

Pathways to Transformation: Supporting Adult Learners' Personal Transformations Through Transformative Learning Theory

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Abstract

Adult learners returning to formal learning after many years out of education often do so with anxieties and apprehensions, possibly having had poor previous experiences of education in the past (Askham, 2008; Goodchild, 2017). Pedagogical designs within pre-entry programmes aim to overcome these anxieties, often resulting in personal transformations through renewed confidence within the educational environment. Within this context Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory is potentially challenged as adult learners are eased gently into the formal learning environment through pedagogic designs which focus on individual communications with a tutor, who supports and guides the student in terms of developing academic confidence and study skills. In this situation, it is likely that the tutor is perceived as the expert, supporting their student to develop the skills necessary to embark on a formal undergraduate qualification. Full application of Mezirow's transformative learning theory is one step beyond this pathway to transformation but nonetheless, contributes to the personal transformation that enables the student to thrive in the formal educational as they progress. Interviews with 23 adult learners engaged on the first year of an undergraduate qualification, having studied a pre-entry module, were undertaken. The interviews explored the impact of previous experiences of education with participants, and how the particular pedagogic designs within the educational institutional supported or exacerbated their personal transformation. Findings suggest that experiences are individual and unique, requiring flexibility and consistency in pedagogic design throughout the student journey. Educational institutions should recognise that transformation is elastic and certain conditions and situations which may align with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, have the potential to both erode or enhance the personal transformations that have developed over time.

Keywords: Adult Learners, Transformative Learning Theory, Mezirow, Higher Education

Introduction

The process by which transformative learning occurs has been clearly articulated by academics over the years, originating from Jurgen Habermas (1984) in terms of communicative action and subsequently developed by Jack Mezirow (1991), David Jarvis (2006) and Knud Illeris (2017). Their approaches to transformative learning suggest, in general terms, that through a process of learning that involves interaction, reflection and socialisation, new knowledge is created or existing knowledge is reaffirmed. This approach is pertinent to adult learners, particularly those who have been out of formal learning for some time, who come to the learning environment with pre-conceived ideas and beliefs, brought about by their life experience (Mezirow, 1991). The situation is less evident, although not entirely obsolete, for younger learners, and the process by which transformative learning occurs is evidenced by pedagogical approaches that encourage active participation and dialogue, rather than the transmission of information, between all of those involved in the learning process (Freire, 1972).

Within a higher education (HE) environment, such approaches clearly focus on the development of an individual through pedagogic approaches that encourage critical thinking, dialogue and reflection. This higher-level knowledge not only enables wider career opportunities for

individuals but also benefits the economy through increased competitiveness and productivity (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016; Million Plus, 2013), and society through more active citizenship (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Within the English HE policy context, the measures by which the quality of HE teaching is judged predominantly focus on hard outcomes such as the awarding of a good degree (first or 2:1) or progression to highly skilled employment or further study (Office for Students, 2022). They fail to recognise the personal transformations that occur through the process of learning, which may include the application of transformative learning theory in addition to a general engagement in learning. For adult learners in particular, the personal transformations that occur can often be more powerful than the process of learning and what is being learned.

Using Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory as a framework, the study presented in this article explores the concept of transformative learning within the context of adult learners at a large global distance learning university, based in the UK. The study builds on the literature that suggests prior educational experiences have a significant impact on adult learners as they return to learning in terms of confidence and sense of belonging (Cross, 1981; McGivney, 1990; Waller 2006). Mapping the pedagogical design for both an entry-level course and year one of a degree programme, the research presents the experiences of adult learners in terms of the impact of their study experience on their own personal transformations. Through qualitative methods, it explores the specific challenges that participants have experienced in their previous formal educational environments and how the pedagogical models adopted as they return impact on their subsequent learning journey.

The findings of the research suggest that the process of personal transformational learning begins at different points in time prior to an individual's decision to formally register with an HE provider. Support from peers, family and friends is key to this process with the introductory modules contributing to increasing personal transformation, despite persistent anxieties, as a result of poor previous educational experiences. Pedagogical models that neglect to acknowledge the individualised learning experience have the potential to erode the confidence of adult learners that has been systematically built up over time. Transformational learning is not a continual, progressive process, and the pace at which personal transformation subsequently occurs can differ between individuals. Exposure to the different elements of the learning environment impact on this transformation. This suggests that persistent exposure to a perceived negative learning environment has the potential to negate the positive transformation that the initial introduction to HE level study has had. Responding to this transformational elasticity requires a pedagogical design that recognises the factors that may impact on an individual's personal transformation, above and beyond transformative learning theory. Flexibility and consistency within the pedagogical design are necessary conditions to ensure adult learners returning to learning after many years out of formal education, can be supported to succeed.

Literature Review

The Neglect of Transformative Learning

The benefits of participating in HE have been reported by European and UK educational policy makers for many years (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2010, 2013; Delors, 1996, Department for Education and Employment, 1998; Faure, 1972; Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). These benefits relate to the economy, to society and to the individual. Economic benefits relate to the ability to meet higher level skills needs (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016) increasing global competitiveness (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2010), enabling faster innovation and technology transfer (Adnett, 2016) and increasing productivity, competitiveness and profitability within businesses (Million Plus, 2013). Benefits to society include increased participation such as volunteering and voting, lower crime, better general health, political stability, and increased citizenship (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). Benefits to the economy are also evident within benefits to the individual. Increased employment opportunities from an increasingly competitive and innovative economy, improve job

opportunities and have the potential to increase earnings, create greater social capital, and transform an individual in terms of the creation of new or affirmation of existing knowledge. This contributes to personal development (Centenary Commission, 2021) an attribute that is often overlooked within the measures of success of participation in HE.

Despite these policy reports presenting these three domains as equal in importance, in reality it is the economic benefits that dominate policy decisions within the English education system and, more specifically HE. This is evidenced by the persistent focus on good degrees (a 2:1 or a first), graduate outcomes in terms of progression to highly skilled employment or further study, as well as continuation and retention metrics, all imposed by the regulator of HE, the Office for Students (OFS, 2022). There is no dispute against the need for the HE sector to provide high quality courses that support students to achieve their ambitions, ensuring that students from all backgrounds, including those who have been disadvantaged and are underrepresented, have equity with their peers. The narrow focus on these, 'easy to measure' metrics however, masks what, whilst more challenging, should be considered an equally valued and measured benefit of HE, namely, its transformative power.

Relevance to Adult Learners

This neglect is particularly relevant for adult learners, especially those who have been out of formal education for many years, as they often return to the formal learning environment having had poor experiences of education in the past which has contributed to their disengagement at an early age (Tight, 1998). As a result of that experience, they often lack confidence in their academic ability (Goodchild, 2017) and are anxious about how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves within this formal learning environment (Mallman and Lee, 2016). This impacts them even before they decide to participate in any form of learning and influences their sense of belonging within that environment and their subsequent decision to register with an institution. Adult learners present a multitude of identities – parent, carer, employee, student (Butcher, 2015) – and bring complex histories and a wealth of life experience with them (Askham, 2008). As such, this impacts on how they engage within a formal learning environment and subsequently influences the pedagogy within which programmes of study are designed. Approaches to supporting younger students, coming from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds into the HE environment focus on embedding academic skills development within induction and first year programmes (Thomson, 2022). This is thought to prepare students for successful participation in HE as they progress into years 2 and 3. They also focus on developing a sense of identity and belonging (Reay, 2010), using mentoring and buddying schemes (Thomas, 2012) as well as the visibility of positive role models throughout the university environment (Hume, 2018). The wider university cultural experience is therefore seen as important in contributing to successful participation and outcomes. In addition to these initiatives, programmes and curriculum designed to specifically address the issues faced by adult learners can also focus on the development of softer skills, such as increasing confidence, through bespoke pedagogical designs which facilitate the introduction into the HE learning environment. These programmes move the emphasis beyond the internal process by which transformative learning occurs to one which creates the external conditions which enable personal transformation to take place. Such initiatives recognise what Jarvis (2006) and Illeris (2017) criticised Mezirow (1991) for, in terms of his narrow focus on the individual, adding another dimension to these models of learning which aim to specifically address issues affecting adult learners.

The Transformative Learning Process

As suggested by Mezirow (1991), transformative learning in terms of the process by which new knowledge is either created or existing knowledge is re-affirmed, is brought about by a process of reflection, interaction and socialisation of ideas based on that learning. This process, according to Mezirow (1991), is pertinent to adult learners as they engage in the learning environment having deeply embedded assumptions and preconceptions of the world around them, and their position within

it. Through a process of learning whereby these existing assumptions are challenged, reflected upon and tested with others, new knowledge is created or existing preconceptions and assumptions are reinforced. Pedagogical designs within the learning environment, support this process and the role of the tutor or lecturer becomes one of facilitator, moving beyond what Freire (1972) terms the banking model of education to active participation by all those involved in the learning process. This pedagogical approach supports the liberation of minds (hooks, 1994) and emancipates all who participate. Subsequent learning theories have developed from the work of Mezirow, who has been criticised for neglecting to recognise the wider sociological, psychological and philosophical influences on the learning process (Jarvis, 2006). Nonetheless, the overarching concepts that present the learning process as a cyclical process of reflection, interaction and socialisation have remained largely intact.

The Application of Transformative Learning Theory to Practice

Applying transformative learning theory to support adult learners returning to learning is demonstrated through the case study within which this article is located. The case study institution is a large global provider of distance learning based in the UK. It has a social justice mission to support all students, whatever their background, to have access to HE and be successful once there. The challenge for the case study institution is that it operates an open entry policy, meaning there are no entry requirements. Students (the majority of whom are adults, over 25) can embark on an HE qualification without having a formal qualification to their name. It is therefore essential that academic study skills are embedded throughout its curriculum, and students get the right level of support required, when they need it. Its core undergraduate modules have academic study skills embedded throughout its curriculum and front-loaded within the first-year programme to ensure students are equipped to progress successfully onto their subsequent years' studies. The pedagogical design mirrors Mezirow (1991), Jarvis (2006) and Illeris' (2017) models of learning, in terms of supporting critical thinking, reflection and interaction with other students within tutorials and forums and also directly with their tutor through the assessment process. Where perhaps the pedagogical design differs from these models is specifically in terms of the level at which interaction and socialisation occurs. The approach to tuition adopted by the case study institution is one whereby most tutorials are delivered online, at scale, with one tutor potentially leading a tutorial of 70 students. Students may not know the tutor who is running their tutorial, and it is also likely that they will not know their fellow students with whom they may need to interact. This poses a challenge if the concept of active participation and collective consciousness is to be realised, placing more of the emphasis of reflection, interaction and socialisation at an individual rather than group level. The extent to which Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy (whilst not used directly as Freire intended within the concept of HE at the case study institution) can truly be re-enacted in this environment, is questionable. There is a risk that the pedagogical design, within this context reverts back to one whereby the expert tutor imparts their knowledge and expertise upon expectant recipients.

Some students who engage in study with the case study institution, take the decision to embark on an entry level module prior to their formal participation on an undergraduate programme. The pedagogical design for these modules is specific to the objectives of developing individual confidence and a sense of 'HE is for me' (Archer, 2007) as well as academic skills development. Both are considered by educational developers within the case study as essential for enabling positive transformations within the individuals. The aim is that this positive transformation will enable students to confidently continue on their academic journey, as well as equip them with the skills and competencies to actively participate within the domains of work and society.

The Case Study

The case study within which this research is positioned is adult learners who were studying on the first year of their degree programme, having previously studied one of the case study institution's pre-entry Access modules. The institution is a large global provider of HE by distance learning, based

in the UK. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study through a mix of online content delivery, online tutorials, informal forums and some face-to-face tutorials. Students are allocated one tutor whose primary function is to provide academic study support. Non-compulsory tutorials are delivered online and largely at scale, with students being led by a tutor, who may not necessarily be their allocated tutor. Students do not necessarily know their fellow students in these tutorials and generally rely on the group tutor to structure the tutorials and engage students.

Some tutorials are also delivered in person. These tutorial groups tend to be much smaller, although similar to the online group tutorials, and may not be delivered through a student's allocated tutor. These face-to-face tutorials are generally held in central locations, meaning some students have to travel quite a way to attend.

As part of its commitment to support students to be successful in their studies, the case study institution also offers a bespoke programme of study, its Access programme, aimed at developing individual confidence and academic study skills. The case study institution does not have any entry qualifications, meaning that programmes designed to support students who may have had poor previous experiences of education and want to give HE a try, are pivotal to students' continuing success. Engagement with the institution's Access programme is not compulsory but institutional data suggest that students who complete an Access programme do better than students who do not. At the time of writing, three inter-disciplinary Access modules are offered by the institution. The modules are entry level 0 and have no academic credit attached to them. They cover a 30-week period and are unique in that students are allocated a one-to-one tutor who supports them throughout the duration of the module, offering one to one telephone tutorials on a monthly basis. The pedagogical model is designed to be developmental in nature, with formative assessment aimed at building confidence in assessment tasks and within students more generally. Table 1 summarises the pedagogic design of both the first-year undergraduate modules and the entry level modules within the context of transformative learning theory and associated models of learning.

Table 1

A pedagogical framework for adult learners returning to learning within the context of transformative learning theory and models of learning

1. What is being learned?	2. Why is it being learned?	3. How is it being learned?	4. What is the impact of the learning?	5. Existing introductory courses at the case study institution
<u>Illeris (2017)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge • Understanding • Skills 	<u>Illeris (2017)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentive <u>Mezirow (1991)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disorienting dilemma <u>Jarvis (2006)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situation • Experience 	<u>Freire (1972)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical pedagogy using experience or new content to challenge existing assumptions, making sense of new situations <u>Mezirow (1991)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relating discontent to others • Explaining options of new behaviour • Experimenting with new roles • Jarvis (2003) • Reasoning and reflection • Evaluation • Practice/experimentation <u>Illeris (2017)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action • Communication • Co-operation 	<u>Jarvis (2006)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforcement of existing assumptions • New learning which creates a change within the individual <u>Mezirow (1991)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building confidence in new ways • Reintegration 	<u>Access Programme</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment is developmental • Interdisciplinary • Study skills development embedded within pedagogical model • Self-reflection exercises at start of module • Tutor provides one-to-one pastoral support • Regular telephone tutorials integral to the pedagogical model to provide academic and pastoral support • No formal contact with other students • Short modules to maintain motivation <u>First year of undergraduate studies</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study skills development embedded within pedagogical model • Peer interaction through informal module forums as well as tutor-led tutorials • Modular-based study

Researcher Positionality and Limitations of the Research

It is important to acknowledge the author's own position within the context of this research. It is difficult to detach their positionality, coming from the perspective whereby engaging in HE has positive benefits to individuals, with the mission of the case study institution and specifically the Access programme. It is also difficult to separate the author's professional practice within the context of the research. As someone who inhabits the space where educational policy meets institutional practice, there is already a preconceived idea of what the case study does or does not do in terms of transformative learning. In this sense, the author holds a unique and powerful position to work with the participants in the research, in order to support the development of programmes that support their personal and professional beliefs. The research therefore does not pretend to be objective, but positively embraces the unique position of the researcher.

Methodology

The research sought to explore the experiences of adult learners as they return to learning in a formal HE environment. Its particular focus was on how those experiences, and the pedagogical design, impact the personal transformations that occur when adult learners return to HE via a dedicated widening participation programme. In order to gain insight into the richness of participant stories (Wang, 2013), a qualitative approach using one to one interviews was adopted. Telephone interviews were undertaken with 23 adult learners between the ages of 21 and 59. An initial pilot study revealed different issues for students who had only recently left formal education as well as for students aged 60 and over. The main study selected a sample of students between the ages of 25 and 59, although all participants' data was included in the data analysis and findings.

Although age was a consideration within the sample design, other variables were also included in the selection process, reflecting the particular concept around widening participation to HE, within which the study was being based. Out of all the students studying at the case study institution, the sample was developed using the following criteria:

- Less than 2 A levels
- POLAR3¹ quintiles 1 and 2
- Aged between 25 and 59
- Studied an Access module prior to the first year of their degree
- In receipt of a full fee waiver on the Access programme

Participants were invited to participate in the research through a series of email invitations using a stratified sampling process to ensure an equal opportunity to be invited to participate across the whole sample, also split by gender. In total, 133 students were invited to participate, 87 females and 46 males. Out of this, 23 students agreed to participate and were invited to engage with the researcher in a one-to-one interview.

Due to the dispersed nature of participants, interviews were undertaken by telephone, at a time convenient to the participants. Non-face-to-face methods of data collection can pose challenges to qualitative researchers in the sense that they can create a barrier to developing a rapport between researcher and participant (Holt, 2010). Subsequently this could impact on how participants engage with the interview process, the level of detail they are willing to share and the level of probing by the researcher. The introduction of new media platforms such as Skype or Facetime have the potential to overcome some of these barriers and participants were given the choice of engaging with the interviews via these platforms. All participants opted for a telephone interview possibly due to their experience of distance learning within the case study institution, in which telephone tutorials were the dominant form of contact during their introductory studies. Interviews were recorded and transcribed

¹ POLAR3 – Participation of Local Areas – a postcode-based measure of the likelihood of 18/19 year olds attending university.

with participants' consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research up to the point at which data was aggregated. They were assured that they would not be identifiable in the research and pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity.

