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CONTENTS

2027 Issue: Call for Manuscripts
Driving Excellent Instruction: Let the Data Speak

The 2027 issue will focus on the theme *Driving Excellent Instruction: Let the Data Speak,* which was also the WERA 2025 Annual Conference theme. Data-driven or data-informed instruction has been a key phrase in educational change for over a decade. Classrooms, schools, and systems benefit when educators and institutions improve instruction through research-grounded, data-supported approaches. We invite educators, instructional leaders, and practitioners to share how they are using data to inform and strengthen teaching and learning in educational settings. Data can take many forms—student work samples, formative assessments, classroom observations, schoolwide achievement trends, district or statewide assessments, and data sets—and when thoughtfully interpreted, data becomes a powerful tool for guiding instructional and leadership decisions.

We welcome manuscripts that highlight research, practical strategies, case studies, and success stories where data has informed lesson design, differentiated instruction, and/or professional learning. Submissions should analyze or demonstrate how data can empower teachers to meet diverse student needs, foster engagement, and continuously improve practice.

For this issue, we encourage educators from all levels of education in the Pacific Northwest to share their experiences utilizing data to inform instructional practice in educational contexts. 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 data analysis and implementation

Topics in *WEJ* cover a wide range 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

We encourage the submission of condensed versions of reader-friendly dissertations and theses. School and district practitioners are encouraged to write for *WEJ.* Manuscripts for the 2027 issue are due August 15, 2026. For information about the *WEJ* and its submissions, see the Submission Guidelines posted on WERA website. If you have questions about the process or about possible submissions, email smithant@uw.edu.

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Community Care, Stewardship, and Professional Learning Demonstrated by School Staff in the Implementation of Place-Based Education in a Small School District

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Abstract

Place-based education (PBE) combines experiential learning and connections between classrooms and a wider local area to raise students' awareness of their communities and inspire them to make meaningful impacts upon those places. PBE has been shown to positively impact students' engagement and enjoyment in the classroom. Additionally, as PBE remains a growing field, it has no set definition. Prior research has shown a PBE program requires significant time and effort from school staff to establish. This paper shares a qualitative study indicating that school district staff expressed strong notions of community connection and care in their PBE work and that a demonstrated mindset of continual professional development supported their efforts in that work.

Place-based education (PBE) is a collaborative effort between students, teachers, administrators, and the surrounding community to create skill-building and connection-making opportunities for students. PBE can create opportunities for students to make positive connections with their communities and practice skills in a local context that can be applied globally (Clark et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2012; Powell, 2021). Additionally, PBE can provide teachers opportunities to collaborate professionally (Kelley & Williams, 2013; Linnemastons & Jordan, 2017) and build connections to their communities (Lowenstein et al., 2018; Smith, 2016).

The findings of this paper are drawn from a doctoral dissertation (Smolinsky, 2023) which focused on the experiences, opportunities, and barriers staff in a small, K-12 school district faced as they implemented a district-wide PBE program. This study utilized a qualitative methodological framework of semi-structured interviews of district staff members of varied positionalities to ask: How did participants express their connections to place in relation to their place-based work, and how did their professional development support those connections?

Literature Review

Place-based education (PBE) is a philosophy and practice of connecting students' learning to local communities beyond the traditional classroom environment. Further, the practice of PBE has shown to have a positive impact on students and teachers. This section will briefly outline PBE literature.

The concept of place is multidimensional (Ardoin, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003b; Hawke, 2011; Resor, 2010). "Place" as a concept provides a web of interactions, knowledge, habits, and geographic identity in which people situate their understandings (Hawke, 2011). This conceptualization can bond people to the past and present of their place and help them shape their future (Hawke, 2011; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004; Soini et al., 2012). Specifically, for PBE, Resor (2010) and Gruenewald (2003b) see "place" as composed of several aspects. Resor (2010) identified three "fundamental aspects": location, locale, and sense of place. Location can

be pointed to on a map, locale is the web of local places where human interactions take place, and sense of place is the subjective human experience where a "space" becomes a lively "place" laden with values and meaning. Gruenewald (2003b) further described "place" as a five-dimensional schema of perceptual, sociological, ideological, political, and ecological parts. Adroin (2006) defines place as a web, drawing biophysical, psychological, sociocultural, and political elements into a multidimensional sense of place.

In K-12 schools, critical pedagogy and constructivism are key tenets in the practice of PBE that can often be observed through projects and lesson plans. First, critical pedagogy is defined here as a critical evaluation of a community and a questioning of where it is, where it has been, and where it might go (Gruenewald, 2003a). For example, a critical pedagogy theoretical framework might challenge hierarchies of power in communities—like consumer dynamics, the influence of political leaders, or the intersection of environmental regulations and economic factors (Martusewicz, 2018; Plumwood, 2010). Through those interrogations, students and educators can also create a shared definition of a place. Second, constructivism is defined as the practice of a learner building knowledge through direct experience and action (Creswell, 2009; Quay, 2003). Here, students take their knowledge of hierarchies of power and put that knowledge into practice. For example, a group of students might work with a local city or county to try to increase public transit ridership or advocate for bike lanes and crosswalks near schools. While the reach of critical pedagogy and constructivism in PBE could be considered infinite, Plumwood (2010) suggests that practitioners work within their sphere of influence. Through critical pedagogy and constructivism, students and educators can work within their communities to define and create a place they want to call home.

Previous studies (Clark et al., 2015; Flanagan, et al., 2019; Smith, 2016) have shown that students engaging in PBE have expressed a motivation to learn, developed positive images of themselves as learners, and felt they were contributing to their community. PBE has also demonstrated a positive correlation with student academic gains (Akkaya Yilmaz & Karakus, 2018; Clark et al., 2015; Powell, 2021). PBE provides multidisciplinary learning opportunities for students, with the ability to incorporate social studies (Akkaya Yilmaz & Karakus, 2018), literacy (Azano, 2011; Wiggington, 1973), geography (Schötz et al., 2020), and STEM (Clark, et al., 2015). These factors indicate PBE can have a multidisciplinary, widespread, and positive impact on students.

There has been some research regarding PBE's impact on teachers and pre-service teachers. Established PBE literature notes that it takes a considerable amount of time and effort for schools to successfully implement a PBE program (Linnemastons & Jordan, 2017; Maloyed, 2013; Smith, 2016). PBE programs also require funding, often beyond the means of typical school budgets. This may require teachers to apply for grants or other types of funding (Linnemastons & Jordan, 2017), which creates additional workload for school staff. Further, many professional habits (e.g., school culture for inquiry, supportive school leaders) and relationships (e.g., with community partners) must be built by a school and district for a PBE program to function well (Howley et al., 2011), which is a considerable undertaking.

Though the work of establishing and maintaining a PBE program is significant, practitioners have expressed positive outcomes. Teachers and pre-service teachers enjoyed collaborating in

PBE efforts (Adams et al., 2014; Chinn, 2012; Kelley & Williams, 2013; Linnemastons & Jordan, 2017; Smith, 2016). For example, after participating in PBE professional development, teachers felt more confident in teaching STEM concepts (Kelley & Williams, 2013; Meichtry & Smith, 2007). Teachers also enjoyed the opportunity to work in interdisciplinary teams (Kelley & Williams, 2013). Perhaps most importantly, teachers and pre-service teachers participating in PBE reported greater feelings of connection to the communities they serve (Lowenstein et al., 2018; Smith, 2016). In total, these factors suggest teachers who participate in PBE will build greater relationships with the broader community, and this in turn may inspire them to teach students how to build stronger community relationships.

Overall, PBE is defined as the practice of building connections for students to directly engage with their community while building valuable skills that can be applied locally and, eventually, globally. PBE has been shown to have positive impacts on students and teachers and the ability to create valuable learning experiences for all involved. Prior research points to school staff's increased feelings of community connection (Lowenstein et al., 2018) through PBE, and professional confidence through PBE professional development (Kelley & Williams; Meichtry & Smith, 2007). This study explores school staff members' feelings of community connectiveness and stewardship in their place-based work and their engagement in a process of continual professional development to support that practice.

Methodology

Site

The site for this study was a small-town school district in the Northwestern United States with an established PBE program. For anonymity purposes, it will be referred to as the "Fern School District." At the time of this study, the district had approximately 1,200 students across four schools: elementary, middle, high, and an alternative school. Fern School District had approximately 85 teachers in classroom roles. Due to the small size of the school district, Various place-based projects of different levels of development were implemented at each grade level.

Participants and Recruitment

Following the approval of the university IRB board and the leadership team at the school district site, invitations to participate were sent via a district-wide email which included details of the study and the IRB-approved consent form. Fourteen participants were recruited from the target school district, representing all schools and grade bands. Table 1 describes the participants' professional roles and experiences in more detail. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. In all, 10 teachers, three school principals, and one district-wide place-based program director participated in this study. Participants received a $25 gift card to a popular local business after the completion of their interview as a token of appreciation for their participation.

