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Sense of Belonging Through Authentic Caring: Free Up Learning from Prejudgment

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Sense of Belonging Through Authentic Caring:

Free Up Learning from Prejudgment

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Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership

By

Jason Ernest Perenon

Spring 2022

This action research project, written under the direction of the candidate's master's project advisory committee and approved by members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the faculty of the Kalmanovitz School of Education, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership degree.

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Abstract

Sense of Belonging Through Authentic Caring:
Free Up Learning from Prejudgment

By

Jason Ernest Perenon
Master of Arts in Teacher Leadership
Saint Mary's College of California, 2022
Karl Meyer, Ed.D., Research Advisor

This project explored the use of student collaboration and authentic caring strategies to foster a sense of belonging among high schoolers. Classroom strategies were implemented that strived to create an environment free of judgment that cultivated cognitive curiosity and insisted on building on a power-sharing student-teacher relationship. The authentic caring strategies utilized during the study sought the students' welfare, getting to know the lives they live, mutual respect, insisting they can succeed, knowing and recognizing students' academic and social needs, and achievement. After the intervention was concluded the data pointed to two major outcomes. Students identified with learning complexities responded positively to the authentic caring strategies and were able to create a stronger bond with their teacher. The other outcome was the lack of continuing involvement on the part of participants during the implementation of COVID restrictions.

Dedication

This Action Research Project is dedicated to my parents. My father was a high school continuation teacher who cared for his students and found a way to motivate each of his students to become successful and graduate from high school. His example as a caring teacher illustrated to me how to use authentic care strategies with my students and how to individualize instruction for each of my students to motivate them to be successful.

My mother was a third-grade teacher, a Chapter One Reading specialist, and a Title One ELL specialist. Her teaching embodied the authentic care strategies studied in this action research project. Her modeling of these strategies illustrated to me that authentic caring and the strategies were so much a part of day-to-day teaching that they should be second nature for the teacher. These two master teachers embody what it means to make learning student-centered and to empower students to succeed.

This Action Research Project is dedicated to my wife, for without her continual encouragement and support I would have been hard-pressed to complete this project. She was always there to remind me to step away when I become stuck and to rethink how I was approaching this project.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my Head-of-School for their support in this action research project and for allowing this study to be conducted. I would also like to acknowledge two members of my cohort who participated in this study. Without their participation and openness, I would not have finished this project. Their encouragement and candor during this project reinforced the use of authentic care strategies.

I would also like to acknowledge the encouragement from my Master of Arts cohort at Saint Mary's College of California. Without their support, I would have found this process to be much harder to complete. Thank you for always being willing to listen and to offer a new focus when I was burned out.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my professors, Faculty Adviser, and Research Adviser from Saint Mary's College of California. Your guidance and suggestions proved to be invaluable to this action research study.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Two pieces of legislation, No Child Left Behind in 2001 (*No Child Left Behind - ED.Gov*, n.d.) and Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 (*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) | U.S. Department of Education*, n.d.), were used to establish the inclusion of students identified as English Language Learners and students identified with learning difficulties/differences (learning complexities) in mainstream classes (Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994). This inclusion was intended to help these students with learning blocks receive a full education, giving them equal access to the same education that "typical" students receive in these mainstream classes. To ensure that all students will receive an equal education, these laws brought about written standards that were designed to guide the teacher's instruction and create the foundation of a common curriculum: Common Core State Standards (California & Department of Education, 2013) and Common Core Subject Specific State Standards (California et al., 2000). To ensure that the students were receiving the equal education mandated by law and spelled out in the standards, states used standardized exams to measure the students' learning. This was the *intention*. What has been created instead is high-stakes teaching and high-stakes testing mixed with anxiety and panic for the student and teacher.

Education has become a high-stakes proposition in the United States. Some students in middle schools compete with test scores to get accepted into elite private high schools. They then go on to compete to be accepted into competitive four-year universities right after graduation. It is assumed that without achieving these benchmarks, the student will never be successful. Yet, it is critical to understand that "[d]rop-out facts show that having ... learning [complexities] results in a 300% increased likelihood of dropping out of middle or high school. Many … [students]

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who drop out may not have their learning disability [identified,] monitored or treated, meaning the issue becomes invisible and doesn't appear in [statistics] as much" (Vuleta, 2020). This is a staggering statistic, yet it is important to point out this increased likelihood of dropping out does not take into account the issues and problems inherent with distance learning during the 2019-2021 COVID pandemic. As well, the Dyslexia Center of Utah points out that one in five students or 15-20% of the population has a language-based learning disability (*Understanding Dyslexia*, 2021). Students with learning disabilities (this study will use the term *learning complexities*) face the challenge of not being part of the community in a high-achieving class and not being able to understand as easily as those without learning complexities. To add to this stress, some of these students may also have further non-academic emotional and educational learning barriers. These learning barriers could be but are not limited to gender, race, and immigration status. These learning barriers compounded with learning complexities will impact students' decision to stop learning and, in some cases, drop out of school.

The high-stakes proposition in United States education has focused teachers on getting the knowledge to the student as directly as possible, so the student has access to the information that is on the test. This idea of "data dumping" into the student, even with the best of intentions, has left a large number of students deprived of benefits given to others. Seven million students in US schools suffer from a lack of adequate teaching (Vuleta, 2020). It is important to realize that the teacher who is more focused on the data dumping of information than focusing on the student may be doing more damage to the student's wellbeing. This teacher's concern is for the success of getting students' information and skills needed for the exams, not the students' understanding and mastery (Valenzuela, 1999; Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994; Wong, 2010). This limits equal access to the teacher's lessons and curriculum. Those students with learning complexities find

themselves so lost they become demotivated (Vuleta, 2020). This study aims to turn this demotivation around and seeks to improve students' sense of belonging in the classroom. With the use of authentic caring, realness, vulnerability, and teacher-student companionship with my students, the hypothesis is that the classroom becomes a safe space, and students with learning complexities become part of the education community and will, as a side effect, master the lessons and curriculum.

In this research project, I used the terms "safe space" and "sense of safety" interchangeably to refer to the classroom conditions that I sought to create through this inquiry. I have used the term *safe space* as one of my students has expressed about my teaching: "no one teaches like you, you free up that space … [making the classroom a place free of prejudgment for the students and their abilities] … to learn and to think." This is the principle that Wong described in her work with Chinese students, and Valenzuela outlined in her research with Latinx students (Valenzuela, 1999; Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994; Wong, 2010). As such, my goal was to create a sense of safety, or a safe space, for students with learning complexities to thrive. This should be seen as an imperative as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), formerly known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (federal law passed in 1975), mandates the provision of a free and appropriate public school education (*COE - Students With Disabilities*, 2021) as reported by National Center for Education Statistics (2021). It was my intention to demonstrate that a sense of safety (or a safe space) and a sense of belonging were foundational for any student, but especially for those students with learning complexities, to be able to learn. We as educators need to be aware of this fact.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching as an Advanced Placement U.S. History, U.S. History, and Honors Literature high school teacher for the past seven years at an upper middle class religious private school in the San Francisco Bay Area, I have seen the impact on students psychologically and emotionally from high-stakes education, and ultimately high-stakes testing. This school self-reports as a highly competitive community, with over 90 percent of graduating seniors eligible to attend competitive four-year universities. As the department chair for both the Social Science and Spanish Departments at my school site, I have heard comments from teachers that strike horror in my heart: "[This student] is not smart enough to get it;" "[that student] is lazy and finds it easier to cheat; they will end up failing the exam in May;" "school is tough, that's the way it goes," etc. It seems that some teachers do not have the intention of establishing a safe space to learn for their students, nor do they intend to create an authentically caring student-teacher relationship that would help the student to learn (Moen et al., 2020; Valenzuela, 1999, 2002). Some teachers have placed importance on the technical aspects of teaching in the classroom and delivering the material to students to be, as the teacher is thinking, prepared for the exams (Valenzuela, 1999). Sometimes, teachers deem teaching as a job and do not focus on developing a student-teacher relationship built around mutual respect (Valenzuela, 1999). In doing so, the teacher inadvertently creates a power relationship within their classroom built on the banking concept of education, where the teacher deposits all their knowledge into their students with the expectation that the student will regurgitate that same knowledge later (Freire, 2000).

These non-authentic caring, or counterfeit caring (Valenzuela, 1999), relationships with teachers who create power relationships with students with learning complexities within their classroom (Freire, 2000) further complicate the situation. Students with learning complexities

see their fellow students "get it" and perform in classes at high levels. They see their peers achieving acceptance to competitive four-year colleges, knowing they are not in the same league academically. The student does not have a safe learning environment because a counterfeit caring (Valenzuela, 1999) teacher has established a destructive power relationship within the classroom. As a result, the students shut down and fall behind, not making efforts to be part of the school or classroom communities. I have seen high-achieving students, concerned that their grades will be harmed by working with fellow learners who have learning complexities, insist that all assignments are completed as individuals, or they will take over and complete the whole group projects themselves, fearing that other students lack understanding or ability will harm their grades. Additionally, I have witnessed top-performing students requesting to not work with another student because the other student did not talk. The student was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder with verbal and physical difficulties. This student could not verbally communicate and needed his mother to help him by being his voice; the high-achieving students did not want to work with this individual because of his learning complexities. As a result, he never fit into the school, let alone the classroom community.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced schooling to transition into distance learning, this student began to shine. He had always been eloquent with his thoughts and brief, successful, and precise with his words, yet it took him a long time to compose the sentences as he needed to use his fist to point at each letter to spell out what he wanted to say. With distance learning and Zoom's chat feature, he became as fast as any other student. His "voice" was "heard" in class discussions, and he became the most involved student. Being outside the classroom environment and online, this student was empowered to communicate in classroom discussions as those that would judge him were not physically present to oppress his words. He also demonstrated how

thoughtful and articulate he was in his posts through Zoom's chat feature. Distance learning had

enabled this student, who has learning complexities, to overcome the educational blocks. This

also suggested that several of my students felt safer at home learning online than they did in my

traditional classroom environment.

These vignettes illustrate the emotional issues that students with learning complexities

face in classrooms beyond the educational blocks that traditionally plague these students, which

include but are not limited to difficulty in reading comprehension, spelling, and/or concentration

(e.g., those challenges presented by the academic routine of the curriculum and the material

being presented in the classroom). Using the ideas expressed above, I set out to foster

connections with students who have learning complexities. It was my experience that students

with learning complexities are having trouble receiving the support given to them through their

504 plans. In my experience, this lack of teaching support could be from an unclear

understanding of the 504 plans' accommodations that seek to modify teacher assignments and

assessments that require extended time and reduced homework for students identified with

learning complexities. This lack of understanding might have stemmed from the need for the

teacher to adhere to the Common Core Standards (California & Department of Education, 2013)

and the standardized tests (*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) | U.S. Department of Education*,

n.d.). It could also be similar to a traditional cultural expectation played out in the classroom as

Raviv and Bader (2021) pointed out in their research on students with learning complexities.

This misunderstanding causes the teachers to say "school is tough; that's the way it goes" or

causes the students who do not struggle with learning complexities to not want to work with

students who have learning complexities. The expectation comes from the idea of

standardization – all students get the same learning – when trying to establish equity.

The needs of students with learning complexities have inadvertently become overlooked and misunderstood by many teachers and lawmakers. Yet, in the past seven years as a teacher, I can recall numerous fond moments in my classroom where these students have found a safe space to express their needs and dreams. As such, I am curious about how the combination of the strategies of *being authentic* (Valenzuela, 1999, 2002) and *being a companion* (Wong, 2010) can impact students' sense of belonging. In most cases, the students who come to use my classroom as a safe space (Aanstoos, 2021; Crandall et al., 2020) have expressed that they experience or are experiencing anxiety and desperation due to the demands placed on them by sociological norms, the school's high-performing culture, and/or the cultural norms expected of them from home. Traditional cultural norms play a massive role in students' expectations. I was able to identify this anxiety and desperation being exasperated during distance learning while teaching remotely through the Zoom platform. What is of concern for the 2021-2022 school year and could be studied independently as students return to in-person learning is the establishment of a safe space in the classroom environment. Will the use of authentic caring strategies on the part of teachers help to ease the social anxiety inherent in students as they are returning to in-person learning?

Purpose of the Research

Students need to have a safe learning environment to have a successful learning experience. Research has demonstrated the need for safety, or a safe space, or a place free of prejudgment, is necessary to establish a sense of belonging because "… if [the] safety needs of an adolescent are not met, it may make it more challenging to achieve feelings of self-esteem and confidence…" (Crandall et al., 2020, p. 274). The research study conducted by Crandall and colleagues was able to demonstrate that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be used to help predict adolescent depression symptoms (Crandall et al., 2020). The researchers pointed out the

connection between depression among adolescents and safety (Crandall et al., 2020). This would beg the question, can an authentically caring teacher establish a safe learning environment to help establish a sense of belonging? In their analysis of data, Crandall and colleagues (2020) found that neighborhood safety was not a contributing factor to symptoms of depression. However, their data showed that the need for safety, a lower order of need, took precedence over the need to belong, a higher-order emotional need. Thus, the lower-level needs took precedent over higher-order emotional needs. Because the lower socioeconomic families studied demonstrated a predisposition to meeting the basic needs, depression did not become an issue. As such, at my school site, I am interacting with students who come from high- to middle-socioeconomic families and their basic needs have already been met. The question becomes: if these students come into contact with an unsafe learning environment, will the higher-order emotional need for belonging affect their ability to learn adversely? With this negative sense of belonging, even though they come from high- to middle- socioeconomic families, students may have a more difficult time learning.

Furthermore, I have been teaching at an upper-middle-class religious private school; the school is also competitive, with approximately 90 percent of the graduating seniors being accepted to four-year universities. The school's junior/senior high school population pre-COVID had been one-third of international students from Asia. The other two-thirds had been made up of approximately one-quarter of first-generation Indian American (from India) and first-generation Chinese American and almost one-quarter Anglo-American with a mix of one percent African-American and one percent Latinx. As Angela Valenzuela and Sanford M. Dornsbuch (1994) pointed out in their research, there is a correlation between the student's family, how much the family is involved, and academic success. At my school site, this family connection is apparent

in the high expectation of students to succeed and go to a four-year university. This family expectation of the students at the school site has created a high-stakes, high-stress learning environment and the classroom has become an academic arena for the students.

With this high expectation permeating the classroom environment, it may no longer seen as a safe space by some students. The classroom environment may cause anxiety and panic attacks among the student population. In addition, those students with learning complexities are even more impacted by this high-stress learning environment. Many of these learners have become overwhelmed to a point of no longer connecting to the school community, shutting down in the classroom, and not completing assignments. This situation was further exacerbated during the COVID distance learning requirements. Because of distance learning during COVID, the connections teachers might possibly have established with students with learning complexities in the in-person classroom have been limited (Raviv & Bader, 2021; Sowell & Sugisaki, 2021; Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994), and with their families' high expectations of them to perform, the lack of a safe space began to present itself. Students with learning complexities struggled even more. I saw this in my Zoom classroom. In my experience with students with learning complexities during distance learning, I saw them completely shut down and disengage. I assumed that the safe space needed for learning, as Crandall has explained the critical nature of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Crandall et al., 2020), no longer existed for them.

This inquiry drew on the work of Angela Valenzuela (1999) and Nga-Wing Anjela Wong (2010), as these researchers have pointed to the importance of developing familism and community for a student's academic success. Drawing on their work with Latinx and Chinese American youth, I would like to cultivate a safe space for students, especially those with learning complexities to establish belonging and build a learning community in my classroom through

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realness/vulnerability and teacher-student companionship. Alice Crandall and colleagues (2019) draw on Maslow's research (1954, 1970), and define a safe space as an environment where "… physical and emotional safety, love and belonging, and esteem must be met first for individuals to reach self-actualization and transcendence" (Crandall et al., 2020, p. 274). This means that before a student can begin to learn, the student needs to feel safe and have a sense of belonging. I hypothesized that the safe space that I cultivated in my classroom will be critical considering how students have returned to in-person learning and need to recover and re-learn how to be in a school community again.

The classroom environment needs to become a safe space for students so they can become connected and foster a sense of belongingness in the classroom and build a connectedness to school. McNeely and colleagues show in their research that a student will likely feel connected to school when the "… teachers are empathetic, consistent, encourage student self-management and allow students to make decisions…" (McNeely et al., 2002, p. 145). This point is reinforced by Valenzuela's work with Latinx students (1999, 2002); when they felt connected to a classroom teacher who showed authentic caring to the students, those students were not only better academic students but were part of the school community. Valenzuela (1999) also demonstrated that when teachers reflect on their teaching and relied on the "banking system" of education, the students did not engage in the classroom nor did they care to be part of the school community, and at times failed to attend class or show up to school.

Wong (2010) also pointed out that when the students know that teachers care, they are more likely to become so engaged with the learning space that they help to build the community, fostering a sense of belongingness and connectedness. It is important to note that the teacher must work at establishing a safe space within the classroom to foster connectedness and

belongingness (Crandall et al., 2020). This safe space can be seen as an environment free of judgment, a place of cognitive curiosity, and a classroom that fosters inquiry-based problem-posing built on the power-sharing student-teacher relationship (Crandall et al., 2020; Freire, 2000; McNeely et al., 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Wong, 2010). The teacher whose classroom environment seeks these things can become the safe space and a refuge for those students looking for belonging. This classroom is more likely to be one where in-depth learning will take place. This teacher's classroom can help bridge the gap for those students with learning complications to have a sense of safety after being alienated by high-stress education and seemingly counterfeit caring.

Action Research Question

The action research question of this study was: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students identified with learning complexities?* Drawing on Angela Valenzuela's (1999) definition of authentic caring, my strategies in this study included teacher realness/vulnerability and teacher-student companionship. I expected that the students would feel connected to the teacher, the classroom community, and the school as a whole. Additionally, I hoped that the students would feel comfortable interacting with the students in my classroom and other classroom learning environments. In doing so they would then feel more comfortable involving themselves in the school community and my classroom environment. Therefore, I hypothesized that students identified with learning complexities would find a safe place and a heightened sense of belonging within the classroom community.

Limitations

This study was subject to several limitations that may have affected the outcome of this research project. These limitations include time constraints, a small pool of participants, and overlapping roles of the teacher-researcher, as well as the personal connection of the teacher-researcher to the subject of the study. The research case study was limited to an eight-week timeframe due to the expectations of the graduate program the teacher-researcher was enrolled in at the time of data collection and analysis. The research was conducted at a small religious private school in the east bay area of San Francisco; this small school environment inherently limits the number of students in courses and thereby limits the number of students with learning complexities within the class sections. The limited number of participants offered a narrowed number of responses to the surveys as there were small class sizes in each of the cohorts. However, the small class sizes did not appear to have a negative impact on the implementation of the authentic caring strategies and teacher-student relationships in general. This allows for a thorough view of the strategies imposed by the teacher-researcher. In this case study, the roles of the teacher and the researcher were combined. This established a close relationship with the students being observed, and this close relationship may have influenced and impacted the data collection process.

Another limitation of this research was the length of the research period. This project was conducted over eight weeks. With this limited scope, the impact of a safe space on students' sense of belonging and involvement was a challenge to assess. However, the data have been interpreted with this in mind, and I as the teacher-researcher worked to establish a safe space in the classroom from the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year to create a community using authentic caring to establish the student-teacher relationships. In this study, I brought self-

reflection to my teaching decisions. Leaning on my experiences with learning complexities growing up in school and being aware of the power and privilege I have been awarded, I modified and adapted my instructional practice so that each student could find a community of learning in my classroom. Utilizing data triangulation, I was able to gather experiences with my students from several different perspectives that enabled me to be objective.

Positionality of the Researcher

I am an Anglo cisgender male who researched how authentically caring relationships with my students created a sense of safety in my classroom, particularly for students identified with learning complexities. I also examined how the impact of this sense of safety has on my students' feeling of belongingness and community in my classroom. Seeing the impact on adolescence due to the increasing high-stress, high-stakes learning environment that is school and the classroom in California schools, I see the need for a safe space for my students to recover and destress, especially students with learning complexities. When I look into my students' eyes while teaching, I see the terror and despair that I had experienced as a dyslexic high schooler in the 1990s. I do not want them to experience the same trauma I experienced from counterfeit care that I received from my teachers (Valenzuela, 1999). Therefore, I have engaged in an ongoing reflective process as a teacher, continuing to reexamine my teaching process and use of power and privilege to ensure that I am using them in such a way that I do no more harm to students in my classroom but instead empower them to be successful (Aanstoos, 2021; Crandall et al., 2020; Freire, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999; Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994).

I, as the teacher-researcher, have been identified with learning complexities. It is important to identify this point here as these learning complexities influence my teaching choices and how I interpreted the data that I collected over the eight-week research period. Being

diagnosed with dyslexia as a third-grader, I continue to come to terms with my learning

complexities. I was terrified of the classroom and dreaded each day. But being in a position to

complete graduate studies – something I never believed possible – I truly do believe that every

student can learn, and every student can succeed. This drives me to find a way to establish a

relationship with my students that will enable them to see their true value and guide them on the

path to success. Through the establishment of authentically caring relationships, students

identified with learning complexities can also find this path (McNeely et al., 2002; Raviv &

Bader, 2021; Valenzuela, 1999; Wong, 2010).

Definition of Terms

The following terms have been defined to bring clarity to the reader. The terms that

follow are used throughout this action research project. It is the hope that these definitions will

add to the understanding of this project.

Authentic Caring

In this study, authentic caring comes from Valenzuela's work with Latinx students. She

has defined it as:

> Caring theory addresses the need for pedagogy to follow from and flow through
> relationships cultivated between teacher and student. Although educación has
> implications for pedagogy, it is first a foundational cultural construct that provides
> instructions on how one should live in the world. With its emphasis on respect,
> responsibility, and sociality, it provides a benchmark against which all humans are to be
> judged, formally educated or not. (Valenzuela, 1999. p. 21)

Counterfeit Caring

Counterfeit caring is a term based on Valenzuela's notion of *subtractive schooling* that

describes a teacher who only gives lip service to caring for their students and their wellbeing

(Valenzuela, 1999). This counterfeit caring teacher's intentions are merely to deliver the

"banking system" of education over that of a power-sharing student-teacher relationship (Freire, 2000).

Learning Complexities

In this research document, the term *learning complexities* will be used for any persons who would qualify as having learning difficulties/learning differences of any kind. These persons qualify as having learning complexities when they have a "… dysfunction of the central nervous system, [and/or] have a neurological base [and manifests through] … acquiring and utilization of attention, talking, reading, writing, conceptualization, or mathematical capabilities. Such internal disabilities are believed to stem from a central neurological dysfunction" (Sharoni, 2011), while inherent LD stem from a dysfunction of the central nervous system, have a neurological base, and affects different people in different manners…" (Raviv & Bader, 2021 p.95-96).