The Use of Vignettes

During the piloting phase of the research it became clear that traditional approaches to interviewing were not providing the level of insight expected. This may have been as a result of the sensitive and complex nature of some of the questions being asked (Neff, 1979), acknowledging that for some participants the recollection of their past experiences of education may expose anxieties that could be traumatic. The decision was made to use vignettes as a way of transferring the power of the research from the researcher to the participant (Stravakou and Lozgka, 2018), enabling participants to identify their own experiences from within the vignettes, that were shared with them prior to the telephone conversation. The vignettes were developed from the existing literature on widening participation to HE for underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds alongside findings from the pilot study. Their use was pivotal in engaging participants in often very deep and personal conversations about their previous and current experiences of education.

Vignette A focused on a student who worked in a supermarket, with parents in low skilled occupations. They felt neglected at school by their teachers and perceived themselves to not be as clever or as academic as their peers. They felt they received little support from their teachers in this respect, made worse by receiving extra sessions which pulled them out of the main class for everyone to see. There was no expectation for these students to go beyond compulsory education and very unlikely that they would achieve many, if any, formal qualifications.

Vignette B presented a student who did quite well at school but, despite wanting to, was unable to continue their formal education beyond the age of 18. Although the student in Vignette B embarked and was quite successful in a career, they also perceived themselves to be less valued within the workplace, and decisions or feedback on key initiatives were directed towards more educated colleagues. This began to erode the confidence of the student in Vignette B and their own ability to make decisions independently. This not only played out in the workplace but began to encroach on their personal life too.

Finally Vignette C presented a scenario where the student had a very poor school and homelife. They were not encouraged by their parents in any aspect of their life and were left to their own devices in all aspects of their lives. They felt neglected by their teachers which contributed to a lack of confidence in the classroom, exacerbated by how they perceived themselves to be amongst their peers. Feelings of negativity were reinforced through news stories of crime and disorder being prevalent in areas with which the student could identify. The student within Vignette C had no experiences of positivity in any aspect of their life.

Using evidence that suggests consideration should be made of the length, language and tone used in vignettes (Stravakou and Lozgka, 2018), the final versions were sent to participants prior to their interview. Participants were asked to read each one and select the one that most resonated with their experience. They were encouraged to develop their own vignette, combining specific aspects of each one, with another. The vignettes were used as the introductory conversation for the interview, acting as an icebreaker, often immediately breaking down the barriers between researcher and participant (Barter and Renold, 2000; Sundaram and Wilde, 2011).

The Interviews

The vignettes were specifically focused on the learning experiences of participants prior to engaging with the case study institution. Subsequent questions were identified within an interview schedule which were introduced during the discussion of the vignettes and as the interview progressed. These questions probed the participant further in terms of their experiences as they began their journey back into formal education. Participants were asked about how they felt as they registered to study on the introductory module, why they chose this particular route and what support

they received as they began the process. They were asked questions in terms of their experience as their studies continued and how they managed their insecurities as they progressed. Broader questions were also available to use to gain deeper insight into participant stories if the previous questions were limiting. These broader questions related to wider experiences that they thought may have been relevant in relation to their transformational journey and how their experience of returning to study has prepared them for further study. They were also invited to talk about how their studies have impacted other aspects of their life outside of the formal learning environment.

Findings

The Process of Transformative Learning

Prior to the research being undertaken, it was already acknowledged that student experiences as they returned to learning at the case study institution were transformative. This was even more evident for those who began their studies with an Access module. Student testimonies used more widely across the institution support this. The findings from this research not only reinforced, but expanded on this belief, by hearing the accounts of participants and the journeys they travelled even before they embarked on undergraduate study at the case study institution.

Turning now to participant responses to the research questions, Adam recounts the impact of the support and encouragement given to him by his grandparents as he overcame severe depression and agoraphobia since leaving school early. Gently easing Adam back into society through his involvement in his grandfather's charity, Adam slowly began to develop confidence in himself. Interactions with others, on his first few visits to the charity were non-existent, but slowly and surely over time they grew. In reflecting on his decision to re-enter formal education he acknowledges the contribution the passing of his grandfather had, in his own words "I wanted to give something back to my grandad and for him to feel proud of me."

For Lee, similarly in response to questions regarding his decision to engage with formal education, he spoke about his employment in a factory. Having always been made to feel stupid at school by both the teachers and other pupils, his engagement with a maths course as part of his work was predominantly down to him wanting to get out of work for a few hours, rather than a desire to learn. Despite this, the results he achieved on the course amazed him and with the continued support of a colleague, he began to develop an inner confidence that eroded the negative feelings that he had held regarding education and his position within it for a long time. He progressed from a maths course to a literacy course. This was the turning point in his life as his tutor referred him for an assessment which resulted in a diagnosis of dyslexia. It was obvious during the conversation with Lee, what this meant to him.

[F]inding out I was dyslexic actually; it changed a lot for me because when she actually told me, I'm a bit embarrassed, but I actually sobbed, I cried my eyes out.

Jill had a similar experience although she had a clearer idea of the career she wanted, a social worker. However, as with Lee, she struggled with core subjects. Despite gaining a distinction in a BTEC diploma, she failed maths and English which prevented her from going to university. Freddie had a similar experience to Jill in terms of career ambitions. He wanted to join the Royal Marines but at 16, his parents said he was too young and needed to wait until he was 18. A Saturday job in a bakery, evolved into an apprenticeship and he never fulfilled his desire to be a marine.

The transformative process for Gary was equally powerful to that of Lee, and responded to some of the broader questions that were asked in relation to the support that he received. He recalls a lack of interest by his mother in all aspects of his life which eventually resulted in him leaving the family home at the age of 14. He spent the next six months living in a barn, able to maintain his attendance at school until the winter set in. He was taken in by his auntie but forced to leave education to contribute to his living costs. Gary's journey back into formal education was turbulent. He joined the army to find the family that he did not have, but then turned to drink and became violent as a result of the many horrors that he saw. Although recognising that something had to change, it was

his partner who began his personal transformation, supporting him to seek professional help to overcome his addictions. It was at this point that he began the search to reengage in formal education, with the belief of the people around him that it was possible. Gary's journey was not a linear process however and it took a long time for him to eventually embark on the Access programme at the case study institution and subsequently continue onto an undergraduate qualification.

Melanie's experience was similar to Gary's in terms of the impact of her homelife. However, where Gary continued his education despite being homeless, Melanie withdrew from both homelife and education. She recalls one or two teachers who were supportive of her but the majority of them wrote her off. Melanie's experience of school and home resulted in her being off long-term sick. When she returned to school her friendship group had moved on and she spoke of how she did not feel she belonged in any group. She acknowledges that this experienced "messed her up until her mid-twenties" and relied on colleagues within her work for the support to keep her positive.

For some of the other participants in this research the transformative process was perhaps more subtle, having left school following poor experiences in relation to bullying by their peers, and a lack of support by their teachers. On reflecting on their school experience and the journey back into formal education, Julie suggested that her experience at school did not affect her as she returned to learning, despite her being bullied and a lack of support from the school. In response to questions about wider support she recalled her mother as being pivotal in terms of engaging with the school but that only one or two teachers were really there to help her. As a result of this experience Julie left school without any formal qualifications. As is also evident in Maureen's recollection of her school experience, financial barriers prevented progression to formal learning beyond compulsory education, rather than any issues relating to confidence brought about by school experience. Similarly, Kirsty and Mya always had a sense that they would go onto formal education at some point in their life. Kirsty lived in a very rural part of the South East of England, her motivation was to move to a more vibrant area of the country. In order to achieve this ambition, she tried college and university but withdrew quite early on in her studies.

Certain situations in Mya's life (which she did not wish to elaborate on) prevented her from following her ambitions to go to university. For Miles, whilst he admits that he was quite academic within his school, the career trajectory being imposed upon pupils was either to go to university or the army, neither of which he wanted. He referred to himself as "a vacuum child" whereby his needs were not being met due to the priorities within the school. This was a similar experience to Gary and other participants such as Sally, Jane and Lesley who felt that they were ignored if they either were not the most academic, were average, or were not aligned to the school's ambitions. Lindsey's misalignment was not necessarily with the school although she does make the point that she felt like she was being treated like a child in sixth form. Her father was keen for her to have a university career but whilst she has subsequently thought that she should have gone to university, at that point in time it was not for her.

Julie and Kirsty's experiences confirm the different trajectories that participants experienced, which for some were severely impeded by their previous experiences of education whilst for others the impact of their schooling was less evident. Jenny revealed her distrust of other students and colleagues in the workplace as a result of the relationship she had with her friends at school, who were also her abusers. She admits that whilst professionally she finds it quite easy to create distance between her colleagues and herself, it is harder within other social settings but proactively takes steps to avoid opening herself up to the situations that she faced at school. Her return to learning is transformative in many ways as she was able to continue her ambitions to study for a degree, which were curtailed due to her negative experiences at school. However, as shall be seen, the pedagogic design within the case study institution that aims to continue the transformative learning process is perhaps not conducive to Jenny's preferred environment.

Transformative Learning

Pedagogic Design

The accounts that participants gave provide the context within which they re-engaged with formal education. The diversity of experience is evident as are the experiences, strengths and anxieties that participants brought to their Access studies. For some to arrive in that position has meant a phenomenal transformation personally and academically, whilst for others the evidence may be less obvious. Despite this every participant was able to share the impact that studying the Access programme has had on them, specifically in relation to its pedagogic design.

Here, we would expect Mezirow's transformative learning theory to be evident, alongside the subsequent models of learning developed by Jarvis and Illeris. What the research revealed, however, reflects the individual journeys and circumstances that participants brought to the learning environment (Waller, 2006). Whereas Mezirow's framework provides the conditions within which adult learners can question, challenge and reframe their existing assumptions within constructive dialogue, the conditions within which students on an Access programme study are potentially one step removed from this process.

Tutorial Structure

Participants recalled a variety of experiences as they returned to study. For some, the one-to-one tutorial structure on the Access programme was pivotal to their continuing transformative learning journey. Donna recalls the proactive engagement by her tutor on the Access programme which she said really helped her to maintain enthusiasm and motivation to study, particularly as she is not confident in actively seeking support. Angela, Julie and Sally also spoke very highly of their tutors on the Access programme particularly in terms of how accessible they were to respond to their queries and concerns. Alison, and Jen spoke positively of the engagement and support they had with their undergraduate tutors. This was not always evident as they continued her studies, as the tutorial structure on the undergraduate programme was considered to be less personal and generally delivered through larger group environments. Lee had mixed experiences on the undergraduate programme as he had a change of tutor partway through his module which revealed to him the different tutoring styles that were difficult for him to adapt to. Angela recalled a lack of input from her tutor apart from providing her feedback on assignments which is a significant departure from the experience she had on the Access programme. Louise, Melanie and Lee also spoke of a lack of support from their tutors as they progressed beyond the Access programme, suggesting a gap in transition to personal transformation which is perhaps not quite as linear a process as the pedagogical design infers. For some participants such as Jenny, however, this development was welcomed as she considers herself to be an independent learner, proactively seeking support when required but generally preferring to be 'left alone'. Assuming that all students on the undergraduate are confident to be proactive in contacting their tutors rather than enabling more proactive tutor support within the pedagogical design is problematic. This is particularly important for students who are less likely to raise their hand or come forward with questions, and speaks to the type of student widening participation programmes are often aimed at.

The varied experiences of participants in this research suggests a lack of consistency in approach to tutoring beyond the Access programme. It was evident amongst all participants, irrespective of the confidence they felt at any particular time in their learning journey, that certain triggers could begin to resurface their anxieties and apprehensions, potentially impacting their continued journey through HE and eroding the transformative learning that they had developed. This is exacerbated for some students who recognised the need for more developmental support as they progress their undergraduate studies. The current model potentially exposes some participants to situations that resurrect their anxieties and perceptions of inadequacy whilst enabling others to thrive in this environment.

Online Tutorials and Fora

For some participants, the online tutorial environment and informal fora that they could engage with, enabled anonymity which gave them the confidence to present their ideas on an equal footing to their peers. This was particularly the case for Adam, whose history included severe agoraphobia and depression. His renewed confidence and enthusiasm to present his own ideas and challenge others was evident, clearly reflecting the overarching aims of the Access programme to enable confident progression to the next level of study. Alison also spoke positively about her online tutorial experience, particularly the benefit of having two tutors in the tutorial, one to answer questions that were appearing in the chat and the other talking through the tutorial material. Similarly Sally felt that the online environment was a safer environment to express views and opinions anonymously, which could be filtered by the tutors or presented slightly differently so as not to directly say to a student that something was not relevant.

For others, however, their engagement within these environments was less of a positive experience, preferring the one-to-one tutorial method they had experienced on the Access programme irrespective of whether it was online or not. The online environment was particularly challenging for Lee who had struggled with reading and writing at school and, despite his dyslexia diagnosis, was still wary of writing anything within these environments for fear of looking stupid or making spelling mistakes. However, the experience recalled by Sally above, whereby comments were anonymous and could be filtered, could help to overcome some of Lee's concerns. Other participants felt a slight apprehension of contributing, with some more comfortable in observing what others were saying without actively participating themselves. This challenges Mezirow, Jarvis and Illeris in terms of the need for interaction between individuals although what level of interaction is perhaps not as clearly defined, meaning that just observing interactions with others may equally contribute to the transformative learning process. No peer-to-peer contact was positive for Jenny, enabling her to engage with the learning environment in the way that suited her best.

Other more practical challenges were also identified by participants in the research particularly around being able to access the technology to enable them to participate in the online environment. This was less about how the tutorial was delivered and more about access to a laptop with the correct software, as in Miles' experience or the ability to participate fully because of a hearing impairment which Louise identified as a reason for her preference for face-to-face tutorials. However, Alison found the experience really positive as she recalls being able to screen shot particular aspects of the tutorial and paste into a Word document so that she was able to capture much more of the content of the tutorial. Alison and Donna also recalled the productivity of the online environment in terms being able to get through a lot more material than in a face-to-face environment.

There were also mixed experiences in terms of engaging in face-to-face tutorials, which for some contributed to their transformational learning journey, whilst for others it was more challenge. Apart from the challenges of physically attending a face-to-face tutorial in terms of location and timing (Miles Melanie, Gary), participants spoke about conversations being dominated by those people with the biggest voices or the session being interrupted as students put their hands up to ask questions. In this sense the online tutorial potentially becomes a more equitable experience (if the technology permits), enabling the tutor to filter questions and responses in a timely way but ensuring all students have the opportunity to participate in a manner that suits them. In turn this contributes to the process of transformation which occurs at different points in time for different students.

Relationship with Tutors

The learning experience in relation to the tutorials, structure and tutors, was enhanced when students and their tutors found common ground, whether that related to backgrounds or circumstance. This was evident as Louise recalls a conversation with her tutor whereby it became apparent that he used a walking stick, as did she. For her, this immediately broke down barriers that are often evident in a teacher/student relationship, supporting Freire's concept of active participation within the learning environment. For others, however, the one-to-one tutoring model was difficult, whether that was due to a clash of personality as perceived by Gary or generally in relation to the perception of the student as to what the tutor expects of them (Lee). Jenny found the structure of the Access programme slightly restrictive. Happy to study on her own, she felt confident in being able to ask for help if needed but did not feel she needed tutorials to be scheduled in so rigidly. This impacted her relationship with her tutor in some ways, which may have been more productive if Jenny had been left to be more independent. However, she does acknowledge that without the support of her tutors she would have given up; as she said "a little bit of support and encouragement keeps her going, reinforcing the message that "she can do it". Angela referred to a "virtual hug" that kept her motivated.

Seeking support from tutors also played out in relation to assessment, not only in preparing for assessment tasks, but also in receiving and responding to feedback. There were mixed experiences of participants in relation to the support they received from their tutor in preparing to submit their assignments. Alison and Melanie both spoke about more guidance required in terms of what some of the language used in assessment means, which they felt they did not get from their tutor but was equally missing in Open University material. They spoke about a need for greater development in relation to academic writing or forming an argument as they progressed onto the undergraduate programme. Whilst some students like Louise and Sally felt comfortable in approaching their tutors because of the relationship they had built up, for others this was more problematic. The discrepancy between the approaches that tutors took was less apparent on the Access programme as the one-to-one model is embedded within its pedagogical design, but it was clear that inconsistency of tutor approaches left students confused about what was expected. This has the potential to resurface some of the anxieties presented from their school experience and, as in Lee's case, begin the process of questioning whether they belong within this academic environment. Lee submitted one assignment having received 80% in his previous one. He received 40% for the most recent submission but the feedback he received did not give any indication of where he had dropped marks. Having renewed confidence to challenge, he queried the feedback with his tutor but received no response. At the time of the research he was still waiting for a reply, but it was clear from the conversation that he was beginning to doubt himself and his ability.

Programme Design

The accounts provided by participants in this study reveal the heterogeneity of adult learners as they re-engage in formal education (Michie, Glachan and Bray, 2001; Waller, 2006). They demonstrate the unique and individual experience of adult learners who have followed varied pathways to arrive at the same destination, in HE. The impact of their previous experiences of education, whilst not buried, have slowly been addressed through initial support provided by peers, colleagues, friends and family, to formal support as the progress into HE. The experiences of the students in this study reveal that for some, the impact of their previous experiences are potentially ready to resurface should the conditions in their learning environment reignite some of their feels of insecurity. In general, studying the Access programme enabled a level of confidence to be developed through its unique one to one telephone tutoring model. Despite this not being a preferred tutoring learning for some participants, for others it was essential to give them the personalised support that they needed. The wider pedagogic design of the Access programme, however, was perceived as positive by all participants in terms of its developmental and nurturing nature. In many ways this compensated for any negative feelings experienced through the tutoring model.