Table 1
Participants' Professional Roles and Experiences

Name	Professional Role	Experience
Norma	High School Principal	Norma had been the Fern High School principal for almost 20 years. She was an elementary school teacher then an elementary principal before moving to the high school. She is one of the longest serving leaders in the school district and has a wealth of institutional and historical knowledge about the district.
Ben	Alternative High School Teacher	Ben has been teaching at the district's alternative high school for over 10 years and has taught for over two decades. He has held teaching positions in special education, middle school, and alternative education programs.
Lucy	High School English Teacher	Lucy currently serves as an English Language Arts teacher at Fern High School. She has been working in education for over 10 years. She has taught internationally and in the district's alternative school program and middle school.
Heidi	Elementary School Principal	Heidi has worked as the principal of Fern Elementary School for almost a decade. Previously she served as a teacher-librarian, the director of a program for highly capable students, and a teacher in two other school districts.
Audrey	Middle School Science Teacher	Audrey teaches science and mathematics at Fern Middle School. She has been a middle school teacher for over 25 years, with nearly 20 years in her current role at the middle school.
Harry	Middle School Fitness Teacher	Harry has been teaching fitness at Fern Middle School for a decade. He has spent his entire career in education at the middle-school level. He has lived in the community for many years and was drawn to teaching because of his desire to help kids and families.
John	High School Media Teacher	John teaches a media class primarily focused on video production and photography at Fern High School. He has a professional and undergraduate background in media and has been teaching for over two decades, with roles in special education, middle school, and high school education.
Eileen	Middle School Principal	Eileen is the principal of Fern Middle School. She has held many roles in education—from special educational teacher to district office leader to special programs coordinator—over a career spanning more than two decades. She is newer to the district and trained in a program specifically for middle-school level education.
Olivia	District-Wide Place Based Program Specialist & Alternative School Principal	Olivia is the place-based program specialist and leader in the district. Half of her time is dedicated to being the place-based specialist, and the other half she is a building administrator. She has almost two decades of experience in education, ranging from outdoor educational experiences to middle school teacher to building principal. She has been the place-based program specialist for almost a decade.
Kimberly	High School Science Teacher	Kimberly teaches science at Fern High School. She has been teaching for over two decades, with about half that time in her current assignment. She has worked as a middle school teacher in previous districts.
Jocelyn	Elementary School Teacher	Jocelyn is an early grade teacher at Fern Elementary School. She has been teaching for over 10 years, predominantly general education in primary grades, with some time in kindergarten and special education as well.

Will	Elementary School Teacher	Will is an early grade teacher at Fern Elementary School. He has been teaching for over three decades, most of that time in the same elementary building he currently works in. He has primarily taught early elementary grades, sometimes independently, and sometimes in team-taught settings.
Diane	Alternative Elementary School Program Teacher	Diane serves as a teacher in an alternative program housed in Fern Elementary School. She is new to public school teaching. However, she has taught music lessons and was an educator in private settings for over 20 years.
Margaret	Elementary School Teacher-Librarian & STEM specialist	Margaret is a teacher-librarian and the elementary Science, Technology, Education, and Mathematics (STEM) Specialist at Fern Elementary School. She has been working in education for almost four decades. She began as a university-level educator and taught students in field-based education programs. She also worked as a middle school math and science teacher.

Procedure, Instrumentation, and Analysis

This qualitative case study utilized a semi-structured interview format with participant interviews lasting 45 minutes to one hour. In the original dissertation (Smolinsky, 2023), the questions (Appendix A) investigated the participants' professional backgrounds, organizational positionality, place-based projects, definitions of PBE, motivations for engaging in PBE, resources utilized, and challenges faced when implementing PBE. Interviews were recorded for audio and transcripts were generated using an IRB-approved automated transcription service with secure electronic storage.

Transcripts were analyzed and coded into themes using qualitive methodological guidelines to create a thick description (Creswell, 2009) of the participants' views and experiences. Emergent themes were guided by established theory of the multidimensionality and community centeredness of PBE (Gruenewald, 2003a) and research (Azano, 2011; Cohen et al., 2012; Howley et al., 2011; Powell, 2021; Schötz et al., 2020; Waller & Barrentine, 2015) into the practicalities of implementing PBE. Using the guideposts of prior scholarship, the findings of this research were generated inductively through repeated transcript analysis. Data analysis was conducted through transcript review, importing each transcript into Microsoft Word, and using the comments feature to mark relevant passages. Then, those passages were organized into themed documents centered around the research questions, which became the major findings of the research. Privacy was maintained through pseudonyms for participants and the school district.

Findings

Multiple participants expressed a desire to generate feelings of community care and stewardship in their students through their PBE work. Additionally, participants expressed the importance of professional development to test, enhance, and energize their place-based work.

Participants' Personal Connection to Community

Multiple participants communicated a sense of personal connection and care toward the community when defining and describing their place-based work. For some participants, their established community connections inspired their place-based work; for others, their community

connections developed through their place-based work. For example, Norma, the high school principal, conveyed a sense of growing affection over time: “I really thought [this place] was just going to be a steppingstone in my career, but I kind of fell in love [with the place] and the folks here.” Statements of warmth toward the community demonstrated a correlation between a school staff members’ feelings of community connection and care and their willingness to engage in PBE. While participants did not explicitly use the term “critical pedagogy,” their place-based work demonstrated those theoretical notions of critical examination of place and the desire to positively shape it for the benefit of the community.

Diane, an alternative elementary school teacher, expressed that her care for her community motivated her to include PBE in her teaching, and she hoped to model that connection for her students:

> I’ve lived [in this place] for so long . . . that the community stewardship is really important. . . . It’s important to me that [students] care for each other and they move that out to their families and to our school community, and to the [wider] community and that they see all of that as a whole, along with the environment and everything that’s in it.

Additionally, Harry, also a long-time member of the community, was drawn to become a middle school fitness teacher because of his own feelings of care toward the community. He had previously worked in a local store, interacting with many of the town’s families. His desire to be a teacher developed in part from those interactions and a desire to positively impact students and their families.

However, not all teachers began their PBE work with strong community connections. Lucy, the high school English Language Arts teacher, had only been in the district a few years and stated:

> There is sort of an assumption with [PBE] that you know your community, and you know what to do there, and that’s not always true. I think when teachers move, it’s a huge disadvantage when you’re new, when you don’t know community people . . . you can feel really lost about how to get going.

Several participants in both teaching and administrative roles acknowledged onboarding new staff into place-based practices took time, indicating that while feelings of community connection were intertwined with place-based work, they often took time to grow. Participants like Norma, Diane, and Harry were longstanding members of the Fern School District community before they began their PBE work, so community connections appeared to come easier to them than Lucy, who was in the process of establishing herself in the community.

Additionally, three participants asserted that the PBE program made it interesting and desirable to work in the Fern School District. Heidi, the elementary principal, explained, “I think, without our [PBE] initiative, we would just be another little school district that wasn’t doing anything that innovative and interesting. . . . I think it’s, in the past, attracted staff to coming here.”

John emphasized the PBE program drew him to teach in the Fern School District after he learned about the district at a job fair:

> I was like well, "I will check out what [this district] has," and they talked about their place-based learning program, and I was like, "Oh that's what I want, that's what I've been wanting to have in my career," so I ended up jumping on to things here.

Jocelyn emphasized the PBE program kept her working in the district, even when she could earn more money elsewhere: "I think [the PBE program is] pretty special. I mean, honestly during the pandemic . . . everybody joked about quitting their job, but I would say [the PBE program is] one reason that I would stay here." She went on to explain in detail that:

> For a while it used to be a lot of people were driving [to a nearby district] because you could earn $5,000 more a year. . . I did talk about commuting [to the nearby school district], but no . . . I feel like it's a nice fit for me [doing PBE here in the Fern School District].

Jocelyn, Heidi, and John all felt the PBE program made the district an important and engaging community in which to work. This suggests that as PBE focuses on community it also may create and perpetuate feelings of community connection for school staff and students alike, in addition to harnessing the established feelings staff who have been in the community for some time. Through those feelings of community connection, school staff appeared willing to engage in the work of critical pedagogy: to know, consider, and positively impact a place they expressed deep care for. Each of these participants illustrates those feelings of community connection and care among school staff correlated with the practice of PBE. This suggests that staff participation in PBE programs is in part driven by their own feelings of care and connection, and while those feelings take time to grow, PBE may inspire and maintain those feelings.

Community Stewardship

Along with community connection and care, many participants defined PBE using themes of community stewardship. For example, environmental stewardship can be teaching students about local pollution and how to change their behaviors to reduce waste in their communities (Bertling, 2015). In this way, stewardship is community care and connection in action. This action is the constructivist framework of PBE—learning and caring about a place through rich educational experiences. Multiple participants in this study expressed the desire to create those feelings and inspire stewardship action in their students, empowering them with the ability to positively shape their communities. Olivia, the place-based learning director, expressed this sentiment when she was asked to define PBE:

> I would describe place-based education as students having meaningful learning experiences connected to the community they live in . . . perhaps even where they're making a positive impact on their community or influencing something in the community, through their learning.

