

# WERA Educational Journal

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## 2025 Issue: Call for Manuscripts

### Theme: Leveraging the Power of Collaboration

**Collaboration** work is a critical concern for schools and districts within the Pacific Northwest region and beyond. When students, educators, and institutions collaborate, transformational change and sustained learning become possible. Through collaborative efforts, diverse perspectives converge, creating a space where creativity flourishes, and problem-solving becomes a collective endeavor. Educators collaborating on curriculum development and teaching practices impacts learning and cultivates essential skills for meeting the interconnected challenges of the future.

For this issue, we encourage educators from all levels of education in the Pacific Northwest to share their experiences with collaboration initiatives, professional learning, impacts, successes, and challenges. This work could include, for example, school efforts to support collaborative professional learning communities, district-community collaborations to foster family connections and parent engagement, and state-level initiatives encouraging collaboration across districts and institutions.

We welcome a variety of submissions, including:

- Research studies on collaborative work
- Practitioner pieces describing collaboration concepts and ideas in practice
- Essays providing perspective on issues of collaboration

In addition to the collaboration theme, *WEJ* is a collection of academic papers, professional reports, book reviews, and other articles and summaries of general significance and interest to the Pacific Northwest education research and practitioner community. Topics in *WEJ* cover a wide range of areas of educational research and related disciplines. These include but are not limited to issues related to the topics listed below:

- Early childhood education
- Curriculum and instruction
- State and national standards
- Professional development
- Special populations (e.g., gifted, ELLs, students with disabilities)
- Assessments and their relationship with other variables
- Early warning indicators
- Social and emotional issues
- School and district effectiveness
- Teacher and principal evaluation
- Education finance and policy
- Educational technology
- Educational leadership
- Remote learning

We encourage the submission of condensed versions of dissertations and theses that are reader friendly. School and district practitioners are encouraged to write for *WEJ*. Manuscripts for the 2025 issue are due August 1, 2024. For information about the *WEJ* and its submissions, see the Submission Guidelines posted on the [WERA website](#). If you have questions about the process or about possible submissions, email [smithant@uw.edu](mailto:smithant@uw.edu).

Antony T. Smith, Ph.D.  
Editor, *WERA Educational Journal*

## Taking Charge: A Case Study of High School Student-Led IEPs

Laurel Weber, Eric Hougan, and Wendie Lappin Castillo

### Abstract

*The acquisition of self-determination skills is crucial for a seamless transition from high school to adulthood, particularly for students with disabilities. In preparation for postsecondary pursuits, the need for self-advocacy skills is amplified as students leave the support and shelter that The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act provides. Implementing student-led Individual Education Program (IEP) Team Meetings, especially when postsecondary planning is involved, is a promising practice for developing self-advocacy skills. This case study unpacks the connection between mentoring students to assume leadership roles in their IEP meetings and individual self-advocacy skill development.*

The purpose of this case study is to examine the impact of a student-led Individual Education Program (IEP) training seminar on the self-advocacy skills of high school students with disabilities, specifically exploring one student's experience. The study sheds light on the potential benefits of student-led IEPs and the implications for improving postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

In 1996, Ward argued that “youth with disabilities must be given opportunities to learn and practice self-determination skills” (1996, p. 15). A longitudinal study by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) tested the link between self-determination—that is, making independent choices in their lives—and their transition process after graduation by following 80 special education students who were graduating. One year after graduation, there were several positive outcomes related to measures of self-determination in school. For example, students who were self-determined earned more per hour than their non-self-determined peers (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Raley et al. (2022) highlight that self-determination—a dispositional characteristic—develops as individuals have more opportunities to set and pursue goals in a supportive environment. In short, research indicates that self-determination skills need to be addressed to improve postsecondary outcomes.

The 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) contains provisions designed to improve students' postsecondary outcomes by providing an opportunity to set and work toward their postsecondary goals. First, IEP teams must invite the students to IEP meetings whenever the focus is on postsecondary goal development and the transition services needed to accomplish those goals (34 C.F.R. § 300.321(b)(1)). Furthermore, “if the child does not attend the IEP Team meeting, the public agency must take other steps to ensure that the child's preferences and interests are considered” (34 C.F.R. § 300.321(b)(2)). It is apparent that IDEA's (2004) provisions aim to provide students with goal-oriented directions and needed support through their transition process.

While Martin et al. (2004) concluded, “The presence of students at the IEP meetings resulted in many value-added benefits and validates the usefulness of the legal requirement that added students and general education teachers” (p. 291), presence alone does not produce the intended

results. Sanderson and Goldman (2021) found that 67.9% of high school students attended their IEP meetings. However, Sanderson and Goldman (2021) further noted that a considerable number of students did not engage in the meetings at all. Alarming, this lack of participation is not a new phenomenon. Martin et al. (2006), in a report on IEP meeting attendee participation trends, showed that secondary students spoke for only 3% of their IEP Team meetings when directed by a teacher. Without meaningful participation in their plan, students may be limited in their opportunities to develop critical self-determination skills.

Martin et al. (2006) observed that students who attend IEP meetings without specific guidance often lack clarity on the meeting's objectives, struggle to comprehend the discussions, and perceive a lack of attentive listening from the adult participants when they attempt to contribute. While attending the IEP meeting is good, it is not enough. Instead, students may benefit from being taught what IEP meetings are for, what topics will be covered, and how they can meaningfully participate in their meetings. Viall (2018) makes a similar argument, stating, "... students need to be taught the skills to be an active participant in their IEP meeting" (p. 18).

Participation in student-led IEP meetings holds great promise in middle and high school IEP meetings (Martin et al., 2006). Beck (2002) argues, "When students are present, they have the potential to provide the most important information during IEP decisions" (p. 39). However, Martin et al. (2006) remind us that simply attending an IEP meeting is not the same as participating. In order to better help students engage in these meetings, targeted training is needed to prepare them to become the *causal agents* in their lives (Wehmeyer, 1992).

The type of training needed for successful student-led IEPs often takes the form of a mentoring relationship, where a teacher helps the student develop the self-determination skills needed to be successful in leading their IEP meeting. Bross and Craig (2022) emphasize that nurturing self-determination skills plays a pivotal role in enhancing student engagement in IEP meetings. They underscore that encouraging student involvement in the IEP process is widely recognized as a best practice within the field of transition education (Bross & Craig, 2022).

One aspect of self-determination for student-led IEPs is the skill of self-advocacy. According to Cantley (2011), a significant number of students lack the necessary self-advocacy skills and do not realize the importance of self-advocacy in their lives. Snyder (2002) suggests that students engaging in the process of creating their IEPs present a logical approach to acquiring self-advocacy skills (p. 340). Mason et al. (2002) found that students who led their IEP meetings experienced increased self-confidence in public speaking, along with gains in self-advocacy and leadership skills. As a student increases participation in their IEP by collaborating on meaningful goals as well as leading their meeting, they begin to practice becoming a self-advocate.

For a student to grow as a self-advocate, it is important to consider the various aspects of this trait. Test et al. (2005) identified four necessary components to become a fully developed self-advocate. These components are:

1. Knowledge of self
2. Knowledge of rights
3. Communication
4. Leadership

It is reasonable to assert that if a student is given adequate opportunity to develop a greater understanding of their capacities in these areas, they would be well on their way to achieving an improved sense of advocacy for their personal goals and the support needed to achieve them.

To bolster the self-advocacy skills of students with a disability, the implementation of a student-led IEP program seems to have a great deal of merit. As such, special education teachers in a rural Washington State high school implemented a student-led IEP training seminar program that provided each student with an opportunity to be mentored by a professional. This approach enabled professionals to better foster students’ self-awareness as individuals and enhance their ability to take on leadership roles in their IEP meetings. The increased understanding and capacity to communicate and lead allowed students to develop critical self-advocacy skills. This article highlights the research from this implementation effort, examining the question: “What impact will the introduction of a training seminar specifically designed to facilitate student-led IEPs have on students’ self-advocacy skills development?”

### Methods

The student-led IEP training seminar consisted of six sessions followed by the implementation of the student leading their IEP meeting. The initial seminar sessions focused on deepening students’ understanding of an IEP, how they obtained one, and the various components found in each program. The subsequent sessions aimed to develop students’ understanding of the purpose of their transition plan followed by career interest surveys designed to facilitate career exploration. Finally, the concluding sessions provided each student with an opportunity to create meeting prompts and practice using those prompts, preparing students to lead their IEP meeting.

The program utilized a framework developed by Test’s work: *A Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy for Students with Disabilities* (2005). This framework, developed after an extensive literature review, identified common components and definitions for the term “self-advocacy.” Test et al. (2005) applied the identified components in their design of the framework, specifically addressing the foundational principles of self-advocacy using an IEP meeting as its implementation source. The components of the framework, topics addressed, and session goals are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Self-Advocacy Framework and Session Goals*

Test’s Framework	Guiding Question	Session Goals
Session 1: Knowledge of Self & Rights	What is an IEP, why do I have one, and what does it guarantee?	Students will: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. state what the acronym IEP stands for.</li> <li>2. identify how they qualify for an IEP</li> <li>3. discuss their rights as a student with a disability.</li> </ol>

Test's Framework	Guiding Question	Session Goals
Session 2: Knowledge of Self & Rights	What are my IEP goals and my accommodations in my IEP?	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. identify the components of an IEP.</li> <li>2. Use their IEP at a Glance to identify their goals and their current accommodations.</li> </ul>
Session 3: Knowledge of Self	What is a Transition Plan?	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. state the purpose of their Transition Plan.</li> <li>2. start taking the student interest surveys in their High School and Beyond Plan Portal.</li> </ul>
Session 4 Knowledge of Self & Communication	What are my strengths, needs, and preferences?	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. complete their interest surveys.</li> <li>2. record their survey results</li> <li>3. use their results to determine their strengths, needs, and preferences.</li> </ul>
Session 5 Knowledge of Self & Communication	What are my future educational, career, and independent-living goals?	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. students will refer to their career survey results and explore potential careers.</li> <li>2. students will discuss potential career interests with their mentor.</li> <li>3. students will write a postsecondary educational, career, and independent-living goal for their Transition Plan.</li> </ul>
Session 6 Leadership	What portions of my IEP meeting do I want to prepare to be in charge of?	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. students will review the components of an IEP meeting.</li> <li>2. students will identify the portion(s) of the meeting they will take charge of.</li> <li>3. with the help of an adult mentor, students will finish sentence prompts to prepare for their meeting.</li> <li>4. students will practice using their prompts with an adult mentor.</li> </ul>

Participation in the student-led IEP program was limited to high school juniors and seniors with an active IEP. The program served 24 students. Of these 24 students, one student, Dante (a *pseudonym*), is highlighted in this article as an illustrative case study of the potential impact of this program. Dante is a junior who has an identified disability and is an English language

learner. Dante is a very genuine person with a positive attitude and solid attendance. Dante was the focus of this study because he had never experienced a student-led IEP, yet despite being extremely shy, he recognized the importance of having his voice in the IEP process. Also, he experienced the most growth compared to his peers. By highlighting a single participant, the researchers could conduct a more in-depth exploration of his experiences and growth from the IEP training seminar. This in-depth approach yielded rich and nuanced data.