Whilst for some participants in this study, this initial introduction to the HE learning environment was sufficient to enable them to positively continue with their undergraduate studies. The pedagogy within the core undergraduate programmes is designed to enable the flexibility to study at a time, place and pace that suits the individual. Some participants in the study reported this was a step too far, and it is evident that a more supportive transition into undergraduate studies was required. Moving from an individualised tutoring model to group tuition is one example of this disparity between the two programmes and in consistency between the support received from individual tutors was also raised as an issue for some students. However, participants did not make reference to the overall design of the programme whereby much of the subject content is delivered either online or through printed textbooks. Wider support to reinforce the subject content or acknowledge individual circumstances, therefore, could be enhanced to create a better learning experience for some students. This reflects the individual experiences that participants reported and supports the argument that adult learners are not homogenous. Pedagogic designs within core undergraduate programmes should reflect this and recognise that for some students, particularly those to whom widening participation is aimed, a more supportive and personalised learning environment is likely to be more effective.

Conclusions

The research presented in this article has explored, through the voices of adult learners in HE, the extent to which pedagogical models support their transitions into and through HE. Positioned within Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the study has provided insight into the impact that bespoke programmes to support adult learners into HE have on personal transformations. It highlights some of the challenges that adult learners battle with, which different pedagogical designs can either help to overcome or exacerbate.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory helps us to understand the process by which adults either increase their knowledge within different contexts or reinforce their existing assumptions. The process of interaction, reflection, socialisation and affirmation are supposedly easy concepts to engage with, through the active dialogue between all those involved in the learning process. For adult learners coming into a HE environment, many having had poor experiences of education, this process can be problematic. Whilst Mezirow's theory has been expanded to include wider psychological, sociological and physiological influences (Jarvis 2006; Illeris, 2017), the influence of pedagogical design within an educational environment, is of equal importance in supporting the personal transformations that occur in adult learners. This personal transformation occurs at different points in time of an adult learner's educational journey. Whilst the implementation of transformative learning theory may support adult learners at the latter stages of this personal transformative process, for those at the beginning of their journey or those that move between different transformative phases, this approach may not be appropriate. Transformational elasticity creates the conditions for which adult learners can thrive or withdraw, depending on the learning environment and pedagogical models that they are exposed to.

Bespoke programmes, such as the Access programme cited in this article, aim to address some of the shortfall that transformative learning theory presents although even then, the pedagogical design that aims to develop individuals to become confident learners may contribute to increased anxiety. However, the individual journeys that participants in this research shared suggest that despite some triggers being apparent, the overarching pedagogical design supports their transformative learning process. If the pedagogical models within the programmes of study adult learners move onto are too far removed from the original experience however, some students may find that the initial transformative benefits gained through specific widening participation programmes are eroded. Pedagogical design should be inclusive, ensuring that individual needs can be met in a timely way, recognising that some students will be less confident in reaching out for support or engaging within the learning environment and that others may need to dip in and out of support throughout their educational journey.

This is not, however, the beginning of the story. The transformative learning process and subsequent personal transformations that occur are emerging prior to formal engagement in learning and without the structure that Mezirow's theory places on the process. There is potentially a need for a similar process, theory or framework to be developed, reflective of the more informal interactions that begin early on in an adult learners' educational journey. This could be challenging given the individualised nature of experiences but nonetheless would enable the bigger picture relating to adult learners as they embark on their journey back to formal learning to be presented.

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How are Reading Experiences Transforming Students in a Virtual World?

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Abstract

The last two years have challenged the way students and teachers engage in reading experiences. Many traditional face-to-face formats have been replaced with hybrid, remote, online, and a combination of these virtual formats. When thinking back to the way most people experienced literature or grew to love reading, it is likely the moment occurred in a traditional setting of some sort. Teachers are still expected to instill a love for literature in their students despite classes being held in different formats. Common concerns expressed in the education community are “How can I make my students enjoy reading when they can never hold a book?” “How can I hold my students accountable with silent reading when they are taught in a virtual environment?” “How are my students getting exposure to literature in these non-traditional settings?” These questions and many others like this have been on the forefront of today’s educators’ minds. Teachers need to create experiences that allow their students to have those same moments as once were offered traditionally. This article provides specific strategies, online resources, and approaches to guide any teacher exposing children to literature in today’s learning environments.

Keywords: Transformative Learning, K-12 Education, Literature, Virtual Learning

Introduction

Kibler and Chapman (2019) articulate the evolution of transformative reading experiences in the classroom. Students transition from simply reading the words on a page to becoming critical thinkers through a deeper understanding of the text. A transformative reading experience occurs when a student is able to transition from taking the text literally to developing their own opinions. Literal thinking is comprehending only the words as written. A transformation begins when the literal meaning leads to making inferences about the text. Inferences challenge thinking to go beyond what the text states and make assumptions based on the students’ experiences. A transformation has occurred when inferences transition into evaluative thinking. Evidence of evaluative thinking is a newfound understanding based on personal opinions, judgements, and insights about the text (Kibler & Chapman, 2019). Ultimately, the goal for educators is to provide engaging reading experiences which transform the learner to establish an evaluative-level of thinking. To create a transformative reading experience, the teacher should support students by individualizing instruction (Abdollahzadeh et. al., 2022). The instructional approaches and resources are essential ways instruction is personalized (Balthazar, 2019).

Recent years have posed challenges to the way students and teachers engage in reading experiences. Students and teachers had to learn to work, go to school, and adjust to life in different settings. Virtual formats are utilized across education in today’s classrooms. One of the challenges has

been how teachers modify critical thinking strategies for a virtual environment. Another challenge is providing support for students to ensure critical thinking occurs.

Transformative reading experiences begin with instilling an interest in literature (Kibler & Chapman, 2019). Despite classes being held in virtual formats, engaging students through interesting texts is still a necessary foundation for transformative reading. Common concerns among teachers regarding how to create engaging reading experiences are “*How can I transform my students through reading experiences using digital texts?*” and “*How can I support my students’ reading transformation when they are taught in a virtual environment?*” These questions and many others like this have been on the forefront of today’s educators’ minds. Through high-quality, virtual resources, supportive learning environments, and a little creativity, teachers can learn how to transform the students to become intrinsically motivated, independent, collaborative, and critical thinkers. This article provides specific strategies and approaches to guide any teacher with transforming reading experiences in today’s non-traditional learning environments.

How can I transform my students through reading experiences using digital texts?

Instilling an interest in reading is an essential foundation to transforming reading experiences (Abdollahzadeh et. al., 2022). Through developing an interest in the text, students build independence and self-confidence. This development occurs because the students have an intrinsic motivation from the beginning, which assists the transformation by learning through different perspectives, and challenging their social-emotional skills (Shin & Bolkan, 2021). Today’s teachers utilize digital resources to create an engaging and collaborative environment with literature to support students’ interests. One example of a digital resource is the *Bitmoji Classroom* (Minero, 2020). A *Bitmoji Classroom* allows teachers to create a virtual representation of their classroom for students to use online. As students explore the virtual classroom, they are able to select literature in the same way they would in a traditional classroom. Students navigate through a virtual bookshelf which is organized by genres and interests. They can flip through pages and look at covers of books before making a selection. Piquing students’ interest is a foundational skill in transforming thinking. Students make connections with the text, thus forming opinions and relating information to deepen their understanding (Shin & Bolkan, 2021).

Another resource that offers students an opportunity to connect to literature is through virtual book bins (Landrigan, n.d.). Teachers sort digital texts by theme, reading level, genre, and special interests. The digital book bins are sorted in desktop folders and easily shared with students in their class. The digital book bins support transformative reading experiences by offering students personalized experiences based on individual needs and interests. Teachers embed reading activities to support the student-text connection. Students are supported through hyperlinks to resources added in the book bins which offer extended assistance with difficult concepts and texts. As students interact with the text and the embedded activities, they strengthen their understanding and open their minds to new perspectives.

Digital expository texts can be another way to transform students’ thinking. Expository texts can be especially challenging for students because of the lack of interest in new topics and readability (Marron, 2019). Virtual field trips are a great way to ignite an interest in new topics. Readers can travel to different places and times to engage in concepts related to texts. Teachers can use virtual field trips to provide students with a positive and realistic experience, while inspiring readers to explore deeper into the topics. By initiating the interest in new topics, students are motivated to delve deeper independently (Abdollahzadeh et. al., 2022). For example, if the students are studying about amphibians, they could be assigned an expository text about amphibians and then take a virtual field trip to a science museum to explore the topic more fully, such as the Ruth Patrick Science Education Center channel located on *YouTube* (Ruth Patrick Science Education Center, 2020). The students’ experience with virtual reality

provides a new outlook because they learn the concept through different lenses; thus resulting in a transformative reading experience.

Virtual book clubs provide opportunities for students to engage with new texts and to support transformative thinking. Students get opportunities to read and explore texts they typically would not have selected. When students read a range of diverse texts, it broadens their understanding of new topics (Kibler & Chapman, 2019). One way teachers can support transformative thinking is through scavenger hunts. Book Riot (www.bookriot.com) provides readers with literacy hunts to challenge students to explore a range of texts. One example of a literacy hunt is where students are tasked with locating a character in a book who represents similar traits as themselves. Students compare traits and use critical thinking skills to justify similarities and differences between themselves and the characters.

Collaboration is an essential aspect of transforming learning. Students gain new insights through interactions with peers and teachers (Kibler & Chapman, 2019). *Blackboard Collaborate* (www.blackboard.com) and *Canvas* (www.canvas.net) are two interactive platforms that have peer collaboration features. Students are able to have meaningful conversations through the use of the discussion board feature about what they are learning from the texts. Through the discussion board, students provide insight into their peer's ideas and questions promptly. One idea is the teacher posts a prompt about a book the class is reading currently and students share their perspectives in the discussion board. Another idea is the use of the wiki and blog feature. In both features students network with one another by posting information about a topic. Allowing ways for students to interact and engage in meaningful conversations will likely produce transformation in reading experiences (Kibler & Chapman, 2019).

How can I support my students' reading transformation when they are taught in a virtual environment?"

Websites, apps, and software can be personalized to meet any students' learning preferences. According to Urlica et. al. (2021), virtual learning became a sustainable option for students because of the individualized learning options. Formative assessments, virtual read alouds, field trips, scavenger hunts, and more are all ways teachers can support transformative reading experiences. Students engage with websites, apps, and software to practice skills on their current level. This prepares students for a solid foundation on the concept which leads to more advanced thinking. Students explore concepts on their level, while the technology scaffolds more challenging skills. Students' thinking transforms through gaining deeper insights, making judgements, and forming opinions related to diverse concepts and texts (Kibler & Chapman, 2019).

One of the most effective ways to support students' reading transformation is through ongoing formative assessments (Tolley, 2019). Formative assessments are necessary because teachers need to be able to identify when students have misinterpretations of text and develop appropriate redirection as soon as possible. Websites such as *Pear Deck* (www.peardeck.com) and *Ed Puzzle* (www.edpuzzle.com) provide students with embedded checkpoints to challenge their thinking and reflect on the reading experiences. Eliciting questions is a standard way to determine the pace and level of the instruction, while providing an opportunity for students to become critical thinkers (Nappi, 2017).

Transformation occurs when students use their knowledge and critical reasoning skills to work together constructively. *Socratic Seminar* (Filkins, n.d.) is a strategy that supports transformative reading through student-led discussions. In this strategy, students work in small groups and collaborate with peers to create essential questions about the reading. Specifically, students bring their own perspectives to the group and work together to develop critical interpretations and questions; therefore, leading to a transformative reading experience.

A digital corkboard is an interactive approach where students can showcase their transformative thinking skills. *Padlet* (www.padlet.com) is a digital corkboard where students can post personal digital connections on a topic, embed videos and images, and link websites on the same board. It is a resource to demonstrate how a student is analyzing and reflecting texts and other concepts. Ultimately, students gain deeper insights through independent reflections. For example, students could reflect on the book, *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1980) by posting a link to a video showing life on the farm, images of real people who fit the traits of the animals in the story, and links to sites which relate to the overall theme of friendship. Students use evaluative thinking when they make the connections between the story and the real world.

Another mode to support students' reading transformations is through videos. *Flipgrid* (www.flipgrid.com) is a video discussion platform used by students to reflect on open-ended questions posed by the teacher, share opinions of texts, discuss their ideas and experiences with their peers, and so much more. The use of videos is an accurate form of assessment because students are able to speak responses as opposed to writing (Tolley, 2019). Students who are not proficient in typing or spelling can still be involved with the learning process. For example, students could submit a 1-3 minute *Flipgrid* (www.flipgrid.com) video-reflection responding to a prompt posed by the teacher. The student can then preview other students' responses and formulate deeper understanding, develop new opinions, and gain new insights because they hear diverse responses; thus resulting in a transformative reading experience.

In conclusion, teachers have always been tasked with transforming and supporting students' reading experiences. Due to the recent virtual movement in education, teachers have a need to learn different approaches to transform thinking through reading. The websites and resources shared in this article will hopefully spark creativity in teachers and give them immediate access to virtual activities to transform students' reading experiences. The sites support transformative reading by exposing students to quality literature, while challenging them to go beyond literal and inferential thinking. The use of the resources provides engaging reading experiences which transform the learner to establish an evaluative-level of thinking. When students explore diverse perspectives, reflect on challenging prompts, and interact with quality reading resources, the result is a transformative reading experience.

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The Transformative Nature of Doctoral Education

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Abstract

Doctoral education is a complex and sometimes intimidating process. However, it is also transformative. Transformational Learning Theory, developed by Mezirow in 1991, helps to explain how graduate education is transformative through embracing education in a cognizant and reflective way. Transformational Learning Theory states that learners change the perception of their experiences and interpret it differently as they progress in their learning. By helping students connect with the school community, their professors, and their own metacognitive process, Transformational Learning Theory helps explain the evolution students go through as they progress through doctoral programs. Written as a personal reflection on the transformative experience of doctoral education, this article explores Transformational Learning Theory in a real-world, practical manner, providing helpful strategies to apply the Transformational Learning Theory to the doctoral education experience, helping doctoral students embrace their own transformation.

Keywords: Transformational Learning, Graduate Education, Doctoral Students, Growth Mindset, Discourse Reflection Cycle.

Transformative Nature of Doctoral Education

What does it mean to earn a doctorate? Does it mean to develop expertise in one specific, narrow area of a dissertation study? Does it mean to grow as an academic and evolve in one's academic acumen? Does it mean to contribute to the scholarly community and join the discourse of researchers in the world of academia through unique research that fills gaps in the overall intellectual knowledge base? Does it mean to acquire more qualifications that enable the progression to university professor or academic? Put simply, the doctoral experience and the process of earning a terminal degree is a combination of the answers to each of these questions and because of this is naturally transformational. I knew as a child that I wanted to earn a PhD, but it was not until thirteen years into my career as an educator that I finally achieved this ambition. What I discovered is that at its core, the doctoral journey is one of transformation. I began my journey with one interpretation of what it meant to earn a doctorate and when I finished, I realized it was a much deeper experience than I had expected. My intention in this article is to examine and evaluate my experience in the doctoral journey and how true growth came once I embraced the transformational nature of the doctoral journey. In this article, I will relate my own experiences and reflection as a doctoral candidate. I will examine the discourse-reflection cycle, the need for community, and the best practices that assisted me in transforming from an educator with a master's degree to a doctor with a PhD. By juxtaposing my experience with the Transformational Learning Cycle, I will endeavor to help the novice doctoral candidate understand that the doctoral and dissertation process is transformational in nature and how to best embrace this philosophy.

Transformative Learning Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Learning developed by Mezirow (1991, 1998) is the process of evolving assumptions and interpretations of a student towards their learning and is based on the experiences the learner goes through. Transformational learning, according to Mezirow (1998), evolves as a series of frames of reference that change based on the experiences of the student. The theory is based on the idea that students interact with their professors and fellow students in a discourse reflection cycle that helps inform the student's understanding of their learning. This is encapsulated in the Transformational Learning Process (Mezirow, 2000). According to Mezirow (2000) in the beginning of the process, students experience a disorientation phase in which they may feel confused or overwhelmed. When the student becomes self-aware, they progress to self-examination, assessment, recognition, and exploration. Once these stages are complete, the student's interpretation of their experience changes and they enter a more proactive stage of planning a course of action. Once complete, the student begins to actively and consciously acquire knowledge and begin to try out different roles. This leads to the stage of developing self-confidence. Finally, the student reintegrates into the process as they start a new stage in their development and the process begins all over again. This process helps the student to grow and transform as they progress from a stage of disorientation to self-confidence. This process, according to Mezirow (2000) is best facilitated when students engage in a discourse-reflection cycle. This involves interacting with professors and classmates productively and using their feedback to reflect on the learning experience. Such community connections help to form the basis of an inquiry process in which the student actively participates in meaningful research and reflection. Through the community connections, discourse-reflection cycle, and inquiry process, students develop a growth mindset. This mindset helps them to become conscious of how their interpretations of their experiences have changed and the transformative process is complete.

