and burnout reduction, administrators focused on recruitment and organizational sustainability, and school board members highlighted accountability to the broader community. These narratives explain why stakeholder groups differed significantly in their quantitative ratings and reinforce the importance of considering multiple perspectives when evaluating calendar reform. (See Appendix C, Table C2)

Concerns and Challenges Associated with Four-Day School Weeks

Survey results demonstrated concerns about implementation remained prevalent across stakeholder groups, particularly regarding instructional quality, student outcomes, and equity implications. Teachers were less convinced than other groups that the four-day schedule would provide meaningful benefits for families.

Although the quantitative analyses identified significant differences across stakeholder groups, the qualitative findings explain how these concerns emerged through participants' experiences with student learning, family responsibilities, and community needs. Teachers frequently expressed concerns about student fatigue during longer instructional days, while administrators worried about potential learning loss and widening achievement gaps. Participants also raised concerns regarding extracurricular scheduling, transportation, and student supervision. One administrator noted, *“We can't afford to lose learning time with our students,”* while a community member observed students may have *“nowhere to go”* on the additional non-instructional day.

These qualitative insights demonstrate stakeholder concerns extend beyond operational logistics and reflect broader questions about educational equity and student well-being. (See Appendix C, Table C3)

Factors Influencing Support or Resistance

Quantitative findings suggested support for four-day school weeks was generally stronger among individuals who perceived direct benefits from implementation, particularly those closest to instructional and staffing challenges.

The qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results by demonstrating stakeholder support is influenced by personal experiences, organizational context, and perceptions of equity.

Participants who had previous exposure to four-day schedules often expressed greater confidence in the model's effectiveness. Others viewed the schedule as a means of addressing teacher burnout and improving workplace satisfaction. However, resistance frequently emerged when stakeholders considered the potential impact on vulnerable student populations and working families. As one board member stated, *"If we can't support families, we shouldn't do this."*

These findings indicate support for four-day school weeks is not solely determined by perceived benefits but is also shaped by stakeholders' beliefs about fairness, access, and community readiness. (See Appendix C, Table C4)

Integrated Interpretation of Findings

When considered together, the quantitative and qualitative findings present a nuanced understanding of stakeholder perceptions. While the survey results identified statistically significant differences among stakeholder groups, participant narratives revealed these differences were influenced by contextual factors such as educator well-being, family needs, community capacity, and equity considerations. The convergence of findings across both data strands strengthens the overall interpretation that stakeholder support for four-day school weeks is highly contextual and dependent upon local implementation conditions. Consequently, educational leaders considering calendar reform should engage stakeholders throughout the decision-making process to ensure both operational benefits and potential unintended consequences are carefully considered. (See Appendix C, Table C5)

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine stakeholder perceptions of a four-day school week and to understand how perceived advantages, challenges, and levels of support vary across teachers, administrators, and school board members. Guided by a convergent mixed-methods design, the discussion integrates quantitative and qualitative results to interpret patterns, explain divergences, and situate findings within the broader literature on alternative school scheduling, educational leadership, and policy implementation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Interpreting Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages

Findings from this study indicate stakeholders simultaneously recognize meaningful advantages and express substantial reservations regarding a four-day school week. Quantitative results demonstrated administrators perceived staffing and retention benefits more strongly than teachers, while teachers emphasized improvements in work-life balance. Qualitative findings

further clarified these distinctions, revealing educators' support is grounded in lived experiences of burnout, workload intensity, and limited planning time.

These findings align with existing research suggesting four-day schedules are often viewed favorably by educators due to perceived reductions in stress and improvements in professional sustainability (Morton & DeWitt, 2024; Thompson & Morton, 2021). At the same time, both quantitative and qualitative data indicate perceived disadvantages particularly those related to childcare access, student supervision, and equity temper enthusiasm for the model. This duality suggests the four-day school week functions as both a potential lever for workforce stability and a source of risk for families and students, depending on contextual conditions.

Stakeholder Role and Divergent Perspectives

Differences across stakeholder groups emerged as a defining feature of the findings.