This case study, utilizing mixed methods, aimed to unpack the impact of a student-led IEP training seminar on the self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities using student self-assessments and participant interviews. Employing a mixed methods approach offers the advantage of combining qualitative and quantitative data, enabling a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the case from multiple angles (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Data was gathered from September 2022 through March 2023. The self-assessment was given at the start of each seminar and compared with the same self-assessment completed after participation in their IEP meeting. This self-assessment comes from the “I’m Determined” project and can be found in the Appendix section of this paper (*IEP Participation Student Rubric—I’m Determined*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 29, 2023). The following assessment topics are included below:

- IEP Awareness
- IEP Participation
- Knowledge of IEP Content
- Abilities and Disabilities Awareness
- Knowledge of Rights and Responsibilities
- Social and Communication Skills

Sixteen participants, including Dante, were interviewed to better understand the program and its personal impacts on participants. This qualitative research is valuable as it allows for in-depth exploration and understanding of participants’ perspectives and experiences, providing rich data for analysis (Creswell, 2013). The 10-question, semi-structured interview, consisting of open responses and Likert scales, prompted students to reflect on and evaluate the IEP meeting they helped run.

More specifically, the interview questions related to the student-led IEP seminar sessions, including which sessions they found the most challenging and which sessions they found the most rewarding, such as “What did you find to be the most rewarding aspect of this training?” (see Appendix for questions). Students were further asked how their personal view of themselves and their disability was changed through seminar participation. The interview ended with a specific question about self-advocacy. The qualitative analysis consisted of iteratively reading each survey response across participants and identifying and coding emergent themes and outliers, if any. Memoing was further used to make sense of data and emergent themes.

Quantitative data was gathered and analyzed from the Likert interview questions and students’ self-assessment scores. Pre- and post-intervention self-assessments were compared to examine changes in students’ perceptions. The Likert questions and their scale are located in Table 2.

**Table 2***Student Self-Assessment*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
Participation in the student-led IEP training improved my ability to be a self-advocate					
The student-led IEP training had a positive impact on the way I view myself					
The student-led IEP training had a positive impact on the way I view my disability					

**Results****Individual Response to the Intervention**

Dante is a student with a disability. Expected classroom behavior, such as raising a hand to ask for help or answering content questions, was beyond Dante’s skill set. While he had excellent attendance, he struggled to articulate his need for help. Typically, he did not understand a portion of the instructions, and instead of asking for clarification, he “hid” in plain sight using his sweatshirt hood. Dante struggled to articulate personal strengths and to identify meaningful IEP goals. He also struggled to identify a meaningful career to pursue after high school. These challenges portray a gap in Dante’s personal education program and the need for targeted instruction with an opportunity to practice his self-advocacy skills.

Dante was invited to participate in the student-led IEP training seminar, which began in November 2022. When the team started preparing for this student-led IEP seminar group, there was a great deal of skepticism about Dante’s ability to participate meaningfully without requiring significant support. Nevertheless, on the first day of the seminar, Dante was focused, attentive, and an active participant throughout the first 35-minute session. In the next session, Dante continued to regulate his behavior and sought to understand how to read his “IEP at a Glance.”

Though the Special Education team was encouraged by his performance in the first two sessions, they worried that Dante’s typical struggles would appear once the group began working independently on their High School and Beyond Plans Career Interest Surveys. One paraprofessional was asked to sit between Dante and another student. When asked how much assistance Dante needed, the paraprofessional replied, “I didn’t assist him at all. The other



student needed help, but Dante kept moving along by himself. Every time I looked at his Chromebook, he had completed another task.” Upon completing the career interest surveys, Dante successfully identified his interest in becoming a mechanic. Through the remaining weeks of the seminar, Dante worked hard to complete each task and advocated for his need for one additional session to practice running his meeting with his case manager, who served as his adult mentor. Dante experienced positive gains through each successive interaction with his mentor.

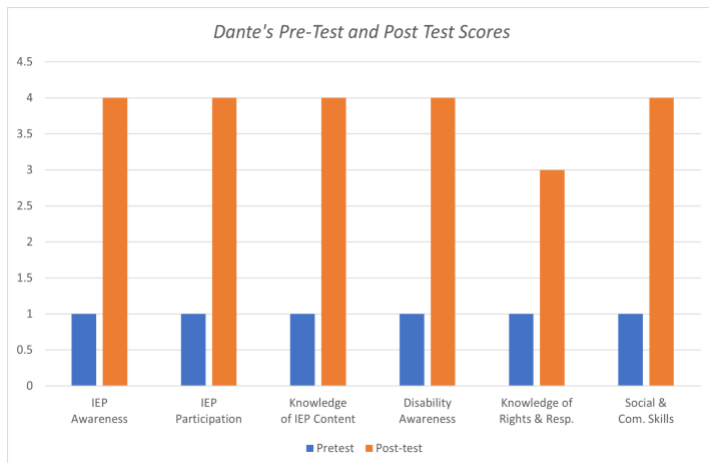
Previously, Dante’s participation in meetings led to low self-esteem and intimidation. Evidence from observations of Dante during this study, as well as pre-and post-data, suggested positive impacts on Dante’s perception of self and noteworthy growth. While this is true, there is more to Dante’s growth than what was externally visible. The most remarkable change occurred in his thought patterns, particularly his ability to communicate and serve as a leader in his IEP meeting. This change in internal perspective was evident in his post-IEP interview.

When asked how his meeting went, Dante gave a shy smile while ducking his head. When he answered, he looked up and said, “I felt good. I got to do more talking.” Dante shared that he has rarely felt “in control” of anything in his life, especially his IEP and educational experiences. At the beginning of the seminar, he was the only student to make the connection that leading his meeting would offer him this increase in control. Where his peers expressed that they were “nervous,” Dante was eager for the experience.

### Dante’s Self-Assessment Analysis

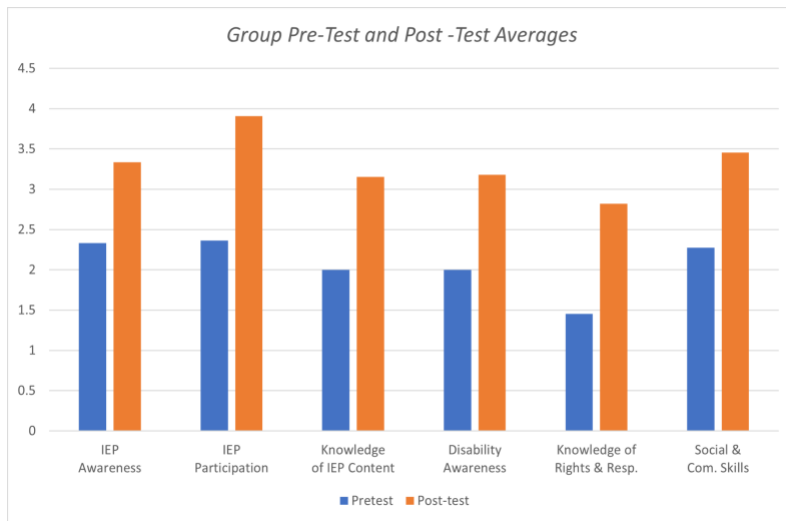
Dante completed a pre-intervention assessment and a post-intervention assessment. Averages were calculated for each of the six self-assessment measures, for both the pre-and post-intervention assessments. Changes between the “pre-test” or pre-intervention assessment, or the “post-test” or post-intervention assessment, for each of the measures, are shown in Figure 1. A “1” rating indicates the student felt they were minimally involved in the IEP process, whereas a “4” indicates the student saw themselves as a fully integrated member of the team who actively participated, led, and advocated for themselves.

**Figure 1**  
*Dante’s Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores*



This bar graph represents Dante’s growth across six individual categories of IEP participation. Note the positive change from the pre-test to the post-test across all measures. The positive impact of this program is also observable when the group averages, excluding Dante’s data, are compared, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
*Group Pre-Test and Post-Test Averages*



These measures are intended to line up with the components of Test’s framework:

1. Knowledge of Self → Abilities & Disabilities Awareness.
2. Knowledge of Rights → IEP Awareness, Knowledge of IEP Content, and Knowledge of Rights and Responsibilities.
3. Communication → Social & Communication Skills
4. Leadership → IEP Participation

### **Dante’s Interview**

As the framework was a measure of self-advocacy skill development, implementing the student-led IEPs signaled a positive effect on Dante’s self-advocacy skills. The interviews further revealed the program’s potential impact on Dante. When asked about his first impression of the seminar’s goal, which was to lead all or part of the IEP, Dante said, “I thought I would be more in control.”

Dante made two observations when asked how the meeting he led was different from previous meetings. The first observation was that he participated throughout the entire meeting. In previous IEP meetings, Dante reported that he only talked “if they made him.” He found it easy to get distracted by his baby brother or other people in the room. While he recognized that being at the meeting was important, he found a big difference between “just being there” and “talking all the time.” Moreover, Dante noted that he was not as bored when he talked more compared with meetings where he just listened.

Dante's second observation was that his general education teachers behaved differently when he was in charge. Dante noticed that his general education teachers stayed longer and participated more. This outcome surprised him. He was also surprised with how they interacted with him in the meeting. He said, "My teachers were nice and more supportive." This shift in the way of interacting was a significant perceptual change, particularly for a student, like Dante, who was anxious to speak to teachers since he always thought he would get in trouble.

Overall, Dante felt that leading his meeting was a positive experience. He reported that he "felt kind of better because I could speak up more. I was awesome because I did it" when asked how he felt after running his meeting. When asked to consider the overall impact of his leadership, Dante laughed and said, "I spoke up more and listened." Finally, Dante felt that leading his IEP meeting improved his ability to advocate for his own needs. He said that "I know it [IEP], so I can ask my teachers about my IEP." Essentially, Dante felt that because he knew what his IEP contained, he could talk with his teachers about the various aspects included.

Regarding the seminar training, Dante expressed that he was well-prepared for his meeting. To Dante, the most challenging aspect of the training was "speaking up." When asked what he found to be the most rewarding aspect of the training, Dante said, "Like at the end, I was speaking up and talking about my IEP. And, my Mom was happy." Dante reported that if other students asked him about participating in the seminar, he would tell them, "It sucks at the beginning because you don't know what to do, but it's cooler at the end because you know what your IEP is. You should do it." Finally, when asked how he views himself and his disability now, Dante said, "I felt I was different 'cuz of my disability, but I know better. I can hold my head up when I talk about my disability and not feel bad about not making eye contact."

The interview concluded with Likert questions. Comparing the interview results with this scale confirms that Dante experienced positive growth through his involvement with the student-led IEP training seminar and the leadership role he assumed in his IEP meeting. His score of 5 out of 5 corroborates the results of his interview.