Transformational Learning Cycle

I earned my master's degree in history in 2004 at the age of 22. I decided to start working as a teacher instead of continuing my education. Ten years later, I determined that it was time to go back for my doctorate. However, the ten-year furlough in my education was long enough that when I went back, the systems had changed. Instead of a face-to-face program, I determined an online program worked best for my needs and I had to adjust to the unique nature of online learning. Between finishing my masters and starting my doctorate, the nature of education had changed, and I had changed as well. My interpretation of what I needed in a program had transformed from wanting a face-to-face program as in my masters to deciding on an online program for my doctorate. So too, I found the writing and citation format of APA instead of Chicago, the nature of research, and even the generally acceptable sentence structures were vastly different from what I was accustomed to coming from the world of history. I entered my doctoral program with a master's in history, and as an accomplished educator but realized that I was very much a novice researcher. My interpretation of where I was, as Mezirow's (1998) theory illustrates, had altered. I quickly recognized I would need to grow, evolve, adapt, and change. In simple terms, to be successful, I would have to transform. When I realized this, my progress in the doctoral program increased and I found it highly rewarding. It was clear that the feedback from professors on papers, the assignments I completed, and every interaction was part of the transformational process, taking me from accomplished educator and expert historian to scholar and academic. Through their feedback, I was able to grow and my interpretation of what I needed changed to one of seeing every interaction as a constructive one and part of my process of growth. Transformative learning, according to Mezirow (1998), is based on the evolving interpretations and assumptions of the student as they progress through the program.

It is for this reason that the Transformational Learning Theory is so important for doctoral candidates to understand. Transformational Learning Theory, developed by Mezirow (1991) is based on the idea that learners' interpretations of their learning experiences evolves and changes as they progress

through their educational journey. It helps to explain the nature of doctoral education as a process of evolution and metamorphosis. Thus, before examining how it relates to the doctoral process and my own journey, it is essential to understand what Transformational Learning Theory is and how it helps to shape the doctoral process. Based on a constructivist paradigm, Transformational Learning Theory provides insight into the process that doctoral candidates go through in that it helps explain how developing expertise, growing as an academic, and taking the important step of entering the world of university research are evolutionary processes (Craig et al., 2001; King, 2002). In this lens, doctoral education is viewed as the process of gaining professional knowledge and skills that the individual can use to enhance their practice and the discipline. In other words, the doctoral candidate transforms from an expert in their respective field to a scholar-practitioner by absorbing new ideas, information, and experiences. Their interpretation of what they need and how they view themselves in the process grows and changes. The transformational nature of the doctoral program is, therefore, inherent in the doctoral journey.

However, beyond the cognitive experiences, doctoral education should also result in a personal transformation that includes shifts towards expanded consciousness and professional emotions (Stevens-Long, et al., 2012). This means that as the student progresses in the doctoral process, their interpretation of what they need and how they see their journey changes. While there are many macrostructures that define the doctoral and dissertation process (Anderson & Gillian Saunders, 2020), such as enrollment and writing proficiency requirements, a primary consideration is that while doctoral candidates may conduct and publish a formal study in their dissertation, the process is what facilitates transformation. The doctoral candidate is in a state of evolution or transformation, learning the processes necessary to become a contributing member of the academic community and in this process interpreting and reinterpreting how they view their experience. The doctoral candidate, upon entering the doctoral program, or even when defending their dissertation is not expected to be perfect. What is essential is not the flawlessness of the journey but how the process of working conducting research that culminates in a completed dissertation helps the doctoral candidate build the skills necessary to practice at a higher academic level. The dissertation process, like doctoral course work and the experience as a whole, is a training process meant to assess how adept the doctoral candidate adapts to circumstances, meets challenges, and solves complex problems. It is the ability to adapt, evolve, and respond that is both evaluated and at the center of the transformative process because it helps students to grow (Steven-Long et al., 2020). When doctoral candidates understand this, they can reflect on the learning process and become conscious of how their interpretations of their growth has changed (Mezirow, 1997); ultimately making the transition from apprentice researcher and advanced scholar (Garcia & Yao, 2019).

Discourse Reflection Cycle

When I began to consciously evaluate how my interpretation of my experience was changing, and was thus able to see the doctoral process as one of transformation, I was able to make real gains in my own knowledge base and develop a perspective that enabled me to grow. When I was younger, getting my master's degree, I was wedded to the words of my thesis and each time my Chair gave me advice and constructive criticism, I was offended and felt that he was judging the merits of my paper and my worth as a scholar and writer. However, when working through the doctoral program, it was clear, after ten years as an educator, that my professors, in providing me feedback were not judging my academic merit or criticizing my worth as a scholar but were instead attempting to guide me through constructive criticism to hone my understanding. This epiphany helped me to understand this as a transformative experience. I realized that if I were to reflect upon the feedback and discourse with professors, I could grow and develop competence in my ability to conduct rigorous academic research. This discourse-reflection cycle, when viewed through the lens of Transformative Learning as described by Mezirow (1991), assisted me in making the most of the discourse with my professors and assisted me in gaining the skill set and foundation necessary to embark upon my dissertation research. Without this frame of mind, my outlook would have stayed fixed and while I may have successfully completed my dissertation, I would not have made the gains necessary to join the academic community. But, by becoming conscious of the transformative nature of my experience and by embracing feedback and using it to grow, my mind

was open to change, and evolution was inevitable. Not only did I complete my dissertation, but I absorbed a wide variety of ideas, techniques, and methods from my various professors and developed a strong knowledge base from which to start my life as a professional at the doctoral level.

What is the discourse-reflection cycle and how it is informative to the doctoral candidate and fit into Transformative Learning Theory? As candidates begin in the doctoral program, they are often unfamiliar with academic processes. To help them become conscious of how their experiences inform their interpretation and reinterpretation of their learning and transform into scholars capable of conducting strong research, support from faculty is essential. Discourse and guidance from professors help doctoral candidates to successfully learn the research procedures and processes as well as write and present their findings in the way deemed acceptable by the academic community. The discourse-reflection cycle can happen when doctoral candidates converse through email, virtually or in person-with professors. It can also take place with other members in the university community. The key is that the initial interaction is followed by reflection about those conversations. The intent is for the doctoral candidate to take the advice and critiques provided and use them to reflect on where they are and where they need to go in their doctoral journey. Through communication, and reflection, doctoral candidates draw on previous experiences to make meaning of new practices through constructivist discourse and reflection. During this process, doctoral candidates learn from the guidance of professors as well as their peers. By interacting with other doctoral candidates with shared needs and common goals, the doctoral candidate finds support, guidance, and inspiration. This can act as a catalysis for doctoral candidates to engage within the discourse reflection cycle and to internalize the meaning of each new experience and by doing so the student's interpretation of their learning process and their experiences as a student transforms (Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2016).

The key, however, is that communication is purposeful and conscious reflection should be embedded in the process (Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2016). If the doctoral candidate does not value the feedback of professors and reflect upon it, the discourse reflection cycle may not occur, and transformation may be stymied. Reflection must focus on what is gained and how it helps the student to grow and change. Thus, emphasis on purposeful communication and thoughtful-conscious reflection are key to doctoral candidates being able to successfully complete the discourse reflection cycle and use it as part of their transformational process.

As related previously, embracing the discourse reflection cycle helped me embrace the transformational process. When I realized that the feedback was constructive in nature and that conversations with tutors, members of the IRB, and professors could help me to better understand not only the expectations but also the mechanisms at my disposal to complete my program, I was able to make great gains in my doctoral journey. By viewing each conversation as an opportunity to grow and useful to my development, my reflection was purposeful and deliberate. I took notes on feedback suggestions and used those notes early in the program for my next assignment and later in my dissertation as my guide for what I needed to do and include in my research. By using the discourse reflection cycle in this way, I was aware of how my interpretation of my learning and growth. This made the transformation from competent educator with a master's degree in history to a Doctor of Education. However, beyond the credential, I learned the process of researching and writing on the doctoral level, something that is and will continue to benefit my journey as it continues into the world of academia.

The need for community connections

As intimated above, an integral part of the transformational process and an imperative aspect of the discourse reflection cycle is the need for community connections. Whether in a face-to-face or online program, doctoral candidates must become part of the university community. According to Cranton (2016) humans are by nature communal and developing strong communicative knowledge helps people within a community to understand the social norms, values, and code of beliefs within the community. Once graduated, doctors join a much larger academic community of fellow doctors and researchers, and this understanding of the importance and value of community is essential to a successful doctoral program and dissertation process (Dowling & Wilson, 2017). Having a community helps doctoral candidates and

new doctors to make purposeful connections. These connections help the individual to grow and change, this transformation, especially when deliberate and thoughtful changes the interpretation of the individual towards their experience. Many doctoral candidates, like myself, are enrolled in online doctoral programs (Garcia & Yao, 2019). In my experience, the connections made through the university community were not only integral but an essential aspect to my success in the program.

However, the unique nature of online learning can create barriers to participation in this community and can lead some doctoral candidates to not realize that a community exists. Because of the barrier of time and distance, online doctoral candidates can feel a disconnect between themselves and their professors and other classmates (Sekulich, 2020). The ability to engage with professors and other doctoral candidates may be limited. This then disrupts the discourse-reflection cycle since the doctoral candidate is not as easily able to engage in dialogue with others in the academic community. This lack of connection can undercut the efficacy of the reflection process. The doctoral candidate may begin to garner a negative self-perception of themselves as a student and their transformation can progress in a negative manner. While the doctoral candidate may still be able to reflect on their journey, without the ability to see how fellow doctoral candidates are experiencing the doctoral program, online doctoral candidates can lose the social connections and the perspectives those provide that are a natural part of the traditional brick and mortar university. As Cranton (2016) explained, when students and professors communicate regularly, students feel more empowered and are better able to make use of the skills, knowledge, and information they need to be successful. However, often, professors expect online doctoral candidates to initiate contact, while doctoral candidates feel a greater need for support (Sekulich, 2020). This discrepancy can leave doctoral candidates feeling unsupported in their efforts (Ray et al., 2019). Such feelings of social isolation, while often more pronounced for international doctoral candidates, can impact all doctoral candidates, resulting in negative academic and personal learning outcomes (Ray et al., 2019). Subsequently, these experiences may interfere with a doctoral candidate's ability to successfully experience a positive transformational process and result in stagnation as a beginning scholar (Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2016).

Therefore, in the online environment, allowing time for both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration is helpful in bridging this gap and helping the doctoral candidate to feel the support needed (Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2016). When virtual interactions take place, doctoral candidates are better able to engage in critical reflection since they can broaden their perspective and help them become aware of their changing interpretations. They also learn from other doctoral candidates and benefit from the knowledge of their peers and professors. The discourse, although virtual is key to a successful online program. According to Swaggerty and Broemmel (2016) when doctoral candidates work closely with professors, whether in an online or traditional program, they are better able to understand the process and their sense of self-efficacy increases. They also can better engage in reflection, deepening their own connection with their learning and broadening their perspective. Cranton (2016) also explained that students in an asynchronous online discussion setting often may engage with peers in a more meaningful and personal manner in an online setting, allowing them to be more forthcoming with their struggles or feelings since they are not talking to people face-to-face. Cranton (2016) referred to this as the "stranger on the train" phenomena and explained that because students in an online setting do not know their classmates and cannot see their face, they may be more likely to share information that they would otherwise keep private. This freedom to explore topics and feelings in a more open manner leads to greater reflection and can help students embrace the transformative process.

Doctoral candidates additionally benefit from opportunities to engage with other doctoral candidates and professors in synchronous face-to-face meetings and asynchronously through community forums, emails, or discussions boards, (Alexander et al, 2013). This ability to connect with and find mentors in professors can help the doctoral candidate in the discourse reflection cycle as well as the transformative process. Ultimately, when doctoral candidates work with professors in a mentoring relationship, they are more likely to experience holistic success since they can share ideas, discuss, and evaluate their dissertation journey as a transformative process (Sekulich, 2020). By proactively seeking opportunities for community engagement, doctoral candidates can better develop a sense of meaning in

their research and develop a strong sense of self-efficacy. This enables them to reflect in a meaningful manner and embrace the transformational nature of the program. As their interpretation of the process becomes reflective, they are better able to make meaningful gains in their academic progress.

Reflecting on my own experience, it took some time for me to realize that a virtual community existed at my university. I found, as Sekulich (2020) intimated, that my professors—while sending an automated welcome email and providing a welcome video on the homepage of the course—waited for me to reach out and establish contact. In the earlier courses, I did not engage with my professors or other doctoral candidates in any meaningful way and my connection to the experience was limited. However, by my second semester, I had realized that a community forum existed in the form of online discussion boards. I also discovered that professors and other school personnel held regular webinars and the tutoring center was available to assist with most any question from statistical analysis to writing help. When I started taking advantage of these outlets, my growth as a budding doctoral candidate became more substantial and I was able to better reach out to professors, engage with them, ask questions, and then use those interactions to help strengthen my own knowledge base. I became part of the virtual community and especially when writing my dissertation, this community was an integral part of my success since it enabled meaningful discourse and reflection which enabled true transformation. By becoming part of the community, I changed from simply going through the motions to being aware of how my interpretation of my experience was changing as part of the Transformational Learning Theory.

Strategies for Success

To help facilitate the transformational process and find success in a doctoral program, in addition to what has already been discussed, doctoral candidates need to be aware of certain strategies or best practices to help facilitate their learning. The first of these are research skills. Dowling and Wilson (2017) explained that when research skills are the focal point of a doctoral program, doctoral candidates are better able to hone their researching skills and develop the skill set necessary for successful completion of the dissertation. It is helpful when the program focuses on helping doctoral candidates understand how to write research questions, develop strong hypotheses, write up findings, and craft a strong literature review. Arsian-Ari et al. (2017) explained that doctoral candidates are more successful when research skills are focused on early in the doctoral program and carried throughout until the dissertation. This enables the student to grow and their understanding of the writing and research process changes. Therefore, when choosing a doctoral program, doctoral candidates should find programs that emphasize the research skills necessary to help them develop the skill set needed to complete their dissertation. However, if already committed to a doctoral program that may or may not focus on such skills, doctoral candidates can use each research assignments and projects as an opportunity to develop their research abilities. By engaging with every assignment as if it were the dissertation, putting in the same level of care and detail, doctoral candidates can, as the adage goes, practice as they play and thus when they arrive at the dissertation are better able to understand the task before them and can progress through it easier and more successfully.

To enable research to be effective, time management is also an essential tool. As Alexander et al. (2013) asserted, developing a work-life balance can be difficult for doctoral candidates. The doctoral program is rigorous, demanding and can consume a great deal of time. Often, doctoral candidates can become overwhelmed by the process and devote too much time to schoolwork, neglecting self-care and burning out early, or they procrastinate the important tasks needed to complete a successful program and draw it out indefinitely. To alleviate either extreme, developing a work-life balance and good time-management skills are necessary. In my case, I completed my doctoral program while still employed full time. I could not, therefore, devote the entire workday to my doctoral studies. As such, I set aside the first two hours of everyday for my doctoral studies. While during the execution of my study for my dissertation I spent more time in the field conducting surveys, I kept very strictly to this two-hour period. When the two hours ended each day, I saved my work and closed it. Key to this, however, was that during those two hours, I did not focus on anything else. I closed off email, silenced my phone, and concentrated

only on my doctoral studies. This hyper-focus allowed me to work efficiently while internalizing the information needed to grow and transform as a doctoral candidate. Because of this strict routine, I finished my doctoral program in three and a half years. Effective time management can, therefore, relieve stress and change the interpretation of the doctoral process from one of stress to one of growth. This is a key element to Mezirow's (1991) ideas.

Within both strategies introduced here, key to both was support from professors and reflection. Mentoring, according to Dowling and Wilson (2017) and Alexander et al. (2013) is key to helping doctoral candidates develop strong research skills and time-management skills. When professors share with doctoral candidates their strategies in both areas, doctoral candidates are better able to reflect on their own needs, strengths and areas of growth and can make the necessary adjustments to become successful researchers who can manage their time effectively. Added to this, reflection is invaluable. When doctoral candidates engage in the discourse-reflection cycle to facilitate their development of an effective study schedule and research regimen, they are better able to see where they are successful and where they still need to grow. Honing one's skills as a researcher and paying attention to time management are inherent parts of Mezirow's (1991) transformative process and can help budding doctoral candidates to be successful.

Conclusion

Circling back to the opening questions, what does it mean to earn a doctorate? Does it mean to develop expertise in one specific, narrow area of a dissertation study? Does it mean to grow as an academic and evolve in one's academic acumen? Does it mean to contribute to the scholarly community and join the discourse of researchers in the world of academia through unique research that fills gaps in the overall intellectual knowledge base? Does it mean to acquire more qualifications that enable the progression to university professor or academic? When considering what it means to become a doctor and what it means to traverse through a doctoral program, transformation is inherent. In my experience, the transformative process was propelled by seeking out connections within the university community and engaging in active, conscious, and critical discourse and reflection. This was assisted by developing strong time-management skills and balancing the demands of the doctoral process in a way that maximized my time spent studying and enabled me to make the critical steps necessary to transform from an educator with a master's degree to a doctor.

To answer the opening questions, progressing through the doctoral process should be done through open and conscious reflection. The candidate should be aware of how their interpretation of their progress evolves and changes. If they do this, they can better reflect on the process and grow as a professional. Once entering the post-doctoral world, the new doctor continues to transform. I have found the Transformational Learning Theory especially helpful in describing this. Transformation does not end with graduation but defines every new development and evolution that one undergoes as one grows as a doctor. By embracing the doctoral experience as one of transformation, I have been able to continue to consciously evolve and transform in my post-university life and will continue to do so. By examining the doctoral journey as one of transformation born through community engagement, discourse and reflection and strong research and time management strategies, one can become successful not only within the confines of the university and its program but afterwards as well.