Sense of Safety or Safe Space

The terms, a *sense of safety* and *safe space* will be used interchangeably throughout this document. The idea of a safe space, in this study, comes from Abraham Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* theory. This research considers safe space as Maslow explains the sense of safety to be a foundational need of all humans: "… this to be true for the needs for love, safety, belongingness, respect, understanding, etc[.] … such needs behave far more like the unconditioned responses upon which conditioning is originally based than like conditioned responses" (Maslow, 1954 p.338).

Teacher-Student Companionship

Teacher-student companionship is derived from the ideas put forth in the work by Freire (1996), Valenzuela (1999), and Wong (2010); the concept is similar to mentorship. The teacher focuses on student learning around moral and/or ethical caring for the real (basic) needs of the

student. This is essential for authentic caring (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21). As Wong puts it, "…a holistic approach is necessary rather than simply focusing solely on the academic well-being of a student" (Wong, 2010, p. 733). And Valenzuela further expands on the point: "Expressive discourse entails a broad and loosely defined ethic [of caring] that molds itself in situations and has a proper regard for human affections, weaknesses, and anxieties" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21). In essence, the teacher looks out for their student's well-being emotionally, physically, and spiritually – in some cases, "real life" skills are taught to the student beyond that of the academic subjects that are expected of teachers.

Implications

There are several implications of this research. Sowell and Sugisaki (2021) helped to establish an understanding that, through the use of the strategies they employed, they can help ELLs and students with learning complexities. These strategies would be helpful for any student to learn. So, the same strategies should be utilized for helping any of my students (Sowell & Sugisaki, 2021). The goal of the teachers is to teach. For students to learn, they must feel comfortable doing so. The tools of authentic caring, teacher-student companionship, and a sense of safety should be explored within other populations and other circumstances. I intend to continue this cycle of research and question how authentic caring and teacher-student companionship impacts international students who are asked to move away from their families and live in a strange land with strangers. Would this study have any impact on their sense of community? I also wondered if the intervention would foster the creation of surrogate families for my international students.

The other impact of this study has been to see students as whole people. By using authentic caring for the whole student, I have seen the impact on all my students. The need for

teachers to utilize authentic caring has now been heightened as we come back to in-person teaching post-COVID-19 distance learning. By treating my students with care and offering a safe space for them to be themselves, I have had several positive responses. One of the extreme responses has come from a student becoming overwhelmed by how much kindness and space I gave them. The sense of being overwhelmed experienced by this student caused panic as they did not know how to process this lack of extreme high stress; and through a personal connection, I was trying to lower the high-stakes environment in my classroom. By transforming my teaching style and offering freedom of self-expression and student thought, my classroom environment became an environment built on safety and a space for free-thinking. This demonstrates the need for teachers to establish a safe space classroom environment – a classroom environment where students are allowed and encouraged to be themselves without judgment. I am super excited to help other teachers in my school community learn how to establish a safe space classroom. Before I implemented this research, I was approached by three colleagues to help them learn how to create this kind of classroom environment. I look forward to sharing the outcome of my research. In fact, the curriculum coordinator asked to see the outcome of my project and indicated interest in having me design a professional development session to help other teachers in my school community.

Chapter II

Literature Review

This project addressed the sense of belonging in the classroom learning environment for all students. This action research project sought to answer the question: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, particularly in students identified with learning complexities*? The project drew on the findings from Angela Valenzuela's (1999) work with Latinx students, and the work of the theorists Abraham Maslow (1958) and Paulo Freire (2000, 2014) that inform the definition of authentic caring. The strategies used in this study include teacher realness, vulnerability, and transparency. The project attempted to develop the teacher-student and student-student relationships. I hypothesized that students would find a safe place and a heightened sense of belonging within the classroom community when using these strategies.

Overview of Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review was to provide an overview of the literature that has informed the study. This literature review began with the theoretical framework established by the theories developed by Paulo Freire (2000), which became know as critical pedagogy, and Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs model. Freire (2000) and critical pedagogy theory are fundamental to understanding the need for a sense of belonging. Maslow (1954) reinforces this need for belonging within the theory of the hierarchy of needs that a safe space is needed before a sense of belonging can be established. Combining Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy theory with Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs model, I concluded it is important to establish the teacher-student power-sharing relationship within the relationship. This power-sharing relationship can

be seen as the backbone and foundation of a safe space in the classroom environment and a sense of belonging within the learning space provided in the classroom. These theories and theorists have driven the research in this literature review. All research studies were retrieved from electronic databases that include EBSCOhost, Education Source, ERIC, and Saint Mary's College electronic book holdings. The key search terms included: *additive schooling, authentic caring, caring relationships, collaborative activities interpersonal relation(s), culturally relevant pedagogy, pedagogy, oppressed, organizational climate (in education), school connectedness, social-emotional learning, collaborative learning, students with learning disabilities statistics,* and *subtractive schooling*; these terms were used to find articles for this study.

Theoretical Rationale

This action research project was grounded in two major psychological and educational theories. The first theory, critical pedagogy, developed a framework that outlines that, for the teacher to be truly successful in their pursuit of teaching, they must reflect on their actions as a teacher (Freire, 2000). The teacher must truly be open to the fact that they will learn from their students. In reality, critical pedagogy, as Freire (2000) argued, is the power of a teacher-student sharing in the learning environment with their student-teacher. This shared power establishes a learning environment that develops a symbiotic codependent relationship that liberates the student and the teacher (Freire, 2000).

The second theory that shaped this action research project is the hierarchy of needs theory in which Abraham Maslow (1958) proposed that human motivation is dependent on meeting needs. Maslow explained that humans are driven by the needs for safety, belonging, and self-esteem. These needs can be seen as important for the classroom learning environment. This action research project looked at how the safety need is interconnected with the sense of

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belonging needed to establish a learning environment. This interconnectedness speaks to Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy because only in a judgment-free environment can the power-sharing relationship exist between the teacher-student and the student-teacher. This judgment-free environment creates, fosters, and maintains a sense of safety within a classroom. The sense of safety is directly connected to the judgment-free environment established by the sharing of power the teacher has with their student. Without this sharing of power, the learning environment of the classroom becomes an authoritarian space that strips the student of their freedom of choice and becomes a barrier to learning. Each of these theories contributed to this action research project and informed the searches for the research that became the foundation of this literature review.

Critical Pedagogy and Paulo Freire

Freire's work centers on the power relationships within the classroom/learning environment. The pedagogy approach to equalizing the power relationship has become known as *critical pedagogy*. Using his established distinction between the oppressed and the oppressor and the interdependent relationship between both these two groups, Freire explained this relationship of the oppressed and oppressor as a symbiotic codependent one. The oppressed cannot exist without the oppressor, nor can the oppressor exist without the oppressed. He argued that this symbiotic codependent relationship is central to every human relationship (Freire, 2000). This relationship between oppressor and oppressed is at the central foundation of critical pedagogy. This relationship is critical to the environment where the teacher is expected to teach and the learner is expected to learn. Yet, critical pedagogy purports that the teacher is expected to also learn from the learner and the learner is also expected to teach the teacher. This is counter to the teaching mindset that the teachers deliver the knowledge, and the student receives that

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knowledge. To see teaching this way, Freire (2014) pointed out, is to turn the student into a receptacle of knowledge, an object that reserves only the knowledge that is deemed necessary, and the teacher then "lords" over their pupil, depositing the knowledge. This kind of teaching establishes an adverse relationship. Freire (2000, 2014) pointed out the flaw in thinking: the teacher is an all-knowing entity and the student is removed from the liberty of choice in their learning. The suppression of choice is an act of oppression and in so doing causes the student to become oppressed and to transform into an object – becoming enslaved by the teacher (Freire, 2000).

On the contrary, critical pedagogy, as defined by Freire (2000), is the establishment of a co-learning relationship between teacher and student. As part of the co-learning process, the teacher reflects on the object of what is being taught as well as how it is being taught to the learner/student. This reflection guides that teacher's instruction. The teacher must always be thinking in terms of their positionally just as Freire presents: "…in favor of whom, in favor of what, in favor of what dream I am teaching, I will have to think against whom, against what, against what dream I am teaching" (Freire et al., 2016, p. 21). These questions are central to critical pedagogy. Without them, the teacher becomes authoritarian. As an authoritarian, the teacher is not in a position to learn from their students. Not learning from their students, the teacher becomes the oppressor and the student becomes oppressed. In oppressing the student, the teacher castrates their freedom, suppressing them into "slavery" (Freire, 2000; Freire et al., 2016).

The critical pedagogy approach embraces the democratic teacher-student relationship to the extent that a dialogue between the teacher and the student takes place, and this dialogue serves as the power-sharing conduit where each has an equal voice (Gürsel-Bilgin, 2020).

Through the dialogue, the teacher enters into a power-sharing relationship with the student creating an environment where the student has the means to teach the teacher as well and learn from the teacher. In this way, the shell of authoritarianism is no longer the gatekeeper of knowledge and instead, establishes a collective of learners. As a result, the learning of knowledge is a shared experience, and students are liberated from the *banking* concept of learing (Freire, 2000; Freire et al., 2014). In other words, the teacher no longer strips students of their liberties to learn (Freire et al., 2014). The practice of dialogue in the classroom reinforces democratic teacher-student relationships, making collaborative space within the learning environment of the school and thereby establishing a sense of safety where the student can learn.

Critical pedagogy, as explained in Vlieghe's (2018) views, infuses the ideas of Rancière's (1991) thing-centered pedagogy, bringing forth the idea of emancipatory education which assumes that "… all are equally intelligent…" (Vlieghe, 2018, p. 922). With the thing-centered infusion, the dialogue between the teacher and the student becomes a relationship where co-equals share equally their ideas and dreams and each becomes liberated (Freire, 2000; Gürsel-Bilgin, 2020; Vlieghe, 2018). When critical pedagogy is embraced, the classroom can become a space of safety for all to learn. This implication was central to the action research and informed how I developed teacher-student and student-student relationships within my classroom.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In his seminal text, *A Dynamic Theory of Human Motivation* (1958), Maslow theorized that human behavior is motivated by a series of needs. These needs, he explained, are predicated and dependent upon one another. He continued to explain that these needs are organized into a hierarchical relationship (Maslow, 1958). Maslow suggested this hierarchical relationship of needs can be grouped into ever-increasing bands of needs that motivate human behavior

(Maslow, 1958). He further explained physiological (food, water, etc.) are foundational needs. When these needs are met, the next band of needs, social needs, is required to be met before learning can take place. Of these social needs, the need for safety is the first need followed by the need for love, which when fulfilled, motivates the need for belonging which in turn motivates the need for self-esteem, followed finally by the need for self-actualization (Maslow, 1958). He went on to argue that the foundational needs must be met before the higher-level needs will emerge. Maslow argued that these physiological needs are fundamental to human survival – this being the major motivation to remain alive (Maslow, 1958). Maslow further argued that until the physiological needs are met all the other higher-order needs do not exist (Maslow, 1958).

According to Maslow's (1958) theory, all social needs are predicated on the meeting of the need for safety. Without meeting the need for safety, none of the other higher-level needs (including the need for safety, love or belonging, and self-esteem) can be met (Maslow, 1958; Engel, 2021). This is an important point as all of Maslow's social needs can be seen at play in the classroom. Rouse (2004) offered an addition to Maslow's theory. The addition is that people are motivated by goals, and these goals can be seen as alternatives to the hierarchy of needs (Rouse, 2004). These goal-oriented people seek to fulfill what society expects from them. Goal orientation as a motivation drives humans to reinforce safety needs, belonging, and self-esteem (Rouse, 2004). Without meeting these needs, a student will likely be hard-pressed to learn. The implications in the hierarchy of needs theory were critical to my action research project, and the connections required to establish a sense of safety and thereby a community of belonging within my classroom.

Review of Related Research

This action research project has three major areas of interest. The first is the students' sense of belonging. Research in this section will focus on the classroom learning environment of all students and how and why they develop a sense of belonging. The theorists Freire and Maslow have established that it is critical to develop a sense of belonging within the classroom learning environment to have a learning community. The action research question revolves specifically around how students with learning complexities enter into and find, a sense of belonging within the learning environment of the classroom. The next area of focus is how other researchers attempted to establish belongingness in the learning environment for all students in the classroom space. The findings of these research studies reveal the strengths and compels questions of inclusivity for students with learning complexities within the classroom community. This action research project sought to reveal if students with learning complexities responded to these critical teaching strategies and found a community within the classroom. The project further explored on how students responded to the use of the critical strategies of collaborative activities and authentic caring and the response to the learning environment and the establishment of a community.

The Students' Sense of Belonging in the Classroom Learning Environment

Students' sense of belonging is not only important for them to begin learning, but also for them to enter into the power-sharing teacher-student relationship. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the need for safety must be met before any other needs can be acted upon. The feeling is critical to the power-sharing teacher-student relationship and will be encouraged with the use of the critical pedagogy theory. Critical pedagogy theory can be seen in the use of collaborative learning spaces and contribute to the sense of belonging. This sense of

community or belongingness is essential to student learning and is pointed out by the following research.

The researchers McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) investigated how to promote school connectedness. These researchers were seeking to answer "Why do some adolescents feel connected to school while others do not?" (McNeely et al., 2002, p. 138). The researchers used a quantitative confidential questionnaire asking students to self-report their school connectedness, their grade point, demographic information, and the school's discipline policies. Students reported their school connectedness, using a five-point, Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" scale (McNeely et al., 2002). McNeely and colleagues also asked school administrators to complete self-administered questionnaires about school policies and procedures, teacher characteristics, and student-body characteristics (McNeely et al., 2002).

The sample set of this research included 71,315 students in 127 American high schools and middle schools (McNeely et al., 2002). The school sizes ranged from tiny schools of 42 students to mega-schools with more than 5,000 students (McNeely et al., 2002). The authors analyzed data from a representative sample of 7th to 12th-grade students as well as school administrators (McNeely et al., 2002).

The authors' conclusions from the data were confusing as they listed several caveats and warnings regarding their interpretation of the findings. They did not come to clear conclusions about their research question but did identify several other avenues to help study school connectedness. The findings demonstrated, from a pool of 127 schools, "connectedness" ranged from 3.1 to 4.4 (average on a Likert scale from 1 to 5) (McNeely et al., 2002). The limitations of this study are in the size comparison. For example, an average class size of 23 students would not be at a mega-school site (McNeely et al., 2002). The results did not consider if this mega-

school site had a first-year teacher with a much larger class size than a small school site with a similar first-year teacher (McNeely et al., 2002). However, this study helped to reinforce the importance of a student's sense of belonging and school connectedness to that of the student's sense of being safe in a learning environment (McNeely et al., 2002). The questions regarding zero-tolerance policies and harsh punishments still may affect students' sense of safety and thereby their sense of belonging. The implications these researchers have made with the strict use of zero-tolerance and harsh punishments added to my understanding that in order for a skilled teacher to correctly utilize school discipline policies, they must balance discipline with authentic caring. Harsher discipline for misbehavior, if not appropriately administered, seemed, based on the findings of this research, may harm creating a safe space in the classroom even though the harsher discipline was intended to establish a safe school environment.

The researchers Raviv and Bader (2021) looked specifically at perceived cultural norms affecting how learning for students with learning complexities and how these students fit within the communities. Raviv and Bader's (2021) findings helped me understand that an individual's traditional cultural background played a larger part in identifying students with learning complexities and how well they would flourish academically, sociologically, and emotionally. It also helped me to see that the same traditional cultural background of the community would play a major role in the assumptions made when offering help to students with learning complexities and the expectations placed on students with learning complexities by teachers, administrators, and parents.

The results of Raviv and Bader's study reinforced the findings of other research when dealing with emotional needs as well as students with learning complexities. However, the study also revealed the need for education and training on the part of teachers and their cultural

traditions. This is an important aspect because the study was conducted within a small community environment just as this action research project will be completed. The research study conducted by Raviv and Bader (2021) clarified the importance of cultural stigma and labeling found within communities that honor traditions both sociologically and educationally. Raviv and Bader (2021) identified the potential negative impacts that are associated with learning complexities and cultural bias.

Raviv and Bader (2021) used the questions to guide their study to focus on how the educational system offered support to students identified with learning complexities, the degree that which parents and teachers of students identified with learning complexities accepted the educational system's assistance, and what obstacles existed in the society that promoted or hindered the assistance to students identified with learning complexities (Raviv & Bader, 2021). The researchers used a mixed method research design, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. The researchers looked at the same phenomenon from two different angles, which was their explanation for the mixed-methods design. The researchers used several questionnaires and interviews to gather the data. Their project included 67 teachers from elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools in the Druze sector of Israel, and parents of students identified with learning complexities. Participants were selected randomly.

The results of the study showed a positive attitude toward the inclusion, or mainstreaming, of students with learning complexities on behalf of teachers. For the most part, the surveyed teachers felt there were many benefits to the inclusion of students with learning complexities. The reasons ranged from the teachers' ability to learn new skills and thereby improve their teaching, that the inclusion would help the socialization of peer-to-peer for both students with learning complexities and those without, and the inclusion would enable students

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with learning complexities to strengthen their self-esteem and emotional development. In addition to analyzing the data they collected, the researchers went beyond and suggested a need to look at the way the cultural traditions affect the way education and society see family honor and students with learning complexities.

I have experienced similar challenges in my classroom over the past eight years. This is a good first step as emotional well-being is just as important as academic success. Tools should be given to teachers, administrators, and community leaders to help understand the ramifications students with learning complexities face when confronted with learning. The results of the Raviv and Bader (2021) study showed a contradiction within the parent's view of the teacher's ability and tools to support and help their students. The issue seemed to be that the teachers did not have the training to work with students with learning complexities, and as a result, the teacher would be kind-hearted and give the assistance and aid needed, but then give an assessment that did not reflect the kind of learning the student received. This is a reflection and interpretation on my part coming from the limited data presented in this research study. The methodology employed by the researchers, I think, was appropriate, for it did indeed identify the expectations from the point of view of the parents, and the intentions of the teachers working with students from the Druze community were to seek help and/or offer help to students with learning complexities.

Raviv and Bader (2021) call attention to how safe spaces need to be established within the learning environments and the need for this space and more importantly the need for a sense of belonging. Similarly, Branka Vuleta (2020) called out the number of students with learning complexities nationwide and pointed out the implications these numbers have on education. Vuleta (2020) assembled data reported in several other sources, including the National Center for Biotechnology, Information, Dyslexia Center of Utah, the CDC, National Institutes of Health,

Attitude Magazine, National Institutes of Health, Learning Liftoff, Autistica, National Center for

Education Statistics, Statista, Learning Disabilities Association, Child Mind Institute, StatCan,

National Institutes of Health, University of Hertfordshire, National Institutes of Health, NCLD,

Read & Spell, and Exploring Your Mind, to arrive at the current (2020) statistics for the several

different learning complexities. Vuleta (2020) reported utilizing these statistics to identify

students with learning complexities and the impact on the educational system to address those

needs. This statistical data make a compelling account for the need of these students to be

addressed.

Vuleta's (2020) report is very useful; however, the title of the article is very unfortunate.

The article's title uses the term "Horrifying" which dredges up an emotionally harmful response

(Vuleta, 2020). What is missing is: how did those students with learning complexities fare under

the circumstances of distance learning during the years 2019-2021 during the COVID pandemic,

and where were these students' needs addressed? The author's approach of generating a list of

statistical data was very helpful for calling attention to an overlooked issue in the US educational

system. So, in that way the author was successful, but the intention of shocking the reader with

"horrific" statistics was not accomplished. Yet, the need to address students with learning

complexities in the US educational system still must to be addressed, and how educators meet

these needs to be improved to help make those with learning complexities successful. These data

show the number of students with learning complexities and suggest the impact will be severe if

their needs are not met by transforming the education system to address those needs. The most

compelling piece of data regarding students with learning complexities is that the dropout rate

among this student population will increase by 300% (Vuleta, 2020). The drop out rate among

students with learning complexities is critical to understand as it points to the trouble and

problems that plague distance learning. Having a national statistic is critical to the understanding of the need for a study investigating the social-emotional need for belongingness and classroom community to address the fact that students with learning complexities are giving up and not learning. As I taught synchronously online during the COVID pandemic using Zoom, I watched my students who had been identified with learning complexities give up and stop learning. With the exception of my autistic student who was able to flourish during shelter-in-place, the rest of my students who had been identified with learing completixies became closed off and were reluctant and even resistant to collaborating in Zoom breakout rooms. In my experience, during the 2020-2021 school year, this was consistent with the information presented by Vuleta (2020): that students with learning complexities are more likely to give in to the stresses of learning and stop learning altogether.

Raviv and Bader (2021), McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002), and Vuleta's (2020) makes it clear that there is a need to address all students in finding a connection to the classroom learning environment. My study emphasizes the importance of students with learning complexities finding connectedness and a sense of belonging within the classroom. The idea of connection and belonging not only helps to facilitate learning but also a feeling of family.

Critical Intentional Strategies - What Has Come Before

It is critical to take action to establish the classroom as a space where belonging can be fostered. The following research focuses on looking at what is needed in order to establish belonging and community. Researchers of these studies looked at the components that affect the sense of belonging and safety from outside the classroom learning environment and the influences carried over into the classroom.

The research by Angela Valenzuela and Sanford M. Dornsbuch (1994) sought to understand the concept of *familism* helped or hindered students' academic achievement. Utilizing two surveys of self-reported grades and other key demographic measures from 2,666 Anglo and 492 Mexican origin, high school students' data were gathered to assess the impact of the students' families on their academic success (Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994). In their studies, students were asked to describe themselves and their families using the surveys. The data were collected from two questionnaires in 1987 and 1988 in San Francisco Bay Area high schools using qualitative/mixed-methods and self-reported grades (Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994).

Valenzuela and Dornsbuch (1994) considered the important question, how do academics measure academic success? Is academic success an "A+" on the test or is it the ability to think and utilize community resources to come to a common understanding and common conclusion? Their study did not look into this "common cultural conclusion," but it did open the door to question of whether the modern understanding of "successful academic achievement" really is an important measure of academic success.

Valenzuela and Dornsbuch tried to answer their research question as best they could from Texas when conduting their resurch in Californa: "Under what conditions is familism a help or a hindrance to academic achievement?" (Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994, p.19) and "Under what conditions does familism promote the academic achievement of Anglo and Mexican origin youth?" (Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994, p. 25). The researchers did advocate for a paradigm of belief from the onus of the academic achievement gap from those being educated and their families and allowed the reader to look at those who were tasked with teaching the student (as well as the teacher) to be responsible for what is seen as a lack of achievement. The two

researchers were able to point out the importance of a family network structure to be able to access the material being taught.

Valenzuela and Dornsbuch (1994) posited that the Latinx community has critical cultural capital and that these families have an important role in the success their students' learning. The family should be considered as a source of strength (Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994). This research added to my understanding of the complex web of relationships found within the homes of my students. It also added to my understanding of where the weight of academic success is coming from and how influential it is in the mind of my students. This shows the importance of the students' family relationships. I can see this family impact on my students, both from Asian backgrounds as well as those students identified with learning complexities.