Administrators and school board members tended to evaluate the four-day schedule through system-level lenses, emphasizing recruitment, retention, and organizational adaptability.

Teachers, by contrast, assessed the model through classroom-level realities, including student fatigue, instructional continuity, and family needs.

This role-based divergence is consistent with scholarship on policy implementation, which emphasizes proximity to practice shapes how reforms are interpreted and enacted (Honig, 2006). Rather than indicating disagreement about goals, these findings suggest stakeholders operate from distinct accountability frameworks. Teachers are primarily accountable for student learning and daily classroom management, whereas administrators and board members balance workforce sustainability, fiscal responsibility, and community expectations. Recognizing these differing vantage points is essential for leaders seeking coherent and inclusive policy adoption.

Concerns Related to Equity and Unintended Consequences

One of the most salient contributions of this study is the identification of equity-related concerns associated with four-day school weeks. Teachers' lower ratings of family flexibility benefits, compared to school board members, were explained qualitatively through concerns about childcare availability, food insecurity, and student safety. These findings echo prior research cautioning that the effects of four-day schedules are highly context-dependent and may disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged families and younger students (Anderson & Walker, 2015; Morton et al., 2024).

Importantly, these concerns do not necessarily reflect opposition to alternative scheduling but rather apprehension about inadequate support structures. Stakeholders consistently emphasized without intentional mitigation strategies, four-day schedules risk shifting responsibility for supervision and enrichment from schools to families and communities that may lack capacity. This finding reinforces the need for equity-centered analyses when evaluating policy innovations in education.

Factors Shaping Support and Resistance

Support for the four-day school week was determined to be conditional rather than absolute.

Administrators' stronger support reflected alignment with staffing and operational goals, while teachers' support was closely tied to perceived improvements in well-being. Qualitative findings

revealed prior exposure to four-day schedules and awareness of educator burnout increased openness to the model, whereas uncertainty regarding student outcomes and community readiness contributed to resistance.

These patterns align with implementation research suggesting stakeholder support increases when reforms are perceived as responsive to local needs and when risks are transparently acknowledged (Desravines et al., 2015). Resistance, in this context, appears pragmatic rather than ideological, underscoring the importance of trust-building, pilot initiatives, and continuous evaluation.

Implications for Educational Leadership and Policy

The integrated findings suggest adopting a four-day school week is a complex adaptive challenge rather than a technical scheduling change. Effective leadership requires navigating competing priorities, aligning system-level objectives with classroom realities, and addressing equity implications proactively. Leaders who approach alternative scheduling as a one-size-fits-all solution may overlook critical contextual factors that shape outcomes.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the importance of inclusive decision-making processes that elevate multiple stakeholder voices. Policies that mandate needs assessments, require monitoring of academic and equity outcomes, and allow for iterative adjustment may better support sustainable implementation. Moreover, the findings suggest flexibility within policy frameworks rather than rigid mandates may enable districts to respond effectively to local conditions.

Contribution to Literature

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on four-day school weeks by providing an integrated, stakeholder-informed analysis that combines quantitative differentiation with qualitative explanation. By demonstrating how perceptions vary systematically by role and context, the study extends prior research that has primarily focused on student achievement or teacher labor markets. The mixed-methods approach offers a more nuanced understanding of how leadership, equity, and community capacity intersect in alternative scheduling decisions.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this mixed methods study suggest the four-day school week (4DSW) holds promise as a strategy for addressing educator wellbeing and staffing challenges; however, it simultaneously raises significant concerns related to equity, student support, and community capacity. Importantly, the success of alternative scheduling models appears to depend less on the schedule itself and more on the quality of leadership, inclusiveness of decision-making processes, governance structures, and the availability of mitigation supports reduce unintended consequences. As districts continue to explore innovative calendar reforms, future research must adopt evidence informed and equity centered approaches that account for the complex and context dependent nature of structural change.