Margaret, the elementary school librarian and STEM specialist, expressed a similar desire for students to become community caretakers through their PBE learning: "So to me, it's like having kids learn to be citizen scientists and take care, be caretakers . . . to understand where they live . . . [and] the long-term implications of the choices they make." Margaret facilitated multiple PBE

projects at the elementary-school level, such as students learning about the habitats of local pollinators, and supporting second- and third-grade students to learn about human impacts on local ecosystems and how to better understand seasonal migratory bird populations. The projects she supported provided opportunities to endow students with their own stewardship powers.

Additional examples of PBE lessons inspiring a student stewardship mindset were present at the secondary level. Ben, an alternative high school teacher, described how students were concerned about the environmental impact of single-use plastic straws. From this, students created a short film about the impacts of single-use plastics, which eventually led to a plastic straw ban in town. Finally, John, a media teacher, built a relationship with the manager of the local community radio station. From that connection, he was able to provide opportunities for students to create on-air content. One of the students became a full-time volunteer reporter at the station after graduation, thus becoming a steward of community affairs and information. These students' place-based experiences are constructivism in action, where students build knowledge of, take part in, and express care toward their communities. These examples illustrate that teachers implementing PBE may use their feelings of community care and stewardship as a vehicle to inspire such values in students, who in turn can positively affect their communities.

Continuous Improvement and Professional Learning

Most participants described their PBE work as a cycle of continuous improvement and professional learning. Their projects demonstrating care, connection, and stewardship were not created in silos. Their projects were the result of sustained professional effort, embracing a spirit of growth, risk-taking, and open-mindedness. Some participants described their place-based projects as iterations that improved each year through practice, and others described how they learned from failed projects and moved on to new ideas from the experience. Further, participants described the importance of the professional development provided by Olivia, the place-based program specialist and leader.

Both teachers and administrators described PBE as a process of growth. They explained that projects were enhanced with practice and experience. Lucy, a high school English Language Arts teacher, described it this way:

> I feel like the first year I do a place-based project, it's kind of just a thrust in the right direction. And then the next year it gets a little better and then it gets a little better. I kind of try to just keep taking it forward and it's okay. I have to have some grace around the fact that they're not going to be perfect.

Lucy explained that she allows herself room to grow in her PBE practice and embraces trial and error.

Both teaching and administrative staff members mentioned that place-based projects changed over time. Jocelyn explained how the elementary school salmon project evolved:

> It [the salmon project], another teacher was doing it before I was, but there wasn't a project around it. It was throw eggs in the tank, kids walk by [and] watch them grow.

> Then, one or two classes would get to go release them. Now it's definitely expanded to a study of salmon and how they're a keystone species.

She explained how a simple tank observation evolved into students deeply examining how salmon are a central species of the local ecosystem. In its current form, early elementary school teachers in the Fern School District, like Jocelyn, now work in concert with a community partner to raise salmon in the school where students can observe their growth and learn about their lifecycle. Then, students visit a watershed with the community partners to release the young salmon and help maintain salmon as part of the local ecosystem. In this way, the place-based theories of (1) critical pedagogy, where students learn about the salmon lifecycle and how humans can help or harm salmon in their community, and (2) constructivism, where students actually build their knowledge through action by raising, viewing, and releasing the salmon, really come alive through teachers' willingness to grow professionally though experimentation in their place-based work.

Further, many participants discussed the importance of structured professional development sessions and workshops provided by the place-based specialist and leader for the district's efforts. Participants noted that Olivia not only found community partners for teachers to engage with in their place-base work, her summer professional development sessions also inspired teachers' connection and enthusiasm for their own community. Through these sessions, Olivia introduced teachers to local farmers, environmentalists, and non-profits, in addition to providing professional development time for teachers to develop PBE projects. This inspired partnerships and connections between the school and wider community. Will, an experienced early elementary school teacher said this when describing Olivia's summer professional development: "I will say when we met this summer, those are fabulous [PBE professional development] workshops, oh my gosh. That re-energized me for sure." Will's enthusiasm demonstrated the power of PBE professional learning to inspire and engage. In turn, teachers took the energy and learning they received from their professional development and utilized that knowledge to engage with students in caring and community-connected place-based work. These insights demonstrate PBE is a fluid cycle of learning and growth for teachers and that experimentation is part of the process of creating engaging projects for students. Through a willingness to take risks, experiment, and engage in meaningful professional development, teachers can build their place-based projects into true community stewardship experiences for their students.

Discussion

Findings from this study mirrored some of the findings of earlier work in demonstrating the correlation of teachers' community connection, stewardship, and ability to inspire similar feelings in their students through PBE (Azano, 2011; Waller & Barrentine, 2015). Previous scholars (Gruenewald, 2003b; Smith & Sobel, 2010) also defined PBE as inherently community oriented. Like these findings, earlier research showed that teachers need professional development and leadership to successfully apply PBE (Azano, 2011; Waller & Barrentine, 2015).

These factors may lead to the question of how does a teacher become connected to their community to practice PBE for the benefit of their students? In this study, several participants

were long-time members of the small town, which aided their fluency in practicing PBE in the community. That kind of connection is gained personally rather than through work activities. Long-time community members may have an advantage in making place-based connections in their classrooms. Lucy, the English Language Arts teacher at the high school, reported it can be challenging for teachers who are new to the community to start making connections for their place-based work and that it took effort to establish those links. That said, Margaret, the teacher-librarian who was new to the district, seemed to jump right into the community's place-based work, though she had received earlier training in place-based work.

Additionally, the findings of this study point the need for teachers to be comfortable experimenting with their place-based work and learning from failures. Just as Wiggington (1973) struggled to connect his students with a traditional literacy program until he created place-based opportunities for students to build literacy skills, teachers in this study experimented and grew in their place-based work, including embracing their failures. Earlier studies also pointed to the need for structured professional guidance implementing PBE (Azano, 2011; Waller & Barrentine, 2015). Kelley and Williams (2015) and Meichtry and Smith (2007) also discovered PBE professional development can improve teachers' professional confidence. Teachers in this study exhibited a growth mindset in their PBE work and were willing to experiment and grow in their professional practices, building their experience in the program each year.

The factor that seemed to build and hold many place-based community connections together in the district was the place-based specialist and leader, Olivia. Multiple participants stressed her ability to initiate, professionalize, and maintain the connections between the wider community and PBE practitioners in the classroom. This paralleled the earlier findings of Howley et al. (2011) that a PBE leader is important for the success of a PBE program. Olivia's key leadership was demonstrated through her ability connect teachers to community partners and guide revisions of teachers' PBE lesson plans and coaching. She conducted place-based professional development in the summer with community partners that teachers could use in the classroom. Olivia also helped teachers who were new to the profession and/or new to the community to establish community connections through coaching and professional development workshops. This indicates that while some teachers may have strong community connections they can utilize in their classrooms, it is also imperative that a dedicated PBE leader be available to professionalize those connections and create them for others.

In their interviews, several participants noted that PBE teaching did not come naturally to teachers. Ben noted that most teaching programs (at the time of this study) did not prepare teachers for PBE. This factor, along with Lucy's earlier point that teachers who are new to the community have trouble initially establishing place-based connections, emphasizes the importance of Olivia's leadership role. Staff turnover, such as retirements and new hires, also creates a need to train teachers to engage in PBE. Lucy utilized Olivia's expertise to support her place-based work when she felt the need to build connections with the community and enhance her PBE practices. Further, Joceyln and Diane suggested that a building-level coaching position could help new teachers better acclimate to PBE, as a teacher coach would be a mentor they could frequently access as a peer. As a peer, this in-building PBE coach could be seen as an easily accessible, supportive partner and reduce any feeling that the coaching was also a form of

administrative oversight. Peer coaches could be a solution to helping new teachers build their PBE skillset.

From this study, school staff practicing PBE described strong notions of community care and stewardship that many of them wished to impart to their students. Participants shared what inspired them to engage in PBE and provided clear examples of place-based learning opportunities for students in a variety of academic disciplines at both elementary and secondary schools. In several cases, it was apparent how a participant's personal sense of community care inspired a similar sense in students and provided students with empowering opportunities to act on their own sense of community stewardship. Lastly, participants acknowledged the importance of continual refinement, professional development, and leadership in their place-based work.

Future Research

The next steps for this research could be threefold. First, a more focused study on teachers' feelings of community connection, stewardship, and how those feelings might correlate with a willingness to engage in PBE would be informative. The dissertation this paper was based on (Smolinsky, 2023) asked broad questions about school staff members' definitions of PBE and the barriers and opportunities they faced in doing so. A targeted study focused on staff members' feelings of community connection and stewardship may illuminate how those factors impact the implementation of PBE. Second, it may prove fruitful to study the practices of place-based leaders like Olivia to determine how they successfully build community connections and foster the professional development of teachers in the pursuit of a strong PBE program. It would be valuable to understand the knowledge and techniques a place-based program leader utilizes to build and maintain those opportunities for new and experienced teachers alike. Third, the findings of this paper were drawn from a case study (Smolinsky, 2023) rather than an experimental model; it reports the dynamics of a district-wide PBE program instead of engaging in a test of a PBE theoretical model. A future study designed to investigate or test theoretical notions of constructivism and critical pedagogy could demonstrate whether those frameworks are truly present in PBE programs in schools. While school staff in this study expressed ideas in line with constructivism and critical pedagogy during their interviews, they rarely framed their work in philosophical or theoretical terms. Place-based education is a fluid and growing educational practice that can benefit the places we all share.