Dante's experience illustrated the positive outcomes a student can experience with appropriate mentoring opportunities. Empirical evidence strongly suggests self-advocacy skills improve when a student has the opportunity to learn about themselves, learn about their disability, engage in meaningful transition goal setting, and lead their IEP meeting.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study aligns with a recent *Principal Leadership* article that reinforces the benefits of student inclusion in their annual meeting (Wolfsheimer et al., 2023). The recommended practice for administrators is to "encourage meaningful engagement" and "at the IEP meeting, invite students with disabilities to share their ideas and truly listen to them" (Wolfsheimer et al., 2023, p. 55). Training a student to lead their IEP meeting accomplishes this and more. The study outcomes reinforce the benefits of student inclusion through the parameters of a student-led IEP. Dante's experience highlights the potential gains in self-advocacy skills available to a student through the application of Test et al.'s framework of self-advocacy. Designing a curriculum that

develops a student's knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership attributes provided insights into this form of intervention and the personal impact this intervention had on students' perceptions of themselves and their disabilities. When asked how the training impacted their perception of their disability, one student remarked, "It (the disability) feels like something is just there - like your nose - you know it's there, but you don't focus on it. Since I know about it (my disability), I am more comfortable with it and talking about it." Sending students into adulthood with this level of understanding and acceptance of their disability may better fortify and prepare them to express what they need to be successful in their endeavors.

In short, Dante's experiences and outcomes provide an illustrative case within the existing literature; however, it is important to note that the findings of this study may have limited generalizability due to the small sample size and unique characteristics of the case. Therefore, it is necessary to exercise caution when applying these findings to broader populations or contexts.

While the student-led IEP model has been a recommended practice since the late 1990s, limited data have been gathered to determine its implementation rate. Future research on this would inform future studies, particularly studies that identify barriers to implementation. Once barriers to implementing student-led IEPs are identified, it opens up research opportunities for researchers in the field to explore potential solutions.

Ultimately, the field could gain advantages from a developed student-led IEP program, enabling educators to customize its components to suit their specific requirements. While educators may be aware of effective strategies for building a rigorous curriculum or are aware of previously developed curricula, time is always a limiting factor. If a context-sensitive program were developed with recommended implementation options, minimal time could be spent on its design, allowing more time to be devoted to program implementation. Implementing a student-led IEP program is a promising practice designed to help develop the self-advocacy skills essential for young adults to achieve postsecondary success.

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## Appendix A

### Student Rubric for IEP Participation

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Area	Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV
<b>IEP Awareness</b>	I don't know what IEP stands for.	I know what IEP stands for.	I know what IEP stands for and the purpose of an IEP Meeting.	I know what IEP stands for, the purpose of an IEP Meeting and I can tell others about these meetings.
<b>IEP Participation</b>	I don't participate or attend my IEP Meeting.	I attend a preconference IEP Meeting and/ or my IEP Meeting, but I don't participate in the meeting.	I attend and contribute information about myself for my IEP in a Preconference or at the actual IEP Meeting.	I lead parts or my entire IEP Meeting.
<b>Knowledge of IEP Content</b>	I don't know what is in my IEP.	I know that I have accommodations and goals in my IEP, but I don't know what they are nor do I have a voice in developing them.	I can name the accommodations and goals in my IEP, but I don't have a voice in developing them.	I can name the accommodations and goals in my IEP, and I have a voice in developing them.

2008 Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education  
 Training and Technical Assistance Centers - I'm Determined Project  
*Student Rubric for IEP Participation*

## Student Rubric for IEP Participation

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

	Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV
<b>Abilities and Disabilities Awareness</b>	I am not sure of what my disability is and how it affects me.	I have knowledge of my abilities and disabilities, but I do not share it with others.	I can describe my abilities and disabilities to others in my IEP Meeting.	I describe my abilities and disabilities to others outside of my IEP Meeting.
<b>Knowledge of Rights and Responsibilities</b>	I don't know my rights under IDEA.	I have knowledge of my rights.	I know my rights and can negotiate with others who I know to ensure that I receive those rights.	I know my rights and can negotiate with others who I don't know to ensure that I receive those rights.
<b>Social and Communication Skills</b>	I don't know how to interact with others in my IEP Meeting.	I know the social and communication skills I need to use in an IEP Meeting, but I have not used them in an IEP Meeting at this time.	I know and practice good social and communication skills in my IEP Meeting.	I use good social and communication skills to get my needs met in meetings and interactions other than IEP Meetings.

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## Appendix B

### Student Interview Guide

#### Part I: IEP Meeting Personal Experience

The goal of your seminar was to be a more active participant in your annual IEP meeting.

1. How did you feel when you first learned that you would be running at least some of your IEP meetings?
2. How was the IEP meeting you helped run different from previous IEP meetings? (if applicable)
3. How did you feel after you helped run your first IEP meeting?
4. How do you feel your participation impacted your IEP meeting?
5. Do you feel your participation improved your ability to advocate for yourself? If so, how?

#### Part II: Training for Student Lead IEP

You participated in training that took place before your IEP meeting. This was intended to help you be successful in leading parts of your IEP meeting and advocating for yourself:

1. How prepared did you feel for the IEP meeting after doing the training?
2. What did you find to be the most challenging aspect of this training?
3. What did you find to be the most rewarding aspect of this training?
4. What would you say to other students who are invited to participate in this program?
5. Did the training have any impact on how you view yourself or your disability?

#### About the Authors

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# **Text-a-Teacher: Exploring the Potential of Virtual Mentoring of First-Year Teachers**

Janine J. Darragh, Eric DuPuis, and Taylor Raney

## **Abstract**

*This exploratory study examined the potential of using a texting app as a vehicle for supplemental, team-based mentoring of first-year teachers to enrich their formal in-district mentorship. The Text-a-Teacher program placed first-year teachers in small teams with university faculty as mentors. Throughout the school year, these teams served as safe, non-judgmental environments for the new teachers to receive advice and to give mutual support and encouragement. Analysis of the written discussions found that participants valued and benefited from this resource. Further and more formal research of the Text-a-Teacher model is indicated.*

According to the United States Economic Policy Institute, the current “teacher shortage is real, large and growing, and worse than we thought” (Garcia & Weiss, 2019, para. 1). As this shortage reaches more than 40 states, the need for newly certified teachers grows. New teachers commonly report high levels of stress, burnout, and feelings of isolation and inadequacy (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Synar & Maiden, 2014). A strong mentorship program for first-year teachers has been shown (e.g. Eisenschmidt & Oder, 2018; Stanulis & Bell, 2017) to mitigate these challenges, leading to significant positive outcomes for teachers, students, and schools, and increasing retention rates for beginning teachers.

Unfortunately, schools that most need a mentoring program are often the least likely to have one, due to a lack of time and resources (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Polikoff, et al., 2013). A form of mentorship that can minimize these burdens by being time-flexible and providing first-year teachers access to advice outside of the usual school hours is needed. Electronic mentoring may fit that need. The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the potential of using *WhatsApp* as a vehicle for providing electronic group-mentoring to first-year teachers. If shown to be promising in feasibility and benefits, this study might then serve as a catalyst to further research.

The research question guiding this study was:

- What is the potential of using *WhatsApp* as a vehicle to provide mentoring to first-year teachers?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Benefits of Effective Mentorship for First-Year Teachers**

Education research has long emphasized the unique challenges faced by teachers in their first year. New teachers commonly report high levels of stress and burnout, feelings of isolation and inadequacy, and a feeling they have been left to “sink or swim” (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Okubanjo, 2014). However, a strong mentorship program for first-year teachers has been shown in numerous studies to go far in mitigating these challenges, leading to significant positive

outcomes for teachers, students, and schools (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Lambeth & Lashley, 2012).

Effective mentoring for new teachers generally leads to improved teacher satisfaction, a feeling of being supported, and improved skills, such as classroom management (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Lambeth & Lashley, 2012). Students show gains in learning, time-on-task, and test scores when their new teachers are effectively mentored (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Lambeth & Lashley, 2012). Research indicates that strong mentoring programs increase retention rates for beginning teachers by improving their feelings of self-efficacy and confidence in their instructional skills (Lambeth & Lashley, 2012). Moreover, Eisenschmidt and Oder (2019) found that first-year teachers who feel supported by mentors are likely to develop long-term collaborative relationships with mentors and other teachers. This helps create “a professional learning community within schools” (p. 7).

### **New Ways to Offer Mentorship Are Needed**

While a strong mentorship program has been shown to be a valuable educational practice, studies find that the schools that need such a program the most might be the least likely to invest in effective mentorship. Schools struggling with finances, time, and human resources are less likely to commit the resources needed for the very mentorship programs that might help to alleviate some of their turnover (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Conversely, schools that feel more comfortable with money, time, and human resources generally invest more in mentoring and reap the benefits.

### **Electronic-Mentorship**

Electronic-mentoring, (often referred to as e-mentoring or online mentoring), though relatively new and under-studied, is emerging as a strategy for overcoming time and geographical barriers to effective mentorship. This kind of program typically employs an online community, a team of experienced advisors and first-year teachers, who can supplement the traditional in-school mentoring program. Gutke and Albion (2008) found that first-year teachers often need more support than the traditional mentorship program can offer. However, their study of an Australian e-mentoring program found that electronic-mentoring can effectively supplement a traditional in-building program and significantly increase the benefits resulting from strong mentorship. Participants felt e-mentoring helped to provide advice, encouragement, specific tips, and teaching strategies. Further, the online community gave them a way to discuss problems in a confidential, non-judgmental forum.

### **Requirements of Effective Electronic-Mentorship**

Strong mentorship in any program (electronic or otherwise) requires teamwork, a multi-faceted approach, and opportunities for informal as well as formal mentoring (Bickmore & Bickmore, 2010; Hallam, et al., 2012). Bang and Luft (2013) and Redmond (2015) agreed that establishing the “personal relationship” between mentors and the first-year teachers on their teams is a critical pre-requisite to the success of an e-mentoring program. Rodesiler and Tripp (2012) found that the most important support offered by mentors in online environments may be friendship and

empathy. Shared materials and ideas are valued, but first-year teachers may be more likely to get the specific resources and information they need from in-building mentors (Rodesiler & Tripp, 2012). Mentors in online environments are most valued when they praise and encourage mentees' good ideas, share empathy, discuss and validate experiences—help mentees to “unpack and process” them (Rodesiler & Tripp, 2012).

## **Discourse Communities**

“Discourse communities are groupings of people—not only face-to-face or actual in-the-moment groupings, but also ideational groupings across time and space—that share ways of knowing, thinking believing, acting, and communicating” (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. 16).

According to James Paul Gee (1999), the term discourse community is more than a group of people that communicate. In his 1999 essay *Literacy, discourse & linguistics: An introduction* Gee claims that the term discourse community is a combination of five factors: saying, doing, being, valuing, and believing. He explains that discourses are ways of being in the world, and forms of life that someone chooses to have, including sharing the same words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities with that community.