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Empowering Educational Leaders through Self-Reflection on Incidents of Race and Ethnicity

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Abstract

Exploring incidents of race and ethnicity in one's life can help an educational leader unearth hidden assumptions and biases, resulting in transformed frames of reference that support social action. This article discusses the perceptions of the participants as they explored their racial and ethnic experiences that have impacted their understanding of bias and themselves. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how engaging in reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity empowered the researcher participants to become transformational educational leaders. Data collection included researcher participants' written racial incidents and racial autobiographies, rational discourse conversations, and meeting reflections. Reflective accounts were framed using Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning to discover common threads. Based on the information elicited from respondents, several themes were identified, namely, geography, influences of environment, feeling seen and heard, and self-acceptance, which contributed to the researcher-participants' feeling empowered to become transformational educational leaders.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, Transformative Learning, Racial Awareness, Bias

Introduction

The field of educational leadership necessitates an understanding of race and its relationship to leadership action to empower transformational leaders. Coursework in educational leadership preparation programs should facilitate these often difficult critically oriented conversations yet have been slow to integrate topics of race and ethnicity into the curricula and pedagogy (Diem et al., 2013; Fraise & Brooks,

2015; Hawley & James, 2010). The racial autoethnography is a valuable tool to help educational leaders reflect on their own racial identities through writing and discussing the impact of specific racial incidents on their views of race, and their actions as school leaders (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). We posit racial autoethnography may serve as a 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 1991) to empower educational leaders to become transformational leaders.

As professors in a doctoral educational leadership program and experienced classroom practitioners, we embarked on a journey with our doctoral students to explore the power of reflection and discourse to unveil their perceptions and beliefs about race and ethnicity and ultimately to ignite personal and professional transformation. Our roles as both instructor and research partners (with each other and with our students) provided opportunities for us to figure out our own assumptions about race and ethnicity, leadership, and praxis; but that is a story for another time.

Study and Researcher Context

The context for the current study was a course for doctoral students enrolled in an Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership. This program is offered by a regional university in the southeast area of the United States and is designed to prepare educational leaders to be agents of change and critically conscious leaders. Doctoral students in this program work as teachers and educational leaders within multiple learning organizations surrounding the university community. Their work contexts include some of the most racially and culturally diverse organizations within our state; one school district is the ninth largest of 67 school districts in the state and its more than 90,000 students speak 147 different primary languages and hail from 141 different countries (School District, 2022). The university has a 24.5% Hispanic undergraduate enrollment and is nearing its goal of becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), designated by the U.S. Department of Education as having a 25% Hispanic undergraduate enrollment (University, 2022).

The Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership has five student learning outcomes with two related to issues of social action: (a) advocate for ethics, equity, and social justice, and (b) collaborate and communicate with diverse communities. The indicators for demonstrating mastery of these learning outcomes requires students be empowered as transformational leaders; those who can reflect critically to become aware of oppressive structures and practices, develop tactical awareness of how they might change these, and build the confidence and ability to work for collective change (Brown, 2004, p. 85; Mezirow, 1991). The Instructional Leadership course is offered annually to students in the Ed.D. program. Students who take the Instructional Leadership course are asked to submit three critical incident assignments and a final racial autobiography as part of their coursework. These assignments and related class discussions are designed to provide students with opportunities for critical discourse as they move through the stages of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and address the program's learning outcomes related to social action.

As experienced faculty members, our interest in race and systemic inequities related to race and ethnicity have permeated our personal and professional lives. Recently, our concern was elevated by state legislation that limits the ability of teachers and educational leaders to discuss issues of race and social inequities that exist within our culture, school communities, and lives of learners. We, the primary researchers and authors, were unified in our efforts to create an open environment where our doctoral students, who were also our research partners, could grapple with issues of race and identity. The course, which was the springboard for this study, was designed around the principles of intergroup dialogues where reading, writing, listening, and reflection are used to engage in active learning through discourse to intentionally create learning across differences.

Class discussions flowed from critical discourse about students' racial and ethnic experiences to students feeling 'safe' and 'empowered' to be open about their feelings on these topics for the 'first time in any of their graduate coursework'. In addition to the writing assignments, students began to eagerly share their 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1991) in class discussions, describing their emotional connections to the racial and ethnic experiences that shaped them in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The faculty

researchers recognized these class conversations as the beginning stages of transformative learning, where the disorienting dilemma denotes a life crisis that prompts a questioning of assumptions, resulting in transformed beliefs (Laros, 2017; Mezirow, 1991). We wondered how these critical conversations about personal racial and ethnic experiences might impact our students' understanding of bias and challenge their understanding of themselves to become empowered as transformational leaders.

Literature Review

Educational leaders today face some of the most challenging environments in recent history (Alvarez et al., 2018). Not a day goes by where the state of educational affairs in the United States does not make national news (Darling-Hammond, 2022; Izaguirre, 2022; Laviates, 2022; Schwartz, 2021; Wood, 2022). The current trending concerns facing these leaders include school/student safety, book bans, banned words and context conversations such as “gay”, state assessment and curriculum requirements, “woke” education accusations, and racial discourse prohibitions to include training on diversity and inclusion. The national debate on the inclusion (or exclusion) of race and ethnicity dialogue (history, equity, systemic racism) in our educational systems is of primary concern for educational leaders today especially for those that seek to impart change in their local educational structures.

Issues of Race, Ethnicity, and Bias for Educational Leaders

The ethnic and racial makeup of students, in both K-12 and postsecondary education, is shifting (NCES, 2020). While White students still make up the largest population in U.S. public schools, the population is declining and is expected to continue declining over the next decade. The Black student enrollment is expected to remain steady at around 15% in the coming decade. However, the enrollment of Hispanic students grew by 7 million between fall 2017 and 2020. In comparison, Hispanic students comprised 13.5 percent of public-school enrollment in 2017 and 26.8 percent of public-school enrollment in 2020 and is projected to continue climbing (NCES, 2020). These shifting trends necessitate understanding how to lead and better serve those of diverse cultural and racial identities, especially, considering that most educators and educational leaders in the U.S. are White. Currently, K-12 teachers in the U.S. are 79% White, 7% Black, and 9% Hispanic, and K-12 public school principals are 78% White, 11% Black, and 9% Hispanic. Post-secondary teacher/administrator demographics largely mimic the predominantly White population seen in K-12.

Racial marketing in education is another common theme that has been the subject of much debate in recent years, with some arguing that it is a necessary strategy for increasing diversity and inclusion in educational institutions, while others argue that it is a superficial and exploitative tactic that perpetuates existing disparities and reinforces stereotypes (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Turner, 2018). The institutions use buzzwords like inclusion and diversity to insinuate a commitment to racial equity in the face of a changing student demographic. Meanwhile, little is being done to encourage leadership to have difficult conversations and take actionable steps to improve the school for all students, but specifically those of minority status (Chen & Guo, 2022). Racial marketing is not a sufficient strategy for addressing and correcting the systemic racism that leads to disparities in educational outcomes for students. It's important to note that racial equity in education goes beyond just a marketing strategy; it's a continuous effort to address and correct the systemic racism in education, through policies, practices, and culture change within the school. Educational institutions must actively commit to addressing and correcting the systemic racism that leads to disparities in educational outcomes for students of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown, 2020; Chen & Guo, 2022).

Educational leaders are legally bound by the Department of Education to ensure equal access to educational opportunities (US Department of Education, n.d.). Often, this requirement is negated by other laws that impact equity in education such as state educational standardized assessment and curriculum requirements, school assignments, and district requirements for segregated classroom placement. This puts K-12 educational leaders in a difficult situation because they are contractually bound to the requirements of the school district with most mandates being pushed by the local school board, which is

not supposed to be political leaning, but often is just that (Okhremtchouk & Jimenez-Castellanos, 2018). Educational leaders in higher education are obliged to accrediting bodies and state and national legislatures regarding their actions. Counter to these obligations are the moral and ethical obligations that educational leaders feel for teachers, instructors, and students to create an environment that helps students thrive by providing an opportunity for diverse discourse, and a space for all students to feel accepted and to share their personal experiences, culture, and upbringing. Educational leaders are teaching individuals to be open-minded stewards of diverse perspectives (Ginsberg, 2015) while at the same time being legally required to remove diverse perspectives from libraries and report teachers who speak about historical racism because it will make other students feel uncomfortable (Bendery, 2021; Wood, 2022). The intersectionality of legal, contractual, and ethical obligations of educational leaders is ambiguous and creates a sort of legal and ethical minefield for educational leaders to traverse.

The Importance of Racial Discourse for Educational Leaders

Due to their commitment to equity and the changing student demographics in American schools, educational leaders must be prepared to work with racially and ethnically diverse stakeholders. The ability to examine assumptions of one's beliefs, often acquired through racial and ethnic experiences beginning in childhood, and uncover their functionality is an integral leadership quality. It is also one that must be learned (Mezirow, 1994).

Schools do not exist in silos independent of the external world around them (Lac & Diamond, 2019); instead, they are embedded in a broader context with which they must contend. Currently the context surrounding race in education includes an attempt to silence discourse in the face of expanding racial diversity (Gross, 2022). The primary reason cited for removing race from education is for fear of making White students uncomfortable (Farrington, 2022). The literature has established that the talk of race makes people uncomfortable for reasons like shame, fear, or defensiveness (Matias, 2016; Chapman, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2000). For example, the increased conflict erupting in school board meetings and school racial equity conversations are the result of this fear and defensiveness (Lac & Diamond, 2019).

Leading and participating in racial equity discourse is stressful and emotionally exhausting (Collins, 2002; Singleton, 2014; Smith et al., 2007). It can result in resistance, anger, and microaggressions from those in the dominant class, therefore, making it professionally risky to talk about race (Miller, 2019). In the 1990s, it seemed that more and more organizations, including schools, were expanding their conversations about race and equity (Darder, 2016). However, in the past decade, it seems that as society and schools become more diverse, the topic of race has become forbidden. However, no matter how challenging, academic scholars cannot stand idly by; they must be the voice for change (Preston, 2021). Education leaders must be prepared to speak about race, and educational leadership programs must develop and hone this skill set (Hambacher & Ginn, 2020).

The field of education is built around sharing facts; however, the current landscape creates extra hurdles and tiptoeing around sensitive topics for both teachers and administrators (Frag, 2021). One example of that is when faced with questions regarding critical race theory (CRT) in the classroom, K-12 educational leaders are sharing that this legal theory is not being discussed within their schools. However, they are being challenged with arguments that include things like history, equity, and diversity being incorrectly considered a component of CRT (Delgado et al, 2019).

Importance of Being a Transformative Educational Leader

The literature is full of stories of minority children's racial experiences and the negative effects those experiences have on them emotionally as adults (Hughes et al., 2016; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Saleem et al., 2016). However, there is a gap concerning childhood and adolescent racial experiences and the impact on one's racial outlook, bias, or desire for transformational change. This is an important area to explore and understand because professional adults in educational leadership have a responsibility to all individuals—both children in PK-12 and adults in postsecondary education—to be advocates for fair, equitable, and just educational environments and outcomes and practitioners of the same.

It is widely accepted that an individual's life experiences shape their attitudes, beliefs, and values. The same understanding holds true of our racial experience or "racial socialization" and the resulting attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding our own race and other races. While the long-term implications of our racial experiences or socialization by significant others is largely unknown or varied, some individuals explain those experiences to encourage mistrust and racial prejudice (Saleem et al., 2016), teach children about the traditions and history of their racial group to instill a sense of pride (Lesane-Brown, 2006), and prepare children to manage racial discrimination (Hughes et al., 2016). Importantly, the messages communicated from adults to children are usually informed by their own encounters (Bentley-Edwards & Stevenson, 2016). Therefore, as children, it is often close adults/family/parents' experiences regarding race that create the fabric of one's own beliefs. As adolescents, our peers have a considerable influence on what we accept and believe regarding race. However, as adults, it is our job to become stewards of change. Depending on our own racial experiences, that might require different amounts of "unlearning". Unlearning is not easy for adults, especially academic leaders who take pride in education and knowledge (Rusch et al., 2009). The conditions for this transformative learning (unlearning and relearning) include the right context, varied medium, support, critical reflection, direct and active learning experiences, dialogue, and trusting relationships (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

Summary

This brief literature review summarizes some of the current challenges facing educational leaders today. Primarily, it focuses on the race and ethnicity issues that these leaders are currently facing and will continue to face as our educational institutions become even more diverse in future years. It is critical that our educational leaders grow and develop beyond the dialogue (misguided or not) shared with them as children and adolescents through transformational learning to lead our educational systems properly. Transformative learning is fundamental to educational leaders being able to reflect on their racial experiences and assumptions and negotiate new meanings and understandings with new information, dialogue, and context (Mezirow, 1994). Transformational leadership—including racial reflection and cross-race dialogue—allows educational leaders to learn, grow, and develop their understanding of racial challenges, equity issues, and inclusive practices, as well as expand their capacity to lead effectively in diverse schools and provide an equitable and safe environment for all stakeholders in educational systems.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how engaging in reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity empowered the researcher participants to become transformational educational leaders. Based on a narrative pedagogical approach using elements of intergroup dialogues and racial autobiographies, the authors and study participants reflected on racial incidents at various times in their lives with the explicit purposes of exploring what influenced their racial awareness and how their awareness and knowledge about race and ethnicity might empower them as educational leaders and seekers of transformational change.

Research Questions

The following central question directed this narrative inquiry study: "How might engaging in reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity empower doctoral students' to become transformational educational leaders?" The following sub-questions further guided this study:

- How do childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences impact understanding of bias?

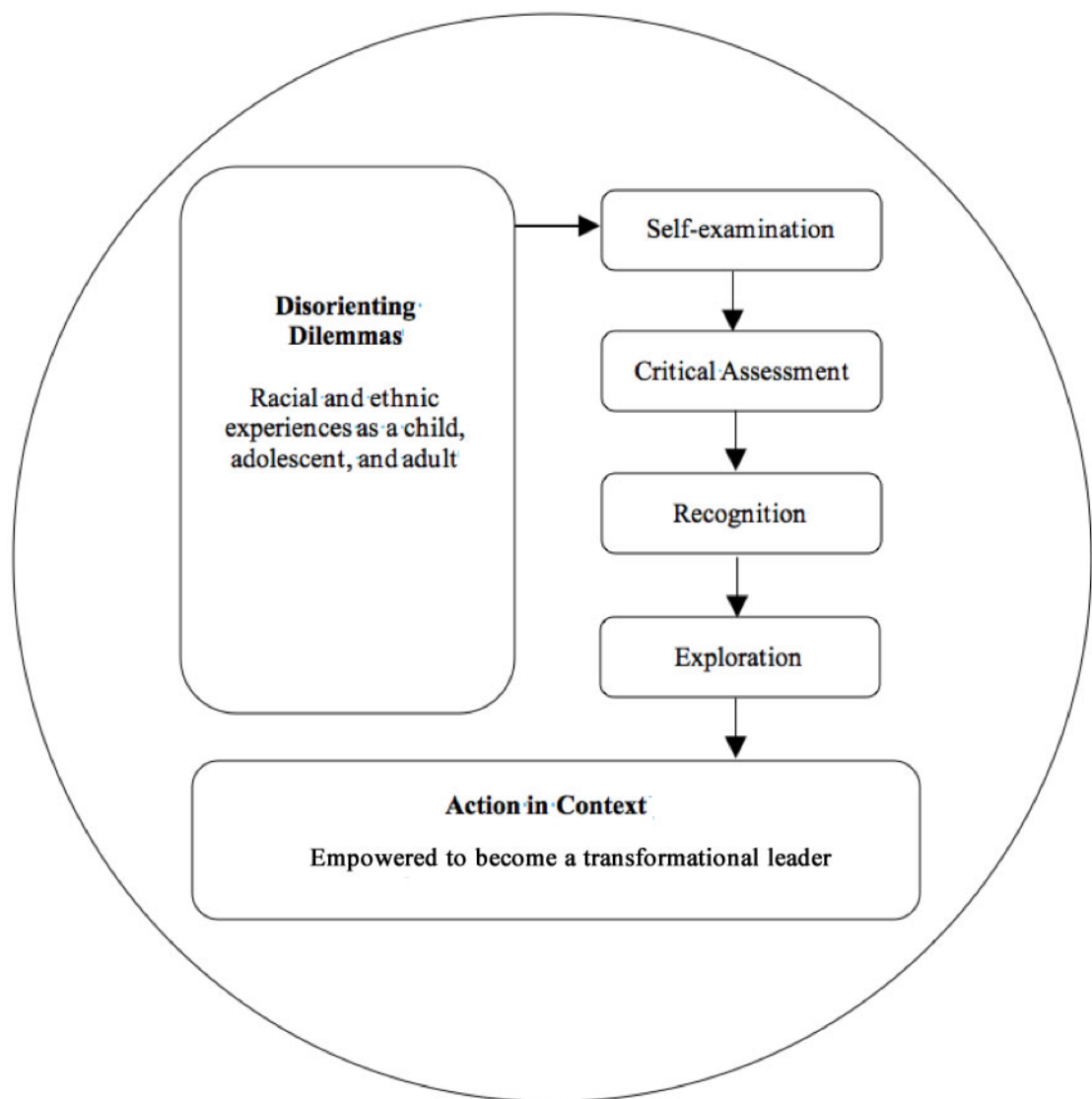
- How do childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences challenge our understanding of ourselves?

Overview of Conceptual Framework

For this narrative inquiry, the conceptual framework was developed using a review of the literature, characteristics of Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning, professional experiences, and generalizations from empirical data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). To safeguard against becoming deductive, the researchers journaled their thoughts and decisions and discussed them with the other researcher-participants to determine if their thinking had become too driven by the framework (Yin, 2014).