First, future research should expand stakeholder representation. While this study incorporated perspectives from teachers, administrators, and school board members, subsequent research should intentionally include students and parents or caregivers. Their lived experiences offer essential insight into how the noninstructional day influences learning, wellbeing, childcare

arrangements, food access, and family routines. Incorporating these perspectives would deepen understanding of equity related impacts and complement the professional stakeholder voices represented here. Mixed method and longitudinal designs integrating student achievement data with qualitative accounts of family and community experiences would provide a more holistic portrait of reform consequences (Anderson & Walker, 2015; Morton, 2022; Thompson, 2019). Second, future studies should investigate the longitudinal effects of the 4DSW across diverse contexts and time horizons. Multiyear research designs tracking academic performance, attendance, wellbeing indicators, and workforce patterns would clarify when and for whom the model is beneficial. Longitudinal analyses are especially critical for identifying differential impacts across grade levels, disability status, multilingual learners, and economically disadvantaged students. Although prior quantitative studies have assessed aggregate academic outcomes (Anderson & Walker, 2015; Morton, 2022), less is known about sustained organizational and community level effects over time.

Third, implementation design and noninstructional day utilization warrant closer examination. Focus group participants highlighted operational complexities involving athletics, transportation, career and technical education, and special education services. Future research should explore how districts structure professional learning, tutoring, enrichment programming, and community partnerships on the noninstructional day, and how these practices influence instructional coherence and policy durability. Because total instructional time appears to moderate academic outcomes (Anderson & Walker, 2015; Morton, 2022), greater clarity regarding how time is reallocated is essential for understanding variation in results across districts.

Fourth, governance processes and leadership framing merit sustained inquiry. Participants described polarized reactions shaped largely by how the 4DSW was framed, whether as a cost saving measure, a workforce strategy, or an instructional redesign. Distributed leadership theory suggests reform legitimacy is constructed through shared interpretation rather than formal authority alone (Spillane, 2006). Comparative case studies could examine how superintendents and school boards engage in collective sense making, how narratives are strategically constructed, and how these processes shape stakeholder acceptance and policy sustainability. In addition, qualitative analyses of board deliberations, stakeholder engagement strategies, and decision-making dynamics would illuminate how competing values such as efficiency, equity, instructional quality, and community wellbeing are negotiated within local governance structures (Honig, 2006).

Fifth, future research should assess equity supports and community capacity. Participants raised concerns regarding childcare access, food insecurity, youth supervision, and supervision for vulnerable students. Studies should measure whether mitigation strategies such as childcare partnerships, meal distribution, transportation adjustments, and community-based supervision reduce burdens for families and promote equitable access to resources. Comparative case studies across districts with varying levels of community infrastructure could clarify how responsibilities shift among schools, families, and local organizations, and what resource investments are necessary to sustain equitable implementation.

Finally, there is a need for research that bridges organizational theory and empirical policy analysis. Adoption of the 4DSW represents not merely a technical scheduling adjustment but a

leadership mediated structural reform embedded within governance systems and community ecosystems. Integrating distributed leadership perspectives (Spillane, 2006) with policy implementation frameworks (Honig, 2006) may provide more nuanced explanations for why similar reforms yield divergent outcomes across districts. Building accessible datasets that link student outcomes, family indicators, workforce data, and implementation logs would further strengthen the field's capacity to conduct cross context comparisons and support evidence informed policy development.

Taken together, these recommendations underscore structural school reform must be examined as a leadership driven, governance mediated, and contextually contingent process. Advancing research on the four-day school week and comparable calendar reforms requires methodological rigor, expanded stakeholder inclusion, longitudinal analysis, and sustained attention to equity centered leadership and community capacity.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this mixed-methods study yield important implications for K–12 educational leaders and policymakers considering the adoption of a four-day school week. Rather than functioning as a universally beneficial reform, alternative scheduling emerges as a context-dependent strategy that requires deliberate planning, stakeholder engagement, and equity-focused safeguards.