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Appendix A
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Below is a list of interview questions that will be used in this study:

1. Tell me about your background as a professional educator.
    a. How long have you been working in education?
        i. How long in the [Fern School District]?
    b. What grade level do you teach?
        i. How long have you been in this grade level?
2. How would you describe or define place-based education?
3. What motivates you to use PBE?
4. Describe a PBE project you do with students.
5. What supports your use of PBE with students?
    a. What resources do you utilize to support your use of PBE?
    b. How do these assist in your teaching?
6. What challenges do you experience in the implementation of PBE?
    a. What resources or support might help you meet those challenges?

Beyond Labels: Embracing Innovation to Support Twice-Exceptional Learners in the Classroom

Krystle Jalalian-Chursky

Abstract

Twice-exceptional (2e) students—learners who are both gifted and have a disability—present a unique paradox in education. These students are often overlooked or misidentified due to the masking of abilities and challenges, resulting in unmet needs. As educational landscapes shift toward inclusive, student-centered learning, supporting 2e students demands not only differentiated instruction but also an innovative mindset that prioritizes strengths, nurtures the whole child, and builds collaborative ecosystems. This paper explores how educators can navigate change and embrace innovation to support twice-exceptional learners through evidence-based strategies, a strength-based approach, and systemic collaboration.

Redefining Success in an Evolving Classroom

As schools evolve in response to increasing neurodiversity, educators must rethink traditional notions of ability, intelligence, and support. No longer can we rely on standardized systems that sort students by narrow benchmarks or test-based outcomes. Twice-exceptional (2e) learners—those who demonstrate high potential alongside disabilities such as ADHD, ASD, or learning differences—embody both brilliance and struggle, often in ways that defy conventional educational models. Their profiles challenge deficit-based frameworks and demand a radical shift toward flexible, strength-driven approaches rooted in equity and neuroinclusive design (Reis et al., 2014). Innovation in teaching is no longer optional; it is essential. Supporting 2e students requires educators to be innovative agents of change—designing responsive environments, leveraging creative pedagogy, and embracing the rich complexity of human cognition (Baum et al., 2014). As these students frequently mask their needs or gifts, recognizing and nurturing their full identities calls for courage, curiosity, and collaborative effort.

Moreover, the landscape of learning is transforming. Policies like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and frameworks like the Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024) underscore the need to differentiate not just for access but for authentic engagement and empowerment. As educators adapt to new tools, evolving student needs, and the growing call for culturally and neurodiversity-affirming practices, the role of innovation becomes not just about what we teach but how, why, and for whom.

The call to action is clear: Navigating this change requires intentionality, adaptability, and collaboration. It means moving beyond labels and compliance into a mindset of possibility. Supporting 2e students is not a matter of adding strategies—it is about reimagining education altogether.

Understanding Twice-Exceptional Learners

Twice-exceptional students are defined as those who demonstrate high achievement or potential in one or more areas (such as math, the arts, or leadership) while also having one or more disabilities, including ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, or learning disabilities (Reis et al., 2014). These students are often under-identified because their strengths and challenges can mask one another, leading to inappropriate support or neglect (Wormald, 2011). Twice-exceptional learners often exhibit a complex and sometimes contradictory combination of characteristics. Many demonstrate high verbal or spatial reasoning abilities, which may appear as advanced vocabulary, abstract thinking, or a deep interest in technical or artistic subjects (Reis et al., 2014). These intellectual strengths are often accompanied by a strong sense of creativity and insatiable curiosity, driving them to explore topics beyond the typical curriculum (Baum et al., 2014).

Despite these gifts, 2e students frequently struggle with low academic self-esteem. This stems from the daily challenge of reconciling their advanced capabilities with learning difficulties, leading to a perception of failure or inadequacy (Neihart et al., 2015). Sensory sensitivities and heightened anxiety are also common traits, often resulting in overstimulation or emotional overwhelm in traditional classroom environments. Finally, many 2e learners display behavioral issues—not out of defiance—but due to underlying frustration, unmet cognitive needs, or boredom from unchallenging material (Wormald, 2011). These complex profiles highlight the need for educators to adopt strength-based, responsive strategies that recognize and address both the assets and challenges of 2e students. Without thoughtful intervention, the gifts of 2e students can go unrecognized and their challenges misunderstood. Educators must innovate identification procedures and create inclusive learning profiles to address the duality of their needs.

Leading Innovation Through Practice

To truly support 2e learners, educators must become architects of innovation—leading change directly from the heart of the classroom. This leadership is not about waiting for systemic reform; it's about pioneering flexible, inclusive, and strength-based practices that adapt to the diverse needs of students in real time. It demands vulnerability to question the status quo, creativity to design new pathways for learning, and an unwavering commitment to viewing students not through a lens of deficits but through the vast potential of their unique, exceptional minds.

Innovation in Action Requires Intentional Strategy

Educators cannot navigate this journey alone; they need concrete tools that bridge theory to practice. Table 1**,** *Action and Innovation Strategies*, serves as a dynamic blueprint, translating Universal Design Learning (UDL) principles into actionable strategies that educators can implement immediately. This map shifts the focus from abstract ideals to practical, classroom-tested actions that foster ownership, accessibility, and meaningful collaboration.

Table 1
Action and Innovation Strategies

Strategy	Action and Innovation Focus
Differentiation	Map UDL checkpoints to content, process, product modifications; use tech tools for responsive lesson design
Flexible Learning Environments	Design learning zones aligned to UDL's emotional and physical access principles
Collaboration	Create multidisciplinary teams that leverage UDL/enrichment data for planning & reflection
Nurturing the Whole Child	Embed UDL checkpoints in social-emotional learning; use strength mapping as regular practice

Each strategy is designed for transformation:

- **Differentiation** is no longer a task of individual accommodation, but a proactive design approach using UDL checkpoints and responsive technologies.
- **Flexible Learning Environments** become ecosystems of emotional and physical access, where every learner feels empowered to engage.
- **Collaboration** moves beyond perfunctory meetings to become strategic, data-informed partnerships that fuel reflective practice and collective growth.
- **Nurturing the Whole Child** practices integrate academic, social-emotional, and identity-affirming support, ensuring that students' strengths are mapped, nurtured, and celebrated daily.

By embedding these strategies into daily practice, educators create inclusive classrooms where 2e students are not only supported but are recognized as leaders of innovation themselves. In these environments, difference is not a challenge to overcome but a strength to harness. The next sections of this article will delve into each of the four strategies.

Differentiation: A Foundation for Innovation

Differentiation is one of the most effective approaches for addressing the diverse needs of 2e learners. Differentiated instruction allows teachers to tailor content, process, and product based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014). Key dimensions of differentiation include content, process, and product. Differentiating content means varying what students learn—for example, using leveled texts, audiobooks, or multimedia to match diverse reading abilities and learning preferences. Process differentiation involves altering how students engage with the material, such as through flexible grouping, kinesthetic activities, or scaffolded discussions. Product differentiation gives students options in how they demonstrate mastery, such as through presentations, videos, or creative projects that honor their individual strengths and interests (Tomlinson, 2014).

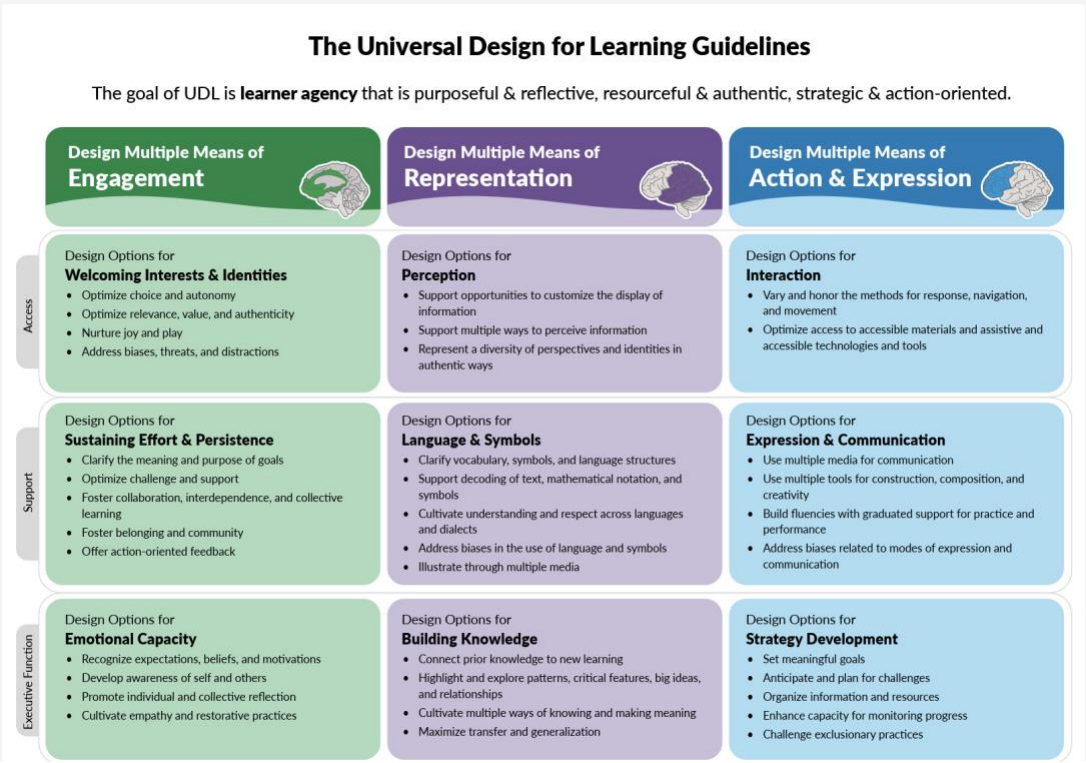
These principles closely align with UDL, which provides a proactive framework for removing learning barriers by offering multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (CAST, 2024). Rather than retrofitting accommodations after difficulties arise, UDL encourages

educators to anticipate variability from the start and design with flexibility and accessibility in mind. See Figure 1 for more details on each of the guidelines within the UDL framework.