At the onset of the COVID pandemic and the Shelter-in-Place order, as schools shifted from in-person learning to distant-learning spaces, the researchers Purbudak and Usta (2021) began studying the effects of distance learning. Over eight-weeks, the researchers studied sixth-grade students and their interactions during distance learning. They made a point to identify each student's learning style, so they could measure how the student reacted to the online learning environment (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). The students were then grouped into their learning styles based on the Kolb Learning Style model and asked to complete assignments from their teachers. The researchers tracked the students' engagement with class assignments and the students' engagement in class online learning environment over the eight-weeks (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). By the end of the study, the researchers were able to determine that students with the "converging" learning style suffered far more in a distance-learning environment, and those students with a "diverging" learning style were much more suited to the distance learning environment (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). This is a compelling point as it reinforces the need for

those students with converging learning styles who depend on the in-person classroom learning environment. This research also points to the implication that distance learning, for students with a converging learning style, was disruptive to learning. It is important to understand that if the student with a converging learning style is also one who has learning complexities, they will most likely stop learning during distance learning and, in doing so compound the problem in learning (Vuleta, 2020). This is something I have seen during my time teaching over Zoom. To see a student shut down and stop learning has haunted me during the COVID pandemic. Pürbudak and Usta's (2021) research has reinforced that the individual aspect inherent within an online learning space may bring success to one learning style more than it does to other styles.

The significance of the Pürbudak and Usta (2021) research is staggering. They are in effect pointing to the importance of how students learn best (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). Students with different learning styles will succeed or fail in distance learning, depending on those styles (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). Those students with a divergent learning style, from Pürbudak and Usta (2021) research, can learn in online teaching, whereas those students with converging learning modalities will suffer in a distance learning model. What becomes even more troublesome is when those students who have converging learning modalities as well as diagnosed, or perhaps undiagnosed, learning complexities are put into a situation where they must learn online. These students become even more susceptible to "learning failures" and will stop learning (Vuleta, 2020). Policy, fear, and legislative mandates could be seen during the COVID pandemic to be detrimental to the learning of those students who live with learning complexities.

The research conducted by Pürbudak and Usta (2021) is important to understand in my research project and for the future. These researchers were able to identify that some learning

styles would thrive in an online learning environment where others would not only suffer but would stop learning (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). The students would not just stop learning, but would not even show up to class during distance learning (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). What is important to identify is that some learning styles would be successful with distance learning, while others would suffer from that particular learning style and would take it upon themselves to stop learning and maybe even "virtually" drop out of school by not logging into class or turning in assignments (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). No matter what kind of breakout room or online collaborative space a teacher would create, the student with the converging learning style suffered (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). This compounds the learning blocks that Vuleta's (2020) research brought to light. Students with learning complexities became even more susceptible to stop learning within an online/distance learning environment.

Research suggests the learning styles of students and learning complexities are intertwined. This parallel connectedness in learning does not make a student harder to teach, it just requires the teacher to extend more grace to the student. For students to recover from the distance learning model and to maximize each student's learning styles, the teacher must be ready to change their teaching to accommodate and facilitate the learning. The classroom has now become a space that needs to be safe for learning. The researchers Purbudak and Usta (2021) have been successful in pointing out the importance of knowing each student's learning style; when connecting student learning styles to their learning complexities the urgency becomes heightened (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021; Vuleta, 2020). In a post-COVID learning environment, teachers need to be hyper-aware of how learning is more likely to be acquired by each student in their learning environment (be it zoom space or classroom). Only with this understanding and awareness will teachers be successful.

The use of collaborative spaces has been explored even before the distance-learning imperatives that have plagued the world during the onset of COVID. The internet and social media have been a space – safe or not – for communication and idea-sharing for 40 years (Zydyk, 2005). The researchers Syafrizal, Gailea, and Hardianti (2020) used Facebook as a means to augment their collaborative learning activities in the pre-COVID environment. These researchers studied senior high school students to find how the use of Facebook contributed to the student's ability to learn and use English. The researchers looked at how the students read and write English both with and without the use of the social media platform (Syafrizal et al., 2020). The choice to use Facebook was made by the researchers since most students in their control group were already engaged in the use of the social media platform (Syafrizal et al., 2020). The researchers pointed out that students already produced and interacted through written text on Facebook in English; their hope was to find a mode to help to correct the English grammar rules and requirements as students produced work in English (Syafrizal et al., 2020). The most critical point the researchers found in their study was the collaborative space – both teacher-student and student-student – social media offers, communication back and forth through the use of text, video, and images is the foundation of social media and students were already utilizing the social media platforms to communicate. The implementation of social media as a mode of communication has become normalized in academia.

The importance this study brings to my action research project is the understanding that students today already collaborate, communicate, and produce – in English – through social media (Syafrizal et al., 2020). The need to incorporate social media platforms into education has been explored before COVID but has become even more pronounced with the advent and predominance of distance learning (Syafrizal et al., 2020). The one thing this study does not

address is the lack of human connection that occurs when in social distance-learning space and the connectedness that occurs among humans. To find connection and free collaboration within an internet environment is normalized now that the world has experienced social distancing; the more important fact is that students were able to find true connectedness within the internet spaces (Aanstoos, 2021; Freire, 2000; Maslow, 1954; Syafrizal et al., 2020; Zydyk, 2005).

It is important to point out that collaboration through social media and the internet has become critical in today's world. The researchers Syafrizal, Gailea, and Hardianti (2021) make the point, however, that it is important to identify that the researchers were writing in a pre-COVID world mindset. It is imperative to understand the need for collaborative work and communication and the role the internet plays in facilitating this collaborative space (Syafrizal et al., 2020; Zydyk, 2005). Collaborative spaces have been around, online, for over 30 years and the critical need to use these spaces had not been fully realized until the COVID pandemic.

The research discussed here all points to the need for collaboration, as this current generation of students has been born into a collaborative space – via the internet and social media – and solitude (Syafrizal et al., 2020; Zydyk, 2005). What is needed is to find a way to establish a safe in-person space where belongingness will be the center of the learning (Aanstoos, 2021; Freire, 2000; Maslow, 1954; Syafrizal et al., 2020; Zydyk, 2005).

The need to learn collaboratively is important for learning. Through collaboration, students can learn. Collaboration does not need to be merely through student-to-student relationships, but should also include teacher-to-student relationships (Freire, 2000; Freire et al., 2014; Valenzuela, 1999, 2002; Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994; Wong, 2010). The establishment of a space for learning is needed for students to feel safe to be themselves, and in so doing, the shared power becomes the cornerstone of learning (Maslow, 1954; Valenzuela, 2002; Wong,

2010). During the COVID pandemic, and even now, the need for belonging is critical to establishing and maintaining a safe space for learning.

Implicit Use of Critical Intentional Strategies: Creating an Environment of Authentic Caring

It is important to find the strategies and techniques teachers can utilize to establish a safe space within their classroom. The classroom learning environment must become the place where both student and teacher feel welcome and have a sense of belonging. The next studies look at how teachers/instructors augmented their instruction with strategies that focused on authentic caring and collaborative activities to establish and maintain a sense of belonging among their students.

Angela Valenzuela's hypotheses illustrated in her three-year study were predicated on the statement that no one cares about the students or the students' learning; she put it this way: "What if each weekday, for eight hours a day, teenagers inhabited a world populated by adults who did not care—or at least did not care for them sufficiently" (Valenzuela, 1999, p.3). She claims that the Anglo-American mainstream education system is structured in such a way that inhibits the student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and student-to-administration meaningful caring relationships. The inherently divisive nature of this academic environment fosters a destructive attitude among Latinx youth and, as a result, has rejected school not education (the structure and process, not the outcome of education). Their modified ethnographic study of one Texas high school used a mixed-methods research design . For quantitative data, participant observation and open-ended interviews were conducted with individuals and with groups of students. Valenzuela (1999) also used field notes, recorded day-to-day experiences, and conversations with students, parents, counselors, teachers, administrators, and community leaders. Valenzuela (1999) then analyzed and recategorized the data and used a method of cross-

case analysis to see if the latter cases matched her findings. The author approached her study

from the standpoint of the historical trend that over the generations the European and Anglo

immigrants struggled to learn and the latter generations became higher-achieving academic

students (Valenzuela, 1999). She was comparing this historical trend with that of Latinx

immigrants and the later generations of Latinx-American-born students. She had identified her

research framework as a modified ethnographic approach.

Valenzuela (1999) claimed that American educational institutions had sought to eradicate

cultural and ethnic identity in favor of Anglo-American mainstream identity; she added the claim

that the Anglo-American assimilationist curriculum assumed that the later generations of Latinx-

American born students were deficient and required further assimilation and resocialization. She

further argued that the assumption that low-achieving and underachieving immigrant and

nonimmigrant students were similar and developed a "we-they" distinction and thereby obscured

the ability to understand the "other" (Valenzuela, 1999). The researcher conducted a three-year

ethnographic investigation of academic achievement and schooling orientations among

immigrant Mexican and Mexican American students at an urban high school in Houston, Texas

(Valenzuela, 1999). Data were collected from students, staff, teachers, administrators, parents,

and community leaders.

The goal of this research was to demonstrate that caring for students had a compelling

outcome on the students' sense of belonging to the school as an institution and to their academic

achievement (Valenzuela, 1999). The author's findings showed two main points: those immigrant

students came to Anglo-American schools with skills and tools from their countries of origin and

an example of success (professionals who have a similar national and cultural background as

them), thus they would achieve higher academically. In addition, the findings showed that the

native-born Latinx-American students underachieved due to the seeming lack of caring on the part of teachers and school institutions.

How the author conducted her research did lend itself to her findings. She was able to support her findings accurately because of how she conducted her interviews. Authentic caring, as Valenzuela (1999) explained, centers on the respectful relationships between individuals and extends into the classroom learning environment. For learning to take place, the teacher and student must both have mutual respect (Valenzuela, 1999). The research completed by Valenzuela (1999) reinforces the theories of critical pedagogy as defined by Freire (2000). The student-teacher relationship is centered on the student's learning of how to navigate the world and the issues they face, and the goals, strategies, and standardized curricula (technical discourse as Valenzuela puts it). Thus, authentic caring puts the student and their issues above the demands to *know the curricula* (Valenzuela, 1999). Therefore, the student cannot learn if they are experiencing anxiety over an outside (the classroom) issue. It was interesting that the immigrant youth performed better academically than the American-born Latinx students (second- and third-generation) American students. The author points out that the learning skills and tools the immigrant students learned in their countries of origin helped them bridge the gap when attending American schools (Valenzuela, 1999). She also points out that the caring the teachers and administration showed to the Latinx-American student helped trigger an interest in academic achievement for the American-born students. I saw parallels between my Chinese international students and my American-born Chinese students. In my own experience, one difference is that if the Chinese international student comes from a well-to-do family, it is the culture to buy their teachers expensive gifts in hopes to receive high marks for the class. This puts a new spin on my topic of research into authentic caring teaching.

Nga-Wing Anjela Wong (2010) used a qualitative research design to study the creation of a safe and trusted space for students to find community; and the research design of the study emulates the kind of space being studied (Wong, 2010). The researcher wanted to demonstrate the importance of community-based youth centers (CYOs) and how they impact and contribute to the students of low-income, working-class immigrants (Wong, 2010). The researcher's hypothesis was to establish that authentic caring and cultural relevance help bridge the multiple worlds the students of immigrants' experience. The study primarily used data collection through direct participant observations, in-person interviews, electronic correspondence, site documents, and follow-up interviews. The language used during these data collection activities was completed in the language the student was most familiar with and comfortable using (Wong, 2010). It is also important to note that Wong (2010) identified her "subjects" as participants-collaborators who worked together to shape the whole of the project and gave a more authentic experience (Wong, 2010). The participants were made up of seven youth (ages 11-18) and four staff members of the Harborview Chinatown Community Center (HCCC) (Wong, 2010).

As stated before, Wong (2010) collected her data through the use of direct participant observations, in-person interviews, electronic correspondence, site documents, and follow-up interviews, yet it is important to note that she became a volunteer at CYO, and was seen as a staff member of the program, fully integrating into the space she was studying. The author's conclusion did follow from the data analysis. She suggested that this research could be useful to developing programs at schools that serve students of similar backgrounds. The evidence illustrated the need for authentic caring to connect with students from immigrant low-income, working-class backgrounds (Wong, 2010). Through the use of authentic caring, the program at this particular community-based youth center was highly successful. The authors set out to do

what was promised and only studied after-school community-based youth centers, namely "Youth (Comm)Unity", and only focused on students from immigrant low-income, working-class backgrounds. It was not clear if the participants were also students with learning complexities as well as ELLs. The author did support the findings with the interviews. It is critical to point out that the author conducted her data collection utilizing the language most common and comfortable for her participants-collaborators. This contributed to the finding that authentic care is central to the establishment and development of a safe space.

Nga-Wing Anjela Wong's (2010) research is of major importance to my study in establishing and developing a safe space for students identified with learning complexities through the creation of authentic caring, teacher realness/vulnerability, and teacher-student companionship to develop a classroom community. It is important to note that Wong's (2010) work emphasized the need for time to be devoted to establishing student-teacher connections beyond the curriculum and outside of the academic minutes allotted to teaching.

The study conducted by Jimalee Sowell and Larry Sugisaki (2021) reviewed texts and reports about action research and surveyed teachers in order to compile an article reporting on the best practices when teaching students with learning complexities (Sowell & Sugisaki, 2021). The researchers sought an understanding of how best collaborative work should be implemented within a classroom learning environment. This article reported on the findings of other action research projects and offered the best strategies and tips for teaching students with learning complexities who also happen to be English Language Learners. The authors organized the information into lists and presented why these strategies would help in the classroom. This article reported findings, suggested best practices when planning and implementing lessons, and

offered suggestions for strategies to teachers of ELL students with learning complexities (Sowell & Sugisaki, 2021).

The authors of this article used the following researchers to create a framework for their report utilizing the following researchers: Abedi (2006); Artiles and Ortiz (2002); Artiles et al. (2005); McCardle et al. (2005); Shore and Sabatini (2009); Klingner, Artiles, and Méndez Barletta (2006); Shore and Sabatini (2009); Klingner and Eppolito (2014); Case and Taylor (2005); Chu and Flores (2011); Hoover, Baca, and Klingner (2016); Klingner (2009); Klingner and Eppolito (2014); Klingner and Eppolito (2014); Burr, Haas, and Ferriere (2015); Farnsworth (2018); Klingner and Eppolito (2014); Sowell and Sugisaki (2021). Their project was very helpful in compiling strategies of best practices for teachers of ELL students with learning complexities in one place. They pointed out that when planning and developing lessons, the best practices would help add to any student learning. They even suggested that more research would be needed with the ELL students with learning complexities as several students may have been misidentified due to the lack of understanding and research in this area (Sowell & Sugisaki, 2021). The authors of this project did approach this topic appropriately and offered some next steps in this field (Sowell & Sugisaki, 2021).

This research project reported findings that helped me to understand that any strategy used to help ELLs and students with learning complexities would also help any student to learn. So, by helping my students with learning complexities, I am also helping all my students. This is very important for the implementation section of my project. Sowell and Sugisaki (2021) were able to identify the strategies that would aid me in implementing my action research project. Furthermore, their research is relevant to my topic as it reinforces the definition and findings of other research projects found within this literature review. This research also expands the topic

with the English Language Learners and pointed out the strategies used to help students with learning complexities and ELLs that would be helpful for all students to learn.

This literature review has provided an overview of the literature and helped to establish a framework for this action research project. Again, it is even more important to take note of the centrality of the critical pedagogy and the hierarchy of needs theories within this action research project, but also how these theories transform the teaching within my classroom. I was interested in finding an answer to the question, *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students identified with learning complexities*?, I was also interested in exploring the dynamics that exist within authentic caring and collaborative assignments as students are returning to in-person learning spaces. The need for a sense of belonging is even more important after distance learning.

Conclusions

It is clear, pandemic or not, that the need to find a safe space to learn collaboratively is essential. We as teachers need to be aware of the need for *critical belonging* within the learning space. It was the purpose of this action research project to illustrate the need for critical belonging and to help to define this term, as well as help establish how the use of authentic caring strategies and the use of collaborative learning environments and collaborative learning assignments facilitated critical belonging. This action research project focused on how authentic caring alongside collaborative learning assignments contributed to a sense of belonging.

This study explored whether the use of student collaboration and authentic caring strategies fostered a sense of belonging among high schoolers. The research question was: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring*

strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, particularly in students

identified with learning complexities? Drawing on Angela Valenzuela's (1999) definition of

authentic caring, the strategies in this study include teacher realness/vulnerability, the

development of teacher-student and student-student relationships, and power-sharing

relationships (Freire, 2000; Freire et al., 2014). Authentic caring strategies have been crafted

utilizing several web articles outlining the strategies: Showing interest in students' welfare,

getting to know your students and the lives they live, showing respect [to] students' perspectives,

telling students they can succeed, knowing students' academic and social needs, and recognizing

students' academic and social achievement (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo,

2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012). I hypothesized that students

identified with learning complexities may find a safe place and a heightened sense of belonging

within the classroom community.

Research has shown that students who have opportunities to develop connections with

their classmates and who know that their teachers care about them may become more engaged

with the learning space, thus building a classroom community, fostering a sense of

belongingness and connectedness (Wong, 2010). This classroom community and sense of

belonging may be fostered through collaborative work among students and the intentional use of

authentic caring strategies by the teacher. According to Crandall and colleagues (2000), a teacher

must work at establishing a safe space within the classroom to foster connectedness and

belongingness. Ideally, this safe space is an environment free of judgment and one that promotes

cognitive curiosity, a classroom that fosters inquiry-based problem-posing built on the power-

sharing student-teacher relationship (Crandall et al., 2020; Freire, 2000; McNeely et al., 2002;

Valenzuela, 1999; Wong, 2010).

This action research study investigated the ways to create a classroom environment that is a safe space and refuge for students and thereby fosters a sense of belonging in students with the use of collaborative assignments and authentic caring. I hoped that by promoting this sense of belonging, this classroom would also be one where in-depth learning would take place. This kind of space may bridge the gap for those students with learning complications to have a sense of safety after being alienated by high-stress education.

Chapter III

Methods

This action research project focused on the following question: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students identified with learning complexities?* This action research question drew on Angela Valenzuela's definition of *authentic caring* (1999) and employed authentic caring strategies fostering student collaboration and a sense of belonging among high schoolers. Authentic caring strategies allow the teacher to show they truly care for their student's welfare as well as for their academic understanding of topics covered in class; the teacher finds a connection with their students and their interests and life goals. A truly caring teacher will also share the respect they expect from their student, and that truly caring teacher will also share respect with their students. The authentically caring teacher will also find ways to help their students succeed, not just in the subject they are teaching, but in life as well as other subjects. The authentically caring teacher will seek to know and understand each of their students' academic and social needs and try to find ways to enable their students to be successful, as well as celebrate with the student – and make a big deal about – their academic and social achievements.

Furthermore, existing literature suggests that authentic caring strategies seek to reinforce the student's self-esteem and social interactions; this is of critical importance now after distance learning and helping the student to re-integrate into culture and society (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012). The present study centers on the teacher's realness/vulnerability, and the development of teacher-student and student-student relationships (Freire, 2000). I hypothesized that, through my use of

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authentic caring strategies, students identified with learning complexities would find a safe place and a heightened sense of belonging within the classroom community.

Setting

This action research project was conducted within an upper-middle-socioeconomic religious private school in Northern California with roughly 250 students. This school is competitive with approximately 90 percent of graduating seniors being accepted to four-year universities. High school performance comes at a cost to students. For many at my school site, high expectations create a high-stakes, high-stress environment which often leads to feelings of anxiety and disengagement (Crandall et al., 2020). I had seen this as an issue even before the COVID pandemic, but it has become even more intensified after the lock-down and the mandate of distance learning imposed on students.

While teaching students with learning complexities during distance learning in the 2020-2021 academic year, I often noted that the student collaborators became disengaged from learning. I wondered whether some students no longer perceived the classroom as a safe space to learn. I have seen that the high-expectations classroom environment often leads to anxiety and panic attacks among the student population at my school site as well as pointed out by Crandall's research (Crandall et al., 2020), and this situation was further exacerbated during the COVID distance learning requirements. In the virtual learning environment, many learners became overwhelmed to a point of no longer connecting to the school community, shutting down in the classroom, and not completing assignments. Furthermore, because of distance learning, the connections students and teachers might have established had they been in the classroom, especially in students with learning complexities, have been limited. This was pointed out in the research conducted by Raviv and Bader (2021), Sowell and Sugisaki (2021), and Valenzuela and

Dornsbuch (1994). Under these conditions, students with learning complexities struggled even more.

Research has shown that students who have opportunities to develop connections with their classmates and who know that their teachers care about them are more likely to become more engaged within the learning space, thus building a classroom community, and fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness (Wong, 2010). This classroom community and sense of belonging can be fostered through collaborative work among students and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher. According to Crandall and colleagues (2000), a teacher must work at establishing a safe space within the classroom to foster connectedness and belonging. Ideally, this safe space is an environment free of judgment of cognitive curiosity, a classroom that fosters inquiry-based problem-posing built on the power-sharing student-teacher relationship (Crandall et al., 2020; Freire, 2000; McNeely et al., 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Wong, 2010).

The school's junior/senior high school population pre-COVID was one-third of international students from Asia. The other two-thirds were made up of approximately one-quarter of first-generation Indian-American (from India) and first-generation Chinese-American and almost one-quarter Anglo-American with a mix of one percent African-American and one percent Latinx. As Angela Valenzuela and Sanford M. Dornsbuch (1994) have pointed out in their research, there is a correlation between the student's family, how much the family is involved, and academic success. At my school site, this family connection is apparent in the high expectation of the student to succeed and go to a four-year university. This family expectation of the students at my school site has created a high-stakes, high-stress learning environment and the

classroom has become an academic *gladiatorial colosseum* for the students, where students compete for sets in renowned colleges without any interest in learning.

At the time of this action research project, my school site's student population represented the surrounding suburban population. Roughly two-thirds of the students are first-generation Americans from several Asian and South-East-Asian countries. This number includes international and exchange students from the same South-East-Asian countries. The remaining third of the students are a collective of Anglo-American, Latinx-American, and African-Americans, which are third and fourth-generation Americans. The overall test scores of the school site had been in the top 10th percentile, with Math and Sciences being the strongest school-wide. This school site has established an English Language program as well as embraced a program for teaching English literacy for students who have been identified with learning differences. These two groups of students, collectively referred to as learning complexities, make up 20% of the school population. The teaching staff is primarily Anglo-American with a fifth of the teaching staff representing the same demographic as the student population. The school's administrators are 100% Anglo-American.

Through my action research study, I investigated ways to create a classroom environment that is a safe space and refuge for students and thereby fostering a sense of belonging in students with the use of collaborative assignments and authentic caring. I hoped that by promoting this sense of belonging, this classroom would also be one where in-depth learning would take place. This kind of space may bridge the gap for those students with learning complexities to have a sense of safety after being alienated by high-stress education.