In this case, our discourse community was a virtual one, utilizing texting through *WhatsApp*, and composed of first-year teachers and mentors—teacher educators from their undergraduate institution. According to Zhao & Rop (2001), although electronic teacher networks are often used in studies and are claimed to be discourse communities, the degree to which the networks meet the criteria of a discourse community, such as shared goals among members and the encouragement of truly reflective discourse, is rarely seriously examined. Still, an electronic teacher network can be an effective professional development platform, presuming it meets certain conditions. These include time-flexibility, ease of use, and high motivation— participants being invested in the goals of the project (Zhao & Rop, 2001). We designed a program of mentorship via texting with just that time-flexibility in mind, finding *WhatsApp* to be an easy platform to use for all participants. To help ensure high motivation, we engaged only volunteers as participants.

## **Methods**

For this exploratory study, we utilized a convenience sample of first-year teachers who had recently graduated from our university. To solicit participants, we sent out email and social media invitations to recent graduates inviting them to join the Text-a-Teacher mentoring project. Ten first-year teachers agreed to participate. We grouped the new teachers according to the content area in which they were teaching and assigned a mentor teacher (university faculty member) to each group that had expertise in the group's content area, and the second author served as a secondary mentor for all groups. For this study, we are focusing on just one of the three mentor groups—the group of secondary English teachers.

This group was composed of three new teachers who chose the pseudonyms Riley, Rose, and Gaiwan. Riley and Gaiwan were traditional undergraduate students who had both majored in Secondary English Education. Riley was teaching 6<sup>th</sup> grade English at a public middle school in a mid-sized city school district. Gaiwan was teaching four preps, including honors and standard

English 10, creative writing, and study skills at a high school in a mid-sized city school district. Rose had completed her Masters plus secondary English teaching certification and was in her first year teaching at a new charter school focused on STEM in a small city. Rose was teaching 7<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grade English and History classes. The school was project-based and team taught, so Rose taught in the same classroom with the math, science, and special education teachers.

### **Text-a-Teacher**

The idea to use texting as a means for mentoring new teachers was inspired by the second author's experiences serving as a Mobile Mentor for teachers in Kakuma Refugee Camp (Mendenhall et al., 2018). As faculty members in teacher preparation, we often lose contact with our students after they graduate. We know the first year of teaching can be especially difficult, so we wanted to investigate whether connecting regularly with our former students-turned-teachers could be effective and helpful. Following the mobile mentoring model (Mendenhall et al., 2018), four faculty members and one doctoral student (with over 100 combined years of K-12 teaching experience) met prior to the study. We brainstormed topics of interest to first-year teachers. Then, we met weekly to discuss progress and decide on a weekly prompt based on participant feedback and questions. We identified one question or prompt to send participants each week (see Appendix for prompt examples). Participants were not required to respond and could also bring up their own questions and topics for discussion at any time.

### **Data Collection**

We used the texting app, *WhatsApp*, to send a weekly message to participants, encouraging them to not only respond but to also share questions, challenges, and successes. All texts were copied and pasted into a Word document, and the resulting transcript was subjected to thematic coding/analysis. Thematic analysis is one of the foundational methods of qualitative data analysis, a method of identifying and examining patterns and themes, levels of meaning, within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The open-coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in which the texts were read and re-read, and words and phrases that showed up repeatedly throughout the school year were identified, led to codes such as “I need advice/What should I do?” “Frustrated,” and “Afraid to/Don’t know whom to ask.” Through repeated readings of the texts, we created theoretical memos noting repeated themes and patterns, then we grouped the codes into three central categories: “Knowing policies, procedures, and rights,” “Difficult colleagues, administration, and parents,” and “Connecting to others/support/encouragement.”

Finally, one category emerged encompassing all others: “Mutual Social/Emotional Support.” From this central category our theory emerged: The most prevalent and important need addressed by this e-mentoring group was social/emotional support, a sense of not being alone with the weight of personal and professional struggles. Though other advice, such as specific pedagogical resources and strategies, was sought and appreciated; far more essential to the group was empathy: a listening ear, and the opportunity to voice questions, frustrations, and hardships in a supportive, non-judgmental environment.

## Results

We found that, indeed, virtual mentoring shows great promise as a viable vehicle to support new teachers, and the need for further research is indicated. Specifically, we found that the Text-a-Teacher model was effective in emotionally supporting our participating new teachers, as it offered a real-time space to vent frustrations and ask questions in a “safe” environment, outside of their school district, with mentors and former classmates whom they trusted. Below we share the central categories that emerged from the nine months of mentoring texts in response to the research question: What is the potential of using *WhatsApp* as a vehicle to provide mentoring to first-year teachers?

### **Knowing Policies, Procedures, Rights**

The new teachers in our study did not always know about policies, procedures, and/or if their rights were being violated. Moreover, they were uncomfortable or unsure whom to ask questions about the above within their school district. For example, in March, Rose had questions about not being assigned a district mentor and not yet having been evaluated. Likewise, in April, Gaiwan was still unsure if his contract would be renewed, and he wasn't sure how, when, or with whom he should broach the topic. Other examples included what to do about not having a planning period, being required to use lunch time to travel between buildings, and being asked to give up spring break without compensation in order to interview new candidates. In these cases, the mentors were able to offer advice, suggestions, and even at times verbiage, so their mentees could confidently and appropriately advocate for themselves.

### **Dealing with Difficult Colleagues / Administration / Parents**

Text-a-Teacher also provided a safe space for new teachers to ask for and receive support regarding difficult colleagues and administrators. For example, the age difference between Riley and her colleagues, along with her being a new teacher, seemed to cause some challenges. She wrote, “Every single person in my team has children older than me, so they treat me like I’m a kid. I do my best to ignore it, but they are... mean to me.”

Gaiwan also felt his colleagues did not always value him. He shared, “I feel exhausted, beaten, and worn... I have started sharing ideas and making suggestions, but I still feel like I get ignored...” Rose found herself in a precarious position after telling her administration that she had accepted a job at another school for the following year. She wrote, “Ever since I told our admin I’m leaving next year, they have been treating me like garbage. Today, without warning, they set up spring picture day IN MY CLASSROOM!!”

For these new teachers, trying to navigate relationships and their positionality in the school, Text-a-Teacher provided a safe space to vent frustrations and share with people who did not work in their district, but who could relate to their experiences. Moreover, the mentors offered practical advice (e.g. “Make sure you document everything;” “As far as saying something, Yes! You should!”) along with an empathetic and listening ear (e.g. “That sounds frustrating;” “It is normal to feel that way at this time of the school year”).

## Connecting to Similar Others / Support / Encouragement

The mentees found *WhatsApp* to be a valuable and safe platform to voice concerns with other new teachers who were going through similar demands. For example:

- Riley: I thought of another unexpected and difficult thing. I HAVEN'T BEEN PAID YET! That is the hardest part so far!!
- Rose: Oh my goodness, same!!! I've been running down my savings.
- Gaiwan: Yeah, this whole getting not paid situation isn't fun. Also, we don't get health care until January??

By the end of the school year, the new teachers were not just responding to provided prompts, but initiating conversations, sharing frustrations and funny stories, and commiserating with one another. For example, the following exchange took place before any mentors had the chance to respond:

- Rose: A group of 9th grade boys, who have a history of being exceptionally rude and disrespectful, literally will not do a single thing in my class. Now they're dragging other students in. What do I do? Parent contact did not work with these students.
- Gaiwan: Rose, I want to let you know I have three students who have also told me that they are "planning to fail." I keep trying to keep them engaged and have contacted parents, but... At this point (two weeks left of school), there is not much to do, and it is their choice in the end. It still hurts to see them waste time away, though.

## Discussion

As our country faces a teacher shortage crisis, it is necessary for teacher preparation programs to join the battle in helping to retain teachers. One way to do so is to investigate ways to support the graduates of their programs into their first year of teaching, as this Text-a-Teacher mentoring sought to do. As have other studies sharing the benefits of electronic mentoring (e.g. Bang & Luft, 2013; Gutke & Albion, 2008; Redmond, 2015), we found that Text-a-Teacher was time-flexible, required limited resources, and helped mentees feel safe while their privacy was protected. Like the Rodesiler and Tripp (2012) study, we found that the most important support offered was sharing empathy, discussing and validating experiences, and helping mentees to unpack and process them.

Most importantly, all the mentees valued the experience. Riley shared, "I have loved this experience!... It was nice having a place to vent and seek advice from people that understand! I really appreciated the prompts every week. They made me think about things that weren't on my radar but needed to be." Rose agreed, "I also LOVED this group! I desperately needed people to talk to about my job outside my school... The first year was so hard, but I felt better knowing I wasn't alone on some of the struggles I faced." From responses like these, it is clear that virtual mentoring has value and that a model like our Text-a-Teacher program shows great promise for further investigation.

We have reason to hope that this small-scale exploratory study can grow into the beginnings of a powerful new tool to supplement traditional mentoring, help new teachers to feel supported, and mitigate the burnout new teachers commonly feel. Drawing upon previous research in the emerging field of electronic-mentoring, such as Hunt, et al. (2013) and Bang & Luft (2014), we knew that electronic-mentoring could benefit new teachers. The Text-a-Teacher model incorporated particular elements, some not always found in prior studies and some highly atypical in the field. The study deliberately set out to explore some of these. The importance of others we only began to realize as the program evolved. These included:

- A text app as the vehicle for mentorship, rather than email, the most common medium used in prior studies; this may have made discussion more accessible to participants, as cell phones are highly mobile and easy to have near at hand;
- Electronic-mentoring as supplemental to and not a replacement for traditional mentoring, common to but not universal in prior studies; a willingness among hard-working new teachers to engage in extra discourse may be an indicator of how much they valued the experience;
- A small discourse community of new teachers and experienced teachers, as opposed to the more traditional one-on-one mentoring partnership model; this may have increased the creative resources available to participants through discussion;
- Mentoring partnerships with trusted partners, (in this case, university faculty), outside the control of the new teachers' own school districts; this may have played a vital role in developing a safe, non-judgmental environment.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Our preliminary Text-a-Teacher study yielded promising results and indicates that further, more rigorous research is warranted. Virtual mentoring models similar to Text-a-Teacher, using text apps or similar means for connecting new teachers to support groups of experienced practitioners in safe, non-evaluative environments should be further implemented and studied. We recommend that future studies should include:

- De-briefing interviews with the new teachers at the end of the virtual mentoring program to provide further qualitative support for findings;
- Follow-up interviews and surveys with teachers at least a year after the virtual mentoring program to provide both qualitative and quantitative support for findings;
- Intentional examination of whether a text (or other electronic) mentoring network meets the criteria of a “discourse community,” as defined by Zhao & Rop (2001); for example, did the network encourage reflective discourse?
- Control groups, provided traditional mentorship but not the supplemental virtual mentorship of the Text-a-Teacher program, to provide the basis for comparison needed to establish the validity of the results;
- Additional sources of virtual mentorship, such as retired teachers, in order to discover how broad a pool of resources might be available to schools and to new teachers.