For 2e students, this combination of differentiation and UDL is especially powerful. Their cognitive profiles often include both advanced reasoning and specific processing challenges, making rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches ineffective. As research affirms, differentiation is essential in inclusive classrooms and can significantly improve student engagement, motivation, and achievement when thoughtfully implemented (Robinson et al., 2007). UDL complements this by providing the structural scaffolding needed to ensure that differentiation is equitable and embedded—not dependent on individual teacher discretion alone.

Educators navigating change must embrace these models not simply as interventions but as foundational pedagogies that elevate all learners. In the classroom, innovation begins by planning for variability—not exception.

Figure 1
Universal Design for Learning Guidelines 3.0



Flexible Learning Environments: Designing for Diversity
Classroom design itself must be reconsidered in terms of the diverse needs of today's learners. Merritt (2014) found that flexible seating and choice-based learning environments significantly increase student engagement, particularly among neurodiverse populations. For 2e students—who often experience heightened sensitivity, anxiety, and asynchronous development—physical space plays a pivotal role in their ability to focus, regulate, and connect. Quiet zones allow for sensory decompression; movement-friendly areas support kinesthetic learning and emotional regulation; and individualized workspaces provide autonomy and minimize distractions. These

are not mere accommodations; they are essential features of an inclusive, strength-based environment.

Designing classrooms in this way reflects a broader commitment to designing for diversity—an approach that recognizes variability as the norm, not the exception. Neurodivergent learners thrive in spaces that are responsive, respectful, and relational. When classrooms are designed to support a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and sensory needs, they become more equitable for everyone. This aligns with UDL (CAST, 2024), which emphasizes minimizing barriers and maximizing learning opportunities from the outset.

Innovative educators continually ask themselves:

- How can the environment reduce stress and promote engagement?
- What physical and emotional tools help students self-regulate?
- How can space promote both collaboration and independence?
- Whose needs might still be invisible in this design?

Creating flexible learning environments is not simply about rearranging furniture or offering beanbags. It is a *mindset* grounded in *autonomy, equity, and empowerment***.** It requires educators to observe, listen, and adapt based on how students respond to space, not just how they perform in it. Ultimately, a thoughtfully designed environment signals to students: *You belong here. Your way of learning is valid. And this space was made with you in mind.*

Collaboration for Individualized Success

As educators strive to move beyond labels and create learning environments where 2e students can truly thrive, collaboration emerges as the connective tissue that binds innovation, equity, and student-centered practice together. While differentiated instruction and strength-based teaching lay the foundation for individualized growth, these approaches reach their full potential only when supported by intentional, systemic collaboration. By working collectively—educators, specialists, families, and students—schools can transform isolated efforts into cohesive ecosystems of support. The following section outlines a practical, cyclical model for collaboration that embodies this vision, offering a roadmap for teams to identify strengths, address challenges, and continually refine strategies to ensure each 2e learner's success.

One of the most transformative shifts in education today is the growing recognition that meeting the needs of 2e students is not the responsibility of a single teacher or specialist—it is a collective commitment. True success for 2e learners requires a collaborative ecosystem where educators, specialists, parents, and students themselves work together intentionally and consistently. This shared ownership fosters a holistic approach that honors the unique strengths of each child while providing targeted support for their challenges.

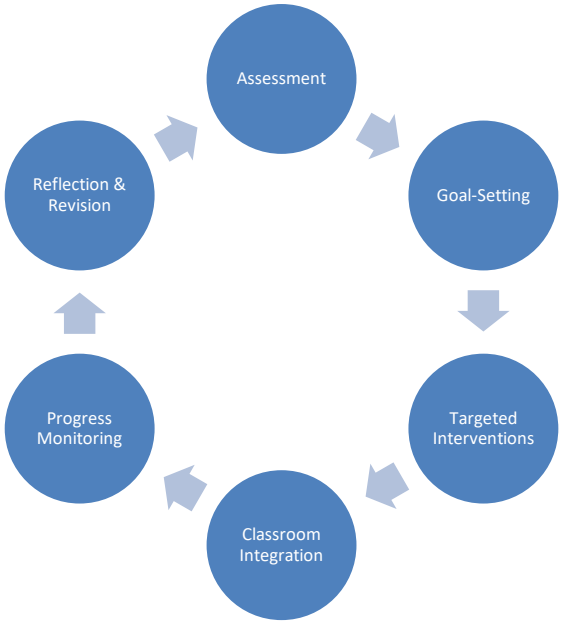
At the heart of this collaborative model lies a structured, six-step cycle designed to bring coherence, intentionality, and shared purpose to the work of supporting 2e learners. This process offers teams a clear roadmap for understanding the whole child, aligning goals across environments, and making informed decisions that evolve as the student does. This intentional approach takes shape through six interconnected phases, each building on the last to create a cohesive cycle of support.

Six Steps for Collaborative Support

1. **Assessment:** Use a comprehensive range of assessment tools—including observations, standardized tests, and strength-based inventories—to identify each student's academic abilities, creative talents, and areas of need. Input from school and home environments ensures a fuller understanding of the whole child.
2. **Goal Setting:** Develop shared, realistic goals that reflect a balance between challenge and support. Goals should encompass academic, social-emotional, and executive functioning domains and be co-created with the student whenever possible to foster ownership and motivation.
3. **Targeted Interventions:** Implement evidence-based strategies that address specific needs while simultaneously nurturing the student's gifts. These interventions should be flexible and responsive, ensuring that support is dynamic rather than static.
4. **Classroom Integration:** Embed accommodations and enrichment opportunities within the daily learning environment. Differentiated instruction, choice-driven projects, and scaffolded tasks allow 2e students to thrive alongside their peers without feeling singled out or limited.
5. **Progress Monitoring:** Establish ongoing systems to track student growth through qualitative observations and quantitative data. Regular check-ins with the collaborative team ensure that interventions remain effective and adjustments are made proactively.
6. **Reflection and Revision:** Create intentional moments for the team to reflect on what is working and where shifts are needed. Revisiting the plan regularly cultivates a growth mindset among both educators and students, reinforcing that learning is a journey of continuous refinement.

The six steps for collaborative support are a continuous cycle as seen in Figure 2. They need each other to work. To bring these collaborative practices to life, team-based simulations and interactive planning sessions offer powerful professional development experiences. In these sessions, educators engage in role-playing real student scenarios, practicing the art of problem-solving through multiple perspectives. These exercises build practical skills and also foster empathy-driven decision-making, ensuring that every team member understands the importance of seeing beyond labels to the heart of each student's story. When collaboration becomes the foundation, we move from isolated efforts to a united mission: nurturing 2e students' potential in a way that is intentional, inclusive, and deeply human.

Figure 2
Six Steps for Collaborative Support



Nurturing the Whole Child: Emotional and Social Learning
Supporting the academic development of 2e students is only one piece of the educational puzzle. Neihart et al. (2015) emphasize that 2e learners often grapple with emotional intensities, anxiety, self-doubt, and social isolation, which can profoundly affect their overall well-being and academic engagement. Thus, addressing emotional and social needs is essential for unlocking their full potential.

Educators play a vital role in nurturing the whole child by:

- ***Fostering resilience through growth mindset practices,*** helping students view challenges as opportunities for growth.
- ***Providing structured opportunities for self-advocacy***, guiding students to express their needs, seek help, and celebrate their successes.
- ***Integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into daily instruction,*** ensuring that emotional literacy, empathy, and self-regulation are embedded within academic content.

A strength-based mindset is key—encouraging students to recognize and embrace their unique abilities fosters self-confidence and a positive self-concept. One practical tool educators can use is the Strength and Support Map (See Appendix A), a collaborative visual that identifies a student's strengths, challenges, support systems, and coping strategies. This tool empowers students and families to co-create personalized action plans that celebrate assets while proactively addressing areas of need.