Implications for Educational Practice

For district and campus leaders, the findings underscore the importance of aligning system-level goals with classroom-level realities. Teachers' strong emphasis on work–life balance and instructional sustainability suggests leadership decisions related to scheduling should explicitly address workload expectations, protected planning time, and educator well-being. When teacher experiences are foregrounded, alternative schedules are more likely to be perceived as supportive rather than imposed.

Leaders should also anticipate and proactively address implementation challenges identified by stakeholders. Childcare access, food security, student supervision, and extracurricular scheduling require coordinated responses that extend beyond the school day. Partnerships with community organizations, faith-based institutions, and local agencies may help mitigate unintended burdens on families, particularly in rural or high-poverty contexts.

Pilot programs and phased implementation models represent promising strategies for practice. Allowing districts to test four-day schedules on a limited basis provides opportunities to gather local data, assess instructional and equity impacts, and make adjustments before districtwide adoption. Ongoing monitoring of academic outcomes, attendance, behavior, and staff retention should be embedded into implementation plans to ensure responsiveness to emerging needs. In addition, the findings point to the value of strengthening leaders' capacity for collaborative sensemaking and shared problem-solving as they navigate calendar reform. Because perceptions of the four-day school week vary across roles, leaders may benefit from establishing ongoing structures, such as cross-role planning teams or routine stakeholder check-ins, that foster transparency and mutual understanding. These structures can help leaders surface unintended consequences early and adapt implementation strategies in real time. Moreover, prioritizing

relational trust and open communication may increase stakeholder confidence and reduce uncertainty during periods of significant schedule change, reinforcing the distributed leadership practices highlighted in prior research.

Implications for Policy

At the policy level, the findings highlight the need for frameworks that balance local flexibility with accountability and equity protections. State and district policies governing alternative schedules should require comprehensive needs assessments prior to adoption, including analyses of childcare availability, transportation, instructional minutes, special education services, and extracurricular access. Such requirements can help ensure scheduling decisions are informed by local capacity rather than solely by anticipated benefits.

Policies should also emphasize continuous evaluation rather than one-time approval. Clear criteria for monitoring student outcomes, equity indicators, and community impact can support evidence-informed decision-making and provide mechanisms for revision or discontinuation if negative effects emerge. Funding flexibility at the state and federal levels may further support districts in developing mitigation strategies, such as expanded meal programs or supervised enrichment opportunities on non-instructional days.

Importantly, policymakers should recognize four-day school weeks are not inherently appropriate for all districts. Contextual factors, including rurality, labor markets, community resources, and family needs must guide decision-making. Policies that allow districts to opt in based on demonstrated readiness may better support sustainable and equitable implementation. Furthermore, the findings suggest policymakers should consider adopting guidance that encourages districts to integrate community capacity assessments and family impact analyses into the early stages of decision-making. Given the equity concerns raised by stakeholders, policies that support partnerships with childcare providers, youth-serving organizations, and local agencies may help ensure the noninstructional day does not exacerbate existing resource disparities. Policymakers might also explore targeted funding streams or technical assistance models that help districts develop evidence-informed mitigation plans. Such supports would allow local leaders to tailor implementation to their specific contexts while maintaining a focus on equitable access and student well-being, a priority echoed throughout the stakeholder responses in this study.

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods study examined how key professional stakeholders perceive the four-day school week and how those perceptions shape leadership and implementation dynamics. By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative focus group and interview findings, the study demonstrates calendar reform is not a neutral or purely operational change but a leadership decision that redistributes time, labor, and responsibility across schools, families, and communities. Stakeholder perceptions were nuanced, role-dependent, and deeply shaped by professional responsibilities and contextual realities.

In response to the first research question, clear differences emerged in how teachers, administrators, and school board members evaluated the benefits of a four-day school week.

Administrators primarily viewed the reform as a strategy for recruitment and retention, reflecting their responsibility for workforce stability amid persistent staffing shortages. Teachers emphasized the value of the four-day schedule for improving work-life balance and reducing burnout, highlighting the daily intensity of instructional labor. In contrast, school board members were most likely to frame the four-day week as a means of increasing family flexibility and responding to community preferences. These differences underscore that no single stakeholder group holds a complete perspective on calendar reform and that perceptions are shaped by proximity to daily school operations.