### **Conclusion**

This preliminary study yielded positive results regarding the potential of text-a-teacher as a model to help new teachers to feel encouraged and supported. With a reasonable time investment

and little or no financial cost, supportive mentoring partnerships such as these might be established with college and university faculty or perhaps with retired teachers eager to continue aiding the profession. Schools could develop a powerful new tool for investing in the success of new teachers. This, in turn, might prove to be helpful in mitigating the high rate of burnout and attrition among teachers, (especially among new teachers), and might be a powerful factor in turning back the tide of the teacher shortage crisis.

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## Appendix

### Examples of Weekly Prompts for Text-a-Teacher Mentor Groups

Week 1	Hello, and thank you for your interest in text-a-teacher mentoring. We hope this is a great experience for you and a place where you can ask questions, share successes and challenges, and get support. Let's start with introductions, so we get to know one another. In a video or text, please share a little bit about yourself including your name, school, grades/subjects you are teaching, and one goal you have for this new school year.
Week 4	This week's topic is about obligations outside of the regular teaching day, such as coaching, academic clubs, chaperoning, advising, etc. What, if any, experiences have you become involved with outside of, but connected to, school activities? How did that go?
Week 5	Professional development days for the vast majority of public schools in Idaho happen this week. Some districts offer/require district-wide professional development, while others leave it up to individuals to identify opportunities. How will/did you make use of this time? Did you find value in that time? What is something you learned that might be useful to other members of this group? What topics do you WISH would have been addressed?
Week 6	Do you live in the community where you are teaching? Are you active in your school's community outside of the school walls? What are you doing outside of your classroom that is not contracted? Going to football games? Going to the fair? Seeing your students perform in a play, musical, etc.? If so, what is your biggest take away from engaging with students on their turf (not like contracted coaching, just non-committal social things).
Week 8	Most schools are getting ready to have or have recently had parent-teacher conferences. If you haven't had them yet, do you have any questions or concerns? If you HAVE had them, how did they go?
Week 12	We know you are looking forward to winter break. What are you planning for stress relief in and out of the classroom? Try to squeeze in some reflection time over the break. If something feels like it is not working, what are you thinking about changing for the rest of the year or next semester?
Week 16	Have you been observed and/or evaluated yet? If so, by whom? Do you have any questions, concerns, or victories to share about the evaluation process?
Week 18	Something we don't expect you to have to deal with but that you should probably know: Sometimes teachers make unethical decisions that end up hurting students. Often those decisions end up going to the Professional Standards Commission for action to be taken against their licenses. Below is a link to a list of those from the past few years. Take a look when you get the chance. What is surprising or interesting to you? What questions do you have?
Week 20	With the snowy weather and flu season, teachers can start to feel down this time of year. Try to focus on your kind, joyful, and hard-working students. Will you share one example of a student who made you smile this week?

Week 22	It's not fun, but if you haven't done so yet, you should be thinking about scheduling a meeting to talk with your principal and/or assigned mentor about the steps you should be taking to prepare your portfolio for evaluation. Have any of you begun this process yet? Have you been given guidelines? (Every district addresses this differently). What questions do you have or advice do you have to share with the group?
Week 27	By now you should have a better idea of your personal strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. As we approach the last quarter of school, what is something you would like to work on/a goal you have to finish out the year strongly?
Week 22	This week let's focus on successes. Has anything gotten easier for you as the year has progressed? What has made you smile at school this week?
Week 30	As you reflect on your first year, what is some advice you have for students who will be beginning their teaching careers next year?

**About the Authors**

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**Taylor Raney** is a Clinical Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, Director of Teacher Education, and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Idaho. Dr. Raney's research primarily centers on continuous program improvement of teacher education programs.

# **Innovative Approaches: Reflections from First-Year Special Education Teachers on the Vital Role of Mentorship and Professional Development**

Krystle Jalalian-Chursky

## **Abstract**

*Mentoring is a crucial component of professional development for special education teachers. Special education is a highly specialized field that demands a unique set of skills and knowledge to accommodate the diverse needs of students with disabilities. This article highlights the importance of and need for intentional mentoring programs for first-year special education teachers. A survey indicated the importance of providing support and tailored education to first-year teachers with an emphasis on collaboration.*

The realm of special education has undergone substantial changes over time to cater to the varying requirements of students with disabilities. As special education teachers (SETs) strive to create inclusive and efficient learning settings, the significance of mentorship for novice teachers is now greater than before. This article explores the significance of mentorship for first-year SETs, highlighting challenges faced by first-year SETs, its influence on teacher retention, and the need for collaboration with administration.

## **Challenges Faced by First-Year Teachers**

New special education teachers (SETs) often express concerns that are connected to elements of their pre-service training, which they perceive as insufficient (Mastropieri, 2001). It is the duty of teacher educators to conduct thorough program evaluations to pinpoint elements within their preparation programs that could either support or impede the smooth transition of novice teachers into full-time teaching. In the first year, novice SETs frequently express stress and burnout concerns in their roles, pinpointing collaborative efforts with colleagues as a supportive factor during the initial years (Belknap & Taymans, 2015). These factors may ultimately influence the retention of highly qualified special educators (Tillman et al., 2011). New first year SETs face a variety of challenges when entering the classroom, which range from classroom management, working on and through individualized education plans (IEPs), collaboration, emotional and behavioral concerns, and legal and ethical considerations. Being able to manage diverse needs and behaviors within a single classroom can be daunting without the proper support in place. Maroney (2000), stated, "Teachers need strategies that are effective, efficient, easy to use, practical and adaptable" (24). The strategies are categorized into six key areas essential for novice SETs: (a) fostering professionalism, (b) fundamentals for effective instruction, (c) academic instruction, (d) cognitive-behavioral instruction, (e) behavioral management, and (f) supplementary classroom elements (Maroney, 2000). The question remains: How do teachers gain these strategies while trying to learn to manage the classroom, create and develop IEPs, collaborate with parents, paraprofessionals, and staff, deal with students who may exhibit emotional and behavioral issues in the classroom, and last, navigate the complex landscape of special education laws?

## The Role of Mentorship

Well-designed mentoring programs can significantly enhance the performance of new employees (Rowley, 1999). A proficient mentor should be capable of recognizing the mentee's shortcomings and help address any deficiencies. It is crucial for the effective mentor to provide ongoing feedback throughout the process to ensure the mentee comprehends and embraces new methods (Norman & Ganser, 2004). The establishment of such a mentor-mentee relationship is only possible when the school culture supports peer observation and fosters open dialogue and feedback from peers (Rowley, 1999). Mentorship within the realm of special education plays a pivotal role in illuminating the path for first-year teachers as they embark on their educational journey. The multifaceted support provided by mentors is instrumental in shaping the success and resilience of novice educators in the specialized field of special education (Evashkovsky & Osipovia, 2023). First, mentors contribute invaluable instructional support to new teachers. Drawing from their wealth of experience, mentors can offer guidance on effective teaching strategies tailored to the diverse needs of SETs. This includes insights into individualized instruction methods and the adaptation of curriculum to ensure optimal learning outcomes for students with varying abilities. Moreover, the emotional toll of special education teaching can be substantial, and mentors play a crucial role in providing emotional support (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). Second, they serve as a reliable source of encouragement, helping first-year teachers navigate the challenges and emotional complexities associated with accommodating the diverse needs of students with special requirements (Ruzak et al., 2016). This emotional support not only fosters resilience but also contributes to the overall well-being of educators in the demanding field of special education (Stark & Koslouski, 2021).

Collaboration and networking represent another vital facet of mentorship. Experienced mentors assist new teachers in building professional relationships within the field of special education. This collaborative environment encourages the sharing of resources, ideas, and best practices, and fostering a sense of community among educators. This concept finds support in the research of Ingersoll and Strong (2011), where they highlighted that consistently scheduled collaboration time between mentors and mentees emerged as one of the most influential factors contributing to heightened teacher retention rates. Through networking, novice teachers gain access to a wealth of knowledge and support that extends beyond their immediate classroom, enriching their professional development. In essence, mentorship in special education goes beyond the traditional role of guidance; it becomes a comprehensive support system addressing instructional, emotional, collaborative, and legal dimensions (Evashkovsky & Osipovia, 2023). By embracing the guidance of experienced mentors, first-year SETs can navigate the complexities of their roles with confidence and effectiveness, ultimately contributing to the positive development and success of their students.

Support from school principals has been identified as a key factor influencing the retention of both general and special education teachers in the profession, according to Darling-Hammond (2003). Correa and Wagner (2011) stress that importance of principals to understand the nature of special education and the impact it takes to retain teachers during the first years on the job. In addition, principal leadership plays a crucial role in establishing environments that facilitate the support of new teachers in addressing the intricate and varied needs of their students. The initiation process for novice SETs can pose unique challenges for school administrators,

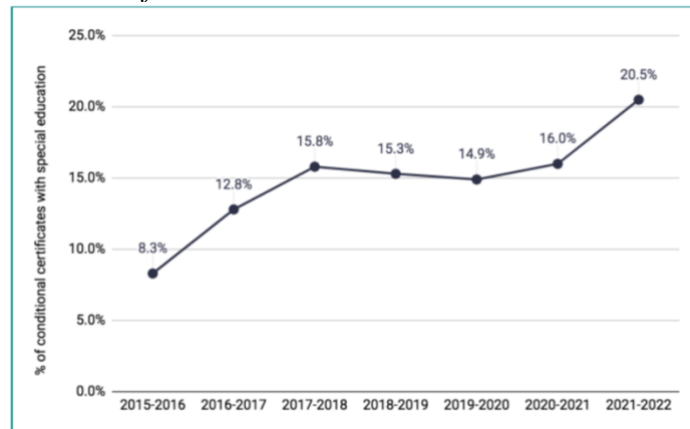
necessitating distinct forms of support compared to other situations. It is well understood that principals wield a direct influence on the trajectory of and educational atmosphere within the school, shaping both the learning and teaching culture, which can lead to teacher retention depending on how effective the impact is (Grissom et al., 2021).

### Impact on Teacher Retention

Mentorship programs have been shown to improve teacher retention rates; “well designed mentoring programs improve retention rates for new teachers, as well as their attitudes, feelings of efficacy, and instructional skills” (Sutcher et al., 2019, p.6). The support and guidance provided by mentors can help new teachers feel more confident and competent in their roles, reducing the likelihood of early burnout. Higher retention rates among SETs contribute to the stability and consistency of special education programs, benefiting both teachers and students. Based on the Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) educator shortage report, there continues to be a shortage of educators in classrooms serving some of the state’s most at-risk students, including those in special education and English language learners (ELL) programs (2021, p.3). Special education is the number two top area of content and role shortages in Washington state.