At its core, supporting 2e learners means seeing and serving the whole child by honoring their intellect, emotions, creativity, and identity as interconnected parts of who they are. When innovation sparks new ways of teaching, when strengths become the foundation for learning, and

when collaboration unites educators, families, and students around shared purpose, we move closer to an educational model that is not only inclusive but deeply human. Nurturing the whole child requires more than a set of strategies; it calls for a culture of empathy, curiosity, and continual reflection. In such an environment, 2e learners are not defined by their labels or limitations but are empowered to flourish, developing the confidence, resilience, and voice to shape their own extraordinary paths.

Table 2

Example Strength and Support Map for a 2e Learner

Category	Details
Strengths	Creative problem-solving, advanced vocabulary, strong visual-spatial reasoning, empathy for others
Challenges	Difficulty with organization and task initiation, anxiety in social settings, perfectionism
Supports at School	Access to graphic organizers, quiet workspace for tests, mentor teacher check-ins
Supports at Home	Visual schedules, weekly family planning meetings, mindfulness apps
Coping Strategies	Deep breathing exercises, using humor to reframe mistakes, asking for clarification when stuck
Goals & Self-Advocacy	Practice requesting extra time when overwhelmed, share personal interests during class discussions

Conclusion: From Vision to Action

The journey toward inclusive excellence begins with intentional action. With tools like the Strength and Support Map, Six Steps to Collaborative Support, and Action and Innovation Strategies, educators have the framework to transform aspiration into reality—building learning spaces where 2e learners are empowered to thrive, lead, and redefine success on their own terms.

Leading innovation for 2e learners requires educators to move from theory to intentional action—transforming classrooms into ecosystems of equity, creativity, and belonging. Implementing strategies such as differentiation, flexible learning environments, collaboration, and whole-child practices is not about following prescriptive checklist; it should be a reflective and adaptive process that begins with small, deliberate shifts: designing lessons through the lens of UDL, reimagining physical and emotional classroom spaces, and engaging families and colleagues in shared problem-solving. These localized acts of innovation, when practiced collectively, begin to redefine the broader educational culture.

For educators, the path forward lies in embracing design thinking as a mindset—observing, iterating, and refining practices to respond to learner variability rather than resist it. Differentiation and UDL become the architecture of inclusion; collaboration becomes the mechanism of sustainability; and nurturing the whole child becomes the moral compass guiding every decision. Together, these strategies invite educators to see students not as challenges to be managed but as partners in innovation whose voices and strengths shape the learning experience.

To lead innovation through practice is to recognize that transformation begins within the daily rhythms of teaching and learning. When educators ground their work in empathy, evidence, and reflection, they not only create conditions where 2e students thrive, they model the very innovation they seek to inspire. This work helps to build classrooms, schools, and systems that honor the full spectrum of human potential.

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Appendix A
Strength and Support Map

Name_____

Filled out by_____

Category	Details
Strengths	
Challenges	
Supports at School	
Supports at Home	
Coping Strategies	
Goals & Self-Advocacy	

Investigating the Role of School Psychologists in Behavioral Assessment and Intervention in Washington State Schools

Richard Marsicano, Avery Kelley, and Meaghan Nolte

Abstract

School districts are required by law to conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and implement a behavior intervention plan (BIP) when students engage in a pattern of challenging behavior that interferes with their learning or the learning of others. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five school psychologists in Washington State to better understand their role in these crucial processes. Analysis of these interviews yielded several themes, including team-based problem solving, participants' solicited reflections on the topic (the "soapbox"), and the negotiation of idealism versus pragmatism in practice.

Student behavioral problems are one of the most significant challenges educators face in providing effective instruction and cause substantial and pervasive stress among educators (Kelly et al., 2022; Strickland-Cohen et al., 2019). Students with behavioral problems often face numerous adverse outcomes, including those that directly impede learning and academic success; e.g., frequent removal from class, suspension, expulsion (Kelly et al., 2022; Strickland-Cohen et al., 2019). Although educators face challenges when addressing difficult behaviors, substantial research supports the use of Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP) to improve behavioral outcomes (e.g., Bloomfield et al., 2020). Managing challenging behavior requires interventions derived from meaningful assessment data (Steege et al, 2019). As such, FBAs are used to explore potential antecedents, consequences, and other variables maintaining a student's problem behavior. FBAs are best understood as a *process*, not a series of standard forms that must be filled out (Dunlap & Lee, 2022; Hirsch et al., 2020; Hirsch et al., 2022; Strickland-Cohen et al., 2019). The optimal assessment approach in each situation will depend on a variety of factors, such as the individual characteristics of the student; the dimensions of the challenging behavior that can be easily observed and measured; the knowledge and expertise in applied behavior analysis of those potentially being interviewed; the degree of familiarity that the evaluator has with the student and their family; and the experience and competencies of the evaluator. To properly assess this wide range of variables, individuals conducting FBAs must have a variety of assessment methods at their disposal to flexibly conduct individualized assessments (Steege et al., 2019).

Behavioral interventions can be selected and implemented for a variety of reasons. For example, school personnel may decide to use a specific intervention because it worked for other students or because it fits seamlessly into a particular classroom. These justifications, however, are not based on data specific to the target student. Best practices necessitate gathering data via an FBA to inform a student's BIP. A BIP is an intervention plan stakeholders can use to decrease unwanted behavior and increase desired behavior across various environments. What separates behavioral interventions in a BIP from behavioral interventions developed absent an FBA is only the former results in intervention recommendations based on the unique characteristics of the individual student (i.e., *function-based* interventions). There is considerable research touting the superior effectiveness of function-based interventions when compared to non-function-based

interventions (Dunlap & Lee, 2022). Given the central role of FBAs in developing effective, function-based interventions, it is critical that school psychologists receive adequate training in FBA procedures and BIP development. As such, the training of school psychologists represents a key factor in ensuring that FBAs are conducted with fidelity and that resulting interventions are both effective and individualized.

School Psychologist FBA Training

Despite the Functional Behavioral Assessment–Behavior Intervention Plan (FBA-BIP) process being considered the *gold standard* for addressing students' challenging behavior, providing function-based support, and supporting school reform efforts, educators continue to struggle with conducting FBAs and developing and implementing function-based behavior intervention plans. These challenges occur across multiple levels, including individual barriers such as difficulty understanding the conceptual foundations of FBA and BIP, contextual barriers such as limited opportunities to practice these skills, and system-level barriers including inadequate training methods (Iovannone et al., 2017). This widespread difficulty is particularly concerning given the training expectations outlined in the *NASP 2020 Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (NASP, 2020), which identifies 10 domains of practice critical to effective school psychological service delivery. All school psychologists are expected to receive adequate training and demonstrate competence across these domains. Specifically, NASP (2020) states that school psychologists must be able to:

- Integrate behavioral supports and mental health services with academic and learning goals for children
- Identify students who may require individualized support and provide a continuum of developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive mental and behavioral health services, including individual and group counseling, behavioral coaching, classroom and school-wide social-emotional learning programs, positive behavioral supports, and parent education and support
- Use systematic decision making to consider the antecedents, consequences, functions, and potential causes of behavioral difficulties that may impede learning or socialization.
- Develop and implement positive behavioral supports at the individual, group, classroom, school, and district levels that demonstrate the use of appropriate ecological and behavioral approaches (e.g., positive reinforcement, social skills training, restorative justice practices, and positive psychology) to promote effective student discipline practices and classroom management strategies (p. 6)

Given the central role of FBAs in meeting these professional competencies, one might reasonably assume that graduate training in school psychology would be relatively standardized and sufficient in preparing practitioners to conduct FBAs and develop function-based BIPs. However, empirical research does not support this assumption. Although Sullivan et al. (2011) and O'Neill et al. (2015) found that only 2% of school psychologists reported no training in FBA, other findings suggest substantial inadequacies in the depth and quality of this training. Hicks et al. (2014) reported that fewer than half (46%) of nationally certified school psychologists received graduate training in evidence-based behavioral interventions, and 71% rated their graduate training in this area as inadequate. Similarly, Yu (2022) found that graduate

programs in school psychology provide limited training in applied behavior analysis, averaging only 1.5 courses, despite its critical role in behavioral assessment and intervention.

FBA Processes in the Schools

Research on school-based FBAs suggests considerable variation in practice, methods, and quality, highlighting gaps between recommended procedures and the ways FBAs are implemented in real-world settings. Regional differences also exist in how school psychologists conduct assessments and in the roles they are expected to fulfill. Hosp and Reschly (2002) attribute these differences to state mandates, administrative codes (specifically those governing special education eligibility and procedures), and the theoretical orientations of graduate training programs. Practitioners often find employment near the programs where they trained, meaning that a program's orientation can influence regional practice.

When examining the specific tools and data sources used in FBAs, Shapiro and Heick (2004) found that school psychologists most commonly relied on indirect measures: 92.4% used behavior rating scales, checklists, or questionnaires completed by teachers or parents. Direct observation of student behavior in natural settings was used by 69.1%, while only 37% conducted systematic functional analyses (experimental FBAs that manipulate environmental variables) in four or more of their last 10 cases involving behavioral or social-emotional concerns. These findings indicate that many FBAs rely on less rigorous or indirect data sources rather than comprehensive, function-based methods. Supporting this concern, Anderson et al. (2015) concluded that the literature likely overestimates the quality of FBAs conducted in schools. Therefore, caution is warranted when interpreting research on school-based FBAs and assuming that published practices reflect the actual function-based assessment and intervention processes used in practice.