The theory of transformative learning is a constructivist, comprehensive adult learning theory characterized by critical reflection and rational discourse appropriate for individuals who must be prepared to make many diverse decisions on their own (Mezirow, 1994). Transformative learning theory offers phases of learning that require critical reflection and dialogue. For the purpose of this study to explore doctoral students' desire to be transformative educational leaders, we focus on the first six phases of transformative learning sparked by (1) a disorienting dilemma, described as a "personally meaningful experience" (Dirkx et al., 2006, p. 132), which sets the stage for (2) self-examination of past experiences and the perspectives that shaped those beliefs, which may or may not be shared by others (DeAngelis, 2021; Mezirow, 1991). In phase (3) critical assessment, learners reflect on their assumptions and become more open to new information and beliefs, resulting in perspective transformation. This is followed by (4) recognition that one's personal problem is shared, and learners realize that others have overcome similar challenges. In phase (5) exploration, learners explore alternative ways of being and living in terms of relationships, roles, and actions. This phase is complemented by another phase, where (6) learners plan new courses of action (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168-169; Moran & Moloney, 2022, p. 81). The major constructs are organized in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Research Methodology

Narrative research has a long history in education research and invites exploration of change (Bateson, 1994; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Geertz, 1988). Embracing Dewey's (1934) view that experiences are always social and personal, grow out of other experiences and "move back and forth between personal and social simultaneously," we specifically used intergroup dialog techniques, to explore stories about "critical racial incidents" shared through researcher and participant auto-ethnographic writings. We held firmly to the tenants of narrative inquiry to explore and understand experiences through "collaboration between researcher and participants over time and in conjunction with social milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

Data Sources and Analysis

Over the course of the semester, all doctoral students in the Instructional Leadership course submitted a racial autoethnography. Three vignettes describing critical racial incidents were part of their work as well as an analysis of their stories with the goal of making sense of their various socializations around race, racism, and racial identity. Directions for the autoethnography are in Appendix A.

The purposeful sample of participants (researcher participants) consisted of five doctoral students who were enrolled in the doctoral course. In addition, there were two faculty researchers. All students in the course were invited to participate in the research. The five student researcher participants made up 50% of the students registered in the course. Each researcher participant who volunteered and used their spirit of inquiry to transform an assignment into a research study, signed a written consent form, and agreed to work as members of a research team; they will be identified as researcher participants in this article. The five researcher participants and the two faculty members self-identified as female, all were under the age of 50 except for the two faculty researchers; one who is in her 50s and one who is in her 70s. Five of the participants were born in America; one identifies as a Black American, one identifies as a Haitian American, and three as white Americans. One participant identified as an immigrant, was born in Jamaica and identifies as a Black Jamaican American immigrant, the last participant was born in Puerto Rico and identifies as a strong Puerto Rican woman. These participant researchers hold a variety of professional positions: One serves as a Captain in a county sheriff's office and was the first Black woman to achieve this rank; three work in higher education; one is a K-12 school administrator; all have a master's degree; all five are working on their Ed.D., and one is completing a second terminal degree.

Data consisted of the initial three vignettes written by the participant researchers and writings by the authors along with transcripts from five research team conversations/dialogs about the meanings and impact of the racial incidents. Team conversations occurred during the spring and summer following the conclusion of the course and were facilitated through the online meeting platform, Zoom. Questions guided the conversation and brought structure to the first three conversations. Questions were developed by the study participant researchers or emerged from the conversations. Questions can be found in Appendix B. The last phase of the study involved the analysis of the data through a series of two conversations. Constant comparative discourse analysis was used as a tool because it provided the potential to challenge our thinking about aspects of reality around issues of race, identity, and empowerment.

All members of the research team read all critical incidents and transcripts multiple times to identify ways we used language to make sense of everyday social life focusing on issues of race, racial identity, and empowerment. Since the participant researchers were novice users of discourse analysis, it was agreed the analysis would be used to identify themes that emerged from the data. Coding and memoing were used at the beginning of the process to identify shared language around racial incidents and clarify their meaning(s) through ongoing data discussions. Themes were brought back to the group for further discussion and to identify those themes that addressed the research question. Both discourse and thematic analysis techniques are appropriate for narrative methodology because we were "thinking together to understand the lives being lived" (Downey & Clandinin, 2010, pg. 385).

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, the research team used reflexivity to assure minimal researcher bias. This was accomplished during the analysis conversations where emergent findings and possible alternative interpretations dependent upon the context of the stories were discussed. Participants challenged each other, including the authors, to unveil assumptions and preconceptions that could bias the findings. These conversations were especially noteworthy because of the variance that contextual variations can bring to any experience. Themes were agreed upon through group consensus. Credibility was established through peer review of all data, careful attention to establishing shared language about race, inequity, identity, and power relationships, prolonged engagement with data, and the authors' notes of the meetings. Participants also provided feedback and suggestions on the drafts of this article. Pseudonyms were used to link de-identified data to the same participant and retain confidentiality of the individual.

Findings and Discussion

Through this study we explored the research question: How might engaging in reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity empower doctoral students to become transformational educational leaders? We conducted constant comparative discourse analysis of the written racial autobiographies and transcripts of the five research team conversations. Several themes emerged that illuminated our original research question regarding how childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences impact understanding of bias and how those experiences challenge our understanding of ourselves. We suggest that each of these themes was revealed through rational dialogue that began as a result of the 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 1991) faced by the faculty researchers and sparked by the racial autoethnography assignment; to create an open environment where our doctoral students, who were also our research partners, might feel empowered to become transformational educational leaders. The following sections provide a detailed discussion of the findings from the analysis of this qualitative data.

Location, Location, Location

Regardless of whether the participants described childhood, adolescent, or adult racial and ethnic experiences, mentions of place and location were woven throughout the self-examination stage of our rational dialogues. When asked to describe themselves, all the participants included a location, and this revealed the lens through which the participants shared their experiences and understanding of bias and themselves.

"I am a Black woman who was born in New Jersey raised by strong women of the South."
(Monique)

"I am a Haitian American woman and a first-generation doctoral student." (Faith)

"I identify as a Black Jamaican American immigrant born in Jamaica and raised in the United States for the past 26 years." (Sara)

"I grew up in a small midwestern town full of people with deep rooted "conservative" beliefs."
(Micaela)

Carmen identified herself as "a strong Puerto Rican woman" and mentioned, "... I am extremely proud of my Latino heritage, and I hope to pass those feelings on to my son someday."

During the self-examination stage of transformative learning, participants began to think about their past experiences and how those connected to their racial and ethnic experiences. Location remained a main focus for the participants as we examined our beliefs and understanding of racial experiences.

I never felt like I fit in, and I always desired a life that allowed me to be who I wanted to be outside of who my family was and beyond the scope of the small-town watchful eye. I moved to a big city, and I found freedom in being invisible. I lived in other countries and in different parts of the U.S. I became friends with a diverse group of people. (Micaela)

During my teenage years, the Haitian population was small but rapidly growing in my city. During those years, there were only certain places I felt comfortable. We had less than 5% of Black teachers and administrators on our high school campus. We clung to those teachers and tried to get to know each other even if we did not have their class. (Faith)

I grew up in Jamaica which is a predominantly Black country in the Caribbean. It was a very diverse nation, but I remember when I first visited the United States when I was five or six years old with my dad and my aunt, I was amazed by White people and people speaking Spanish. I remember trying to talk Spanish. Because I lived in a predominantly Black country, it's all about the skin color. (Sara)

The racial makeup of the teachers and staff in New Jersey where I grew up were African American. It wasn't until I became an adult and moved to this state when I realized that it wasn't the norm to have African American educators in high-ranking positions. (Monique)

I remember the first time I was told I am "brown." I was 22 years old, and I had recently moved to Washington state to attend graduate school. It was in that town where I found out that I am "brown" and that there were people who did not welcome those who do not look or sound like them. But it was also there where I had the opportunity to learn more about my identity as a Latina and as Puerto Rican, and I also learned the value of always being proud of my heritage, even when others do not understand it or accept it. (Carmen)

Assumptions about race and ethnicity impacted by location or geographic area is evidenced in the literature (Forest, 2002; Freng et al., 2019; Gilmore, 2010). As participants reflected on their own childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences, they explored their perspectives about themselves and others through the lens of place. By critically examining the way their assumptions influenced them, the participants began their perspective transformation. Self-examination is an essential aspect of the transformative learning process because it leads to transformative action (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). Marsick and Mezirow (2002) concluded that critical reflection is a necessary step in the transformative learning process to move toward exploration (Mattila et al., 2020, p. 39).

Influences of Environment

In addition to childhood school experiences, other environmental factors may contribute to racism, including size and diversity of one's hometown, diversity in friendships, and travel experiences (Smith & Ross, 2006, p. 2752). It is widely understood that assumptions about race and ethnicity originate from parents and peers (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999, as cited in Smith & Ross, 2006), an idea that participants also noted. Several participants commented on how their family or environment influenced the way they viewed themselves and others.

Carmen shared, "I always thought I was white until I moved [from Puerto Rico] to the United States and was told I was brown." Sara described her struggles with being a proud Jamaican and not feeling part of the Black community in the United States, "I think that's why a lot of times we exclude ourselves from Black culture because we view ourselves as just Jamaican". Faith considers herself a

Haitian American because she was raised in the United States, but her parents raised her as if she were “on the island”. This made her feel “different” than her parents.

During our discussions, participants recognized some of those influences may have been biased. During our conversations, Sara began to recognize why her ethnicity made her feel separate from those with a similar race, “[T]hat’s why it’s been really hard to connect to what a lot of Black people face in America, because I’ve always viewed myself as an outsider [because I’m Jamaican].” As they acknowledged some of their assumptions might be wrong, they shared that they were becoming more open to new information and thoughts.

Faith, who is Haitian, shared an experience that was several years old but was a factor in how she perceived some White people. “Is that really your name?” a White female customer said to me one day. “I bet your mama wanted to be unique and different, huh?,” she said laughing in my face while attempting to make eye contact with another customer. My biases against a specific population affect my ability to show up as an educational leader adequately...I have been empowered to think twice about the biases I hold and the benefits of learning more about others.

I witnessed racism, and I realized that some people can never be invisible. The world is always watching what they do to further solidify biases and stereotypes. (Micaela)

I’m so happy we are doing this because I see them (my peers) through a very different lens right now... now learning about them, makes me understand that everyone has so many different experiences and knowledge and backgrounds and we should be able to take the time to listen to them, compare, connect, and be willing to accept the differences as something beautiful... not everyone is brave enough to do that. ...it’s hard for everyone. (Carmen)

Throughout the critical assessment phase of our discussions, participants began to look at their past assumptions and review them critically. During this phase, participants shared how their ideas about race and ethnicity had been influenced by their environment during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Feeling Seen and Heard

During the recognition phase of our conversations, participants shared perspective transformations. When they described feeling seen and heard, they also considered strategies for learning new things, seeing new perspectives, or talking to new people. At this phase of the learning process, participants realized they were sharing the journey of transformation (Mezirow, 1994).

The faculty researchers noted a pivotal moment during one of our conversations. Sara shared her anguish over feeling that she had to sit her Black sons down and explain that if they were walking down the street or pulled over driving a car they had to respond in a certain way because she was afraid the color of their skin would make them vulnerable. She shared, “this is a long and hard journey I am willing to take to heal my heart and make this world a better place for my two Black beautiful boys.” In response, Monique, who is a police captain commented:

I am also frightened for my own Black son who is 25 and big and has dark skin. I worry a lot when he’s out after dark because he’s a soft gentle guy but because of his race people may feel threatened by him. I always remind him that he must be extra respectful, so he doesn’t have any issues or problems when he’s out.

As faculty researchers who are White, we realized that we were walking the journey of transformation with our students. We shared with the other participants that we had never even considered having that conversation with our own White children. We noted our own new perspectives. Sara responded by saying, “I felt so vulnerable in sharing that but I’m happy you saw it”.

Listening to my peers' stories gave me a new perspective of myself and how they see me. I feel closer to them, because we connected; they can see me, and I can see them. We understand each other at a different level. (Carmen)

I think we see each other so much more now, more than just classmates but for who we really are. This experience has allowed me to recognize my biases, but also how I see myself. It showed me how to see how my experiences influence my perception of others. (Sara)

This research project demonstrated how educational leaders can discuss race and its impact on the educational system in an empathetic and meaningful way. It demonstrated a method for discourse that allowed us all to know each other better, grow our relationships, and develop our trust and commitment to each other. This is what every school needs, and it can be done if all participants are willing to empower themselves and each other. (Carmen)

Transformative learning is designed to help individuals develop new assumptions about the world that will guide their activities to create enhanced conditions for social action (Mezirow, 1991). Feeling seen and heard led the participants to feel more open to new information and thoughts. They became empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others (Solórzano and Yosso, 2016, as cited in Maylor et al., 2021). With appropriate attention to issues of race and ethnicity, and development of personal awareness, participants' perspectives are transformed (Gooden & Dantley, 2012), which may enable aspiring leaders to explore opportunities for change.

Self-Acceptance

Conversations during the exploration phase revealed participants' self-acceptance. The participants described how their roles, relationships, and actions were connected with their new understanding. Sara commented, "once you have a different lens on you see so much more". She shared that she normally talks about issues of racism with her "core group of people" but "it was very eye opening to talk about it with everyone and to listen to the experiences of everyone, and to learn". She elaborated further:

I think it's like the first step, and it's in such a structured way to even talk about race because you're talking about yourself you're talking about you first and what happened in your life...and then, it allows you to analyze information, so I thought this process just it was it was really powerful.

Participants began to share the ways our rational dialogues had empowered them. Micaela shared her thoughts about this, "I feel like there's been a shift since your class where there's a stronger comfort between everybody and I really do think it's because of sharing more with each other." Sara mentioned, "I think a format like this, or something where people can have honest, open conversations and have that space to do that, I think that is a good step".

I am a woman who did not know my strength until I was pressed and challenged by life. I am eager to push my limits to see how far I can go before I am told I can't go any further, just to push a little more to prove them wrong. I was empowered going through this project with women of all shades finding their way in life to make changes for themselves and others to follow. (Monique)

It made me realize my want to be seen and heard for who I am, for my experiences to be told, and to be understood. For the first time in my life, I felt my experiences as a child immigrant mattered and shaped who I am today. Through this research project, I realized that I need to be that person for others and see others for who they are. (Sara)

It often becomes frustrating when bureaucracy, people's ignorance, and the lack of resources (and/or interest) prevent you from even getting closer to achieving part of these goals, but I keep trying. Living is learning, and it is my goal to keep learning. I'm not trying to impose anything on anyone, but I do try to provide opportunities to learn about things that we cannot find in books. I think I owe that to my students and to my son. (Carmen)

My goal is to continue to educate myself and encourage other people to push past the fears of racism and negative stereotypes. People working in Corrections or Law Enforcement should be trained about understanding different races, racial identity, and racism such as Human and Cultural Diversity. (Monique)

Mezirow (1994) suggests that transformation does not necessarily mean taking action but deciding to take action because of changed perspectives. Participants in the exploration phase reflected on their new understandings about their roles, relationships, and actions. This led them to discuss the paths they may take in their own leadership practice as transformational leaders.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This research is shared through both researcher and participant auto-ethnographic writings. We focused on how we assigned meaning to our experiences through the stories we shared. The richness and nuances cannot be expressed in definitions or abstract propositions, they can only be evoked through storytelling (Moen, 2006, p. 60). As a result, our final narrative is open to a wide range of interpretations by others and findings may not be generalizable beyond this study.

People often fear talking about experiences with race and ethnicity because they are afraid of how others will react. It can feel unsafe to share uncomfortable experiences, because they can reveal who we are. Sharing our lived experiences in educational leadership programs can provide a model for practitioners to become agents of change. By engaging in reflective practice and actively listening to the stories of others, leaders can gain a deeper appreciation for the diversity of experiences and perspectives within their communities. This can help them to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments, where all members of the community can thrive and succeed. We encourage other researchers to explore with their students the ways reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity are integrated into educational leadership preparation courses to provide opportunities for transformational learning.

Narrative inquiry in the social sciences is a form of empirical narrative, and in every narrative study from educational practice there will always be some facts (Denzin, 1989, as cited in Moen, 2006, p. 64). Future narrative studies may consider how to inspire and initiate dialogues about race and ethnicity in the field of leadership; something that is essential for reflection on practice and development.

Conclusion

Scholars acknowledge the importance of educational leaders recognizing issues of race, ethnicity, and bias in professional practice (Diem et al., 2013; Fraise et al., 2015; Gooden et al., 2015; Maylor et al., 2021; Theoharis, 2019). The ability to examine assumptions of one's beliefs, often acquired through racial and ethnic experiences beginning in childhood, and uncover their personal impact, is an integral leadership quality. It is also one that must be learned (Mezirow, 1994). The journey to empowerment in our study is the power of the storytelling, both the commonalities and the uniqueness of the researcher participants' experiences. As we engaged in these storytelling experiences, we uncovered the hidden stories, experiences, and perspectives that shape the lived realities of not only ourselves, but also our educational institutions and communities. Reflecting on racial experiences with others can enable educational leaders by providing them with a deeper understanding of their own stories and the stories of those around them. By listening to these stories, educational leaders can gain insight into the complexities of their institutions and communities, which can help them to develop more empathetic and inclusive

leadership practices. As we shared our own stories, we built trust, understanding, and respect for one another. This can help to foster more collaborative and supportive learning environments, where all members of the community feel valued and heard. Using racial autoethnography activities with opportunities for open, rational discourse and critical reflection in educational leadership preparation courses can offer students and faculty a transformational learning pathway to become agents of social change.