**Figure 1**

*Percentage of Conditional Certificates Issued in Social Education*



The current pattern in Figure 1 (PESB, 2021, p.12) underscores the significance of special education, particularly emphasizing the necessity to recruit and retain SETs in the state of Washington. The figure indicates the percentage of conditional certificates issued in special education continues to increase. Conditional certificates are requested by schools when they are unable to find a regularly certified educator for a position. Of the many content area shortages spanning the state, qualified SETs continue to be a significant shortage in Washington’s educator workforce (PESB, 2021). A key strategy to guarantee the success of new special education professionals involves providing support and essential tools, primarily through mentoring and continuous professional development initiatives at both the school and district levels. Educators desire recognition for their contributions and the chance to actively participate in decision-making processes that directly impact them and their students.

## **Project Design and Overview**

The initial project design originated from interactions with graduates from outside the classroom, sparking meaningful discussions and aspirations regarding their teaching trajectory. The graduates were prior students in the School of Education at Seattle Pacific University (SPU), majoring in special education. The open line of communication established a dynamic relationship between the graduates and the program director, fostering a sense of community and ensuring that the alumni felt connected and supported as they navigated the initial stages of their teaching careers. The insights gleaned from these alumni not only prompted the design of this study but also emphasized the value of experiential knowledge and the diverse paths educators embark upon leaving college. The study aims to harness and amplify real-world narratives and experiences from special education teachers and the support received during their first year of teaching. With the cohort being smaller in size, there was no need to break the participants into groups for the study. Each participant was sent a survey via forms to complete.

### **Participants**

Five participants from across Washington state volunteered to be surveyed to speak about their experiences as SETs in both the general and special education classrooms. The program director at SPU recruited participants via email, reaching out to all special education teachers who graduated within the past five years. All participants were female, and three were educators of color (70%), and all had two years of experience in their current role.

### **Methods**

All participants received a three-item survey asking about their experience as first-year SETs (see Appendix A). The response rate was 100% (five participants completed the survey). The three-item survey consisted of open-ended questions allowing participants to provide insight and personal experiences. The purposes of the survey were to 1) understand the experiences and challenges first-year SETs face throughout the year, 2) elicit participants' perceptions of mentoring and professional development opportunities, and 3) identify approaches and areas for improvement for schools and districts to provide meaningful mentoring opportunities. To analyze the descriptive, open-ended responses, qualitative methodologies were applied, integrating an open-coding methodology along with iterative readings to identify evolving patterns and themes.

### **Results**

Navigating the landscape of special education is marked with experiences and challenges. The survey findings unveil a nuanced landscape where positive and negative outcomes have left an indelible mark on mentoring and professional development for the participants. The survey sheds light on the multifaceted impact that these experiences have had, shaping the trajectory of individuals engaged in this field.

## Experiences and Challenges

Participants were asked to share about their experience throughout the year as a first-year SET. Below, are the narratives provided by each participant.

*Participant A: In terms of experiences as a SPED teacher, establishing a clear and consistent routine for students is the most important part of the start to each school year. This school year, I have focused on establishing a consistent schedule for students. We have a daily schedule that we follow, and some students have individual schedules that they follow as well.*

*Participant B: I enjoyed getting to know my students and their families; however, I felt I didn't have enough hours in the day to be fully present with every student.*

*Participant C: Surprises are challenging, so it's important to prepare students for changes in schedules via social stories, visuals, etc.*

*Participant D: Overload of students from start of year until end of year (contract language is 10 and I started out with 14).*

*Participant E: I wish we had more time to plan and more support, whether that be more paraeducators or even support from Admin. I am at a school where we have a lot of students facing big challenges, and it is really hard when they refer them to special education when that isn't always the case. Not having enough support from administration when I needed it the most. All I want and need is collaboration with my administration and colleagues to ensure I am on track.*

## Mentoring and Professional Development Opportunities

Participants were asked to share any insight on mentoring and professional development they had as a first-year SET. Below are the narratives provided by each participant.

*Participant A: My district has an awesome mentoring program! My first two years of teaching I had a mentor teacher who was my job-alike at another school. I got to take a morning off to observe her classroom. We had bi-weekly or monthly zoom meetings. My district is small, so I also work closely with our special education coordinator and our director of student services. I feel very supported by my district and have a great professional learning community of other special education teachers at the elementary, middle, and high-school levels.*

*Participant B: My first year in the district I had a mentor teacher whom I would have weekly meetings with, and she was meant to help me through the first 2 years. She wasn't a classroom teacher but more of a mentor that I could go to when I wasn't sure what to do.*

*Participant C: The professional development we had was more geared towards general education, so it never really was beneficial for me or the other sped members.*

*Participant D: I never received professional development and still wish I was able to advocate for myself, but I didn't know how or whom to speak with about it.*



*This is something I want to learn more about, and still hope I can have these opportunities.*

*Participant E: We have staff meetings once a month in where we discuss different things, whether that be practices we can use to improve our teaching, learning about the changes in education and how that may impact our students, discussing the Danielson teaching framework, or working with other colleagues to see what they have been doing in their classrooms. We also sometimes get to attend trainings that are related to our position or any. For instance, I attend one about the Danielson framework, which is the framework my district uses to evaluate teachers. I've also attended a special education training that focused on goal book and how that can be a resource when writing IEPs. These professional development opportunities have been great! Sometimes it gets hard to attend because there is no time!!!*

## **Areas for Improvement**

Participants were asked to identify any areas for improvement for mentoring and professional development for first-year SET. Below are the narratives provided by each participant.

*Participant A: I think that something districts could improve upon for mentoring programs would be assigning mentors based off job-alike, setting aside pre-approved time for mentor meetings. Setting up time for the mentors to visit the mentee's classroom several times throughout the year.*

*Participant B: If we could have actual mentoring or professional development that focuses on areas we struggle in in the classroom, it would be very beneficial.*

*Participant C: Having resources for families that they could use outside of the classroom would be a great tool to have, especially for families who are multilingual.*

*Participant D: Actually, having an opportunity to be involved in professional development, anything that can help all teachers grow but more so sped teachers—we need it.*

*Participant E: More trainings on how we can improve our teaching. Trainings about behavior plans or different practices we can use in a resource room setting. My school is going through a lot right now and many teachers have reached out to the district and even HR and not much has been done. So, any trainings on how we can improve will always be helpful!! Mentors that have background in sped assigned to first-year teachers will also be helpful!!*

## **Discussion and Implications**

In their inaugural year as SETs, participants shared a range of challenges and insights. The diverse experiences highlighted critical issues, including Participant A's emphasis on the pivotal role of establishing clear routines and schedules for students. Participant B found joy in building connections but grappled with time constraints limiting their full presence for each student.

Participant C underscored the challenges posed by surprises and advocated for proactive measures in preparing students for schedule changes. Participant D faced the substantial challenge of an overload of students beyond contractual limits, while Participant E voiced a need for more planning time, additional support, and improved collaboration with administration. In terms of mentoring and professional development, the participants' experiences varied. Participant A applauded their district's effective mentoring program and the robust support received from mentors, special education coordinators, and the director of student services. In alignment, a study in 2015 by Belknap and Taymans interviewed first-year SETs to explore their school experiences. The research identified that individuals who experienced support in their school environment and believed they were contributing positively displayed higher levels of resilience. Conversely, feelings of isolation and a perceived lack of preparation for the role were linked to lower resilience (Belknap & Taymans, 2015). Participant B benefited from a mentor for the initial two years, offering guidance beyond the classroom. In contrast, Participant C found professional development geared more toward general education, lacking direct relevance for special education; in alignment, in numerous schools, novice SETs receive mentoring from general education teachers, a practice identified as less effective according to Whitaker (2000). Participant D expressed a desire for more professional development opportunities and a need to learn self-advocacy skills, and participant E appreciated existing monthly staff meetings and relevant trainings but faced challenges in finding time to attend.

For areas of improvement, participants offered insightful suggestions. Participant A recommended aligning mentors based on job similarities and dedicating pre-approved time for mentor meetings. Participant B advocated for mentoring and professional development that specifically addresses classroom challenges. Participant C proposed resources for multilingual families outside the classroom, while Participant D highlighted the need for more inclusive professional development opportunities. Participant E underscored the importance of additional training on teaching improvement, behavior plans, and practices, emphasizing the value of mentors with a special education background for first-year teachers. Suggestions for improvement included tailored mentor assignments and dedicated time, specific professional development addressing classroom challenges, resources for multilingual families, and a need for more inclusive opportunities for self-advocacy and training. Collectively, the findings underscore a compelling need for targeted support and resources to enhance the overall experiences of first-year SETs, reflecting a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and potential improvements in the field.

The findings of the study can shed light on specific issues such as classroom management, collaboration with other families and other professionals, and support from administration. Gathering participants' perceptions of mentoring and professional development opportunities not only provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of existing programs but also where there are gaps in the system. Whitaker (2000) highlighted a discrepancy between apparent support "on paper" and its actual manifestation, as observed in a survey of first-year SETs. The study emphasized that the success of mentoring programs hinges on key factors such as consistent support, accessibility, and the alignment of personal and professional characteristics, which aligns with the current study for designing mentorship initiatives that align with the needs and preferences of first-year SETs. Understanding how these teachers view mentoring relationships and professional development can help in creating more personalized and targeted support

systems. The identification of approaches and areas for improvement is a proactive step toward enhancing the overall support structure for first-year SETs. The idea of having job-alike at another school is a proactive way to ensure SETs are provided with the appropriate tools to be successful in the classroom, which could lead to recommendations for refining mentorship programs and tailoring professional development opportunities.

In summary, the discussion of the three-item survey reflects a comprehensive approach to supporting first-year SETs. By understanding their experiences, gathering perceptions on mentoring and professional development, and identifying areas for improvement, the study contributes valuable insights to the ongoing efforts to enhance the support systems within schools and districts for SETs. According to Hagaman and Casey (2018), additional research revealed that newly appointed SETs prioritized mentorship as their top choice for induction support, with disability-specific training and collaboration with administration following closely behind, which aligns with the current reflections from the SETs in the study. The hope is that with more data and knowledge, schools and districts can create innovative approaches to the vital role of mentorship and professional development for SETs that be aligned with needs of the teachers and students they serve.

It's crucial to acknowledge that the study's sample size is limited, comprising a relatively small number of participants, all of whom are educators in the elementary setting. While the findings offer valuable insights within this context, the generalizability of the results to broader educational settings may be constrained. Additionally, participants expressed a desire for more in-depth exploration, indicating that a more personalized and detailed approach, such as conducting interviews, could have enhanced the depth of the data collected. This suggests that a broader and more intensive investigation, perhaps incorporating qualitative interviews alongside surveys, could provide a richer understanding of the experiences and perspectives of first-year SETs.