Study Purpose and Methods

The purpose of this study is to better understand the role of school psychologists in Washington state in behavioral assessment and intervention within their schools and how they understand and utilize the FBA-BIP process within their practice. The guiding research questions were:

1. What role do school psychologists play in behavioral assessment and intervention within their schools?
2. How do school psychologists approach behavioral assessment and intervention?

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to evaluate school psychologists in Washington state to answer these questions. The flexible nature of qualitative research enables researcher questions to evolve throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative research designs typically draw from fewer participants, but the data gathered from these participants are much richer, more detailed, and heavily contextualized (Levitt et al., 2018). Qualitative research is especially useful to shed light upon sets of findings or literature that contains contradictory, problematic findings for a particular subpopulation (Levitt et al., 2018). As such, a qualitative research design was fitting for understanding the actual practices of school psychologists conducting behavioral assessments and interventions in schools.

The primary researcher (second author) was a graduate student with professional experience in applied behavior analysis, including conducting functional behavioral assessments and implementing behavior intervention plans.

Through graduate coursework, especially practicum and internship, the primary researcher came to understand more clearly the complexities and challenges of FBAs and BIPs in the school setting.

Participants

Participants involved in the current study were five school psychologists from varying districts across the state of Washington. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom with the primary investigator over the span of three months, with the length of time between interviews ranging from one to four weeks. Identifying information of participants has been removed, and participants are referred to throughout this research using their unique pseudonyms given at the time of interview transcription, with all pseudonyms following the pattern of "SP #" representing "school psychologist" and the chronological order in which they were interviewed, resulting in the following pseudonyms: SP 1, SP 2, SP 3, SP 4, and SP 5.

Participant Selection

The current research used purposeful sampling to ensure participants could offer varied information about the implementation of FBAs and BIPs. As such, all participants who were or had been licensed school psychologists in the state of Washington in the last two years and had a role in behavioral assessment or intervention were eligible to participate. School psychologists' email addresses from school and district websites were input into an Excel spreadsheet, then randomized. The researcher then contacted the first 20 randomized school psychologists in Washington, a process repeated seven times (140 emails), until the five interviews were completed.

Interview Questions

All interviews were conducted over Zoom and ranged in length from 33 minutes to 73 minutes. Participants responded to three types of questions embedded within a semi-structured interview format. First, non-elaborative demographic questions focused on participant characteristics (e.g., race, age, gender, etc.). Second, the following elaborative demographic questions focusing on school psychological training and the amount of time spent on FBA-related activities were asked:

> "What training have you received in behavioral assessment and/or intervention?"
> "Is a multi-tiered system of behavioral support in place at any of the schools you serve?"
> "Approximately what percentage of your time each week do you spend in behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention-related activities?"
> "Approximately how many FBAs do you typically conduct in a school year?"

Third, participants were provided a vignette (see Appendix) describing a fictitious student's behavior in a 5th grade classroom and then were asked how they would go about conducting an FBA and BIP.

Data Analysis

After each interview was completed, the recorded Zoom meetings were transcribed. Transcriptions of participant responses to the interview questions were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns, or "themes," and is widely used across multiple disciplines, including applied behavior analysis, school psychology, general and special education. The researcher followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke developing familiarity with the dataset through the transcription process. Following the transcriptions, the researcher coded the data by identifying initial codes and taking reflective notes in a repetitive and integrative process. In the third phase, the researcher generated initial themes and recorded them themes in the data notebook, including phrases tagged during coding that were deemed to be relevant. In the fourth phase, themes were reviewed and revised as additional interviews were completed. The PI reexamined each of the initially derived themes by considering the boundaries, significance, and pervasiveness of each theme and their relation to the broader dataset and research questions and revising these themes as new insights emerged. In the final stage, the identified themes were refined and finalized, and the PI created visualizations (i.e., mind maps) of the themes with the most relevant extracts from the dataset. During this stage, the PI returned to the literature that inspired the current research purpose, objectives, and questions and reflected upon the most meaningful data extracts to be used in conveying the findings.

Results

Demographic Information

Non-elaborative demographic data are displayed in Table 1. The elaborative demographic questions were posed during the semi-structured interview as closed-ended questions and were originally intended to be part of the survey; however, including these questions in the interview elicited depth which further contextualized the thematic findings that were the focus of this study. Participants' initial responses to the elaborative demographic data are displayed in Table 2.

Table 1

Participant Responses to Non-elaborative Demographic Questions

Pseudonym	Race	Age	Gender	Degree	# of Students Served	Grades Served	First year as SP
SP 1	White	50 - 59	Female	Specialist	1,001-2,000	6 - 12 +	2020 - 2021
SP 2	White	40 - 49	Female	Specialist	1,001-2,000	K - 5, 9 - 12	2019 - 2020
SP 3	White	60 +	Female	Masters	501-1,000	3 - 12	1986 - 1987
SP 4	White	30 - 39	Female	Specialist	501-1,000	PreK, K-5	2018 - 2019
SP 5	White	30 - 39	Female	Specialist	500 or less	PreK	2021 - 2022

Table 2

Participant Initial Responses to Elaborative Demographic Questions

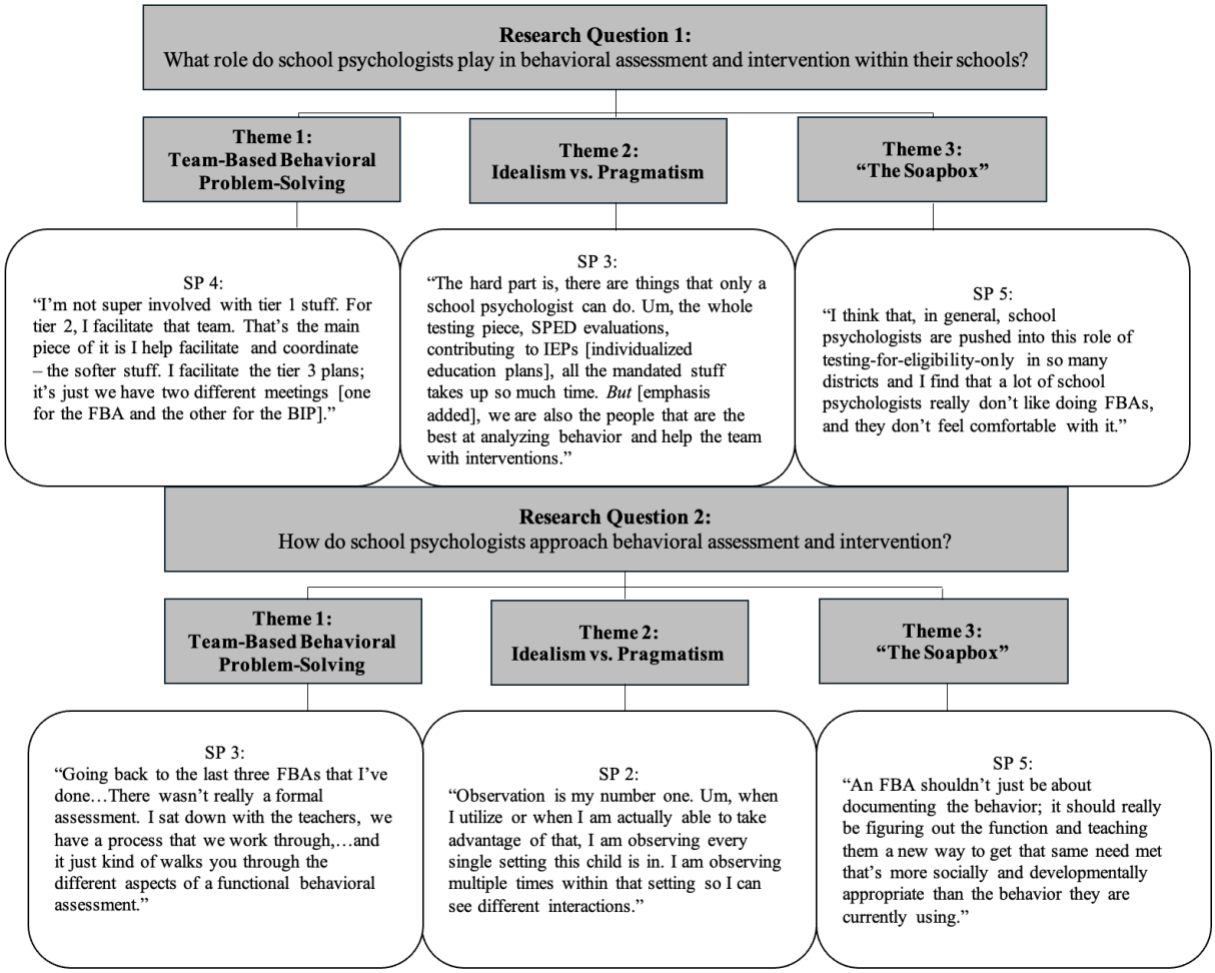
Pseudonym	What training have you received in behavioral assessment and/or intervention?	Approximately what percentage of your time each week do you spend in behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention-related activities?	Approximately how many Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) do you typically conduct in a school year?
SP 1	3+ classes	20-29% (between 8 and 11 hours per week)	5-10
SP 2	1-2 classes	10-19% (between 4 and 7 hours per week)	5-10
SP 3	1-2 classes	20-29% (between 8 and 11 hours per week)	5-10
SP 4	3+ classes	30% or more (12 or more hours per week	15 or more
SP 5	1-2 classes	0-9% (less than 4 hours per week)	1-5