Demographics of the Classroom

This action research project included student participants from my Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature and AP US History classes, who agreed to collaborate with me in this project. At the time of the study, they were juniors (Advanced Placement United States History) and seniors (Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature) during the 2021-2022 school year. These student participate were made up of 33 students altogether and included four students identified with learning complexities and three international students identified as English Language Learners. At the beginning of the intervention 18 students from the AP US History class chose to participate and 15 students from the Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature class chose to participate in this research project. All of these student collaborators came from an upper-middle-class background, and most are from first- or second-generation non-Anglo-American families. The international students came from upper-class families from their countries of origin. Roughly half of the student collaborators identified as females, and the other half of the student collaborators identified as males.

A parent information letter and a consent letter were emailed home to parents and students advising them of the research study and the invitation to participate. Parents/guardians indicated their consent for their student to participate by selecting the link to the parental consent form within the information letter. Student collaborators were asked to participate via a student script and a student consent form. Parents/guardians consent, as well as student consent, was collected via Google Forms and/or wet signature on the parent consent form.

All student collaborators participated in the critical thinking discussions, reading, writing, and collaborative assignments as assigned that meet the Advanced Placement Framework, the California US History Framework, the California Common Core State Literacy Standards, and

English Language Arts (ELA) Standards. Only the results of those student collaborators whose parents/guardians and who provide consent were included in the data analysis. These student collaborators are those students who choose to participate in this research project. Student collaborators with learning complexities had been disaggregated from those without learning complexities (as based on a reported 504 plan and/or English Language Development status).

The action research question explored how students identified with learning complexities find community and a sense of belonging within the classroom environment. Gender was not considered within the disaggregation of data results. It was the intention of this action resource project to determine if those deemed less able due to their learning complexities could find a community within the cultural norms of a common classroom learning environment rooted in authentic caring. This intention was the driving force behind the decision of how to disaggregate data.

Data Collection Strategies

This action research project, otherwise known as the *Building Authentic Caring and Belonging* project, was implemented over eight-weeks. This action research project included two cohorts of student collaborators. The units within the study were different between the two different cohorts. This action research project spanned two units of study in the Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature course, and it spanned three units of study in the AP US History course. At the beginning of this project, I administered a pre-intervention assessment asking anticipation questions that reflected the Social Science and English Language Arts requirements and included questions that asked the students their impressions and feelings of a sense of belonging (Appendix A). This action research project began with all students completing the pre-intervention assessment, also known by Anticipation Guide (Appendix A),even if they indecatied

they woere not going to be part of the intervention. Those student who indicated they did not want to be included in the intervention, their responses were never documented or tracked. The Anticipation Guide (Appendix A) was used at the end (post-intervention) of this project as a comparison to mesuer the student collaberators' sence of belonging when the intervention concluded.

During the intervention, non-collaborating students and student collaborators participated in lessons and activities that meet Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Advanced Placement United States History Framework. Students were asked to complete several collaborative dramas and Socratic seminar assignments. Each unit (in both classes) asked student collaborators to complete an Anticipation Guide (Appendix A) that included several Likert Rating Scale questions as well as open-ended free-response questions to help identify the students' sense of belonging.

Data Collection

This action research study capitalized on a mix of quantitative and qualitative data with a heavy emphasis on quantitative data. I used survey items adapted from an instrument created by Williams (2018) to measure my student collaborators sense of belonging (Appendices A, B, C, D, & E). There were four data collection strategies: anticipation guides, debrief forms, field notes, and individual interviews.

Anticipation Guide. This form was given to all students at the beginning of the unit regardless if the student was a participant in this action research project or not. The guide measured each student's level of understanding and background of the new unit (Appendix A). Students who opted out of participating were not asked to complete the questions asking about their sense of belonging. The Anticipation Guide included questions that asked my participants

to "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4) on four

Likert-type questions that asked participants to self-assess their sense of belonging in the

classroom environment at the beginning of the unit. The Anticipation Guide also included three

open-ended questions that asked participants to explain their sense of belonging and connection

to the learning environment. Students received the same Anticipation Guide after the unit with

the same questions. I compared the responses before the intervention and the responses after the

intervention and tracked the differences within each participant to better understand how their

sense of belonging changed.

Debrief Form. This form was given to all students after completing Socratic seminars

activities assignments and after drama activities and assignments for the unit, regardless if the

student was a participant in this action research project or not. The Debrief form measured each

student's level of understanding and background of the new unit as well the student's anxiety

levels before and after the activities, and their impressions of how well they and their group

partners collaborated during the activities (Appendix C). Students who opted out of participating

were not asked to complete the questions asking about their sense of belonging. The Debrief

Form included questions that asked participants to "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2),

"Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4) on four Likert-type questions that measured participants'

sense of belonging in the classroom environment during the activities. The students received the

same Debrief Form after the unit with the same questions.

Field Notes. The Anecdotal Field Notes (Appendix F) were completed during students'

regularly scheduled class periods during each of the several collaborative and drama activities

over the course of the intervention. The field notes were used to augment the student

collaborators' responses to the Debrief Form's questions. During collaborative and drama

activities I would make brief check-ins with the student collaborators as they interacted in these

collaborative assignments, I used the Anecdotal Field Notes document (Appendix F) to record

the interactions with me as well as made notes of my student collaborators' responses to the

authentic caring strategies used. I also used the Field Notes to record how my student

collaborators interacted with their peers. As I recorded my observation for each student

collaborator the fields expanded as my observations were entered.

These check-ins were completed over the two to three days allotted for the assignment

while the student groups were developing the assignments together. I was able to pull students

aside individually (outside of class time, during lunch, brunch, and after school) to check on their

progress and record my perceptions of the students' reactions during the interactions.

Individual Interviews. The individual interviews occurred in my empty classroom for 30

minutes during the students' 43-minute lunch break or for 30 minutes after school, according to

the preference of the student collaborator. The individual interviews were a time for the student

collaborators to communicate their feelings about how I used the authentic caring strategies

during the intervention. The student collaborators were asked 14 questions (Appendix E) that

helped them to reflect on their experiences during the collaborative group work activities. These

questions also asked them to reflect on the several check-ins I made with them throughout the

intervention. After asking the student these questions, I transcribed their words as they

communicated their thoughts and feelings. This method of data collection offered me the

opportunity to ask students to clarify what they meant when responding to the interview

questions, and it also offered the student collaborators a way to reflect on and give their ideas

about the project. This method also allowed them to be freewith their answers – not constrained

by a Likert-type scale. The strength of this method was in interviewing through a conversational dialog as this dialog created a comfortable atmosphere for the student collaborators to respond.

If interviewing during their lunch, students were invited to get their lunches and eat during the interview. Additional snacks were provided to my student-collaborators as a way to express appreciation for participating in the interview during their lunch period. The student collaborators were also allowed to choose to come after school for the debriefing interview.

Procedures

Student collaborators were informed that each of them was assigned a pseudonym and that their responses to the several questions would not be traceable to them personally. Pseudonyms were assigned randomly to the students whom choose to collaborate with this action resource project. All pseudonyms that were assigned originated from fictional god's names from the Greek, Egyptian, Celtic, and Nordic cultures. This offered the student collaborators anonymity to be authentic and honest in their responses to the several Likert-type rating scale questions as well as open-ended free-response questions. During this intervention, the student collaborators were asked to participate in several collaborative dramas and Socratic seminar assignments. As part of each of these assignments, students were asked to collaborate with partners together to prepare a drama and/or arguments that reflected their understanding of the material covered in the class. They were then asked to deliver the drama and/or arguments as a group in a presentation. After completing each collaborative argument, student collaborators were given opportunities to express their comfort level in the classroom and their input, and their perceived input of their group partners into each assignment (Appendices B, C, & D). These forms offer student collaborators the opportunity to give their opinions towards a sense of belonging to the classroom and school learning environments through several Likert rating scale

questions as well as open-ended free-response questions. Each of these assignments

corresponded to the topic or chapter of the study and reflected the Common Core State Standards

for English Language Arts and Advanced Placement United States History Framework required

of each class (Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature and AP US History). All lessons

and activities occurred during students' normal, daily periods.

The data collection sources (Appendices A, B, C, D, & E) had been developed to offer

the student collaborators the opportunity to present their feelings of belonging and community

based on the authentic caring strategies: showing interest in students' welfare, getting to know

your students and the lives they live, showing respect students' perspectives, telling students they

can succeed, knowing students' academic and social needs, and recognizing students' academic

and social achievement (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016,

2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012).

Pre-Intervention Procedures

All student participating in this action research project including my Honors Literature

and AP US History classes were invited to participate in the intervention. The beginning of the

intervention started with my reading of an Oral Script for Students document to potential

participants. I then distribute the Content to Participate in Research Form and the Parental Letter

and Consent for Student Participation Form to potential student collaborators for them to indicate

their consent to participate by signing and returning the documents. Students had been advised

that an additional copy of the Consent to Participate and Parental Letter and Consent for Student

Participation would be sent home in an email to be discussed with parents.

These forms had a QR code leading them to a Google form where both parent and student

could indicate that they agreed to participate. Potential student collaborators were told that even

if they initially agreed to participate, they could decide to withdraw their consent at any time and there would be no penalty for deciding to withdraw from data collection. For those students who did not elect to participate in the study, I did not include their data in the analysis of this project. At the beginning of the intervention 18 of the 19 students from the AP US History class chose to participate and 15 from the 17 students from the Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature class chose to participate. However, content-related classroom discussion and reading and writing, and drama assignments are a regular part of the curriculum and my teaching practice. As a result, all students, regardless of being among the student collaborators or not, regularly participated in all classroom lessons and Social Science and English Language Arts assignments.

Intervention Procedures

The intervention phase lasted for eight-weeks. Student collaborators participated in lessons and activities that meet Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Advanced Placement United States History Framework. Students were asked to complete a collaborative drama assignment and a Socratic seminar assignment. The student collaborators worked in groups of three for both activities to prepare for the assignment. All students were scored individually on their contribution to the preparation and their performance in the drama and seminar assignments. These two assignments took two to three days for each assignment type to prepare for over the eight-week period. Both assignments asked students to collect information individually to help contribute to the assignments in the weeks leading up to these assignments.

The student collaborators completed an Anticipation Guide that would include several rating scale questions (Appendices A, B, C, & D) help to identify the students' sense of belonging. Then, they were asked to participate in several collaborative dramas and Socratic

seminar assignments. In these assignments, the students were asked to collaborate with partners to prepare a drama together and/or arguments that reflected their understanding of the material covered in the class. They were then asked to deliver the drama and/or arguments as a group. After completing each collaborative argument students were given opportunities to express their comfort level in the classroom and their input and their perceived input of their group partners into each assignment. Each assignment corresponded to the topic or chapter of the study and reflected the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Advanced Placement United States History Framework required of each class (Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature and AP US History); subsequent assignments were adjusted as needed depending on the rate at which students were ready to move on to the next chapter/topic. All lessons occurred during students' normal, daily periods.

Incorporation of Authentic Caring. This action research project relied on the pedogeological theory championed by Valenzuela's work with Latinx students in Texas, and the foundational cultural construct she pointed out that impacted the learning environment for that research site, authentic caring (Valenzuela, 1999). As pointed out in Valenzuela's work and reinforcing Freire's work the teacher-student shared power dynamic brought about the student-centered learning environment that fostered authentic caring in the classroom (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Freire, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). The authentic caring strategies implemented during the project reflected the amalgamation of *showing interest in students' welfare*, *getting to know your students and the lives they live*, *showing respect for students' perspectives*, *telling students they can succeed*, *knowing students' academic and social needs*, *recognizing students' academic and social achievement* (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012).

Showing Interest in Students' Welfare. Showing genuine interest in my students'

welfare was expressed in my use of the "check-in," either during class activities or during lunch,

brunch, or passing period or before or after school. When checking in with each student, I used

active listening when they responded and asked follow-up questions if I needed clarification. As

part of the active listening, I would try to put myself in their shoes (perspective-taking) and

began to see the school and classroom community from my students' cultural and generational

backgrounds (Nishioka, 2019). This helped to build my empathy and understanding of my

students and their backgrounds. One other benefit was that I also learned the current slang or my

students tried to teach me their primary language; in doing so, I could then use these in future

lessons.

Getting to Know Students and the Lives They Live. By getting to know my students and

the lives they live, I was able to can understand where they were coming from and their cultural

and generational backgrounds (Zakrzewsi, 2012). This information came from the check-in,

either during class activities or during lunch, brunch, or passing period or before or after school.

My students expressed their fears, anxieties, and understanding – either verbal or non-verbal

communication – during the check-in. Depending on how they answered or did not answer, I

made follow-up check-ins or asked clarifying questions so that I would begin to understand how

the lives that they live outside of school impact their perceptions, understanding, and

performance in the classroom learning environment. During these check-ins, I tried to avoid the

cultural misunderstanding between myself and my students that negatively impacts my students'

education and understanding. Some of the most useful questions I had used on the spot were

"what is your favorite movie?" or "what was something you did this weekend that you thought

was fun?" These questions have allowed me to understand how my students use their time and have kept me from making false assumptions about them (Zakrzewsi, 2012).

Showing Respect to Students' Perspectives. When teaching, whether in a whole class setting, in a group of students, or in a one-on-one setting, I have attempted to develop authenticity about myself and my abilities and weaknesses. One of the most important ways that I cultivate this authenticity came out in my opening up to my students on the first day of class. I told them I am dyslexic and have trouble reading out loud and that I am a horrible speller. This revealed to my students that I am a real person and that I, too, have things that cause me trouble. Revealing these troulbles upfront helped to reduce my students anxiety within this project and demonstrated to them that I could be trusted as I have given them knowledge about myself. The other big area of respect I showed my students was when I actively listen to them. This could have been when they asked me questions in class or outside of class. It could also be seen in the check-ins I had with students. Showing my students respect also came in how I interacted with them; I took what they said seriously and thought of them as an adult who is intelligent and can make decisions. It is my job, as the educator, to help them understand the ramifications of their thinking and decisions and help them adjust if they need to. I endeavor to withhold making character judgments about my students when and if they follow a bad path (Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012).

Telling Students, They Can Succeed. Being unwavering that all my students can succeed comes from my background living as a dyslexic. Being that role model that does not allow difficulty to stop me, puts into action the words: "you can do this" and "don't let this stop you." I would not let students say they could not do something, or that something was too hard. When a student ran into a learning struggle, I tried to enlist others to help figure out difficult concepts. In

doing so, I positioned myself to collaborate with students on the difficult concepts together. This facilitated an inclusive learning environment and built belonging and trust (Lewis, 2016).

Knowing Students' Academic and Social Needs. The number of check-ins and strategies to create authenticity I used in classroom teaching facilitated the building of student-teacher relationships with each student. By building the teacher-student shared power dynamic, I could then foster a positive and caring learning environment that enabled me to understand the academic and social-emotional strengths of my students as well as those areas they might have had opportunities to improve. In my classes, I set a high bar for learning, but I sought to scaffold the lessons to ensure that all students have a way to achieve success. The best way for me to determine what academic strategies and scaffolding I needed was through the check-ins with my students. These helped me to cultivate caring relationships and set high academic expectations for all my students (Nishioka, 2019). The best check-ins, the check-ins where I can get the most useful information about my students and their dreams as well as their abilities, were those when I sat with them and allowed the conversation to drift off-topic into "seemingly unrelated topics." These kinds of conversations allowed the student to build their sense of belonging and feel comfortable trusting the learning environment. These interactions also strengthened the teacher-student shared power dynamic (Freire, 2000).

Recognizing Students' Academic and Social Achievement. I worked hard to see my students as more than just their academic abilities. They all had interpersonal skills as well and I tried to maximize them in the learning environments I established. As part of building an authentically caring classroom, I selected groups to work on projects based on the similarities and differences of my students to help them see that they all have common likes and dislikes. This helped to facilitate connections and commonalities in their backgrounds and provided

opportunities for them to recognize similarities they have with each other (Lewis, 2016). When developing these groups, I considered the information I had learned from my check-ins with my student. This understanding helped me to create that caring learning environment. In one case I deliberately chose students with dissimilar abilities and characteristics in creating a group that I was hoping to develop more than just academics. In these cases, the group would consist of an academically strong student, a strong social-emotional student, an out-going student, and kind student, and an introverted student. During the activity, I made several check-ins to ensure they were all comfortable and working well together.

Group Work Assignments. In the classroom when working in groups, I interacted with each student about how they are managing the homework from all eight of their classes, how late they stayed up, and how their relationships were with their families. These inquiries were likely to be perceived by students as friendly and normal dialogue, encouraging open lines of communication with me should the student need to talk about other things. Any conversation about private topics occurred out of earshot and eyesight of other students within the class. Such check-ins occurred outside of academic learning time in the classroom. I had invited students to a one-on-one appointment that occurred during brunch, lunch, or after school. It was their choice to participate in these one-on-one check-ins and did not disrupt their group work activities within the classroom learning environment.

When students offered ideas or opinions during debates and class discussions, I asked them to connect these positions to documents we were reading, and I kept my comments focused on specific academics the students were working on learning at the time. When I saw students anxious, frustrated, or alienating themselves during class and passing periods, I approached them and spoke with them. I found ways to encourage them to keep going or offered suggestions to

take a time out and re-center their thinking, reminding them that they can be successful. Through these check-ins and interactions with my students, I endeavored to get to know them and better understand how to offer helpful and meaningful socio-emotional support. Nonetheless, if students revealed something that needed to be reported to the school counselor or the authorities, I reported that information and interaction to the correct parties immediately.

Post Intervention Procedures

Upon the completion of the intervention, I administered a unit questionnaire to complete the unit. It asked the same questions as those in the Anticipation Guide allowing students to offer their impressions and feelings to identify changes and analyze any shifts in their sense of belonging after the intervention and to help identify how the use of authentic caring strategies and group work impacted my students. In addition, I interviewed each student collaborator, those who had agreed to participate in this action research project, to better understand their feelings of a sense of belonging to the classroom learning environment. These interviews were conducted during non-school hours, either during lunch or after school, according to the participant's preference. The interview protocol is attached in Appendix E. The goal of these interviews was to better understand the commonalities and differences in how the participants experienced the care of the teacher and the care of their peers. Along with their experiences of the collaboration assignments and what they felt they did or did not gain by engaging with these assignments. I interviewed all students who agreed to participate in my study.

Plan for Data Analysis

Each data source was collected and recorded to address the action research question: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students*

identified with learning complexities? The student collaborators took part in my action research study, *Teacher Use of Authentic Caring and Collaborative Activities to Build Sense of Belonging among High School Students*, by answering survey questions and responding to Likert-type ration questions. Several students from my Honors Literature and AP US History classes took part in the collaborative group activities and drama assignments (Appendices A, B, C, & D), and in the student interviews Appendix E). In addition, as the researcher I recorded my observations during and after lessons and activities throughout the intervention of my student collaborators who took part in each of the collaborative group activities and drama assignments (Appendix F). These data sources served to provide a triangulation of information. This triangulation can serve as a means to provide a more accurate depiction of the learning and reveal a better picture of potential shifts in belongingness that the student collaborators experienced throughout the intervention.

I quantitatively analyzed the results from the Likert Rating Scale questions statements from the pre-and post-Sense of Belonging surveys as well as the assignment rubrics (Appendices A, B, C, & D). For baseline data, the initial sense of belonging ratings for two different courses – Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature and AP US History – were analyzed to assess individual participants' connections towards their peers, teachers, and school community. The surveys' numerical values had been assigned to each response as follows: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). Student collaborators' responses were coded accordingly. A total was collected for each of the questions, giving a total score for each student collaborator's level of belonging towards their peers, their teachers, their school community, as well as an overall sense of belonging. These scores were then analyzed, calculating the mean for all student collaborators. The data were then disaggregated to assess the

findings of the students with learning complexities. The same descriptive statistical analysis was repeated for the post-intervention *Level of Belonging* for both cohorts.

I utilized qualitative data to analyze the strategies for the data that emerged from the focus group interviews and researcher field notes. These data were coded and analyzed for themes and trends that naturally emerged. When reviewing the researcher's field notes, I looked for data that showed how participants engaged within the collaborative learning classroom environment and what potentially led them to grow their sense of belonging. For instance, I noted some students were very reserved at first and were uncomfortable whereas others seemed to be more comfortable interacting with their fellow students.

Additionally, I examined the interview responses, focusing on times in which the interviewees reported being affected by the experiences gained through collaborative learning activities and my authentic caring strategies. Similarities and differences in student responses were compared to locate patterns and outliers in the students' perceptions. These patterns were then compared to the themes that were then identified within and across instruments to provide an analysis of study results regarding the impact of student collaborators' level of belonging with their peers, teachers, and school community.

Summary

This action research project focused on the following question: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students identified with learning complexities?* The *Building Authentic Caring and Belonging* project has been implemented for over eight-weeks. At the beginning of this project, I administered a pre-assessment asking anticipation questions that reflected the Social Science and English Language

Arts requirements and included questions that asked the students their impressions and feelings of a sense of belonging (Appendix A). Additional data sources included open-ended survey questions, Likert-type rating questions, and interview questions. Using a mixed-methods approach, I analyzed each source quantitatively or qualitatively to investigate students' sense of belonging. The findings of the data collected throughout the eight-weeks are analyzed in Chapter 4.

Chapter IV

Findings

This action research project sought to answer the question: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students identified with learning complexities*? This study utilized the findings from Angela Valenzuela's (1999) work with Latinx students, and work from the theorists Abraham Maslow (1958) and Paulo Freire (2000, 2014) that inform the definition of authentic caring. This project studied the teacher's ability to exhibit realness, vulnerability, and transparency. In addition, I explored how these strategies helped teacher-student and student-student relationships develop. This study focused on my student collaborators' sense of belonging and how that sense contributed to a safe space and fostered a learning community. With the establishment of an inclusive authentic caring environment within the classroom for all students, I wanted to find out if the connectedness and belongingness would help to develop a classroom that fostered inquiry-based, problem-posing, and power-sharing student-teacher relationships based on the work of Crandall (2020), Freire (2000, 2014), McNeely (2002), Valenzuela (1999), and Wong (2010).

Overview of Methods and Data Collection

This project called for an intervention that asked the student collaborators to participate in two different collaborative assignment types. Student collaborators were assigned a pseudonym to help establish anonymity to insure authentic and honest responses to the Likert-type and open-ended question types. The pseudonyms were assigned to students participates randomly. All of the pseudonyms assigned originated from fictional god's names from ancient cultures. As part of each of these assignments, students were asked to collaborate with partners

to prepare a drama and/or arguments that reflect their understanding of the material covered in the class. After completing each argument, student collaborators were given opportunities to express their comfort level in the classroom. In addition, they were able to share their perceptions of their group partners' contributions to each assignment (Appendices B, C, & D). These forms offer student collaborators the opportunity to give their opinions towards a sense of belonging to the classroom and school learning environments through several Likert rating scale questions as well as open-ended questions.