The second research question addressed themes related to equity, well-being, and community impact. Across stakeholder groups, participants acknowledged the four-day school week can enhance educator well-being and, in some cases, improve student focus by providing longer recovery periods. At the same time, substantial concerns emerged regarding childcare access, food insecurity, student supervision, and unequal family capacity. These equity-related risks were especially visible to teachers who work closely with families facing economic hardship. Participants also described increased pressure on community organizations to provide meals, supervision, and enrichment on the non-instructional day. Together, these findings suggest that while the four-day school week may offer meaningful benefits, it can also create or intensify inequities if not accompanied by intentional supports.

The third research question examined how stakeholder perceptions inform leadership and implementation strategies. Findings indicate the success of a four-day school week depends less on the schedule itself and more on how leaders manage the reform process. Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of transparent communication, early calendar release, pilot programs, and ongoing evaluation. These strategies reflect the need for distributed leadership in which administrators, teachers, school boards, and community partners collaboratively interpret and adapt the reform to local conditions. Support for alternative scheduling increased when stakeholders perceived alignment with community needs and adequate safeguards to address potential risks.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate the four-day school week is a complex policy reform that requires adaptive, equity-centered leadership rather than technical adjustment alone. For district and school leaders, this means that calendar change must be accompanied by robust stakeholder engagement, partnerships that address childcare and nutrition, and continuous monitoring of student and family outcomes. For leadership preparation programs, the four-day school week provides a valuable case for teaching policy implementation, collaborative governance, and equity-oriented decision-making.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates the success of four-day school weeks is determined not simply by the structure of the school calendar, but by the quality of leadership guiding its implementation. Educational leaders must balance workforce sustainability with their responsibility to ensure equitable opportunities for all students and families. Leadership-informed, equity-centered decision-making requires meaningful stakeholder engagement, careful consideration of local context, and continuous evaluation of both intended and unintended outcomes. As school systems continue to pursue innovative approaches to addressing persistent educational challenges, reforms that are grounded in evidence, collaboration, and a commitment

to equity are far more likely to produce sustainable and meaningful improvements for schools and the communities they serve.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, D. M., & Walker, M. B. (2015). Does shortening the school week impact student performance? Evidence from the four-day school week. *Education Finance and Policy*, 10(3), 314–349. https://doi.org/10.1162/EDFP_a_00165
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Camp, A. M., Zamarro, G., & McGee, J. B. (2025). Effects of four-day school weeks on teacher recruitment and retention. *Educational Researcher*. Advance online publication.
- Coburn, C. E. (2001). Collective sensemaking about reading: How teachers mediate reading policy in their professional communities. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23(2), 145–170.
- Cooper, J. L., Masi, R., & Vick, J. (2021). Schools as critical supports for student mental health. *Journal of School Health*, 91(2), 89–98.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Day, E., Ward, J., & Thompson, P. N. (2025). Instructional time, student experience, and equity in four-day school weeks. *Educational Policy*. Advance online publication.
- Desravines, L., Aquino, K., & Fenton, B. (2015). *Breakthrough principals: A step-by-step guide to building stronger schools*. Jossey-Bass.
- Harris, A. (2008). Distributed leadership: According to the evidence. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46(2), 172–188. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230810863253>
- Honig, M. I. (2006). *New directions in education policy implementation: Confronting complexity*. State University of New York Press.
- Ingersoll, R. M., & Collins, G. J. (2017). The status of teaching as a profession. In D. J. Clandinin & J. Hsu (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 199–213). SAGE Publications.
- Johnson, S. M., Kraft, M. A., & Papay, J. P. (2012). How context matters in high-need schools: The effects of teachers' working conditions on their professional satisfaction and their students' achievement. *Teachers College Record*, 114(10), 1–39.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22.
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Morton, E. (2020). *Effects of four-day school weeks on school finance and achievement: Evidence from Oklahoma* (CEPA Working Paper No. 20-02). Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis.
- Morton, E. (2022). Effects of four-day school weeks on adolescents: Examining impacts of the schedule on academic achievement, attendance, and behavior in high school. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 45(1), 52–78. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737221097420>