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with school psychologists surrounding their role in behavioral assessment and intervention within their schools and their approach to the FBA-BIP process revealed the following three themes: *team-based behavioral problem solving, idealism v. pragmatism, and "the soapbox*" (see Figure 1 for an overview and example participant responses). The alignment of these themes with the study's objectives was intentional, highlighting the nuanced understanding that emerged from the participants' responses. Precisely, *team-based behavioral problem-solving* reflects the ways multidisciplinary problem-solving teams are utilized by school systems in their efforts to address challenging student behavior. This theme was further broken down into two subthemes: *problem identification and "problem analysis"* and *intervention and "intervention evaluation,"* which outlines the problem-solving process and the ways in which participants describe these teams are operating, with quotations suggesting these steps are not achieving their purpose. The second theme, *idealism v. pragmatism*, includes the discrepancies between the participant's ideal role and actual role in ways that both directly and indirectly impact their FBA-BIP practices and their role as school psychologists more broadly, as well as their role as problem-solving team members. The third theme, "*the soapbox,*" represents participants' input on the research topic, which was solicited at the conclusion of the interview.

Figure 1

Overview of Research Questions, Themes, and Example Responses



Discussion

The purpose of this study is to add to the literature on school psychologists' knowledge and reported practices relating to behavioral assessment and intervention through open-ended semi-structured interview questions in which elaboration was encouraged to provide rich and detailed descriptions. Results of the current study reveal that participants viewed their role as school psychologists as being situated within a multi-disciplinary, team-based approach to addressing and managing student behavior in their schools, illustrated in the following quote:

> I have the teacher collect some data. I give them some different tools to collect that data, and then, depending on the type of data they collected and how comfortable I am with using it, sometimes I'll just go in and collect it myself. . . . The type of data that I usually like to get when I'm working on an FBA is ABC data [Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence]. ABC data can be hard for a lot of people to do correctly. Sometimes, if I

> just ask them to collect ABC data, they'll get it back to me, and the consequences are not really the consequences, and the antecedents are not really the antecedents. I will go into the class and collect the data myself, then go over it with them to show them what it is exactly that I am looking for.

Most participants referenced their role as team members within a multi-tiered system of behavioral support, and they explained that their role in behavioral assessment and intervention was situated within the context of problem-solving teams:

> Our district has been doing tier 1 PBIS for years and years and years. And then they started building the tier 2 systems across the schools, and now we are trying to do Tier 3 […] That is another interest of mine, and I am very proud of the systems that I have helped build at my school.

> "Oh, that's such a tricky question (laughs). I would say a very rough form, yes [there is a multi-tiered system of behavioral supports in place]. It does exist. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports."

> "There are individual pieces [of a multi-tiered system of behavioral supports] that individual staff members have put into place, but there's no consistency or cohesion involved."

Although participants appeared to understand multi-tiered systems of behavioral support, the problem-solving process and data-based decision-making, and the FBA-BIP process, they were not able to influence the rest of their team members to abide by the quality indicators of behavioral problem-solving in universal prevention, intervention for those "at-risk" of challenging behavior, or individualized, intensive intervention for those with challenging behavior (i.e., FBA-BIP).

> …but when you look at actually what is implemented, there is not a lot of conversation […] I mean going back to their tier 1, the universal access for students, it's all over the place—and they'll be the first to tell you that their tier 1 systems are very complicated and not working well…

> "Obviously, there are some kinks—the tier 3 plans are always just a nightmare. It's just trying to monitor them and sustain the things that we are doing already."

> So, this is sort of an unfortunate thing, but in our district, the school psychologist does the FBA, and then the SPED [special education] teacher writes the BIP, and they typically just copy over what we wrote in the FBA into the BIP, rarely making any changes at all…. I also really try to influence the SPED teacher as they are writing the BIP by really talking through the FBA…I will check back in with the team a couple of weeks later and nobody is doing it [authoring a high-quality BIP].

As such, these data suggest school psychologists' knowledge of and skill in the FBA-BIP process alone is not sufficient for effective intervention and assessment practices in a school

when viewed within the context of working as part of a problem-solving team. This point was further elucidated when comparing participants' *ideal* approach to conducting FBAs with what is actually done (pragmatism) in their school(s). Ideally, participants described an FBA process heavily focused on multiple, purposeful, and contextually based direct observations and data collection.

> For the actual FBA, observation is my number one…. I am observing multiple times within that setting so that I can see different interactions. I want to see peer interactions. I want to see adult interactions. I want to see what transitions look like. I want to see what academic demands look like and what the independent workload is like. I want to understand all the possibilities of antecedent interactions that could possibly be triggering the behavior…. I will also be looking at what the rest of the students are doing. Super, super, important, because I cannot be saying this student has a behavior problem if everybody is out of control, that isn't —that can't happen, *ever* [emphasis added].

> Once I understand what's going on from the teacher's perspective, and I see a need for an FBA, I would talk to the teacher, and I would walk through a process that I call a mini-FBA with the teacher, and some of the questions would be really narrowing down that target behavior. I want to know: What is it that we are trying to intervene on, what problem are we *really* [emphasis added] having?

Pragmatically, participants discussed the conflict between engaging in FBA best practices, competing paperwork, and administrative tasks.

> Most of the FBAs that have happened at the high school are really the result of a manifestation determination, and all of those are pretty limited in their very nature as far as what you are able to do for your FBA and how much time you have to do it in, so they really end up being pretty minimal.

> If I were at one school full-time, there are so many things that I could do, and I like working with behavior and trying to figure out interventions that are going to be effective—and I do a lot of these things, but it is just, you are just pulled in so many different directions.

> The hard part is, there are things that only a school psychologist can do. Um, the whole testing piece, special education evaluations, contributing to IEPs [individualized education plans], all of the mandated stuff takes up so much time. *But* [emphasis added], we are also the people that are the best at analyzing behavior and helping the team with interventions. And yeah, they really are two competing things.

The *ideal* approaches of conducting an FBA that participants described aligned well with best practices by, for example, focusing on the function of the behavior, collecting data from multiple sources, and considering the role of antecedents in the maintenance of unwanted behavior (Hirsch et al., 2020). When speaking to the realities of conducting an FBA (i.e., *pragmatism*), participants communicated processes inconsistent with best practices resulting from inadequate time and resources as exemplified by this quote:

> I think that for us to do everything that needs doing right now in the schools, they would definitely need to double us school psychs, and they would also need to double the counselors to handle everything that is coming up and be proactive instead of reactive.

Limitations

The current study is not without limitations, and interpretation should be considered in relation to the limitations. First, the current study focused only on school psychologists in the state of Washington who additionally indicated that they had a role in behavioral assessment and intervention within their schools. This study did not include school psychologists working in any other state or school psychologists who do not have a role in behavioral assessment or intervention within their schools; thus, the generalization and transferability of the results of the current study to these populations are unknown. Second, the current study included only five participants, which limits the extent to which these findings can reasonably be generalized to the broader population of school psychologists at the state and national levels. The current study must not be thought to depict all school psychologists' roles in behavioral assessment and intervention within their schools, nor their approach to conducting FBAs and developing BIPs. However, the current study's findings—specifically, the disparity between FBA/BIP best practices and actual practices—are similar to findings from other research (Blood & Neel, 2007 [Washington state]; Cook et al., 2007 [California]; Van Acker et al., 2005 [Wisconsin]) and should be considered in relation to its strengths, limitations, and consistency with the broader and ever-expanding research base.

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Appendix

Vignette

Read the following Vignette to yourself (or I can read it for you if you would prefer), and let me know when you are finished reading. The vignette will be available for all Vignette-specific questions, so there is no need to memorize it.

You receive the following email from one of the 5th grade special education teachers at your school:

Can you conduct an FBA for James? He has been sent to the principal's office until a parent could come pick him up 4 times this week, and today the principal said that he really needs to have an FBA done and that I could ask you because I don't know how to do it. Here is some additional information:

- *James knows how to behave in class but frequently chooses not to. James disrupts class multiple times per day, interfering with the learning of other students who want to be in class and do well academically.*
- *James often chooses not to follow and comply with the school and class rules, directions, and expectations.*
- *James chooses not to complete assignments or do any work in class, even when given all the answers and separated from peers.*
- *He often destroys personal, classroom, and even peers' school materials while screaming inappropriate remarks or insults about me and other students.*
- *James frequently engages in power struggles with others, even over perceivably small and insignificant things.*
- *When given directions, James often argues with me and other staff members, stating that we cannot make him do anything and/or threatens to physically harm himself.*

This past week he began flipping over desks, and I have no idea how to handle these behaviors. I have spoken with both James and his parents about his behavior, but nothing seems to work.

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