The data collection sources (Appendices A, B, C, D, & E) were developed to offer the student collaborators the opportunity to present their feelings of belonging based on the authentic caring strategies: *showing interest in students' welfare, getting to know your students and the lives they live, showing respect students' perspectives, telling students they can succeed, knowing students' academic and social needs*, and *recognizing students' academic and social achievement* (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012)

Demographics of the Participants

All demographical data were collected from the school's records and informational system. This action research project includes student collaborators who agreed to collaborate with me in this project from my Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature and AP US History classes. This intervention studied two different cohorts of students. The first cohort was made up of juniors from an Advanced Placement United States History course and the second was made up of seniors from an Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature course during the 2021-2022 school year. At the beginning of this research project 18 students were recruited from the AP US History class and 15 students from the Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature

class. In the AP US History cohort 2 participants were student identified with learning

complexities, and from the Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature cohort 5 participants

were student identified with learning complexities. The student collaborators were made up of 33

students and included four students identified with learning complexities and three international

students identified as English Language Learners. These seven student collaborators make up the

disaggregated sub-group.

All of these student collaborators (*N*=33) came from an upper-middle-class background,

and most are from first- or second-generation non-Anglo-American families. One-third of the

student collaborators come from varying racial backgrounds. As seen in Table 1, the entire

following sub-groups make up less than (1%) of the cohort: Anglo-American, Latinx-American,

Vietnamese American, Korean-American, Filipino-American, Indian-American (from India),

and international students from China. The remaining two-thirds of the student collaborators

were native-born Chinese-American. The American-born student collaborators range from first-

generation to fifth-generation Americans. Almost half of the student collaborators reported as

female (*n*=15), and the reminder of the student collaborators reported as male (*n*=18).

Table 1

Ethnic Background of Student Collaborators

Demographics	Number of students collaborators
Indian-American (from India)	4
Filipino-American	1
Korean-American	2
Vietnamese-American	2
Latinx-American	2
Anglo-American	3
Native-born Chinese-American (Immigrant)	5
Chinese-American	11
International students from China	3

Note. Table 1 presents the ethnic background of the student collaborators who participated in the intervention, (*N*=33).

Analysis of Data Collected Before Innovation

The students of the Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature and AP US History cohorts were invited to participate in this study. The intention of the pre-innovation data collection was to establish a baseline for how the student collaborators felt. Before the innovation began, the students collaborators were given a pre-assessment asking them to reflect on their impressions and feelings of a sense of belonging within the classroom learning environment (Appendix A).

To establish a baseline of their sense of belonging, student collaborators were given the same form that they completed at the beginning and the end of the intervention. This allowed me to compare the results before, during, and after the intervention. This survey measured my student collaborators' sense of belonging in the classroom, with their peers, and in the school environment (Appendix A). The intention was to offer the student collaborators a way to communicate their level of comfort within the classroom environment and communicate their connection with their fellow students. At the beginning of my intervention, I identified the seven

student collaborators identified with learning complexities within the two cohorts in my research notes. These seven student collaborators identified with learning complexities were given the same survey forms and were treated the same ways as the student collaborators who did not have learning complexities.

This survey consisted of two parts. The first included questions that asked my participants to "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4) on four Likert-type questions that measured students' sense of belonging in the classroom environment at the beginning of the intervention and the end. The second part included three open-ended questions that asked student collaborators to explain their sense of belonging and connection to the learning environment.

The data collected from this survey identified the majority of my student collaborators responded with "Agree" (3), or "Strongly Agree" (4) across all four of the quantitative questions (Figure 1). Additionally, five of my student collaborators responded, "Strongly Agree" (4) for all four of these quantitative questions. What is apparent from these results is that the student collaborators had a strong connection with each other. The average for each question is within 3 (N=33) (see Table 2). It is important to observe that the responses of my student collaborators to the Likert-style questions were too similar to one another which suggests that the questions themselves were not dissimilar enough to identify a trend in their level of belonging.

After compiling all the student collaborators' responses and analyzing the Likert-type questions it became evident that the majority of them had established connections with each other. The data that were collected from this survey identified the majority of my student collaborators responded with "Agree" (3), or "Strongly Agree" (4) across all four of the quantitative questions (See Figure 1). Additionally, five of my student collaborators responded

71

"Strongly Agree" (4) for all four of these quantitative questions. After coding my student

collaborators' responses to the open-ended questions, a pattern arose that the student

collaborators in the two cohorts already have connections to each other and enjoy spending time

with each other. As presented in Table 2, these student collaborators resonded that they enjoy

meeting with each other and talking with each other. However, two student collaborators – one

in each of the cohorts – did not answer the open-ended questions.

Table 2

*Student Sense of Belonging (Mean): Pre-Intervention (N=33)*

Questions from Anticipation Guide Survey	Mean
1. My classmates understand who I am and respect me.	3.333333333
2. I have lots of allies in my class who will stick up for me.	3.2592593
3. I feel connected to my classmates. For example, my classmates know a lot about me and I know a lot about them.	3
4. I enjoy working with my classmates.	3.2592593

Note. Table 2 presents the mean of student collaborators' responses to the means for the four Likert-type questions presented on the Anticipation Guide Survey at the beginning of the intervention. Student collaborators responded to the following: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4).

Figure 1 displays the raw data on how each student collaborator responded to the four

questions presented on the Anticipation Guide Survey (Appendix A). These data show that a

majority, 26 out of 30, of the student collaborators were comfortable within the classroom space

at the beginning of the intervention. This data pattern shown in Figure 1 may suggest the lack of

variation in opportunities in the survey for my student collaborators to present alternative views.

Figure 1

Student Sense of Belonging Ratings: Pre-Intervention
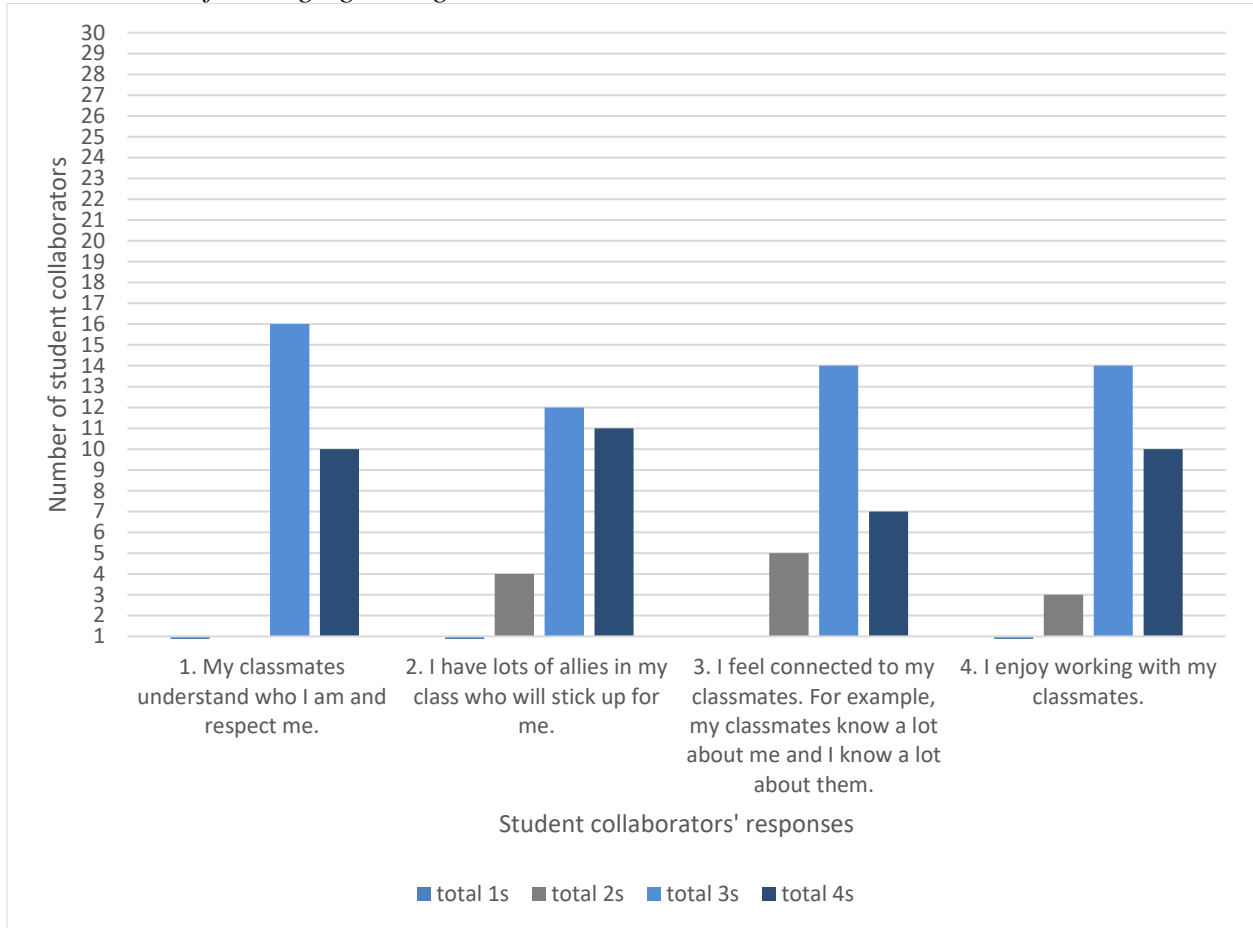
After coding my student collaborators' responses to the open-ended questions, a pattern arose that the student collaborators in the two cohorts already have connections to each other and enjoy spending time with each other. The pattern of enjoying spending time with each other led to a theme that being together in an in-person environment was important to my student collaborators. They explained that they enjoyed meeting with each other and talking with each other. Responses to question 7 included: "When is a time when you felt very important at school," encapsulate this theme. When the student assigned the pseudonym Aegir stated, "when I understand what I'm talking about and can contribute," and the student assigned the pseudonym

Hermod further reinforced this theme when they expressed, "when I can converse w/the teacher about the subject on a level other than the one taught, when I can explain stuff to my friends, when I have of make friends in class, when other friends gave me attention." This theme brought together was also evident in the responses to question 5: "What subjects at school do you like? Why do you like them?" For example, the student assigned the pseudonym Sobek responded: "5th period USB TA (student teacher's assistant in united student body class) because [being with] Junior Highers makes me feel young." Other student collaborators also expressed that the subject of science and math were undesirable when responding to question number 6: "What subjects at school do you NOT like? Why do you NOT like them?" All student collaborators (N=28) responded with negative feelings about math and science. However, two student collaborators – one in each of the cohorts – did not answer the open-ended questions.

After compiling and disaggregating the results of the pre-intervention survey, the data of the disaggregated sub-set identified that almost all five of the seven of my student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities responded with "Agree" (3), or "Strongly Agree" (4) across all four of the quantitative questions (Figure 2). The average responses of my student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities can be seen to be just over 3 out of 4 (Table 3). This can be seen in both cohorts as the disaggregated data was not segmented between cohorts.

Table 3

*Sense of Belonging (Mean) for Students Identified with Learning Complexities: Pre-Intervention*

Questions from Anticipation Guide Survey	Mean
1. My classmates understand who I am and respect me.	3.333333333
2. I have lots of allies in my class who will stick up for me.	3.5
3. I feel connected to my classmates. For example, my classmates know a lot about me and I know a lot about them.	3.1666667
4. I enjoy working with my classmates.	3.3333333

Note. Table 3 presents student collaborators' responses to the means for the four Likert-type questions presented on the Anticipation Guide Survey at the beginning of the intervention. Student collaborators responded to the following: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). The two cohorts' responses of students identified with learning complexities to these questions were compiled together in figure 1, (*n*=7).

After compiling and disaggregating the data from the Likert-type questions, the responses for those student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities revealed a similar pattern from the overall data. The data of the disaggregated sub-set identified that five of the seven student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities responded with "Agree" (3), or "Strongly Agree" (4) across all four of the quantitative questions (Figure 2). Additionally, only one of the student collaborators of this sub-group "disagreed" (2) with these two questions: "3. I feel connected to my classmates. For example, my classmates know a lot about me and I know a lot about them" and "4. I enjoy working with my classmates." After coding these student collaborators' responses to the open-ended questions, it was very evident that the student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities value the connections they have created with their teachers.

Figure 2

Sense of Belonging for Students Identified with Learning Complexities (Ratings): Pre-Intervention
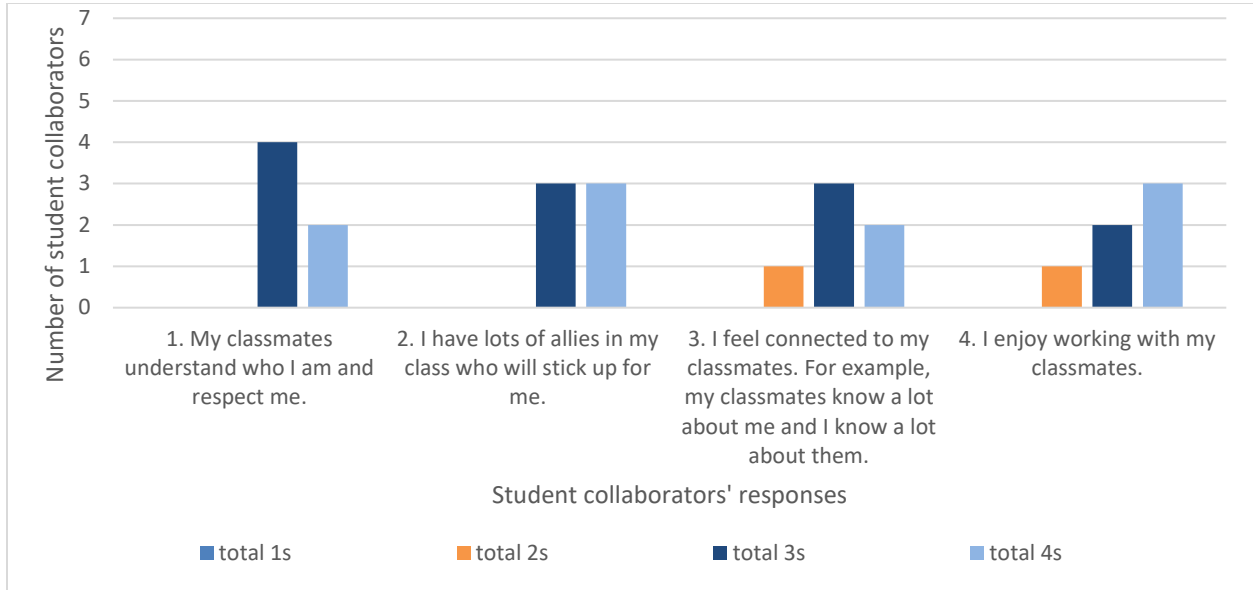
Note. Figure 2 presents the disaggregated responses of the student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities. These student collaborators were asked to respond to the same four Likert-type questions presented on the Anticipation Guide Survey at the beginning of the intervention. Student collaborators responded to the following: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). The two cohorts' responses to these questions were compiled together in figure 2, (*N*=7).

Analysis of Data Collected during the Innovation

Students in the two classes, Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature and AP US History, were given debrief survey after completing collaborative group activities. These surveys were intended to offer my student collaborators an opportunity to express their level of belonging during the innovation activity (Appendices B & D). The students of each cohort then interacted with their teacher who used the authentic caring strategies as a check-in (Appendix F).

Socratic Seminar Debrief Form Survey

This form was given to the 17 student collaborators that made up the Advanced Placement United States History cohort immediately after they had completed a Socratic Seminar. This survey was used to assess my student collaborators' sense of belonging in the

classroom, with their peers, and in the school environment (Appendix B) as they worked in small groups of two to three students. The student collaborators identified with learning complexities were also given the same survey forms and were treated the same way as the student collaborators who did not have learning complexities.

This survey included questions that asked student collaborators to "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4) on four Likert-type questions that asked about their level of belonging during this collaborative activity (Appendix B). The 17 student collaborators that made up the Advanced Placement United States History cohort responses reveiled that none of them responded "Strongly Disagree" (1) to the 12 questions in the survey (N=17). These Likert-type questions offered my student collaborators the opportunity to present how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements and demonstrated their various connections to their peers and their comfortability within the classroom/school learning environment.

The data collected from the questions on Socratic Seminar Debrief Form Survey show that about two-thirds (*n*=12 vs. 17) of the student collaborators' responses were closely clustered in a way that suggested the questions on this form may have been too similar and did not offer an opportunity for students to express contrary perspectives (Figure 3). It is important to point out no participant responded "Strongly Disagree" (1) to any question on this form. In addition, there was a low response rate of "Disagree" (2) to all questions on this form among the student collaborators. In addition, about half of the student collaborators (*n*=7*)* responded with a score of 3 to all questions, which suggests that these student collaborators enjoyed the in-person classroom experience (Figure 3 & Table 4).

Table 4

Socratic Seminar Debate Survey (Mean)-Advanced Placement United States History cohort

Questions from Socratic Seminar Debate Rubric Survey	Mean
1. My classmates understand who I am and respect me.	3.411765
2. I enjoy working with my classmates.	3.611111
3. I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of the school.	3.117647
4. I feel connected to my teachers. For example, I know a lot about my teachers and they know a lot about me.	3.352941
5. My teachers at school understand who I am and respect me.	3.4375
6. I enjoy talking with and learning from my teachers.	3.705882
7. My teachers think that I matter.	3.470588
8. I feel like I belong at school. In other words, I feel like I fit in at school.	3.235294
9. I like being at school.	2.823529
10. My teacher shows he cares by checking in on me.	3.470588
11. I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of the school.	3.058824
12. I know a lot of people at school who are not in my grade level.	3

Note. Table 4 presents student collaborators' responses to the average for the four Likert-type questions presented on the Socratic Seminar Debate Rubric during the intervention. Student collaborators responded to the following: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). The two cohorts' responses to these questions were averaged together in table 4, (*N*=17).

Figure 3

Socratic Seminar Debrief Survey Results

	1.My classmates understand who I am and respect me.	2. I enjoy working with my classmates.	3. I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of…	4. I feel connected to my teachers. For example, I know a lot about my teachers and they…	5. My teachers at school understand and who I am and respect me.	6. I enjoy talking with and learning from my teachers.	7. My teachers think that I matter.	8. I feel like I belong at school. In other words, I feel like I fit in at school.	9. I like being at school.	10. My teacher shows he cares by checking in on me.	11 I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of…	12. I know a lot of people at school who are not in my grade level.
total 1s	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
total 2s	1	0	2	2	0	0	0	3	7	0	2	6
total 3s	8	7	11	7	9	5	9	7	6	9	12	5
total 4s	8	11	4	8	7	12	8	7	4	8	3	6

Student collaborators' responces

Note. Figure 3 presents the responses of the student collaborators to the Socratic Seminar Debrief Form Survey. These student collaborators were asked to respond to the same 12 Likert-type questions presented on this. Student collaborators responded to the following: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). These responses were collected from the student collaborators that made up the Advanced Placement United States History cohort. The responses from the student collaborators identified with learning complexities were combined and presented with the other student collaborator's responses in figure 3, (*N*=17).

The student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities have not been disaggregated in Figure 3, as there were only two individuals within this cohort. They both responded with "Agree" (3), or "Strongly Agree" (4) to the following four questions "1. My classmates understand who I am and respect me" and "2. I enjoy working with my classmates"

and "3. I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of the school," and "12. I know a lot of people at school who are not in my grade level"

Drama Debrief Form. The Drama Debrief form was given to the student collaborators of the Honors Science Fiction Literature cohort immediately after they had completed a Drama reenactment they had adapted from a novel for the class. This survey asked about my student collaborators' sense of belonging (Appendix D) as they worked in small groups (three students per group) to read and adapt chapters or scenes from the novel read for class to a drama to express their collective understanding of the events. During this collaborative activity, I included each of the five student collaborators identified with learning complexities within different groups so that they could interact with their peers.

This survey included questions that asked my participants to "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4) on three Likert-type questions that asked about participants' sense of belonging in the classroom environment during the collaborative activity (Appendix D). These Likert-type questions offered my student collaborators the opportunity to present how strongly they agreed or disagreed to statement that demonstrated their various connections to their peers and their comfortability within the classroom/school learning environment.

The responses to the Drama Debrief survey form illustrate a trend toward "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). This trend can be seen when adding the responses of "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4) for all questions on this form (Figure 4). The results reveal that the average student collaborator responses to the questions on this survey were "Agree" (3) (48%) and "Strongly Agree" (4) (38%). This result is similar to that of the Advanced Placement United State History cohort's Socratic Seminar Debrief Form Survey (Figure 3).