- Morton, E., & DeWitt, E. (2024). *Impacts of four-day school weeks on teacher recruitment and retention and student attendance* (CALDER Working Paper No. 307-0924). American Institutes for Research.
- Morton, E., Thompson, P. N., & Kuhfeld, M. (2024). A multi-state, student-level analysis of the effects of the four-day school week on student achievement and growth. *Economics of Education Review*, 100, 102524. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2024.102524>
- Patterson, K., Connelly, M., & Ritter, G. W. (2020). Stakeholder perceptions of four-day school weeks. *Journal of Education Finance*, 46(1), 1–25.
- Rothstein, R. (2014). *The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. Liveright.
- Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Steinberg, M. P., & Lacoë, J. (2018). What do we know about school-based childcare and student outcomes? *Educational Policy*, 32(1), 5–37.
- Stone, C. N., Henig, J. R., Jones, B. D., & Pierannunzi, C. (2001). *Building civic capacity: The politics of reforming urban schools*. University Press of Kansas.
- Sun, J., & Leithwood, K. (2015). Direction-setting school leadership practices: A meta-analytical review of evidence about their influence. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 26(4), 499–523.
- Thompson, P. N. (2019). Effects of four-day school weeks on student achievement: Evidence from Oregon. *Education Economics*, 27(3), 271–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2019.1613849>
- Thompson, P. N. (2019). The effect of four-day school weeks on student achievement and district expenditures. *Education Finance and Policy*, 14(4), 628–654. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00247
- Thompson, P. N., & Morton, E. (2021, July 12). *4-day school weeks: Educational innovation or detriment? Evidence suggests instructional time makes the difference*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/4-day-school-weeks-educational-innovation-or-detriment/>

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Survey: Exploring Stakeholder Perceptions of the Four-Day School Week

Estimated Completion Time: 10–15 minutes

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your feedback is valuable in understanding the potential impacts and perceptions of the four-day school week. All responses will remain confidential.

Section 1: Demographic Information

1.1 What is your current role? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Teacher
- ☐ Administrator
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Parent/Guardian
- ☐ School Board Member
- ☐ Community Member
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

1.2 What grade level(s) or area are you affiliated with?

- ☐ Elementary (K–5)
- ☐ Middle School (6–8)
- ☐ High School (9–12)
- ☐ District Level (Central Office)
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

1.3 How many years have you been involved with the school district?

- ☐ Less than 1 year
- ☐ 1–5 years
- ☐ 6–10 years
- ☐ More than 10 years

1.4 What is the type of your school district?

- ☐ Urban
- ☐ Suburban
- ☐ Rural

1.5 In what state is your school district located?

Section 2: Perceived Benefits

Instructions: Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.

Scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

The four-day school week improves student attendance.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

The four-day school week reduces overall costs for the district.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

The four-day school week improves work-life balance for staff.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

The four-day school week provides greater flexibility for families.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

The four-day week helps attract and retain staff.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Other benefits you perceive:

Section 3: Perceived Challenges

Instructions: Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.

The four-day school week creates childcare difficulties for families.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

The four-day week negatively affects student academic performance.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Students miss access to meals and support services on the fifth day.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

The longer school days are tiring for students and staff.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

It is difficult to align extracurricular or athletic schedules.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Other challenges you perceive:

Section 4: Overall Support

4.1 Overall, how supportive are you of implementing a four-day school week?

- ☐ 1 - Strongly Oppose
- ☐ 2 - Oppose
- ☐ 3 - Neutral
- ☐ 4 - Support
- ☐ 5 - Strongly Support

4.2 Please explain your answer:

Section 5: Additional Comments

Is there anything else you would like decision-makers to know about the four-day school week?

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses!