In his “Talk to Teachers,” James Baldwin (1963) asks, “Because if I am not what I’ve been told I am, then it means that you’re not what you thought you were either. And that is the crisis.” We offer this crisis as our spark...our disorienting dilemma...for this work. We wondered how doctoral students in an educational leadership program might be empowered to become transformational leaders through a journey of reflection and discourse about childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences. We walked together with the participant researchers as they explored their understanding of bias and challenged their understanding of themselves. We agreed that location, influences of environment, feeling seen and heard, and self-acceptance were threads woven throughout our transformative learning experience, and these themes led participants to embrace social action in the context of leadership practice.

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Appendix A

Autoethnography Assignment

*Because if I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that **you're** not what you thought **you** were **either**. And that is the crisis.*

James Baldwin "A Talk to Teachers."

Goal of the Assignment:

In this assignment, you will explore your racial identity and the messages, lessons, distortions, celebrations, stereotypes, and ideas you carry with you, regarding how you understand race in general and your racial identity in particular. What are the stories you tell and were told to you about race? How has race and your own racial identity impacted your life?

Your final completed assignment must:

- Address your understanding of your racial identity by exploring your experiences and various messages you have received about race.
- Analyze how your racial identity impacts you and your understanding of race in the USA.
- Analyze how your racial identity interacts with other pieces of your apparent and non-apparent identities (i.e., social class, ability, gender, sexuality, language, citizenship).
- Describe where you think you are headed in your understanding of race. You might also consider where you see the USA is heading regarding race.
- What learning, action, or reflection do you personally hope to be able to do in the coming years in relationship to race?

Structure: We are borrowing ideas from Gloria Ladson-Billings' approach, using "critical incidents" to structure this assignment ("It's Not the Culture of Poverty, It's the Poverty of Culture: The Problem with Teacher Education"). For each section (and there are three), write a brief vignette that in some way deals with lessons and experiences you've had regarding race, racial identity, and racism.

Following your description of each critical incident, analyze it and explore what it taught you. You are encouraged, where possible and appropriate, to use course texts, journal articles, class notes, and discussion notes to explore each critical incident. The idea is to make sense of the various socializations you've had around race, racism, and racial identity and how those socializations impact your larger understandings of the world.

Note that in this assignment you are exploring race, racism, and racial identity, but that race also interacts with a variety of other aspects of your identity and education. While you will privilege race in your discussion, you are encouraged to continually ask: How does race connect with your other apparent and non-apparent identities (gender, social economic status, language, sexuality, ability, citizenship, nationality?)

Critical Incident #1:

Describe an incident during your childhood that focuses on early teachings about race (100 words or fewer). Analyze this incident (600 words or fewer).

Questions you might consider:

- Who makes up your family?
- How do they racially identify?
- Where did your parents grow up?
- What exposure did you have to racial groups other than your own?
- What messages did you get from parents and/or other adults in your life regarding race?
- What were you taught (explicitly or implicitly) about your own racial identity?
- What was your first awareness of your own race?

Critical Incident #2:

Describe an incident during your teenage years (100 words or fewer). Analyze this incident (600 words or fewer).

Questions you might consider:

- What cultural influences were big in your life: TV, advertising, novels, music, movies, etc.
- What was the racial makeup of students at your school?
- Racial makeup of the teachers and staff?
- Racial makeup of your teams and organizations? (sports teams, music, drama, scouts, church etc.)
- What was the racial make-up of your own friend group?
- Were there any experiences with racial slurs or racial conflicts?
- What lessons, discussions, curricula, or other academic structures dealt with race, racial identity, or racism?

Critical Incident #3:

This incident should deal with a more recent moment and explore where you are today regarding your own racial identity and your own understandings of race. Describe an incident in Southwest Florida (100 words or fewer). Analyze this incident (600 words or fewer).

In your analysis, you should address:

- What has been the most enlightening or frustrating (or both) aspect of addressing race, racial identity, and racism in Southwest Florida? What learning do you feel you still need to do around race, racial identity, and racism? How might you go about expanding your learning during the next year?

Suggestions for All Sections:

- Use stories that take us to specific moments from your past as you craft your critical incidents.
 - Don't try to tell someone else's story. Tell your story and how you understand yourself in our racialized world.
 - Free write on the questions listed under each critical incident before you choose a critical incident. Find out which questions and ideas have the most resonance with you.
 - Write more than you have room for, and then trim away excess before submitting your final draft.
 - Work with your colleagues; read their vignettes; talk about the assignment with each other.
 - Plan to re-write your initial draft.
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/my-pencils-outlast-their-erasers-great-writers-on-the-art-of-revision/267011/>

Requirements:

Length and Format: Each section begins with a critical incident (100 words or fewer), which should be at the top of the section, single spaced, and in italics. The analysis of the incident (600 words or fewer) should be double-spaced.

Voice: The paper is a structured autobiography. Please use first person in writing this essay. Avoid separating yourself from the analysis.

Content: Each section must contain a critical incident and an analysis. In each analysis, you should refer to course readings and/or lecture notes and/or and discussion notes. You must directly cite course readings at least three times in the paper. But avoid making a superficial connection to the readings. Also avoid misapplying the readings by (for example) using short quotes that support your point but misrepresent the overall ideas of the author. You are welcome to cite outside class materials in your analysis, but these do not count towards the three required citations.

Citations format: Use APA 7. Include a bibliography at the end of the final product.

Appendix B

Guiding Questions for Research Team Dialogues/Conversations

Meeting 1 Guiding Questions:

1. What exposure did you have to racial groups other than your own as a child?
2. What were you taught (explicitly or implicitly) about your own racial identity?
3. What was your first awareness of your own race?
4. As a teen, were there any experiences with racial slurs or racial conflicts?
5. What lessons, discussions, curricula, or other academic structures dealt with race, racial identity, or racism during your teenage years?
6. As an adult, what has been the most enlightening or frustrating (or both) aspect of addressing race, racial identity, and racism in Southwest Florida?
7. How do you think these experiences/incidents impact your outlook on race?

Meeting 2 Guiding Questions:

1. Who makes up your family?
2. How do they racially identify?
3. Where did your parents grow up?
4. What exposure did you have to racial groups other than your own?
5. What were you taught (explicitly or implicitly) about your own racial identity?
6. What cultural influences were big in your life as a teen: TV, advertising, novels, music, movies, etc.
7. What was the racial makeup of students at your school during your middle and high school years? Racial makeup of the teachers and staff? Racial makeup of your teams and organizations? (sports teams, music, drama, scouts, church etc.) What was the racial make-up of your own friend group?
8. How do you think these experiences/incidents impact any bias(es) you may have regarding race?

Meeting 3 Guiding Questions:

1. What learning do you feel you still need to do around race, racial identity, and racism?
2. How might you go about expanding your learning during the next year?
3. How do your racial experiences/incidents impact the way you view your role to transform institutional and societal systems of racism as an educational leader?

A College Course on Mindfulness and Self-Compassion: A Social and Emotional Approach to Facilitating Transformative Learning

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Abstract

Mindfulness and self-compassion can theoretically help students engage in transformative learning through socio-emotional effects such as enhanced attachment security, university belongingness, and academic self-efficacy. We created a college course called Mindfulness Studies that emphasizes the practice of mindfulness and self-compassion, with the purpose of enhancing students' social and emotional functioning in ways that may expand their potential for transformative learning. To assess whether the Mindfulness Studies course provides such benefits, we collected data with a sample of 70 students taking the course to compare pre-test and post-test measures of mindfulness, self-compassion, attachment security, university belongingness, and academic self-efficacy. Results showed significant improvements by the end of the course on all measures, suggesting that the Mindfulness Studies course helps students enhance their social and emotional functioning in ways that could facilitate transformative learning experiences. Additional data analyses showed that improvements in mindfulness and self-compassion each contributed to improvements in the other outcomes but suggested that mindfulness and self-compassion have somewhat different roles in promoting transformative learning. Future directions include more in-depth exploration of students' transformative learning experiences within the Mindfulness Studies course, as well as longer-term follow-up to assess how gains from the course affect students' transformative learning in the remainder of their university education.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Self-Compassion, Social and Emotional learning, Attachment and Learning, College Teaching

A College Course on Mindfulness and Self-Compassion: A Social and Emotional Approach to Facilitating Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is one of the most intensively researched theories in the field of adult education (Taylor, 2005, 2008; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Mezirow's (1991) original definition of transformational learning is, "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove truer or justified to guide action" (p. 7-8). Mäklä (2010) expanded Mezirow's theory to highlight emotion and focused on the concepts of "edge-emotions" and "comfort zone" to explain the dynamics of emotion and not just cognition, that arise in the process of critical reflection and transformation. Barner and Barner (2011) argued that the

emotional challenges needed for transformational learning require a base from which participants learn to regulate their emotions when their “edge emotions” arise, outside their “comfort zones” and that mindfulness can serve as such a base because it can help to establish the non-defensive openness to experience to be truly be able to challenge cherished assumptions and beliefs (Mätkki, 2010).

Mindfulness, Self-Compassion, and Attachment Security

Bishop et al. (2004) defined mindfulness as a process of relating to whatever arises in the field of awareness with openness and receptivity. Individuals seeking to improve their mindfulness focus first on attention training and learning to stabilize the mind so that it is not “tossed to and fro” by a continuous stream of thoughts and emotions. Although training in mindfulness can effectively stabilize the mind by helping to focus attention and reduce distractibility, a substantial amount of additional mindfulness practice may be needed before a person can work with more emotionally-intense internal experiences (Hildebrandt, et. al, 2019). It takes time and the strengthening of mindfulness before a person can learn to regulate emotions more successfully and not be overcome by emotional triggers that occur in day-to-day life and relational functioning. To significantly improve emotion regulation, Moodie et al. (2020) suggest that cognitive reappraisal, self-distancing, and attention deployment are all necessary strategies that need to be developed before emotional regulation is possible. Mindfulness helps to develop these strategies, which also helps to establish equanimity of the mind, so that it is possible to remain calm in the face of “provocative stimuli” (i.e., emotional triggers) and thereby maintain “meta-awareness” (Desbordes, et.al, 2015). Meta-awareness can be understood as a form of self-awareness that helps in noticing and being aware of emotional triggers as well as the reasons for being triggered, potentiating conscious awareness. Such awareness and understanding of one’s emotional triggers allows for more conscious and deliberate choices in how to react to and cope with the triggering experiences. This can prevent emotionally-triggering experiences from limiting one’s capacity for thoughtful reflection, self-exploration, and openness to new and diverse perspectives. In this way, mindfulness training and ongoing practice can increase the potential for transformative learning.

Empirical studies with college students have shown that the practice of mindfulness meditation can enhance their potential for academic success by improving concentration and effort and by minimizing emotional and personal distress (Shapiro, et al., 2008). Williams (2020), for example, found that mindfulness meditation helped to reduce college students’ test anxiety while improving their critical thinking and self-regulation of learning. In a more social respect, Martin (2018) found that including mindfulness meditation practices in college courses enabled students to connect with each other and engage in open discussion. Thus, based on such studies in the empirical literature, and the conceptual approaches of Mätkki (2010) and Barner and Barner (2011), mindfulness can serve as a foundation for the openness needed for transformative learning, not only by increasing cognitive factors such as focus and concentration, but also by enhancing emotion regulation and social connectedness.

Mindfulness can also serve as a basis for the development of self-compassion. When paired with mindfulness, self-compassion further impacts a student’s ability to regulate emotions when encountering academic frustrations and disappointment (Neely et al., 2009; Sirois, 2015; Terry, et al., 2013; Williams, et al., 2008), and to stay engaged in the learning process (Neff, et al., 2005). Self-compassion, moreover, helps students to see themselves more realistically, rather than with excessive shame and self-criticism (Hanley, et al., 2017).

Self-compassion may impact transformative learning by decreasing defensiveness due to fear of failure and criticism. According to Mezirow (1991) transformative learning can only occur with critical reflection. Critical reflection in this context does not refer to being harshly critical of one’s self, even though such self-criticalness may be a common experience for many college students (Fairlamb, 2020; McIntyre, et al., 2018). Rather, in the context of transformative learning, critical reflection that is grounded in mindfulness and self-compassion, helps shift the student’s orientation from defensively reacting to internalized harsh criticism, toward greater openness to self-reflection and non-defensive questioning of one’s beliefs and perspectives (Elphinstone et al., 2019; Im & Follette, 2016; Hildebrandt, et al., 2019). As opposed to being limited by a felt need to avoid painful emotions triggered by self-

criticism, students engaging in mindful self-compassion may experience greater openness to alternative views and perspectives that can impact views of self (Benda, et al., 2018; Hanley, et al., 2017; Kaurin, et al., 2018; Ross, et al., 2019).

Self-compassion-focused meditation may also affect attachment security. According to attachment theory, interpersonal relationships are crucial in providing emotional support and helping individuals with developing the ability to regulate emotions and maintain a positive, yet realistic view of self and others (Thompson et al., 2021). Due to differences in the quality of their interpersonal relationships, individuals can be categorized as having a secure or an insecure attachment style (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Within an academic context, students with secure attachment styles tend have a greater sense of trust and openness with peers, as opposed to students with insecure attachment styles who feel less supported by their peers and experience greater emotional distress (Bernardon, et al., 2011). Those with insecure attachment styles are either anxious, experiencing their need for emotional support from others more frequently and intensely, or they are avoidant, denying their need for emotional support from others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). In contrast, students with secure attachment styles are able to give and receive emotional support as needed and appropriate to the situation. With respect to mindfulness, attachment security is theoretically related to higher levels of mindfulness, in that both of these psychological tendencies are characterized by a realistic view of self and others that is relatively free of distortion due to defensiveness; this hypothesis that has been supported empirically by studies showing that those with greater tendencies to be mindful also tend to experience greater attachment security (Shaver et al., 2007).

Regarding self-compassion and attachment security, Borphy and colleagues (2020) found that once self-compassion practice is deepened, attachment security increases. For those with insecure attachment styles, increasing their self-compassion lowers their tendency either towards anxiety and over-dependence on others for support, or for avoidance of emotion and the need for emotional support even when needed and appropriate. In this way students who practice self-compassion may feel more secure, engaged, and less anxious or avoidant. The students' experience of engaged calmness allows them to feel less alone and more connected with their fellow classmates so that they feel more "at home" in the university environment and more confident in the learning process (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Hausmann, et al., 2009; Jarukasemthawee, et al., 2019; Larusa, et al., 2005; Tubbs, et al., 2019). Such improvements in students' social and emotional experiences within the academic environment should enhance their openness and potential to engage in transformative learning.

Purpose and Hypotheses

The purpose of this paper, besides presenting a conceptual basis for a college course on mindfulness and self-compassion, is to present outcome data on the course's effectiveness in enhancing social and emotional factors that may facilitate transformative learning. Secondly, we also assess whether mindfulness and self-compassion each uniquely contribute to enhancing students' potential for transformative learning in terms of social and emotional outcomes relevant to an academic context (viz., attachment security, university belongingness, and academic self-efficacy). If both mindfulness and self-compassion independently contribute to positive social and emotional outcomes, such results would support our position that pairing mindfulness training with self-compassion practices can enhance students' social and emotional well-being in ways that facilitate openness to transformative learning.

Regarding the outcome data, our hypotheses are as follows. First, we expect that, through completing the mindfulness studies course, students will increase their tendencies to be mindful and self-compassionate. Second, we expect that students completing the mindfulness studies course will experience increases in the social and emotional factors of attachment security, university belongingness, and academic self-efficacy. Finally, we expect that both mindfulness and self-compassion will independently contribute to the increases in the other social and emotional outcomes.

Mindfulness Studies Course

To enhance students' potential for transformative learning by addressing social and emotional factors, we created a course called *Mindfulness Studies*. The focus of the course is for students to learn and practice mindfulness and self-compassion to increase their tendencies to be mindful and self-compassionate. Increased tendencies toward mindfulness and self-compassion, in turn, should address social and emotional factors that increase openness, comfort with critical self-reflection, and thus the potential for transformative learning; that is, social and emotional factors such as attachment security, university belongingness, and academic self-efficacy.

At the beginning of the course, students are encouraged to participate and co-create an atmosphere of mindfulness in the class, so they feel safe to self-disclose and to provide support to classmates as well as to receive it. The aim is for students to gradually feel more secure and open with each other, creating a sense of belonging and support which helps them to re-appraise shaming self-criticisms and engage more openly in self-exploration and consideration of new perspectives. The self-disclosure and sharing of experiences which occurs in the class allows students to feel they are not alone and that the issues they are struggling with are quintessentially human. As they share and connect with each other, the aim is for a transformation in how they feel about themselves and each other; as they process through emotional obstacles (e.g., self-doubt in ability to succeed academically), they experience belonging and greater confidence in achieving at the university. Consistent with the focus on students' emotional and social well-being, the course is taught largely with relational and experiential teaching/learning approaches. The following are the teaching strategies used in the course:

1. **Online Discussions on Questions from Textbook Chapters:** Chapter readings focus on various conceptions, research, and applications of mindfulness and self-compassion. Students post answers online to questions on the chapter readings and comment on other students' postings.
2. **In-Class Discussion on Chapters:** In addition to a brief lecture on the chapter, students are asked to speak and listen mindfully to each other in dyads. After the dyads finish their discussions, students are invited to share their experiences with the class as a whole.
3. **In-class Guided Mindfulness and Self-Compassion Practice:** After class discussion, the instructor leads guided mindfulness meditation and self-compassion practices using insight gained from the class discussion.
4. **Individual Guided Mindfulness Practices:** Students are asked to spend a minimum of five to ten minutes three to four times a week following a guided meditation or self-compassion practice from the instructor. Students are also encouraged to stop and breathe for a few minutes throughout their days, especially at stressful moments. Students journal once a week about their experience with mindfulness, meditation, and self-compassion.
5. **Small-Group Discussion on Mindfulness Practice:** Students meet three times a month for 45 minutes to discuss mindfulness practice (formal and informal) in groups of five and practice meditations at the end of the chapter for that week. Students take turns reading the guided meditation or self-compassion practice script. Once a month, the groups meet with the instructor for 45 minutes to discuss questions and difficulties with meditation, mindfulness, and self-compassion practices as well as engaging in guided meditations from textbook chapters.
6. **Day of Mindfulness:** Students meet for four hours for a day of practicing mindfulness, yoga, and self-reflection. During the four hours students focus on learning to calm themselves and relax, increase their self-compassion, and develop compassion for others based on their own struggles with emotional reactivity and self-compassion.
7. **Presentation in Class:** Student form groups around interest in a topic in mindfulness or self-compassion and make presentations on topics that have personal relevance to their own experience in applying mindfulness and self-compassion in their lives.