Figure 4

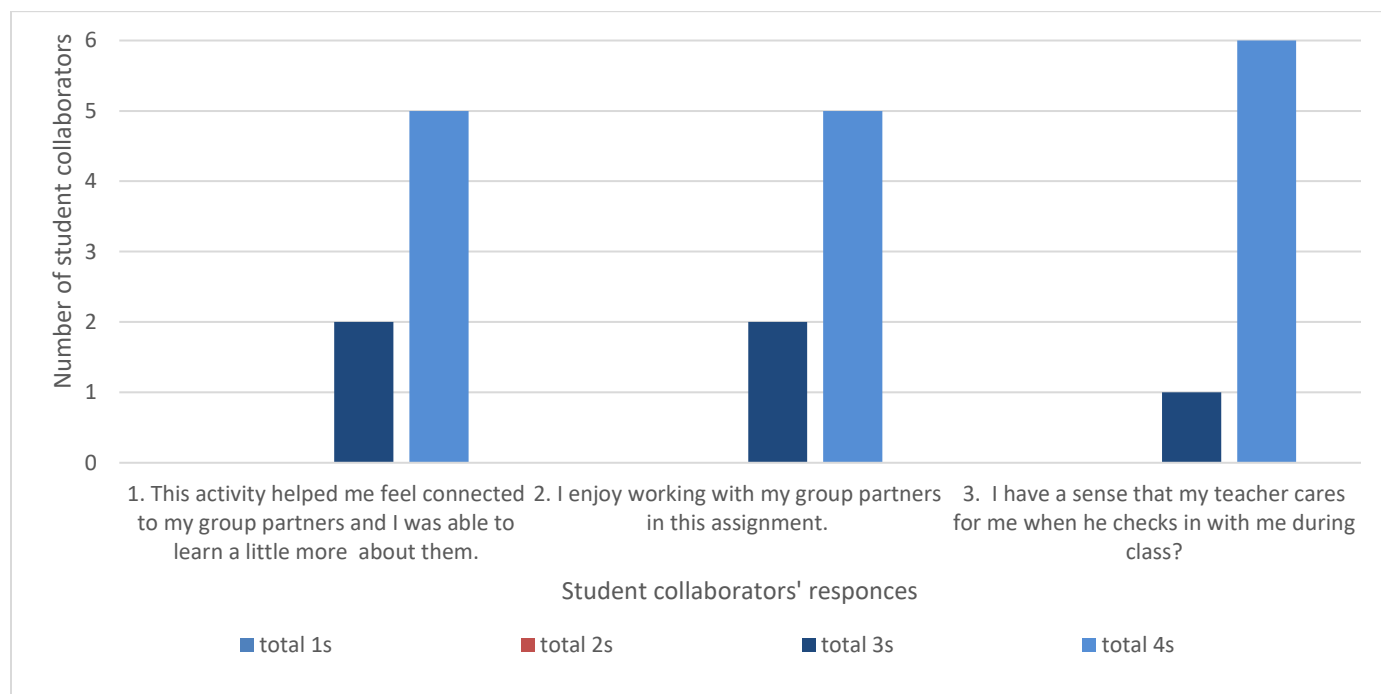*Group Work Debrief Ratings for Drama Assignment*
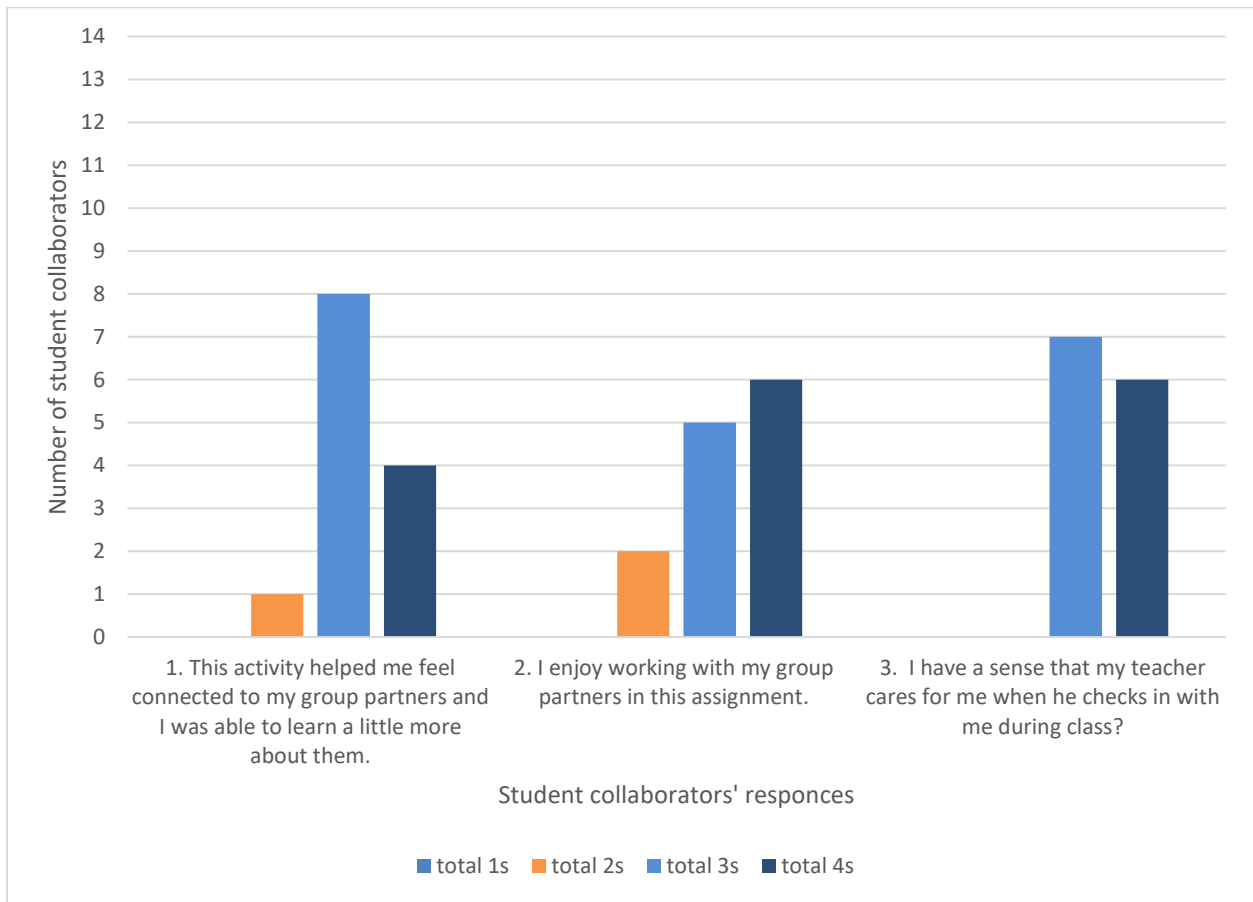
Note. Figure 4 presents the responses of the student collaborators to the Group Work debrief rubric for drama assignments. These student collaborators were asked to respond to the same 3 Likert-type questions presented on this. Student collaborators responded to the following: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). These responses were collected from the student collaborators that made up Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature cohort. The responses from the student collaborators identified with learning complexities were combined and presented with the other student collaborators' responses in figure 4, (n=14).

The data was then disaggregated into the sub-set of the student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities. Their responses reveal that the majority, or five of the six, responded with either "Agree" (3) or "Strongly Agree" (4) across the quantitative questions (Figure 5). Additionally, only one of the student collaborators of this sub-group "disagreed" (2) with each of the following questions: "1. I feel connected to my classmates. For example, my

classmates know a lot about me and I know a lot about them", and "2. I enjoy working with my classmates".

Figure 5

Group Work Debrief Ratings for Drama Assignments by Student Collaborators (Disaggregated Groups)

Note. Figure 5 presents the responses of the student collaborators to the Group Work debrief rubric for drama assignments of Disaggregated Student Collaborators. These student collaborators were asked to respond to the same twelve Likert-type questions presented on this. Student collaborators responded to the following: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). These responses were collected from the student collaborators that made up the Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature cohort. The responses from the student collaborators identified with learning complexities were combined and presented with the other student collaborator's responses in figure 5, (*n*=6).

Anecdotal Field Notes and Check-ins

The Anecdotal Field Notes (Appendix F) forms were completed during regularly scheduled class periods and were completed during each of the collaborative activities throughout this intervention. During each of these collaborative activities, I would make brief check-ins with the student collaborators as they interact within these assignments. I would use the Anecdotal Field Notes (Appendix F) to record student interactions with me as well as make

notes of my student collaborators' responses to the authentic caring strategies that I used during each check-in. The intention of this form was to allow me to collect data from my student collaborators within both the Advanced Placement United State History and Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature cohorts. The form (Appendix F) and the check-ins were intended to record the student collaborators' sense of belonging in the classroom as they worked in collaborative groups.

These check-ins offered an opportunity for me to utilize the authentic caring strategies and to offer the student collaborators to communicate to me their comfortabilities within the classroom environment. The check-ins also were an opportunity for my student collaborators to communicate their level of comfort and response to those strategies. The data were intended to be coded and analyzed for themes and trends that naturally emerged. These check-ins sought to find each student collaborators' sense of belonging within their group during the collaborative activity. When reviewing my research field notes, I was looking for data that showed how participants engaged within the collaborative learning classroom environment and potentially led them to grow their sense of belonging.

After collecting data during the check-ins at the time my student collaborators were conducting the collaborative activity, I recorded their responses on the Anecdotal Field Notes from (Appendix F). It was their choice to participate in these one-on-one check-ins, and it did not disrupt their group work activities within the classroom-learning environment. During both the observations of my student collaborators' interactions during the collaborative activities and during the check-ins, I recorded their interactions on the Anecdotal Field Notes form. The trends and themes that emerged from the collaborative group work activities were consistent with the finding of the Socratic Seminar Debate and Drama Debrief surveys. When I interacted with my

student collaborators who identified with learning complexities interacted with me during these check-ins, I recorded their responses in the same way within the Anecdotal Field Notes as I did with those my student collaborators who were not identified with learning complexities.

The data recorded on this form illustrated three major themes became evident. These three major themes were also reinforced in the individual interviews that were conducted after the interventions were reinforced by the observations and interactions recorded in the Anecdotal Field Notes. These themes were "caring environment fostered by the teacher," "relationship of support from the teacher," and "group work being an important skill."

Presentation of Findings after Innovation

The students of the Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature and AP US History cohorts who continued to participate in this study were given the same survey at the beginning of the study. The intention of this post-Innovation was to compare the finding for how the level of belonging of my student participants felt by the end of the Innovation (See Appendix A).

Anticipation Guide Survey

At the end of this research project the students were given the same Anticipation Guide Survey as at the beginning. The 22 remaining student collaborators completed this survey, 14 student participants from the AP US History cohort and 5 student participants from the Honors Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature cohort. The shift in student participants was due to some decided to no longer participate and the COVID restrictions keep others from continuing their participation as they needed to remain home. This survey used the same questions given to the student collaborators at the beginning of the intervention. This survey was used to measure if my student collaborators' sense of belonging had changed over time because of the group work activities and teacher's strategies used during the innovation (Appendix A). The intervention was

able to determine the impact of the collaborative group activities. The intention was to compare their responses to the Likert-type questions and open-ended questions to the original responses for each student collaborators' sense of belonging at the beginning of the intervention.

This survey included the same four Likert-type questions as the questions at the beginning of the intervention that measured my participants' level of belonging in the classroom environment. The Likert-type scale asked my participants to respond with "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4) to four questions (Appendix A). These Likert-type questions offered my student collaborators the opportunity to present how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements that demonstrated their various connections to their peers and their comfortability within the classroom/school learning environment. This survey also included the same three open-ended questions that were asked at the beginning of the intervention that asked my participants to explain their sense of belonging and connection to the learning environment.

The compiled data from this survey presented from the Likert-type illustrated a shift occurring in the innovation. The data from this survey identified that the majority of my student collaborators responded with "Agree" (3) across all four of the quantitative questions (Figure 6). Analysis of the data also shows a small drop in the number of student collaborators responding with "Strongly Agree" (4) and an increase of the student collaborators responding with "Disagree" (2) across all four of the quantitative questions (Figure 6). Additionally, eight of the student collaborators did not respond to the questions on this survey and were unable to continue their participation in this project due to the COVID restrictions. Only three student collaborators responded "Strongly Agree" (4) to all of these questions.

Figure 6

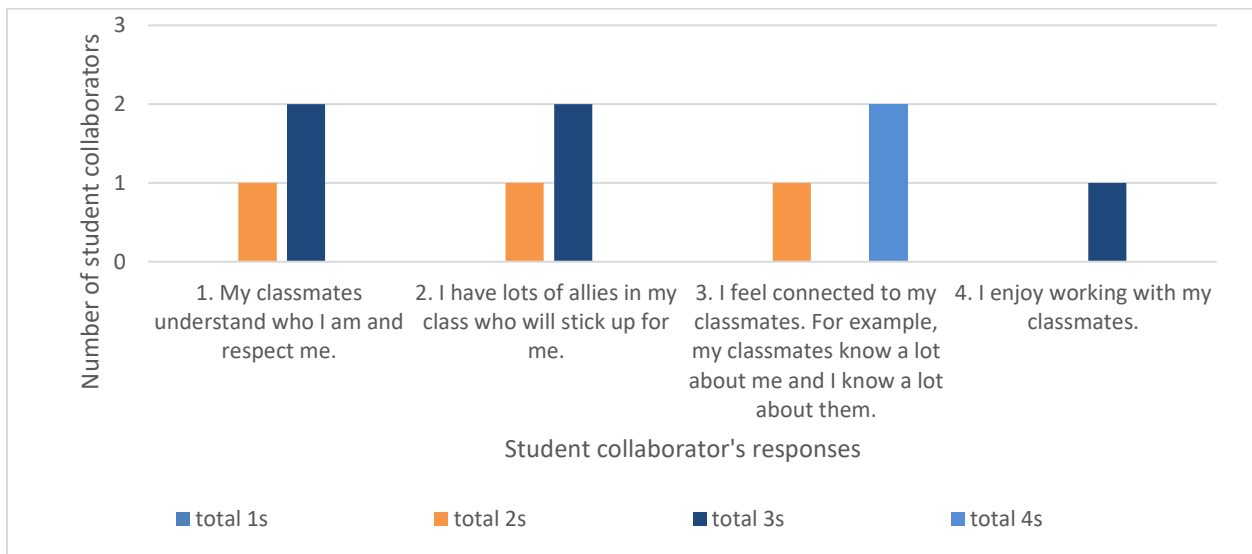*Student Sense of Belonging (Ratings): Post-Intervention*
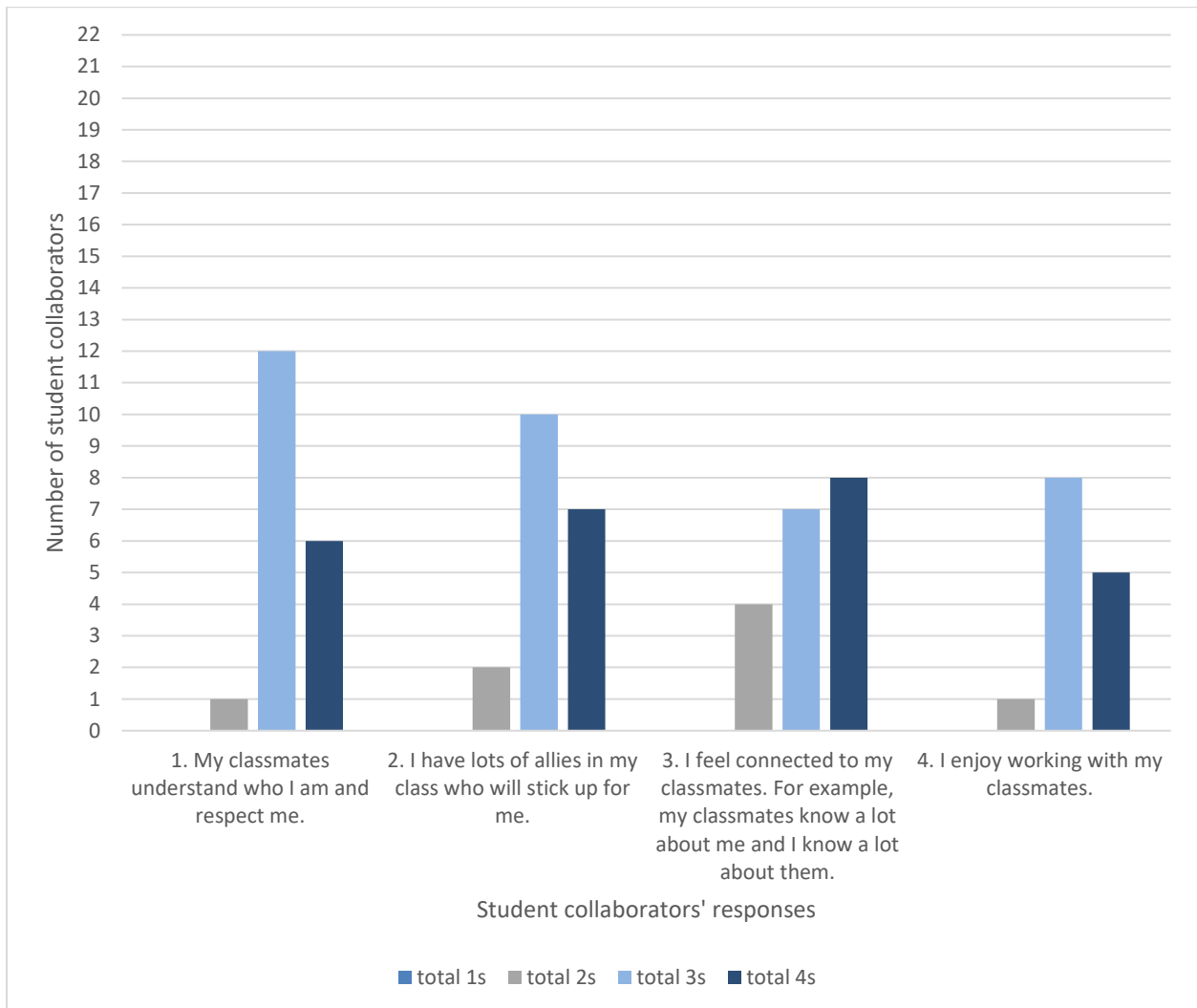
Note. Figure 6 presents student collaborators' responses to the four Likert-type questions presented on the Anticipation Guide Survey at the beginning of the intervention. Student collaborators responded to the following: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). The two cohorts' responses to these questions were compiled together in figure 6, (*N*=22).

After compiling all the student collaborators, I disaggregated the data to find the responses for those student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities. The data of this disaggregated sub-set (3 vs 22) was sparse as only three of these student collaborators continued participation in the project due to the COVID restrictions (Figure 7). Of these student collaborators who were able to continue their participation, the responses to the

questions shifted downward from "Agree" (3) or "Strongly Agree" (4) to "Disagree" (2) or

"Agree" (3). In this survey, two students answered: "Disagree" (2). For example, question 1,

"My classmates understand who I am and respect me" had answered "Agree" (3) on the previous

survey. The same two student collaborators who had answered "Agree" (3) to question 2, "I have

lots of allies in my class who will stick up for me." had answered "Strongly Agree" (3) on the

previous survey. After coding this sub-sets' responses to the open-ended questions, these student

collaborators revealed that they felt valued when they were participating in Sports and

Performing Arts activities.

Figure 7

Sense of Belonging for Students Identified with Learning Complexities (Ratings): Post-Intervention

Note. Figure 7 presents the disaggregated responses of the student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities. These student collaborators were asked to respond to the same four Likert-type questions presented on the Anticipation Guide Survey at the beginning of the intervention. Student collaborators responded to the following: "Strongly Disagree" (1), "Disagree" (2), "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). The two cohorts' responses to these questions were compiled together in figure 7, (*N*=3).

Individual Interviews. The individual interviews (Appendix E) occurred in my empty

classroom for 30 minutes during the students' 43-minute lunch break or for 30 minutes after

school, according to the preference of the student collaborator. These interviews were intended

as a time for my student collaborators to communicate their sense of belonging and their feelings

about how I used the authentic caring strategies during the intervention. The student

collaborators were asked 14 questions that helped them to reflect on their experiences during the

collaborative group work activities. These interview sessions were intended to allow my students

to speak freely about their level of belonging within the classroom learning environment.

During the individual interviews, my student collaborators were asked to reflect on the

collaborative activities and the check-ins I made with each of them during the intervention

(Appendix E). This method of data collection offered me the opportunity to ask students to

clarify what they meant when responding to the interview questions and as well as my

observations during the check-ins. These interviews also offered my student collaborates a way

to speak into this project. This method of data collection also offered my student collaborators to

use their own words to communicate exactly what they were thinking and feeling during the

collaborative group activities, as well as during the check-ins I conducted during the

intervention. It was important to offer this opportunity for my student collaborators to

communicate their level of belonging as their responses to these questions.

This method also allowed my student collaborators to be free with their answers. The

strength of this method was an interview through a conversational dialog. This dialog created a

comfortable atmosphere for the student collaborators to respond. My student collaborators likely

perceived these inquiries as friendly and normal dialogue, encouraging open lines of

communication with me. Analysis of the interview transcripts surfaced three major themes:

Caring Environment Fostered by the Teacher, a Relationship of Support from the Teacher, and

Group Work Being an Important Skill. As I conversed with my student collaborators during the

individual interviews, it become evident that using the authentic caring strategies had helped me to establish trust with those students within my classroom.

Summary

The purpose of this action research project was to determine the effects of how collaborative group work activities and how the deliberate use of authentic caring strategies helped to establish a sense of belonging in learning spaces both in the classroom and in the school environment. This action research project particularly focused on the sense of belonging within the classroom and in the school environment for those students identified with learning complexities. The intervention consisted of several collaborative group activities and reoccurring check-ins by the teacher over the course of eight-weeks. A pre-intervention survey was used to establish a baseline sense of belonging for each student collaborator. Then after each collaborative group activity, the student collaborators were given a debrief activity survey to gauge how the activity affected their sense of belonging. During the collaborative group activity, the teacher conducted several check-ins utilizing authentic caring strategies and recorded the responses to questions to the student collaborator and the interactions with the student collaborators to establish a real-time feeling about the activities and peers. A post-intervention survey was conducted to capture the student collaborators' sense of belonging at the end of the intervention, and a debrief interview was conducted with each participant for an opportunity for them to communicate their feeling and impression of the intervention.

The quantitative data that was collected from the Likert-type questions during the pre-intervention, the intervention, and post-intervention illustrated that my student collaborators enjoy meeting with each other and talking with each other. When disaggregating the data, it became very evident that these student collaborators value the connections that they had created

with their teachers. This connection with teachers is seen in the responses of all respondents in the two cohorts but was strong with those student collaborators identified with learning complexities. The data collected through these surveys were able to identify that a relationship exists between the student collaborators, that they enjoy working with each other, and that a number of them had already had connections with one another (Figure 3). This trend suggests that the student collaborators have established a connection of respect and care from their teachers. After disaggregating the data for the students identified with learning complexities, a unique aspect of the data shown in their responses was that they had established stronger connections with their teachers. These responses to this question suggested that my student collaborators felt that the check-ins during the collaborative activities were the optimal time to establish and develop the student-teacher relationship that the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) argue is essential for learning. The Individual Interviews helped to develop an understanding of the student-teacher relationships that developed over the course of the intervention. These conversations added to the collection of data that pointed to and established three major themes: a Caring Environment Fostered by the Teacher, a Relationship of Support from the Teacher, and Group Work Being an Important Skill. The findings developed from analyzing the data for chapter 4 will be further explained in chapter 5. The discussion in chapter 5 will elaborate on the limitations of the intervention's timing and help develop the next steps for further study.

Chapter V

Conclusions and Next Steps

Education has become a high-stakes proposition in the United States. Students in middle schools compete with test scores to be accepted into elite private high schools. They then go on to compete for spots in competitive four-year universities right after graduation. Students and their families assume that, without achieving these benchmarks, the student will never be successful. Yet, it is critical to understand that:

> "[d]rop-out facts show that having ... learning [complexities] results in a 300% increased likelihood of dropping out of middle or high school. Many [students] who drop out may not have their learning disability [identified,] monitored or treated; meaning the issue becomes invisible and doesn't appear in [statistics] as much." (Vuleta, 2020, para. 31)

This is a staggering statistic, yet it is important to point out that this increased likelihood of dropping out, does not consider the issues and problems inherent with distance learning during the 2019-2021 COVID pandemic. To add to this stress, some of these students may also have further non-academic emotional and educational learning barriers. These learning barriers could be, but are not limited to, gender, race, and immigration status. These learning barriers compounded with learning complexities may affect students' decision to stop learning and, in some cases, drop out of school.

I have seen the impact on students psychologically and emotionally from high-stakes education, and ultimately high-stakes testing. This school self-reports as a highly competitive community, with over 90 percent of graduating seniors eligible to attend competitive four-year universities. As the department chair for both the Social Science and Spanish Departments at my school site, I have heard comments from teachers that strike horror in my heart: "[this student] is not smart enough to get it," "[that student] is lazy and finds it easier to cheat. They will end up failing the exam in May," "school is tough, that's the way it goes," etc. It is clear that some

teachers do not actively work to establish a safe space to learn for their students, nor do they intend to create an authentically caring student-teacher relationship that would help the student to learn (Moen et al., 2020; Valenzuela, 1999, 2002). Some teachers have placed importance on the technical aspects of teaching in the classroom and delivering the material to students to be, as the teacher may be thinking, prepared for the exams (Valenzuela, 1999). Often, teachers deem teaching as a job and do not focus on developing a student-teacher relationship built around mutual respect (Valenzuela, 1999). In doing so, the teacher inadvertently creates a power relationship within their classroom built on the banking concept of education, where the teacher deposits all their knowledge into their students with the expectation that the student will regurgitate that same knowledge later (Freire, 2000).