Appendix B

Interview or Focus Group Protocol

Interview Protocol: Exploring Stakeholder Perceptions of the Four-Day School Week

Estimated Time: 30–45 minutes

Introduction Script:

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. This interview is part of a study about perceptions of the four-day school week. Your participation is voluntary, and you may skip any questions or stop at any time. Your responses will be kept confidential.

Questions:

1. Can you describe your experiences or thoughts about the four-day school week?
2. What do you see as the main benefits for students, families, or staff?
3. What concerns do you have about this schedule?
4. How do you think this change affects the broader community?
5. What would help make this transition successful?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Closing Script:

Thank you for sharing your perspectives. Your input is very valuable and will help inform our understanding of how this policy affects the school community

Appendix C

Table C1
Themes and Exemplar Quotes

Theme	Description	Exemplar Quote (Participant Identifier)
Improved work–life balance	Reduced burnout and increased time for personal and professional responsibilities	“Having that extra day would help teachers recharge and be more effective during the week.” (Teacher)
Increased planning and instructional focus	Additional time for lesson preparation and collaboration	“With more planning time, instruction would be more intentional instead of rushed.” (Administrator)
Childcare challenges	Limited access to affordable childcare on the non-instructional day	“The biggest issue is what parents are supposed to do with their kids on that extra day.” (Parent)
Equity and access concerns	Disproportionate impact on low-income families	“Families with resources will manage, but others will struggle.” (Support Staff)

Table C2
Stakeholder Differences and Exemplar Quotes

Stakeholder Group	Primary Perspective	Exemplar Quote (Participant Identifier)
Teachers	Work–life balance, burnout reduction	“This would help teachers stay in the profession longer.” (Teacher)
Administrators	Recruitment, retention, district competitiveness	“We have to stay competitive if we want to attract teachers.” (Administrator)
School board members	Community impact and accountability	“We have to consider how this affects the whole community.” (Board Member)
Parents/support staff	Childcare, safety, supervision	“It creates another burden for families who already struggle.” (Parent)

Table C3
Anticipated Challenges and Exemplar Quotes

Area of Concern	Theme	Exemplar Quote (Participant Identifier)
Instructional quality	Student fatigue during longer days	“Little kids are already tired by the end of the day.” (Teacher)
Academic outcomes	Risk of widening achievement gaps	“We can’t afford to lose learning time with our students.” (Administrator)
Extracurricular access	Scheduling conflicts	“Everything would end up happening on Fridays.” (Coach)

Area of Concern	Theme	Exemplar Quote (Participant Identifier)
Community impact	Supervision and safety	“Kids will be out in the community with nowhere to go.” (Community Member)

Table C4
Factors Influencing Support or Resistance and Exemplar Quotes

Factor	Influence	Exemplar Quote (Participant Identifier)
Prior experience	Increased confidence and support	“Once you see it work, it makes more sense.” (Administrator)
Awareness of burnout	Support driven by staff well-being	“Teachers are exhausted, and this could help.” (Teacher)
Equity concerns	Resistance linked to childcare and food access	“If we can’t support families, we shouldn’t do this.” (Board Member)
Contextual fit	Rural capacity and community readiness	“What works in one district won’t work everywhere.” (Administrator)

Table C5
Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings by Survey Section

Survey Section	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Themes	Integrated Interpretation
SS2: Advantages and disadvantages	Administrators rated staffing benefits higher; teachers rated work–life balance higher; board members rated family flexibility higher	Well-being, recruitment, childcare, equity	Perceived benefits vary by role, while disadvantages center on family and equity impacts
SS2: Group differences	Significant ANOVA differences across all three items ($p < .05$)	Role-based priorities and proximity to daily operations	Stakeholder role strongly shapes perception of benefits and risks
SS3: Concerns and challenges	Teachers less convinced of family flexibility benefits	Childcare, student fatigue, extracurricular conflicts	Classroom-level awareness heightens concern for unintended consequences
SS4: Support or resistance	Greater support among those closest to implementation benefits	Experience, burnout awareness, contextual fit	Support increases with experience and perceived relief; resistance reflects equity and capacity concerns