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## Appendix A

### Three-Item Survey

1. Can you provide any experiences you have faced throughout the year as a first year SET teacher?
2. Can you provide any insight on mentoring and professional development opportunities you have had as a first year SET?
3. Can you identify approaches and areas for improvement for schools and districts to provide meaningful mentoring opportunities for first year SET?

### About the Author

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# Developing Relational Leadership Habits in Educational Leaders: Utilizing the StrengthsFinder® Assessment

Rebecca Smith, Jeromy Koffler, and Jennette Lovejoy

## Abstract

*This mixed methods research study investigated the impact of using the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment (Rath & Conchie, 2009) on graduate student leadership development. The data were triangulated through the use of a pre-post Leadership Capacity Staff Survey (Lambert, 2003) and qualitative feedback in the form of student reflective feedback on their experiences throughout the study. Participants included 11 Canadian students enrolled in a Master's of Education cohort-based degree program from an accredited U.S. university. Findings indicate significant positive impacts ( $p < .05$ ) on student confidence in educational leadership capacity and cohort cohesiveness, in addition to significant pre-post growth in broad-based participation in the work of leadership and reflective practice.*

**Keywords:** leadership development, strengths finder, relational leadership, graduate education, cohort

Educational leadership must respond to the dynamic social and cultural demands that impact our students today. School leaders need the skills and capacities to adapt to complex social contexts with appropriate judgement (Komives et al., 2006), and perhaps more than ever before, school principals must adapt to rapidly changing learning environments (Heffernan, 2018). However, research indicates that our school leaders may not graduate from preparation programs ready to effectively lead schools (i.e., Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). For instance, in one study (Cray & Weiler, 2011), superintendents reported deficiencies in principal preparedness that could be addressed in leadership preparation programs, and there is high principal attrition, with nearly half of public-school principals leaving school leadership after three years (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017). Kouzes and Posner (2014) argue that “Leadership is important in every sector, every school, every community, and in every country” (p. xvii), and the mission statements of many higher education institutions highlight building student leadership skills and capacities with the goal of responsible civic engagement and life-long learning (Cress et al., 2001). With this value of developing effective leaders in place, in conjunction with the unique sociopolitical climate that demands effective school leadership, universities must take responsibility for helping to develop leaders who are prepared to meet the demands of an ever-changing society. The development of effective school leaders is essential for the future of our schools and our societies.

## Relational Leadership for School Change

Research on leadership development is extensive, including the following leadership models: servant, transactional, transformational, relational, distributed, and team leadership (Kezar et al., 2006; Komives et al., 2011; Komives et al., 2013). Universities continue to seek methods for developing students as leaders, including through course work and leadership programs. In one study of pre-service teachers (Furtado & Anderson, 2012), personal reflection activities

increased knowledge and confidence in participants. Furthermore, Sorensen et al. (2009) found that utilizing experiential and self-directed leadership methods increased student knowledge and self-confidence as leaders. The need to find methods for supporting these leadership development skills is necessary work.

A relational model for leadership development, which focuses on collaboration and strengths-building, may be particularly effective at developing school leaders. This approach focuses on multiple stakeholders working collaboratively toward positive change (Komives et al., 2013). Relational leadership targets shared goal attainment and eliminates the hierarchal paradigm by distributing power. This leadership focus on relationships and inclusivity is more network driven and horizontal in structure (Shim, 2013). It appears that this collaborative style may be preferred by millennials (Shollen, 2015) and that relationship-building tends to be a strength among female leaders (Davidson, 2018). With approximately 72% of the public education workforce identifying as female, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), developing school leaders within a relational framework, focused on collaboration and strengths-building, feels appropriate and necessary.

### **Purpose of this Study**

One leadership tool that can be used to develop relation-focused leaders is the Clifton StrengthsFinder®. There is a prevalence of research on the use of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® in the field of business (i.e., Rigoni & Asplund, 2016; Olsen, 2013), or in the development of undergraduate students (i.e., Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Soria et al., 2015; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). Yet, there is little research about the impact of this strengths-based approach on in-service teacher leadership development. Thus, the purpose of this mixed-methods research study was to investigate the impact of using the Clifton StrengthsFinder® Assessment with graduate students studying educational leadership. The hypothesis is that the Clifton StrengthsFinder® Assessment results and course-based activities that supported the use of this approach would positively impact students' self-perceptions of their leadership skills and abilities and potentially change their school-based leadership practice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Gallup (2020), the Clifton StrengthsFinder® is based on the framework of *positive psychology*. Positive psychology revolves around individuals' subjective experiences, including: "well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). When utilized, this framework can help individuals and groups flourish. Rath and Conchie (2009) advocate for cultivating one's strengths, rather than trying to improve weaknesses. Thus, the Clifton StrengthsFinder® provides individuals with their top five *talents* or strengths and encourages leaders to understand, cultivate, and reflect on these; understanding the strengths of those with whom you work will also allow a leader to create a more effective team with a balance of different strengths.

In addition to positive psychology, the theoretical framework guiding this study of leadership development is founded in *Consciousness of Self* (Early & Fincher, 2016), which includes an

awareness of one's strengths and skills. Consciousness of self includes developmental readiness, which is the motivation and ability of the leader to develop. Research related to leadership identity development (Komives et al., 2006) found that consciousness of self is impacted by five dimensions: 1) deepening self-awareness; 2) building self-confidence; 3) establishing interpersonal efficacy; 4) applying new skills; and 5) expanding motivation. These five domains will be used to guide the qualitative data analysis for this study.

## Methods

This mixed methods study investigating the impact of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® (Rath & Conchie, 2009) assessment on graduate-student-teacher leadership development occurred within one liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Students in this study were living in Alberta, Canada and attending a locally offered U.S. university degree program. Participants included 11 graduate students enrolled in a Master of Education (M.Ed.) program in educational leadership. The program was a two-year cohort model degree program. Of the participants, 91% ( $n = 10$ ) self-identified as female, and one identified as male. The majority (64%,  $n = 7$ ) of participants identified as White Canadian, one identified as First Nation, Metis, Inuit, and three students did not identify their race. The participants had a combined sum of 157 years of experience as educators, with a mean of 15.7 years. All participants were working educational professionals, including: five elementary school teachers, two middle school teachers, two high school teachers, one principal, and one education consultant. The students were all enrolled in a Professional Development and Growth course for one semester.

## Data Sources

In order to improve confirmability and quality of the findings, multiple forms of data were collected in this study for triangulation (Miles et al., 2014). First, participants took the Leadership Capacity Staff Survey (Lambert, 2003) as a pre- post-survey measure, at the beginning and end of the semester course. Permission was granted via the Copyright Clearance Center for use of this survey instrument, as required by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) for use of the survey. In addition to the Likert item questions in this survey, participants were also asked open-ended questions regarding their professional growth and leadership in the pre- and post-survey. Second, following completion of the Leadership Capacity Survey, participants were provided class time to complete the Clifton StrengthsFinder® survey online. This 181-item survey includes questions based on 34 themes; individuals receive a summary of their results directly from Gallup. Third, data on participants' overall feedback on their experience with the StrengthsFinder were collected at the end of the study. The qualitative data gathered in reflective exit feedback were deductively coded using a priori, or prefigured coding (Creswell & Poth, 2013). The codes were based on a leadership identity development framework (Komives et al., 2006) within five dimensions: 1) deepening self-awareness; 2) building self-confidence; 3) establishing interpersonal efficacy; 4) applying new skills; and 5) expanding motivation. The results of this study will be summarized below.

## Results

Data analysis found many interesting findings about leadership development in graduate education students related to understanding their own strengths and the strengths of their classmates. The quantitative and qualitative data will be discussed below.

### Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data from the pre- and post-Leadership Capacity Survey (Lambert, 2003) were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a paired samples *t*-test in Excel. The results are discussed below.

#### *Increased Cohort Connection & Leadership Confidence*

It appears that understanding the strengths of the class helped the cohort develop as a connected learning community, demonstrated by increased interconnectedness. There was a statistically significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) between the pre-assessment ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) and post-assessment ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = .52$ ) item: *How connected do you feel to your current cohort?*

Additionally, it appears that the StrengthsFinder focus throughout this course-based study increased confidence in personal educational leadership. There was a statistically significant difference ( $p = .025$ ) between the pre- ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = .52$ ) and post-assessment ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .63$ ) question: *How confident are you as an educational leader (teacher, administrator, coach, etc.)?*

#### *Leadership Capacity Growth*

The Leadership Capacity Staff Survey (Lambert, 2003) was used as a pre- and post-survey measure of leadership development over time. Table 1 identifies the frequency counts of participant responses in each leadership domain from pre- to post-survey. According to the survey author (Lambert, 2003), these frequencies indicate the following recommendations for aspiring leaders:

- Not Observed / Infrequently Performed (NO/IP) areas: Find opportunities to observe these skills in practice and be trained in them.
- Frequently Performed / Consistently Performed (FP/CP) areas: Find more opportunities to demonstrate and practice these skills.
- Can Teach to Others (CTO areas): Find opportunities to coach others and participate in formal governance groups.

As indicated in Table 1, all leadership domains for the NO/IP area showed a decline, indicating an increase in leadership engagement among participants. Furthermore, all FP/CP areas showed an increase in frequencies from pre- to post-, indicating an increased engagement in leadership skills. Finally, the *Can teach to others* category showed variation in its findings, suggesting a lack of consistent opportunities for coaching or formal leadership governance.



**Table 1***Frequency Counts Per Leadership Domain*

Leadership Capacity Domain	Pre-Total NO/IP	Post-Total NO/IP	Change	Pre-Total FP/CP	Post-Total FP/CP	Change	Pre-Total CTO	Post-Total CTO	Change
Broad-based participation in the work of leadership	10	6	-4	24	28	+4	2	2	0
Skillful participation in the work of leadership	30	21	-9	73	82	+9	5	5	0
Shared vision results in program coherence	12	8	-4	23	28	+5	1	0	-1
Inquiry-based use of information informs decisions and practice	6	2	-4	39	40	+1	0	3	+3
Roles and action reflect broad involvement, collaboration, and collective responsibility	5	0	-5	28	35	+7	3	1	-2
Reflective practice consistently leads to innovation	10	3	-7	34	40	+6	1	2	+1
High or steadily improving student achievement and development	11	7	-4	35	42	+7	8	5	-3

*Notes.* NO/IP = Not Observed / Infrequently Performed; FP/CP = Frequently Performed / Consistently Performed (FP/CP); CTO = Can Teach to Others

**Frequency Mean Pre-Post Data Analysis**

The pre- and post-survey data from the Leadership Capacity Staff Survey (Lambert, 2003) were also analyzed with a paired samples *t*-test based on the overall average number of responses for the three main response categories: 1) Not observed / Infrequently performed; 2) Frequently / Consistently performed; and 3) Can teach to others. This analysis found statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) declines in the number of responses in Category 1, indicating that these teacher leaders did in fact engage more frequently in leadership domains from pre to post. This finding is reinforced by Category 2, which also found statistically significant ( $p = .001$ ) increases in the number of times participants frequently or consistently performed the leadership tasks. The final category, *can teach to others*, did not have any significant differences from pre- to post. Overall, these findings indicate that these teacher and principal leaders did increase their engagement with leadership tasks after understanding their own strengths; however, there is still a lack of engagement in teaching leadership skills to others.