This project centered on students' sense of belonging that may be fostered by establishing a collaborative safe space within the learning environment (Freire, 2000, 2014, Maslow, 1958; Wong, 2010). This classroom community and sense of belonging have fostered a collaborative working space among students. With the establishment of an inclusive authentic caring environment within the classroom for all students, the needed connectedness and belongingness helped to develop a classroom that fosters inquiry-based problem-posing, built on the power-sharing student-teacher relationship (Crandall et al., 2020; Freire, 2000; McNeely et al., 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Wong, 2010).

This action research project explored whether the use of student collaboration and authentic caring strategies fosters a sense of belonging among high school students. The research question was: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, particularly in students identified with learning complexities?* Drawing on Angela Valenzuela's (1999)

definition of authentic caring, the strategies in this study included teacher realness/vulnerability, the development of teacher-student and student-student relationships, and power-sharing relationships (Freire, 2000; Freire et al., 2014). The authentic caring strategies were crafted utilizing several resources outlining the strategies show interest in students' welfare, getting to know your students and the lives they live, showing respect [to] students' perspectives, telling students they can succeed, knowing students' academic and social needs, and recognizing students' academic and social achievement (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012). I hypothesized that students who were identified as having learning complexities may find a safe place and a heightened sense of belonging within the classroom community.

This action research project drew on Angela Valenzuela's (1999) definition of *authentic caring* and employed authentic caring strategies to foster student collaboration and a sense of belonging among high school students. Authentic caring strategies allow the teacher to show they truly care for their student's welfare as well as for their academic understanding of topics covered in class; the teacher finds a connection with their students and their interests and life goals. A truly caring teacher will also share the respect they expect from their student, and that truly caring teacher will share respect with their students. The authentically caring teacher will also find ways to help their students succeed, not just in the subject they are teaching, but also in life as well as other subjects. The authentically caring teacher will seek to know and understand each of their students' academic and social needs and try to find ways to enable their students to be successful, as well as celebrate with the student – and make a big deal about – the academic and social achievements.

Summary of Findings

A mixed-methods approach was used within this action research project to determine the effects of how collaborative group work activities and how the deliberate use of authentic caring strategies helped to establish a sense of belonging in learning spaces both in the classroom and in the school environment. This action research project particularly focused on the sense of belonging within the classroom and in the school environment for those students identified with learning complexities. The intervention consisted of several collaborative group activities and reoccurring check-ins by the teacher over eight-weeks. A pre-intervention survey (Appendix A) was used to establish a baseline sense of belonging for each student collaborator. Then after each collaborative group activity, the student collaborator was a given debrief activity survey (Appendices B, C, & D) to gauge how the activity affected their sense of belonging. During the collaborative group activity, the teacher conducted several check-ins (Appendix F) utilizing authentic caring strategies and recorded the responses to questions from the student collaborator and the interactions with the student collaborator to establish a real-time feeling to the activities and peers. A post-intervention survey (Appendices A & D) was conducted to capture the student collaborators' sense of belonging at the end of the intervention, and a debrief interview (Appendix E) was conducted with each participant for an opportunity for them to communicate their feeling and impression of the intervention.

The quantitative data from the Likert-type questions contained in the surveys was collected during pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention. I analyzed my student collaborators' responses and discovered that they enjoy meeting with each other and talking with each other. When disaggregating the data, it became evident that the student collaborators value the connections that these students had created with their teachers. This connection with teachers

was seen in all respondents in the two cohorts but is stronger with those student collaborators identified with learning complexities. The data collected from these surveys were able to identify that the student collaborators enjoying working with each other and a number of them had already had connections with each other (Figure 3). This trend shows that the student collaborators had established a connection of respect and care from their teachers. After disaggregating the data for the students identified with learning complexities, I discovered that the data suggested that they had established stronger connections with teachers. These responses to this question demonstrated that my student collaborators feelt that the check-ins during the collaborative activities were the optimal time to establish and develop their role as student-teacher; this relationship can be seen in the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) as they argue the student-teacher relationship is essential for learning. The Individual Interviews helped me to understand how the student-teacher relationships developed over the course of the intervention. These conversations added to the collection of data that pointed to and established three major themes: a caring environment fostered by the teacher, a relationship of support from the teacher, and group work being an important skill.

Anticipation Guide Survey Pre-Intervention

After compiling my student collaborators' responses and analyzing the Likert-type questions for this survey, it became evident that 17 out of 30 the student collaberators had established connections with each other. The analysis of the data gathered from the pre-intervention Anticipation Guide Survey and the post-intervention Anticipation Guide Surveys demonstrated that the student collaborators, as a whole, maintained their sense of belonging to their peers throughout the study. These results suggest they maintained their sense of belonging to their peers (M=3) both at the beginning of the intervention and after the intervention.

However, the data did show an increase in the student collaborators' sense of belonging with one question: "I feel connected to my classmates. For example, my classmates know a lot about me and I know a lot about them." The mean of the responses to this question were 3 at the beginning of the intervention and 3.21 after the intervention. This project spanned a two-week winter break and a two-week J-term. During these four-weeks, the cohorts did not meet together, and the project was on hold. When the cohorts met together after the break, there was a spike in the number of student collaborators who tested positive for COVID and had to remain home for additional days. The data show a drop in the number of student collaborators continuing participation in the action research project (n=33 vs. 22). This drop in the number of student collaborators continuing to participate may account for the flat growth in their sense of belonging to their peers.

Disaggregated Anticipation Guide Survey

After coding this sub-sets' responses to the open-ended questions, it was very evident that these student collaborators value the connections they have created with their teachers. This connection with teachers was seen in both cohorts. Analysis of the data gathered from the pre-intervention Anticipation Guide Survey and the post-intervention Anticipation Guide Surveys demonstrated that this sub-set of student collaborators' level of belonging to their peers slightly decreased throughout the study. These data show they sliped slightly in their sense of belonging to their peers, the mean at the beginning of the intervention was 3.5 whereas at end of the intervention was 3. However, the data for this sub-set does show an increase in the student collaborators' sense of belonging with one question: "I feel connected to my classmates. For example, my classmates know a lot about me and I know a lot about them." The mean score of responses to this question was 3 at the beginning of the intervention and 4 after the intervention.

The spike in the number of student collaborators testing positive for COVID may have had a negative impact on this project and the participation of the student collaborators with learning complexities. The restrictions brought on by these COVID cases extended the time these student collaborators remained at home. Findings show a drop in the number of student collaborators with learning complexities who continued to participated in the action research project went from seven participants to only three. This drop in the number of student collaborators continuing to participate could account for the overall decrease in these students' sense of belonging to their peers.

Socratic Seminar Debrief Form Survey

Analysis of the data collected from the Socratic seminar debrief survey given to the AP Hisotry cohort (n=18) demonstrated that a relationship exists between the student collaborators; they enjoyed working with each other and the number of them already had connections with each other (Figure 3). This relationship was evident comparing the following questions: "1. My classmates understand who I am and respect me," "2. I enjoy working with my classmates," "3. I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of the school," and "12. I know a lot of people at school who are not in my grade level." When comparing the responses to these questions, the cohort responded with "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). When looking at these three questions together, the results suggested that more than two-thirds ($n = 11$) of the student collaborators enjoyed working with group partners when preparing for the Socratic seminar. In addition, when comparing the responses to the following questions: "4. I feel connected to my teachers. For example, I know a lot about my teachers and they know a lot about me," "5. My teachers at school understand who I am and respect me," "6. I enjoy talking with and learning from my teachers," and "7. My teachers think

that I matter," it became clear that those student collaborators who answered these questions with "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4) had established a connection of respect and care from their teachers.

The Drama activity was assigned towards the end of the intervention, I was able to collect data from 14 of my student collaborators due to the remainder of the cohort were not present due to the COVID restrictions to continue participating (see Figure 1). This drama collaborative activity was completed after the two-week winter break, after the two-week J-Term, and during the 2022 winter spike of COVID positive responses. The collective data reflects the results of three student collaborators and three student collaborators identified with learning complexities. The resulting data represents (42%) participation in this collaborative activity. The collected data embodies (50%) student collaborators who are not identified with learning complexities and (50%) student collaborators who are identified with learning complexities. The analysis of the questions: "4. I feel like I belong at school. In other words, I feel like I fit in at school," "5. I like being at school," and "7. I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of the school," indicated that my student collaborators found a connection within my classroom environment, and they enjoy working together on projects. This finding demonstrates the possibility of stronger connections to teachers.

These data suggest that the personal, in-person connection my student collaborators had when reading and analyzing both primary and secondary source material was enhanced. These data point to the importance of having an opportunity to form an in-person connection when students analyze literature together. This point was hinted at in the research conducted by Pürbudak and Usta (2021). These researchers found that only one-quarter of the students in an online learning environment would be able to learn and thrive (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). These

data demonstrate that two-thirds of my student collaborators were able to engage, learn and thrive within a collaborative learning engagement.

In addition, when comparing the responses that show a sense of belonging to peers with the responses to questions: "4. I feel connected to my teachers. For example, I know a lot about my teachers and they know a lot about me," "5. My teachers at school understand who I am and respect me," "6. I enjoy talking with and learning from my teachers," and "7. My teachers think that I matter," it becomes clear that those student collaborators who answered these questions responded with "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). This trend shows that the student collaborators have established a connection of respect and care from their teachers. This trend of feeling connected and experiencing a sense of belonging is evident from the data. The results further show that the student collaborators (over 80%) feel comfortable and safe in the classroom learning environment. It is important to note that all student collaborators responded "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4) to question "6. I enjoy talking with and learning from my teachers". It is even more important to note that 70%, or 12 out of 14, responded "Strongly Agree" (4) to question "6. I enjoy talking with and learning from my teachers." This points to the fact that check-ins with student collaborators conducted during the collaborative group activities positively affected the sense of belonging. It also points out the fact that using authentic caring strategies has enhanced the student collaborators' level of belonging.

Disaggregated Socratic Seminar Debrief Form Survey

I disaggregated the data from the Likert-type questions in the Socratic Seminar Debrief Form Survey to find the responses from those two student collaborators who had been identified with learning complexities. The data of the disaggregated sub-set identified that almost all of my student collaborators (N=2) also responded with "Agree" (3), or "Strongly Agree" (4) to the

Likert-type questions (See Figure 5). This result similarly demonstrates that a relationship exists between my student collaborators. This trend shows that the student collaborators have established a connection of respect and care from their teachers. This trend, the feeling of connectedness and the experiencing a sense of belonging was evident from the data collected from my student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities. It is important to note when analyzing the responses to question 3, my student collaborators felt that the check-ins I made with them during the collaborative activities demonstrated the teacher's care. The responses to this question demonstrated that my student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities also feel that the check-ins during the collaborative activities were the optimal time to establish and develop the student-teacher relationship that the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) argue that is essential for learning.

Drama Debrief Form

After compiling all the student collaborators' responses to the Likert-type questions and analyzing the data, it became evident that the majority of them enjoy working with each other during collaborative activities (Figure 4). This relationship was especially evident in analyzing questions "1. This activity helped me feel connected to my group partners and I was able to learn a little more about them" and "3. I have a sense that my teacher cares for me when he checks in with me during class." The data suggest to when my student collaborators are given time to work together, they begin to make connections with each other, and they feel more learning can take place. When analyzing the responses to question 3, my student collaborators felt that the check-ins I made with them during the collaborative activities demonstrated my use of the authentic caring strategies I was using during the intervention. The responses to the questions that my student collaborators demonstrated that they felt the check-ins during the collaborative activities

were the optimal time to establish and develop the student-teacher relationship that the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) argue is essential for learning.

When analyzing the responses to the following questions: "1. My teachers at school understand who I am and respect me," "2. I enjoy talking with and learning from my teachers," and "3. My teachers think that I matter," I learned that my student collaborators felt that they are connected to the teacher and find it important to have this connection with their teacher. The responses to these questions were "Agree" (3), or "Strongly Agree" (4) for those students identified with and without learning complexities. It is critical to understand that the teacher is making a safe space through the use of authentic caring strategies. These authentic caring strategies enable the student with or without learning complexities to feel safe in a learning environment.

Additionally, the check-ins I made with my student collaborators during the collaborative activities demonstrated the teacher's authentic caring strategies. When analyzing the responses to the following questions: "1. My teachers at school understand who I am and respect me," "2. I enjoy talking with and learning from my teachers," and "3. My teachers think that I matter," the responses to these questions demonstrated that my student collaborators felt that the check-ins during the collaborative activities were the optimal time to establish and develop the student-teacher relationship that the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) argue is essential for learning. When analyzing the responses to question 3 for students with learning complexities, these students also felt that the check-ins I made with them during the collaborative activities demonstrated the teacher's care.

Anecdotal Field Notes and Check-ins

After completing the data analysis from the Field Notes (Appendix F) that included the Check-in observations, three major themes started to become apparent. These themes were: a caring environment fostered by the teacher, a relationship of support from the teacher, and group work being an important skill. These three major themes were further reinforced from the data collected during the Individual Interviews (Appendix E) at the end of the intervention.

With the observations of my student collaborators' interactions and Check-ins recorded on the Anecdotal Field Notes form (Appendix F), I was able to find the themes and aggregate the data from my observation during the group collaborative activities. During the observations and Check-ins during the group collaborative activities, I was able to compile the interactions of my student collaborators' actions and responses to the group collaborations activities within their groups, and of the interactions during check-ins.

The data point of the three major themes that were reinforced during the individual interviews conducted after the interventions were reinforced by the observations and interactions recorded in the Anecdotal Field Notes (Appendix F). These three major themes were a caring environment fostered by the teacher, a relationship of support from the teacher, and group work being an important skill. The themes of a caring environment fostered by the teacher and the relationship of support from the teacher can be seen in the student collaborator assigned the pseudonym Zeus' response. When they were asked about the check-ins during the individual interviews, "Did my check-ins with you during the assignments help you in any way?" they replied, "Yes, though I did not talk with you specifically much, it helped keep me grounded and know I have the support if needed". This illustrated the importance of the authentic caring strategies of showing interest in students' welfare, telling students, they can succeed, and

knowing students' academic and social needs had such an impact that this student collaborator felt the classroom to be a safe space and all students belonged within that space.

Zeus' interactions during the group interactions and check-ins were critical to this intervention, as Zeus was one of the student collaborators identified with learning complexities. In following Zeus throughout the learning environment, I was able to see how comfortable they became as the group collaborative activities progressed. Zeus' interaction with different groups is important to this study as they were moved from group to group due to the COVID restrictions. Though Zeus was placed into different groups, they were able to connect with the other student collaborators, and when I observed the groups' interaction and collaboration it became more evident. Zeus' interaction with their groups was comfortable and helped the productivity of the groups. Zeus later commented that working in groups was a critical skill to learn.

This reflects the major theme of group work is an important skill that I observed. In a group of three student collaborators, I intended to work together during a collaborative group activity because of their different abilities. The student collaborators in this group assembled because of their different abilities, these abilities included an academically strong student collaborator, a strong social-emotional student who was also an out-going student, and a kind and introverted student collaborator. During the activity, I made several check-ins to ensure they were all comfortable and working well together. Each time I conducted a check-in with this group during the collaborative activity, I noted how each of these students' strengths off-set their fellow group members. The academically strong student collaborator became more patient do the interaction with working with the strong social-emotional student collaborator. The kind and introverted student collaborator began offering more opinions and ideas do the interaction with

working with the strong social-emotional student collaborator. The strong social-emotional, outgoing student collaborator started exhibiting leadership abilities because of interaction working with the other two student collaborators. With this collaborative group activity, each student was able to develop an important skill. The responses demonstrated that my student collaborators felt that the check-ins during the collaborative activities were a means for me to establish what both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) have pointed out that the student-teacher relationship is essential for learning.

Anticipation Guide Survey Post-Intervention

Offering an Anticipation Guide survey after the intervention allowed for the student collaborators' responses to be compared to their responses at the beginning of the intervention. A similar pattern arose at the beginning of the intervention. The student collaborators had maintained their connections with each other. This connection to their peers is also depended upon whether or not they have the knowledge or skill to be effective at what they are being asked to complete. An additional theme emerged for the qualitative questions; my student collaborators explained that they felt they had value when they were productive and able to complete assignments successfully. After coding the response to this survey's open-ended questions, the combined two cohorts of my student collaborators had identified that they are more likely to feel connected to their peers if they are needed and/or relied upon.

One very interesting outcome of this survey was the number of students who completed the responses. This is important to point out that as the number of participants changed, the number dropped from 33 to 22. This decrease in participation of my student collaborators came towards the end of the intervention. The participation drop-off could be a result of the combined two-week winter break, followed by a two-week J-Term, and culminated in the COVID

restrictions imposed when the students were returning from the winter break. This combination of four weeks of being out of the classroom environment and changing restrictions seems to have been too much for my student collaborators and as a response stopped participating in this research project. It would be interesting to study the stress and impact the stress that comes from COVID restrictions on students' ability to learn.

Individual Interviews

Offering a method for my student collaborators to be free with their answers and communicate their impressions of these interventions was critical to this project. It was also important to the research of establishing a sense of belonging within a learning space. The student collaborators' voice was seen as central to the findings of this study. The strength of this method was in interviewing through a conversational dialog, this dialog created a comfortable atmosphere for the student collaborators to respond. This method of data collection also offered my student collaborators to use their own words to communicate exactly what they were thinking and feeling during the collaborative group activities, as well as during the check-ins I conducted during the intervention. It was important to offer this opportunity for my student collaborators to communicate their level of belonging as their responses to these questions. illustrated their feeling of belonging and point to the development of the student-teacher relationship that the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) argue is essential for learning.

These data point to, and is reinforced by, the Anecdotal Field Notes (Appendix F) and Check-ins, three major themes: a caring environment fostered by the teacher, a relationship of support from the teacher, and group work being an important skill. As previously communicated with my student collaborators, it become evident that using the authentic caring strategies helped me to establish trust with those students within my classroom. One of the most impactful events

that demonstrate the criticalness and importance of the authentic caring strategies emerges from the interactions with my student collaborators from my AP US History cohort. This event points to the establishment of a caring environment fostered by the teacher and leads to the strategies, showing interest in students' welfare, showing respect to students' perspectives, telling students they can succeed, and knowing students' academic and social needs. My student collaborators assigned the pseudonym Hestia, Pan, and Apep each responded to the question, "What was one thing I did or say that made you feel like you were cared about in class." They felt the classroom was a safe place and that I was a teacher that cared for each of my students. They each explained that when I offered all the extra time, Apep needed to complete an assessment and successfully demonstrated care over academic standards. In doing so, all three communicated they found the classroom to be a safe space. This event reinforces the findings from Nga-Wing Anjela Wong's (2010) research into the creation of a safe and trusted space for students found in community-based youth. Just as Wong's (2010) research pointed out, my student collaborators commentated on similar feelings, the importance of a safe space contributed to their sense of belongingness and their willingness to be a part of the community.

Another example of care and showing respect to students' perspectives, knowing students' academic and social needs, as well as recognizing students' academic and social achievement was demonstrated when the student assigned to the pseudonym Math Mathonwy communicated, "No one teaches like you, you free up that space … [making the classroom a place free of prejudgment for the students and their abilities] … to learn and to think". The use of these strategies was reinforced when Zeus was asked, "Do you feel more connected to your classmates since participating in the group work assignments?" they responded, "I feel more connected to my classmates. I am able to have academic conversations, which I try to make more

personal so that I can get to know someone better. Then I can progress the relationship into a friendship." These responses suggested that Zeus connected the academic expectations of the collaborative group work activities with the opportunities to build or strengthen peer-to-peer relationships. The responses expressed during the individual interviews demonstrated that my student collaborators feel the authentic caring strategies helped to establish and develop the student-teacher relationship that the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) argue is essential for learning. These responses also reinforce Wong's research when the youth at the community-based youth centers studied communicated that the adults truly cared for the youth who when to the centers. This authentic caring can be seen in the response in the Individual Interviews, but specifically in the statements from the student's assigned to the pseudonym Apep, Hestia, Math Mathonwy, Pan, and Zeus.

This method also allowed my student collaborators to be free with their answers. The strength of this method was an interview through a conversational dialog. This dialog created a comfortable atmosphere for the student collaborators to respond. My student collaborators likely perceived these inquiries as friendly and normal dialogue, encouraging open lines of communication with me. The data points to three major themes: a caring environment fostered by the teacher, a relationship of support from the teacher, and group work being an important skill. As I communicated with my student collaborators during the individual interviews, it became evident that by using the authentic caring strategies it helped me to establish trust with those students within my classroom.

As an example of this care leading to trust, the student collaborators assigned the pseudonym Hestia, Pan, and Apep each responded to the question, "What was one thing I did or say that made you feel like you were cared about in class." They felt the classroom was a safe

place and that I, as a teacher, cared for each of my students. They each explained that when I offed all the extra time that Apep needed to complete an assessment successfully demonstrated care over academic standards. In doing so, all three communicated they found the classroom to be a safe space. Another example of care was communicated by Math Mathonwy when they stated, "no one teaches like you, you free up that space … [making the classroom a place free of prejudgment for the students and their abilities] … to learn and to think." Zeus is connecting the academic expectations of the collaborative group work activities with the opportunities to build or strengthen peer-to-peer relationships. The responses expressed during the individual interviews demonstrated that my student collaborators feel the authentic caring strategies helped to establish and develop the student-teacher relationship that the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) argue is essential for learning.

Interpretation of Findings

The action research study focused on the question: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students identified with learning complexities*? This project drew upon Angela Valenzuela's definition of authentic caring (1999), the strategies implemented in this study include teacher realness/vulnerability and teacher-student companionship. It was expected that the students would feel connected to the teacher, the classroom community, and the school as a whole. Additionally, it was hoped that the students would feel comfortable interacting with the students in the classroom learning environment. The use of authentic caring strategies is essential to the establishment of a safe learning environment. The authentic caring strategies implemented during this action research study that enabled the sense of belonging were, Showing interest in students' welfare, Getting to know your students

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and the lives they live, Showing respect for students' perspectives, Telling students they can succeed, Knowing students' academic and social needs, Recognizing students' academic and social achievement (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012). It should be stated that the collaborative activity culminated after the two-week winter break, after the two-week J-Term, and during the 2022 winter spike of COVID. The collective data reflects the results of three student collaborators and three student collaborators identified with learning complexities. The resulting data represents (42%) participation within both of the cohorts being studied. The culmination of the data collection gave rise to three major themes, a caring environment fostered by the teacher, a relationship of support from the teacher, and group work being an important skill. The results of the data and the importance of my student collaborators' feelings of a sense of belonging have been significant. It is important to draw attention to how each aspect of the research question has been addressed by the data.