Method

Participants

Seventy undergraduate, upper-division (3rd or 4th year) students enrolled in one of four sections of the *Mindfulness Studies* psychology course at Governors State University across four semesters participated in this study. Typical class size of the four course sections was approximately 20 students; all four sections were taught by the same instructor (one of this paper's authors). Participant demographic data were not collected, but according to available demographic data for students enrolled at the university during a recent semester (Fall 2019), the average age of undergraduate psychology majors was 27.3 years, approximately 79% identified as female, and racial/ethnic make-up included 34% Black/African American, 31% White, and 20% Hispanic students. Regarding first-generation status, 44% of the undergraduate psychology majors enrolled during the Fall 2019 semester were first-generation college/university students, defined as neither parent of the student having completed a bachelor's degree or higher.

Measures

Mindfulness

The Five-Facet Mindfulness (Baer, et al., 2006) self-report measure was used to assess student-participants' levels of mindfulness. This questionnaire taps five dimensions of mindfulness: 1) "Observe," defined as the tendency to observe one's sensory experiences (e.g., "I pay attention to sensations, such as the wind in my hair or sun on my face"); 2) "Describe" defined as the ability to describe one's experiences with words (e.g., "I'm good at finding words to describe my feelings"); 3) "Act with Awareness" defined as attentiveness to current situation and experience, rather than being distracted (e.g., "I find myself doing things without paying attention" [reverse-scored]); 4) "Non-judgment," defined as not judging, but accepting, all of one's internal experience and emotions, including negative feelings (e.g., "I tell myself I shouldn't be feeling the way I'm feeling" [reverse-scored]); and 5) "Non-reactiveness," defined as ability to control one's reactions in stressful or distressing circumstances, without reacting impulsively (e.g., "In difficult situations, I can pause without immediately reacting").

Responses were on a 1-to-5 scale, with 1 = "never or very rarely true" to 5 = "very often or always true." Total Mindfulness scores for each participant were obtained by summing across the 39 items on this measure. Reliability of this measure in the present study as assessed by Cronbach's alpha was .928 for pre-test and post-test combined.

Self-Compassion

The Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003) consists of 26 items tapping six dimensions of self-compassion: self-kindness, self-judgement, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. Sample items include 1) "When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and the tenderness I need" (Self-Kindness); 2) "I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies" (reverse-scored; Self-Judgment); 3) "When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through" (Common Humanity); 4) "When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure" (reverse-scored; Isolation); 5) "When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness" (Mindful Self-Compassion); and 6) "When I fail at something important to me, I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy" (reverse-scored; Over-Identification).

Responses were on a 1-to-5 scale, with 1 = "almost never" to 7 = "almost always." Reliability of this measure in the present study as assessed by Cronbach's alpha was .932 for pre-test and post-test combined.

Attachment Security

The Relationship Structures Questionnaire (Fraley, et al., 2011) is a self-report measure that was used to assess attachment security. Rather than being assessed directly, attachment security is usually

assessed in terms of low scores on attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are viewed as general orientations across various kinds of interpersonal relationships.

This measure consists of nine items, six assessing general attachment avoidance and three assessing general attachment anxiety. Sample items are 1) “I often worry that people do not really care for me” (Attachment Anxiety); 2) “I’m afraid that other people may abandon or reject me” (Attachment Anxiety); 3) “I prefer not to show others how I feel deep down” (Attachment Avoidance); and 4) “I talk things over with people” (reverse-scored; Attachment Avoidance).

Responses were on a 1-to-7 scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”). Reliability, as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha in the present study, for pre-test and post-test combined, was .800 for attachment avoidance and .865 for attachment anxiety.

University Belongingness

Student-participants’ experiences of belongingness in relation to the university (with respect to student-peers, faculty, university community), was assessed with the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (Goodenow, 1993), which was re-worded to apply to university students (original scale assessed middle-school and junior high school students). Sample questions include 1) “I feel like I belong here at this university;” 2) “Other students at this university take my opinions seriously;” 3) “I can really be myself at this university;” 4) “Professors at this university respect me;” 5) “There is at least one professor or advisor I can talk to at this university if I have a problem.”

This measure consisted of 18 items responded to on a 1-to-7 scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”). Reliability of this measure in the present study as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha was .872 for pre-test and post-test combined.

Academic Self-Efficacy

The Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (Zimmerman, et al., 1992) consists of 11 items assessing students’ confidence in successfully engaging in and performing various academic tasks (e.g., studying, completing homework assignments, organizing, scheduling, and concentrating on academic tasks, motivating oneself to study, and participating in class discussions).

Responses were on a 1-to-5 scale, with 1 = “no confidence at all” to 5 = “complete confidence.” Reliability of this measure in the present study as assessed by Cronbach’s alpha was .850 for pre-test and post-test combined.

Procedure

Students in the Mindfulness Studies undergraduate psychology course at a public university in the mid-western United States were invited during the first week of the semester to participate in the study on a volunteer basis. Students who consented to participate completed the questionnaire measures on paper either during or outside of class time. Response data were kept confidential by not recording student names or any other directly identifying information on the questionnaire response forms. This procedure was repeated at the end of the semester (last week of classes) for post-test data collection.

Results

Outcomes of Mindfulness Studies Course

We hypothesized that, at the end of the course on Mindfulness Studies, in comparison with the beginning (pre-test to post-test comparison), students would report increased levels of mindfulness, self-compassion, attachment security (as decreases in attachment anxiety and avoidance), belongingness to the university, and academic self-efficacy.

As expected, students reported improvements in all the outcomes (see Table 1). Specifically, there were improvements in students' mindfulness, $t(65) = 5.72$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.70$; university belongingness, $t(67) = 5.02$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.61$; self-compassion, $t(64) = 5.75$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.71$; and academic self-efficacy, $t(69) = 3.05$, $p < .003$, Cohen's $d = 0.37$. Student-participants also reported increases in attachment security, as measured in terms of decreases in attachment avoidance, $t(69) = -5.13$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.62$; and attachment anxiety, $t(69) = -3.58$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.43$. In terms of usual interpretations of the size of Cohen's d , these effects range from small (between $d = 0.2$ and $d = 0.5$) and the larger side of medium effect sizes (between $d = 0.5$ and $d = 0.8$).

Table 1: Outcomes of a Mindfulness Studies Course

Measure	Pre-test		Post-test		Pre-test – Post-test comparison			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Mindfulness	119.77	20.48	136.50	21.28	65	5.72	<.001	0.70
University Belongingness	94.10	13.81	100.75	11.81	67	5.02	<.001	0.61
Attachment Avoidance	21.77	5.87	18.39	5.85	69	-5.13	<.001	0.62
Attachment Anxiety	13.08	4.89	11.17	4.88	69	-3.58	.001	0.43
Self-compassion	76.77	18.41	89.02	17.10	64	5.75	<.001	0.71
Academic self-efficacy	41.48	7.10	44.01	6.54	69	3.05	.003	0.37

Unique Contributions of Mindfulness and Self-Compassion to Outcomes

We assessed whether mindfulness and self-compassion each uniquely contributed to the improvements in the other outcomes measured in this study. If both mindfulness and self-compassion contributed to students' improvements in social and emotional outcomes, it would support the idea that both mindfulness and self-compassion contribute to facilitating transformative learning. This analysis was done by addressing the possibilities that 1) the beneficial effects of improved mindfulness can actually be attributed to (i.e., mediated by) improvements in self-compassion, and 2) that the beneficial effects of self-compassion can actually be attributed to (i.e., mediated by) mindfulness.

To conduct these meditational analyses, we used an approach based on partial correlations (Garson, 2017). This approach consists of comparing a correlation between two variables (e.g., mindfulness and academic self-efficacy) with a partial correlation between the same two variables in which a third variable is statistically controlled for. An example from the present study is adding self-compassion as the control variable to compute a partial correlation between mindfulness and academic self-efficacy. If the results of the partial correlation show that the correlation between the original two variables (i.e., mindfulness and academic self-efficacy) is no longer present when the third variable (self-compassion) is controlled for, it suggests that the third variable mediates (is actually responsible for) the relationship between the original two variables – in this example, that self-compassion is actually responsible for the improvements in academic self-efficacy, with mindfulness having no effect.

This approach to assessing mediation of the relationships of mindfulness and self-compassion and the other study outcomes, was done as follows. Before computing the correlations among study variables, the variables were transformed into improvement scores by calculating differences between post-test and pre-test results on each outcome in the Mindfulness Studies course (e.g., post-test minus pre-test Mindfulness scores as representing improvements in mindfulness). We then computed correlations among the improvement scores. The results of the correlations, as seen in Table 2, indicate that the relationships between improvements in mindfulness and improvements on the other study variables were generally strong (4 out of 5 of the r 's $> .50$).

Table 2: Correlations among Study Variable Improvement Scores

Improvement Score	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Mindfulness	—					
2. Self-Compassion	.80**	—				
3. Attachment Avoidance	.41**	.57**	—			
4. Attachment Anxiety	.73**	.72**	.52**	—		
5. University Belongingness	.65**	.54**	.38**	.54**	—	
6. Academic Self-Efficacy	.59**	.47**	.09	.41**	.32*	—

Note. Improvement scores consist of post-test scores minus pre-test scores. Attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety represent the inverse of attachment security; thus, improvement is indicated by negative scores (i.e., decreases in avoidance or anxiety) but for consistency with other variables in denoting improvement as a positive value, table entries for attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety do not include minus signs unless there was an actual increase (i.e., worsening) in avoidance or anxiety

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Next, we computed partial correlations between mindfulness increases and increases in other study outcomes, with increases in self-compassion as a control variable. As seen in Table 3, results of partial correlation analyses between increases in mindfulness and other study outcomes were reduced in strength (mostly from strong to medium) but still present when increases in self-compassion were statistically controlled for. Thus, according to these partial correlation results, self-compassion did not fully mediate (i.e., was not responsible for) the relationship between mindfulness and improvements in university belongingness, academic self-efficacy, and attachment security. This result indicates that mindfulness contributed to these outcomes independently of any contributions of self-compassion.

Table 3: Partial Correlations among Improvement Scores Controlling for Self-Compassion or Mindfulness

Control Variable	Improvement Score	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Self-Compassion	1. Mindfulness	—				
	2. Attachment Avoidance	-.12	—			
	3. Attachment Anxiety	.35*	.20	—		
	4. University Belongingness	.42**	.08	.23	—	
	5. Academic Self-Efficacy	.40**	.25	.10	.07	—
Mindfulness	1. Self-Compassion	—				
	2. Attachment Avoidance	.46**	—			
	3. Attachment Anxiety	.34*	.37**	—		
	4. University Belongingness	.06	.15	-.11	—	
	5. Academic Self-Efficacy	.00	.21	.04	-.12	—

Note. Improvement scores consist of post-test scores minus pre-test scores. Control variables are also improvement scores. For attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety, improvement is indicated by negative scores (i.e., decreases in avoidance or anxiety), but for consistency with other variables in denoting improvement as a positive value, table entries for attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety do not include minus signs unless there was an actual increase (i.e., worsening) in avoidance or anxiety.

Lastly, to assess whether self-compassion uniquely contributed to the outcomes independently of mindfulness, we computed partial correlations between self-compassion increases and other study outcomes with mindfulness increases as a control variable. As seen in Table 2, the correlations between increases in self-compassion and increases in the other study variables were generally strong (4 out of 5 of the r 's $> .50$). Regarding partial correlation analyses, results showed that some of the relationships between increases in self-compassion and other outcomes were reduced and no longer statistically significant when increases in mindfulness were controlled for (see Table 3). Other results of partial correlation analyses, however, showed that increases in self-compassion did uniquely contribute to study outcomes. Specifically, increases in self-compassion were still significantly related to decreases (i.e., improvements) in attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety (r 's = $-.464$ and $-.337$, respectively), indicating that increases in self-compassion were uniquely related to improvements in attachment security even when mindfulness was controlled for.

Discussion

The outcome results of our Mindfulness Studies course clearly showed that students completing the course significantly increased their tendencies to be mindful and self-compassionate. Results also

showed improvements in other areas of social and emotional functioning, namely, attachment security, university belongingness, and academic self-efficacy. Overall, these results suggest that the Mindfulness Studies Course positively affected students' social and emotional functioning, especially within the academic context. As a consequence of training in mindfulness and self-compassion, students appeared to feel greater attachment security, university belongingness, and academic self-efficacy. In other words, experiencing enhanced mindfulness and self-compassion seemed to help students be less self-critical and to see themselves as being more capable academically and more interpersonally connected and trusting toward fellow students and peers than they did at the beginning of the course. These improvements are transformative, in that the perceptions of students in the Mindfulness Studies course of themselves and others, as well as their interpretations of their experiences, were arguably transformed to be more open and reflective, and less constricted by negative self-appraisals. Such transformative experiences, moreover, may pave the way for further transformative learning as the students continue in their university education.

Regarding the relative contributions of mindfulness and self-compassion in transforming student learning, our results suggested somewhat different roles for mindfulness and self-compassion. As seen in the partial correlation analyses, improvements in mindfulness seemed to play a role both in improving students' confidence in their ability to study and successfully apply their academic skills (i.e., academic self-efficacy) as well as in their social and emotional functioning within the academic context (i.e., university belongingness and attachment security). In contrast, improvements in self-compassion seemed to benefit students more with respect to their social and emotional functioning (i.e., attachment security) than with respect to their ability to study succeed academically (i.e., academic self-efficacy).

The differences in the findings for self-compassion as compared with mindfulness may be understandable within the context of recent literature on the role of self-compassion in student learning, which indicates that the role of self-compassion is complex and depends on other factors such as students' academic resourcefulness (Martin, et al., 2019). Such research on self-compassion in learning, moreover, has tended to focus on academic self-efficacy and performance outcomes more narrowly, rather than on the broader conception of transformative learning, with its greater emphasis on emotional factors, openness, dialogue, and willingness to engage in deep reflection and challenging of personal beliefs. Thus, the ability to engage in transformative learning is perhaps more affected by a student's level of self-compassion than his or her level of mindfulness, as the capacity to engage in learning that is more transformative may be especially facilitated by the sense of security and non-defensive openness that is enhanced by self-compassion. Thus, as discussed further below, a promising line of further investigation would be to study the contributions of self-compassion (as well as mindfulness) to students' capacity to engage in the social and emotional aspects of transformative learning, such as openness to experience and willingness to engage in dialogue with those who they may disagree with and to consider views different from the ones they presently hold.

Limitations and Future Directions

Due to this study's correlational design, without a control group or random assignment, a primary limitation is the possibility that the observed improvements are due to extraneous or confounding factors, such as students' positive expectancies or a lessening of anxiety due simply to progressing through the Mindfulness Studies course. A research design with random assignment and greater control of other factors that could influence the results would address this limitation, though it may have other weaknesses, such as ethical concerns due to not providing a control group of students with the same beneficial experiences provided to the experimental group. A further weakness of an experimental approach would be that greater control over the learning environment for research purposes could jeopardize the authenticity (i.e., external validity) of the learning experience such that it does not reflect student's actual experiences in a more realistic or typical classroom setting.

Although the improvements observed in this study in students' mindfulness, self-compassion, attachment security, and the other outcomes may be considered transformative in and of themselves, our aim is more extensive. We aspire to prepare students to be more comfortable with, and be better able, to

engage fully with learning at the higher education level that challenges assumptions about one's self and others as well as understanding of the world in ways beyond the outcomes assessed in the present study. While our results support the notion that a college course can help students enhance aspects of their social and emotional functioning in ways that are transformative, this is only a first step in investigating the broader conception that teaching students to be more mindful and self-compassionate will increase their potential for engaging in self-exploration, dialogue, and open-minded consideration of diverse and conflicting perspectives, particularly for emotionally-laden, self-relevant, and controversial topics. One way to study the effects of mindfulness and self-compassion training on transformative learning in this broader sense would be to conduct more detailed, deeper explorations of students' efforts in applying mindfulness and self-compassion to their understanding of themselves (e.g., by studying the content of the journal entries they wrote as part of the course).

To further study the beneficial effects of mindfulness and self-compassion training on transformative learning in a broader sense, an important future direction is to follow students' progress in their university education after they have completed the Mindfulness Studies course. Such a longer-term approach would address whether students are able to maintain the gains they achieved in mindfulness, self-compassion, and the other aspects of social and emotional functioning that we assessed while they were taking the course. Any longer-term benefits of taking the Mindfulness Studies course, while beneficial to students and significant in their own right, would be necessary if such a course can truly provide a foundation for the kinds of transformative learning experiences that would enable students to receive the greatest benefits possible from their college or university education.

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