**Table 2**  
*Pre-Post Averages Per Response Category Frequencies*

	Category 1: Not Observed / Infrequently Performed			Category 2: Frequently / Consistently Performed			Category 3: Can Teach to Others		
	Pre	Post	<i>P</i> - Value	Pre	Post	<i>P</i> - Value	Pre	Post	<i>P</i> - Value
Overall Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	12 (8.35)	6.71 (6.92) **	<.001	36.57 (17.12)	42.14 (18.48) *	.001	2.86 (2.79)	2.57 (1.90)	.715

Notes. \* $p < .05$ \*; \*\* $p < .001$

**Increased Participation in Broad-Based Leadership & Reflective Practice**

In addition to the data analysis recommended by the survey designer (Lambert, 2003), the data were also analyzed based on a Likert scale. A paired samples *t*-test was conducted from pre- to post-survey means, both overall and per leadership capacity domain. The overall pre-post mean was not statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ); however, there were significant differences in two of the leadership domain categories: *Broad-based participation in the work of leadership* and *Reflective practice consistently leads to innovation* (see Table 3). The Broad-based participation domain consisted of four survey items, including *Seeks to increase interactions among staff, students, and community members in order to build relationships and increase participation* and *Engages others in leading opportunities*. It appears that these educational leaders did increase their overall participation in leadership after understanding their leadership strengths. The Reflective practice domain included five survey items, such as *Encourages reflection among colleagues and students* and *Uses reflective practices such as peer coaching, journal writing, and collaborative planning*. The data analysis indicates that the educational leaders in this study did increase their reflective practice throughout this study. Perhaps the increased reflection was related to their engagement in academic reflection in their educational leadership course.

**Table 3***Pre-Post Overall Means of Leadership Domains Based on Likert Scale Items*

Leadership Capacity Domain	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	P-Value
Overall Survey Data	3.13 (.48)	3.42 (.39)	.054
A. Broad-based participation in the work of leadership	3.03 (.61)	3.42 (.70) *	.008
B. Skillful participation in the work of leadership	3.08 (.63)	3.33 (.35)	.142
C. Shared vision results in program coherence	2.92 (.59)	3.17 (.59)	.450
D. Inquiry-based use of information informs decisions and practice	3.16 (.47)	3.53 (.58)	.093
E. Roles and action reflect broad involvement, collaboration, and collective responsibility	3.39 (.52)	3.53 (.34)	.489
F. Reflective practice consistently leads to innovation	2.93 (.59)	3.36 (.49) *	.045
G. High or steadily improving student achievement and development	3.39 (.62)	3.65 (.44)	.149

Notes. \* ( $p < .05$ ); Scale: 1 – Not observed, 2 – Infrequently observed, 3 – Frequently observed, 4 – Consistently performed, 5 – Can teach to others

### Qualitative Findings

In addition to the quantitative findings indicating positive impacts on student development, the qualitative data revealed similar growth. The qualitative data collected at the end of the semester included the question item: *How do you see yourself using the information you have learned from the StrengthsFinder results in your future professional and personal life, if at all?* The data were coded using the five domains from the Developing Self framework (Komives et al., 2006), including: 1) deepening self-awareness; 2) building self-confidence; 3) establishing interpersonal efficacy; 4) applying new skills; and 5) expanding motivation. Table 4 contains all of the coded qualitative data from this survey item. Each of the domains received at least one data item; however, the *establishing interpersonal efficacy* had the most, with several comments from participants about building relationships, “bring[ing] the potential out in other people in a meaningful way,” and “analyz[ing] what other people’s strengths are and how they complement mine.” Furthermore, there were several comments that illustrated participants improved their self-awareness. For instance, one participant stated: “As a leader, [setting goals] really helps to recognize my strengths, how to apply those strengths, and to recognize and support different strengths in my team to assist in my weaknesses. This will help me to be more aware as a leader.”

**Table 4***Participant feedback on using Clifton StrengthsFinder® results in future*

Developing Self Domain	Participant Quotations
Deepening self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I make sure I am aware of my own [strengths] and try to make sure I use them to build relationships instead of sometimes stepping on people’s toes.</li> <li>- I like the idea of getting better at things I am already good at to help further my understanding and to help me work with others.</li> <li>- As a leader, [setting goals] really helps to recognize my strengths, how to apply those strengths, and to recognize and support different strengths in my team to assist in my weaknesses. This will help me to be more aware as a leader.</li> </ul>
Building self-confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- [My strengths] are definitely going to be essential to my success or failure in my new position!! I’m counting on the “Achiever” in me to turn my actions and decisions into successes!</li> <li>- I have realized that I don’t need to dwell on the things I am not as good at and [will] relish my strengths in a positive manner.</li> </ul>
Establishing interpersonal efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I see myself using the StrengthsFinder results to bring the potential out in other people in a meaningful way.</li> <li>- I find I am already starting to analyze what other people’s strengths are and how they complement mine.</li> <li>- I will definitely continue to create and maintain new and old connections with colleagues and to continue to strengthen the feedback/input loop.</li> <li>- It has made me aware of the other strengths out there. I have always tried to encourage the colleagues in my department to use their talents, but it has made me more aware of what their particular strengths are.</li> </ul>
Applying new skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Awareness of these strengths will help me build on these skills. When I do find myself in the role of an administrator I hope I can use this to see the strengths of my colleagues and use that to implement positive school change.</li> <li>- I will keep trying to use those strengths to support and lead the staff at my school. I feel lucky to have my strengths and I think they are a good fit for my role. However, I am very thankful to have others around me that balance me out and are strong in my weaker areas.</li> </ul>
Expanding motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I have even mentioned this book to my husband and my partners in a company and how we can take a closer look at our organization and strive to create an even stronger team of employees by identifying everyone’s strengths.</li> <li>- I could see myself using this if I move into a formal position of leadership. I can see myself trying to figure who best to have on my “team” and looking at all of their strengths in order to make a well-rounded group.</li> </ul>

### *Using Strengths in Escape-Room Challenge*

The final piece of qualitative data collected for this study was a reflection on the final course activity, which entailed paying to engage in an off-campus escape-room activity at an as a class. This culminating activity was intended to engage graduate student participants in applying their strengths in a “real-life” problem: working together to escape from a locked room. The question item asked students to write an analogy about this experience. The data are included in Table 5. The analogies included comparisons to building a house, a hockey team, and a school.

A few participants highlighted how they used their strengths to help the group. For instance, one stated: “One of my strengths is in collecting information and sharing it with others, and I felt like I wanted to know everything that was happening so I could use this strength.” Another participant said, “I leveraged two of my strengths—learner and context. I drew on past experiences and applied it to this situation, and I used my learner to understand the task that I was working on.” Another said, “I used my strategic and developer strengths. I was able to work with people to solve a problem and know when to ask for help from someone who could fill in my gaps. Different people helped the group in different ways.”

Another participant was able to see how different classmates used their individual strengths to help the group:

I saw myself using my harmony and individualization strengths during our escape-room experience. At first I stood back, watched what was happening, saw what other people were strong at, and then inserted myself into an area I felt I would be successful at. I saw a lot of other people...using their analytical strengths to look at a problem and then devise a way to try and solve it. I also saw others using their positivity strength to support others, especially when they got something correct.

It appeared that this final escape-room activity was a fun and interactive way to apply the strengths-based learning the class had engaged in throughout the semester.

**Table 5***Participant Feedback: Analogies for Escape Room Experience*

Analogy	Explanation
Escape rooms are like schools.	Everyone is doing amazing and intelligent things but because there is so much going on we do not always get to see all of the brilliant things that are going on quite near us.
[The escape room] is like building or renovating a house.	We all had something to contribute. Sometimes we need the foreman, sometimes we just have to figure it out on our own. We all have a common goal of completing the task and will struggle along the way, to reach deadlines but when we are done, there is a great deal of satisfaction, knowing you were part of the team that helped to put it together.
The escape room compared to a hockey team.	Often times, the players are positioned in different areas with different parts of the rink based on their skills, they have to pass to each other; all working toward the same goal.
Our time in the escape room is comparable to a car.	Underneath the hood there are tons of little parts doing their job to make a car run. We each did our part in order to complete our task of getting out of the escape room.
Building leadership capacity through distributed leadership.	Each person on a team has different strengths, skills, and gifts. In distributed leadership there is a common goal that all are working toward, that has to stay in the forefront. To achieve the goal each person uses their strengths to bring the goal to fruition. While working towards the goal, all teammates are building their skills and making them stronger. Each strength they have becomes more honed. Once a goal is achieved all have gained valuable experience. The escape room requires each participant to use their strengths to attain the goal. Each person on the team leaves knowing they have gained some experience and built on their skills or gifts.

**Discussion**

Overall, it appears that the use of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment positively impacted graduate-education-student development over the course of a semester. The quantitative data analysis revealed statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) impacts on both connectedness to cohort and confidence as an educational leader. Additionally, there was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) growth from pre- to post-test in the leadership capacity domains of broad-based leadership and reflective practice, based on Lambert’s (2003) Leadership Capacity survey. Furthermore, the qualitative data were coded using the five domains from the Developing Self framework (Komives et al., 2006), and affirmed quantitative findings related to positive affective growth in student-leadership development, particularly related to deepening self-awareness and establishing interpersonal efficacy. The findings from this study support prior research (i.e., Komives, 2006; Soria et al., 2015) on the positive impacts on college students of knowing their strengths. Perhaps one participant summarized the overall impact best: “This was a perfect way to start off our Master’s program. It helped all of us see that we all have the ability to lead. We can all contribute and have value and that all different strengths are needed for an organization to succeed.” The need for developing relationship-focused, collaborative school leaders is critical in

our dynamic sociopolitical context, and this method for developing leaders appears to be one way to effectively prepare future school leaders.

## Limitations

While this study provides practical and research-based instructional strategies for leadership development programs, it is not without its limitations. Firstly, the small sample size limits generalizability of the quantitative findings. A future study with a larger sample size could increase generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, this study suggested overarching positive impacts of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® on the development of the graduate student participants in this study; however, the qualitative data were all self-reported feedback, which contain inherent bias. A follow up study about the long-term impact of the course-based strategies on the leadership of participants in this study would contribute to the findings of this study.

## Conclusion

Creating effective school leaders is critical for the success of our schools and the education of our children. Leadership during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly challenging for school principals. Prior to the pandemic, principals already had stressful, demanding jobs; however, the pandemic placed new demands on principals to succeed in unprecedented situations (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). Leadership preparation programs must evolve to better support leaders in developing relational leadership and self-reflective skills that prepare them as strengths-focused leaders.

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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