Collaborative Classroom Activities

It is important to point out when looking at the action research question: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students identified with learning complexities* is that the data collected during the study was able to identify that a relationship did exist between the student collaborators enjoying working with each other and that a number of them already had connections with each other (Figure 3). This relationship became evident when comparing the following questions: "1. My classmates understand who I am and respect me," "2. I enjoy working with my classmates," "3. I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of the school," and "12. I know

a lot of people at school who are not in my grade level" from the anticipation guide (see Appendix A). When comparing the responses to these questions the majority of the cohort responded with "Agree" (3), and "Strongly Agree" (4). When looking at these questions together, responses suggested that more than two-thirds, nine of the 11, of the student collaborators enjoyed working with group partners when preparing for the Socratic seminar.

When the data were disaggregated, it reflected the overall results of the study. My student collaborators who have been learning complexities resulted in (42%) participation in the collaborative activities. The data from the Drama Debrief Form was analyzed. When highlighting the following three questions, "4. I feel like I belong at school. In other words, I feel like I fit in at school," "5. I like being at school," and "7. I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of the school," communicated that my student collaborators find a connection within my classroom environment during the collaborative group activity and that they enjoyed working together on projects.

These data point to the overall importance of learning activities that rely upon collaborative work. This point was implicit in the research conducted by Pürbudak and Usta (2021). These researchers found that only one-quarter of the students in an online learning environment would be able to learn and thrive (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021). These data suggest that my student collaborators prefer to work collaboratively, and in-person, on projects. It could be concluded that collaborative group projects are better and help to establish a sense of belonging when performed in an in-person learning environment.

Intentional Use of Authentic Caring Strategies

In this study, authentic caring comes from Valenzuela and Dornsbuch's (1994) work with Latinx students. Authentic Caring was deliberately implemented during this action research

project to discover the importance of these strategies and to point to the research by Valenzuela and Dornsbuch (1994) as a way to establish student ability critical to learning. The authentic caring strategies implemented during this action research study were: showing interest in students' welfare, getting to know your students and the lives they live, showing respect for students' perspectives, telling students they can succeed, knowing students' academic and social needs, and Recognizing students' academic and social achievement (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012).

The use of these strategies became evident from the themes that arose from the data of this action research study. The themes of a caring environment fostered by the teacher and the relationship of support from the teacher can be seen in the responses of the student collaborators assigned the pseudonym Apep, Hestia, Math Mathonwy, Pan, and Zeus. When they were asked about the connectedness and importance the teacher placed on teacher caring during the individual interviews, they pointed to the importance of the authentic caring strategies of showing interest in students' welfare, telling students, they can succeed, and knowing students' academic and social needs had such an impact that this student collaborator felt the classroom to be a safe space and all students belonged withing that space. This can be seen in the statement from Math Mathonwy, "no one teaches like you, you free up that space … [making the classroom a place free of prejudgment for the students and their abilities] … to learn and to think". A safe space for the student to express their thinking is critical to their feeling of belongingness.

In this study, authentic caring comes from Valenzuela's work with Latinx students. Valenzuela (1999) defined authentic caring as the need for pedagogy caring that follows and flows through relationships between teacher and student; the implication for pedagogy is the

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foundational cultural construct that allows each, the teacher and the student, to achieve respect and responsibility for each other. According to Valenzuela, this is the foundation of authentic caring. This embodies what the student assigned the pseudonym Math Mathonwy and Zeus were calling attention to within the classroom-learning environment during this research study.

Foster a Sense of Belonging in Students

When looking at this study's research question: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students identified with learning complexities?* a sense of belonging is embodied within the idea of a safe space. From Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the need for safety must be met before any other needs can be acted upon. The feeling is critical to the power-sharing teacher-student relationship and will be encouraged with the use of the critical pedagogy theory (Freire, 2000, 2014). Critical pedagogy theory can be seen in the use of collaborative learning spaces and contribute to the sense of belonging. This sense of community or belongingness is essential to student learning and is pointed out by the following research.

It was critical to understand that without meeting the need for safety, none of the other higher-level needs (including the need for safety, love or belonging, and self-esteem) can be met (Maslow, 1958; Engel, 2021). This is an important point as all of Maslow's social needs can be seen at play in the classroom. It is important to point out that Rouse (2004) offers an addition to Maslow's theory. This theory is supported by Zeus' response when they were asked about the check-ins during the individual interviews, "Did my check-ins with you during the assignments help you in any way?" they replied, "Yes, though I did not talk with you specifically much, it helped keep me grounded and know I have the support if needed." This illustrated the

importance of the authentic caring strategies, showing interest in students' welfare, telling students they can succeed, and knowing students' academic and social needs and how they had such an impact that this student collaborator felt the classroom to be a safe space and all students belonged within that space.

Additionally, Rouse's (2004) research supports Maslow's idea of social needs developed in the Hierarchy of Needs theory. As it has been pointed out that people are motivated by goals, and these goals can be seen as alternatives to the hierarchy of needs (Rouse, 2004). These goal-oriented people seek to fulfill what society expects from them. Goal orientation is a motivation that drives humans to reinforce safety needs, belonging, and self-esteem (Rouse, 2004). Without meeting these needs, a student will be hard-pressed to learn. The researchers McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) investigated how to promote school connectedness in 2002. These researchers were seeking to answer, "Why do some adolescents feel connected to school while others do not?" (McNeely et al., 2002, p. 138). This is critical to point out as their research supports Rouse's (2004) research and strengthens Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1954) and is echoed in Zeus' statement. Clearly, the student's sense of belonging is essential for them to learn and is developed through the use of authentically caring relationships.

Foster a Sense of Belonging Students Identified with Learning Complexities

When addressing the action research question: *In what ways do collaborative classroom activities and the intentional use of authentic caring strategies by the teacher foster a sense of belonging in students, and particularly in students identified with learning complexities,* it is important to point out the disaggregation of the student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities from the pre-intervention Anticipation Guide Survey and the post-intervention Anticipation Guide Surveys. The data demonstrated that this sub-set of student

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collaborators' sense of belonging to their peers slightly decreased throughout the study. These data show they maintained their sense of belonging to their peers (*M*= 3) both at the beginning of the intervention and after the intervention. However, the data for this sub-set show an increase in the student collaborators' sense of belonging with one question: "I feel connected to my classmates. For example, my classmates know a lot about me and I know a lot about them" (*M*=3).

Again, this project did span a two-week winter break and a two-week J-term. During these 4-weeks, the cohorts did not meet together and the project was on hold. When the cohorts did begin meeting together after the break there was a spike in the number of student collaborators testing positive for COVID and had to remain home for additional days. The data show a drop in the number of student collaborators continuing participation in the action research project (from seven to three student collaborators). This decrease in the number of student collaborators continuing to participate could account for the overall decrease in this sub-set's sense of belonging to their peers. When looking at the data what is affected is the participation in the project due to the COVID restrictions. The student collaborators within this sub-set's sense of belonging still show a relatively strong connectedness to the learning environment.

The use of the authentic caring strategies implemented during this action research study was: Showing interest in students' welfare, Getting to know your students and the lives they live, Showing respect for students' perspectives, Telling students they can succeed, Knowing students' academic and social needs, Recognizing students' academic and social achievement (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012) can be attributed to this feeling among this sub-set's sense of belonging. The researchers Raviv and Bader (2021) looked specifically at perceived cultural norms affecting

how learning for students with learning complexities and how these students fit within the communities. Their study (Raviv & Bader, 2021) helped the understanding of that of an individual's traditional cultural background and how it played a larger part in identifying students with learning complexities and how they would flourish academically, sociologically, and emotionally. Coordinating Raviv and Bader (2021) researchers with that of the authentic caring strategies (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012) helped to foster a classroom environment that would enable a sense of belonging.

Reflection on Limitations

This action research project was subject to several limitations that may have affected the outcome of this research project. These limitations include time constraints, a small pool of participants, and overlapping roles of the teacher-researcher, as well as the personal connection of the teacher-researcher to the subject of the study. The research case study was limited to a eight-week timeframe due to the requirements of the graduate program in which the teacher-researcher was enrolled at the time of data collection and analysis. The school site the research case study was conducted at was a small religious private school in the San Francisco Bay Area. This small school environment inherently limits the number of students in courses and thereby limits the number of students with learning complexities within the class cohorts. This limitation does not offer a diversity of reactions from students, yet the limitation does magnify the results from an authentic caring student-teacher relationship the students and the teacher-researcher establish. This allows for a thorough view of the strategies imposed by the teacher-researcher. In this case study, the roles of the teacher and researcher were combined. This established a close

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relationship with the students being observed, and this close relationship may have influenced and affected the data collection process.

Another impact of this research is the length of the research period. This project was conducted over eight-weeks. With this limited scope, the impact of a safe space on students' sense of belonging and involvement was a challenge to see. This timeframe was further impacted by a two-week winter break and a two-week J-Term, followed by the restrictions and constraints from the COVID mandates imposed when a student test positive. However, the data have been interpreted with this in mind, and I as the teacher-researcher had worked to establish a safe space in the classroom from the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year to create a community using authentic caring to establish the student-teacher relationships. In this study, I brought self-reflection to my teaching decisions. Leaning on my experiences with learning complexities growing up in school and being aware of the power and privilege I have been awarded, I will modify and adapt so that each student will find my classroom their community of learning. Utilizing data triangulation, I will be able to gather experiences with my students from several different perspectives that will enable me to be objective.

Summary

This action research project spanned a two-week winter break and a two-week J-term, thus an eight-week study that encompassed a four-week break that was impacted by the 2022 winter COVID spike. During these four weeks, the cohorts did not meet together, and the project was on hold. When the cohorts did begin meeting together after the break, there was a spike in the number of student collaborators testing positive for COVID and had to remain home for additional days. These data show a drop in the number of student collaborators continuing participation in the action research project (N=33 vs. 23). This drop in the number of student

collaborators continuing participating could account for the, as a whole, flat growth in their sense of belonging to their peers. The data show a decrease in the number of student collaborators identified with learning complexities continuing participation in the action research project (N=7 vs. 3). This drop in the number of student collaborators continuing to participate could account for the overall decrease in this sub-set's sense of belonging to their peers.

The data collected from this action research project is showing a simpler outcome than that of Pürbudak and Usta's research (2021). Two-thirds of my student collaborators were able to engage, learn and thrive within a collaborative learning engagement. With the finding from data collected from this project, I concluded that the in-person connection my student collaborators had when reading and analyzing both primary and secondary source material was enhanced. These data point to the importance of a live in-person connection needed to analyze documents together. This point was hinted at in the research conducted by Pürbudak and Usta (2021). These researchers found that only one-quarter of the students in an online learning environment would be able to learn and thrive (Pürbudak & Usta, 2021).

These data suggest they maintained their sense of belonging to their peers (*M*=3.5) both at the beginning of the intervention and after the intervention. However, the data from the sub-set of my student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities has shown an increase in the student collaborators' sense of belonging with one question, "I feel connected to my classmates." When the cohorts began meeting together after the four-week break, there was a spike in the number of positive tests for COVID. The data show a decrease in the number of student collaborators with learning complexities continuing participation. This drop could account for the overall decrease in this sub-set's sense of belonging. These data point to an

adverse effect on my student collaborators' sense of belonging due to the mandates and restrictions brought on by the COVID pandemic.

The data collected during this research study points to a trend that demonstrates that my student collaborators who have been identified with learning complexities had been able to establish a connection of respect and care from their teachers. This trend, the feeling of connectedness, and the experiencing a sense of belonging were evident and attributed to the use of the authentic caring strategies implemented during this action research study. The authentic caring strategies implemented during this action research study that enabled the sense of belonging were: Showing interest in students' welfare, Getting to know your students and the lives they live, Showing respect for students' perspectives, Telling students they can succeed, Knowing students' academic and social needs, Recognizing students' academic and social achievement (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2015; Lewis, 2016; Melo, 2016; Nishioka, 2016, 2019; Henik, 2018; Zakrzewsi, 2012). The responses to the check-ins from my student collaborators demonstrated their feelings during the collaborative activities was the optimal time to establish and develop the student-teacher relationship that the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) argue is essential for learning.

The check-ins I conducted with each group during the collaborative activity utilized authentic caring strategies. When conducting the check-ins, I noted how each of these students' strengths offset their fellow group members; the academically strong student collaborator became more patient do the interaction working with the strong social-emotional student collaborator. The kind and introverted student collaborator began offering more opinions and ideas do the interaction with working with the strong social-emotional student collaborator. When establishing this kind of group for the collaborative activity, each student was able to

develop an important social-emotional skill critical for learning. The responses to check-ins demonstrated that my student collaborators feel that the check-ins during the collaborative activities were a means for me to establish what both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) have pointed out that the student-teacher relationship is essential for learning.

The data collected during the individual interviews enabled my student collaborators to express how they felt about the authentic caring strategies, and give voice to how the strategies helped to establish and develop the student-teacher relationship. These student-teacher relationships have been argued as being essential for learning in the works of both Freire (2000) and Valenzuela (1999). These responses also reinforce Wong's research when the youth at the community-based youth centers communicated that the adults truly cared for the youth who went to the centers. This authentic caring can be seen in the response in the Individual Interviews, but specifically in the statements from Apep, Hestia, Math Mathonwy, Pan, and Zeus. As Math Mathonwy has stated with regards to a safe learning environment: "…no one teaches like you, you free up that space … [making the classroom a place free of prejudgment for the students and their abilities] … to learn and to think." The student assigned the pseudonym Math Mathonwy finds the safe learning space essential to the student-teacher relationship.

Plan for Future Action

Collectively, the results from this action research project demonstrated that a sense of belonging can be fostered from the teacher's use of authentic caring strategies not only in students who have been identified with learning complexities but in all students. This action research project demonstrated that a sense of belonging within the learning environment may not be connected to collaborative group activities; however, students find enjoyment and value when participating in collaborative group activities. I plan to present the findings of this action

research project to my school site's administration and advocate for all teachers to utilize these authentic caring strategies. I will then ask to utilize a faculty meeting to present this study and its finding to the assembled teachers. In this presentation, I would like to demonstrate the importance of using authentic caring strategies. I would also include the data showing how impactful the authentic caring strategies were to my student collaborators. This presentation would help demonstrate the need for teachers at my school site to find value in the power-sharing dynamic within the student-teacher relationship (Freire, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). I would also advocate for the use of more collaborative group activities within my fellow teachers' classes as findings of this study demonstrate that the connectedness was able to facilitate learning. This insistence on the use of collaborative group activities may push against some of the entrenched teaching styles of the more established teachers. To this end, I would make myself available to help my colleagues develop collaborative group activities of their own. I will also invite my colleagues to observe my classroom teaching for them to see how I implement the collaborative group activities in my subject area. I will also offer my colleagues opportunities to observe my classroom as I teach my students to demonstrate to them how I utilize authentic caring strategies. This plan of presenting and modeling would be most helpful for those colleagues that are most resistant to this new teaching style, as well as those colleagues who have trouble understanding the theories around authentic caring teaching.

I am optimistic that sharing my findings from this action research project will help to encourage my colleagues to seek out ways to establish a power-sharing dynamic within the student-teacher relationships (Freire, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999) within their classrooms. It is also my hope that my colleagues would become sensitive to the how impactful a safe and caring to the learning environment will be for not only the students but for the student's families as well

(Rouse, 2004; Maslow, 1958, 1954; Valenzuela, 2002; Wong, 2010). I believe that this action research project helps to improve the understanding needed to see students with learning complexities as being able to, not only learn the curriculum but also become the catalyst to change the modes of teaching so that all students can be successful. I hope that more research will be done on the use of authentic caring strategies that will affect the learning outcomes of those students who have been identified with learning complexities.

I plan to conduct further action research within the realm of the use of authentic caring strategies with those students who have been identified with learning complexities. In the next steps of this action research, I would like to couple the authentic caring strategies with social-emotional learning and mental health wellbeing. Connecting authentic caring strategies with social-emotional learning and mental health well-being, I feel will help to bring light to the traumas inflicted during COVID distance learning mandates. This specific combination of strategies and skills will bring about a more robust teacher toolbox. In so doing, I hope to transform learning spaces into safe spaces where all will find a sense of belonging.

The student collaborators who contributed to this action research project were able to gain a unique experience after coming out of Zoom teaching and distance learning. They were allowed a space of non-judgment to re-enter social and public spaces after eighteen months of shelter-in-place and to find themselves when interacting in collaborative group activities. Those student collaborators who had been identified with learning complexities were offered a space of equality and to explore areas of strength within the activities. Their voices were the strongest and demonstrated more appreciation for the use of authentic caring strategies. As a teacher, I found more joy in utilizing the authentic caring strategies and seeing my student collaborators interact during the collaborative group activities. The joy and excitement felt with my student

collaborators were similar, if not stronger, to my year as a student-teacher. The bonds created with my student collaborators during this action research project mimic the closeness expensed during an extremely stressful event. I will miss my cohorts next year. This bond that was established using the authentic caring strategies speaks volumes to the findings of Freire (2000), Maslow (1958), and Valenzuela (1999). The power-sharing dynamic within the student-teacher relationship (Freire, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999) coupled with the establishment of a safe space (Maslow, 1958) truly brings about a unique and special learning environment that empowers all involved to learn and grow as humans.

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Appendices

Anticipation Guide

Title of Unit _____

What do you KNOW?	What do you WANT to know?	What have you LEARNED?

Anticipation Guide

Read each statement and consider if you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree, then circle the number that is most true for you.

Example: When I read fiction books, I can feel the emotions of the characters.

1_____2_____3_____4
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

1. My classmates understand who I am and respect me.

1_____2_____3_____4

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

2. I have lots of allies in my class who will stick up for me.

1_____2_____3_____4

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

3. I feel connected to my classmates. For example, my classmates know a lot about me and I know a lot about them.

1_____2_____3_____4

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

4. I enjoy working with my classmates.

1_____2_____3_____4

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

Adapted from Williams (2018).

Anticipation Guide

Write answers to the following questions:

5. What subjects at school do you like? Why do you like them?

_____

_____

6. What subjects at school do you NOT like? Why do you NOT like them?

_____

_____

7. When is a time when you felt very important at school?

_____

_____

Adapted from Williams (2018).

Appendix B

Socratic Seminar & Debate Rubric

_____ Spoke AT LEAST 4-5 times;
(2 points)

_____ Meaningful contributions to the conversation (agreed, disagreed, as well as adding a new comment/idea);
(2 points)

_____ Takes 2 or more notes per question during debate;
(2 points)

_____ Prepared and presented 1 or more question(s) derived from debate notes and connected to source materials;
(3 points)

_____ Respectful and on-task during the discussion;
(2 points)

_____ Completed Preparation Sheet (detailed answers, well explained) with correctly formatted MLA citations;
(2 points)

_____ Total out of **13 points**

Please complete the following before returning this assignment for a grade. Read each statement and consider if you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree, then circle the number that is most true for you.

My classmates understand who I am and respect me.

1_____2_____3_____4

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I enjoy working with my classmates.

1_____2_____3_____4

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of the school.

1_____2_____3_____4

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I feel connected to my teachers. For example, I know a lot about my teachers and they know a lot about me.

1_____2_____3_____4

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

Adapted from Williams (2018).

Debate Debrief Form

Before Debate:
How well prepared do you feel for this debate?

How anxious do you feel?

     1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*   *7*   *8*   *9*   *10*

Why do you think you feel this way?

After Debate:
What is the most interesting thing you think was said during the debate?

What would you have liked to have said during the debate?

How anxious do you feel?

     1   *2*   *3*   *4*   *5*   *6*   *7*   *8*   *9*   *10*

Why do you think you feel this way?

Debate and Drama Debrief Form

Please complete the following before returning this assignment for a grade. Read each statement and consider if you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree, then circle the number that is most true for you.

My teachers at school understand who I am and respect me.

1_____2_____3_____4
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I enjoy talking with and learning from my teachers.

1_____2_____3_____4
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

My teachers think that I matter.

1_____2_____3_____4
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I feel like I belong at school. In other words, I feel like I fit in at school.

1_____2_____3_____4
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I like being at school.

1_____2_____3_____4
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

My teacher shows he cares by checking in on me.

1_____2_____3_____4
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I feel connected to my school community. In other words, I feel like I am an important member of the school.

1_____2_____3_____4
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I know a lot of people at school who are not in my grade level.

1_____2_____3_____4
Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

Adapted from Williams (2018).

Group Work Debrief Rubric for Drama Assignments

Student Peer Evaluation Sheet – Evaluate your group members AND yourself. This will be done confidentially. Be honest.

      1 (rarely/never)   2(occasionally/sometimes)   3 (all/most of the time)

Evaluate Each Group Member Below (on the scale of 1-3)

Your Name:	**Partner's Name:**
___ did a fair share of work	___ did a fair share of work
___ was cooperative/did agreed-upon task	___ was cooperative/did agreed-upon task
___ contributed to ideas/planning	___ contributed to ideas/planning
___ was positive/helpful	___ was positive/helpful
___contributed to overall project success	___contributed to overall project success
How you contributed:	**How they contributed:**
Partner's Name:	**Partner's Name:**
___ did a fair share of work	___ did a fair share of work
___ was cooperative/did agreed-upon task	___ was cooperative/did agreed-upon task
___ contributed to ideas/planning	___ contributed to ideas/planning
___ was positive/helpful	___ was positive/helpful
___contributed to overall project success	___contributed to overall project success
How they contributed:	**How they contributed:**

Please complete the following before returning this assignment for a grade. Read each statement and consider if you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree, then circle the number that is most true for you.

This activity helped me feel connected to my group partners and I was able to learn a little more about them.

          1_____2_____3_____4

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I enjoy working with my group partners in this assignment.

          1_____2_____3_____4

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

I have a sense that my teacher cares for me when he checks in with me during class?

          1_____2_____3_____4

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

Adapted from Student Peer Evaluation Sheet, Baldwinsville Central School District (2010).

Adapted from Williams (2018).

Appendix E

Interview Protocol for One-on-One Debrief after Intervention

Pseudonym of student: _____

Debrief Interview Questions

1. **How did you contribute to the group work assignments? What did you do?**

2. **How did participating in these group work assignments make you feel? Explain.**

3. **Tell me about a time when you felt successful during group work assignments.**

4. **What did you like about the group work assignments and the process of putting them together?**

5. **How did you feel when I asked you about how life was at home?**

6. **Do you think I must know how you spend your free time? Do you feel this information is necessary for me to know to teach you?**

7. **Did my check-ins with you during the assignments help you in any way? Please explain.**

8. **Did participating in the group work assignments change the way you feel about school? If so, how?**

9. **Do you feel more connected to your classmates since participating in the group work assignments? Please explain.**

10. **Do you feel more connected to your teacher since participating in the group work assignments? Please explain.**

11. **Would you want to participate in group work assignments at school in the future? Why or why not?**

Adapted from Williams (2018).

12. Do you think my check-ins with you build your feeling of belongingness to the class?

13. What was one thing I did or say that made you feel like you were cared about in class?

14. If you could change a part of the group work assignments process or assignments, what would you change?

Appendix F

Research Field Notes Template

Date:	Observations: