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## How Two English Language Arts Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Impact Their Students' Academic and Emotional Success

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### Abstract

This study commenced as part of a more extensive narrative inquiry about a literacy coach building relationships with two early-career sixth-grade English language arts teachers. The more extensive study revealed a gap in research about the teachers' beliefs and practices and their impact on their students' academic and emotional success. The research questions are: (1) in what ways do two teachers' beliefs and professional knowledge influence their teaching philosophies? (2) How do these teachers' identities influence student outcomes? The two teacher participants took part in interviews, observations, and reflections. By re-storying the data into narratives, three themes from each question emerged. The data shows that teachers firmly believe in their roles in student learning, pedagogical styles, content planning, and curriculum. Additionally, teacher identities influence student outcomes with their engagement, relationships, and comfort in the classroom environment. The results of this study add to the growing body of research on the impact of student success concerning how teachers' beliefs and practices play a role in academics and the social and emotional well-being of overall student achievement.

### Keywords

teacher beliefs, practices, narrative inquiry, students, success, relationships

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# **How Two English Language Arts Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Impact Their Students' Academic and Emotional Success**

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This study commenced as part of a more extensive narrative inquiry about a literacy coach building relationships with two early-career sixth-grade English language arts teachers. The more extensive study revealed a gap in research about the teachers' beliefs and practices and their impact on their students' academic and emotional success. The research questions are: (1) in what ways do two teachers' beliefs and professional knowledge influence their teaching philosophies? (2) How do these teachers' identities influence student outcomes? The two teacher participants took part in interviews, observations, and reflections. By re-storying the data into narratives, three themes from each question emerged. The data shows that teachers firmly believe in their roles in student learning, pedagogical styles, content planning, and curriculum. Additionally, teacher identities influence student outcomes with their engagement, relationships, and comfort in the classroom environment. The results of this study add to the growing body of research on the impact of student success concerning how teachers' beliefs and practices play a role in academics and the social and emotional well-being of overall student achievement.

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## **Introduction**

Teacher beliefs and practices significantly influence students' academic and emotional success. Though research exists on the importance of understanding the role teachers' views and practices play on students' success, there is little inquiry into how those beliefs and methods impact students' diverse learning needs to be successful (Knopp & Smith, 2005; Pajares, 1992; Smylie, 1995). The discussion about teacher beliefs in research is not new (Clark & Peterson, 1986). In the 1980s and early 1990s, a shift in the educational landscape witnessed a reform of teacher education programs and the teaching profession (Ravitch, 1990). With a growing, diverse K-12 student body, a widening achievement gap, and a new focus on teacher education and professional development, a shift towards the impact of beliefs and practices on student learning took shape.

Early in the research, Pajares (1992) learned that understanding the relationship between teachers' personal and professional beliefs and their practices is a complex and messy construct. Farrell and Ives (2014) learned that personal views are often held tacitly and remain hidden from teachers yet have a powerful impact on their pedagogical practices. Despite these complexities and uncertainties about personal and professional beliefs and practices, researchers learned that teachers make a difference in student achievement (Aaronson et al., 2007; Chait, 2009; Gordon et al., 2006; Rivkin et al., 2005; Rockoff, 2004). For example, a multiple case study by Schmid (2018) on the impact of teachers' beliefs and practices concluded that the keys to their students' success were a combination of teachers' personal belief in student

achievement, professional knowledge, and teacher collaboration. Despite these connections between teacher and student achievement, more research still needs to be done on how teachers' belief systems and motivations impact student outcomes.

For this study and to add meaningfully to the body of research, I will define the terms “beliefs” and “practices” in the context of this inquiry. To encompass teachers' personal and professional beliefs, I look to Schwartz's work on human values because values drive beliefs. Accordingly, Schwartz (2006, p. 2) states, “[V]alues are used to characterize cultural groups, societies, and individuals, to trace change over time, and to explain the motivational basis of attitudes and behavior.” Teachers' personal and professional beliefs encompass Schwartz's description of the use of values. Teachers' beliefs are based on their values and, in turn, determine their attitudes and behaviors. “Practices” are defined as how teachers understand and implement instruction (TALIS, 2009). Generally, the two practices are traditional or structured and constructivist or student oriented. Turner et al. (2009) learned that many teachers believe in the traditional approach where the learner and the content taught are fixed – also known as the top-down approach, where the teacher imparts knowledge to the student. In an earlier study, Nuthall (1999) learned from teacher observations that traditional teacher practice was the norm. In a later study (2004), through student observations, he recognized that learning and understanding involve various socio-cognitive activities conducive to constructivist teaching. The above studies address the early misconceptions between teachers' beliefs about learning and students' understanding and comprehension. The focus of this study expands on those notions and later research to identify the impact of teachers' personal and professional beliefs and practices on the growing diverse population of student learners.

This study provides empirical evidence of how two early-career English language arts teachers' personal beliefs and professional knowledge impact their teaching practices and student achievements. In comparison, previous research has focused on teachers' professional beliefs (Fang, 1996; Pajares, 1992), culturally relevant and sustainable pedagogy (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), and culturally relevant and proficient beliefs and practices (Nuri-Robins et al., 2007). This study provides a narrative inquiry into the journey of two teachers' clashes between personal beliefs, professional beliefs, and the diverse needs of their students as they grow and learn in their identities. This inquiry addresses the small but growing research on teacher voices about how their personal and professional beliefs about their practice influence student outcomes. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) in what ways do two teachers' beliefs and professional knowledge influence their teaching philosophies? (2) How do these teachers' identities influence student outcomes?

Also, in conjunction with the above research questions, the influence of teacher beliefs and practices that make up teacher identities and their impact on the growing diversity of the K-12 student population is examined.

## **Literature Review**

### **Teacher Beliefs**

Teachers' beliefs consist of personal and professional knowledge. Personal and professional knowledge combines subjective and objective knowledge influenced by one's sociocultural environment. Green (1971) defines “beliefs” as a compound of conscious or unconscious beliefs, hypotheses or expectations, and combinations. Schwartz (2006) adds that values are beliefs that influence feelings and behaviors. So, when values are activated, beliefs are infused with feelings. As a result, teachers' beliefs influence students' academic and emotional outcomes. In a study by Schmid (2018) on teachers' beliefs about student success, the researchers concluded that teachers play an integral role in student achievement. The

researcher conducted interviews and observations of three English language arts teachers whose annual student test results were 10% above the state average. Schmid learned that teachers who provided a comfortable and safe learning environment and believed all their students could learn showed the most student learning growth.

Furinghetti and Pehkonen's (2002) study on teacher beliefs and knowledge substantially impacted students' learning. Teachers' beliefs tended to vary according to their surroundings and experiences. "Knowledge" was defined as professional development and training. The participants consisted of 18 math teachers who were interviewed via email. The researchers learned that the teachers' beliefs played a significant role in how they taught the concept-based subject and its varied student outcomes.

In Pajares and Graham's (1998) study of two English language arts teachers' beliefs and practices, a substantial distinction between the impact of teacher values and practices was evident in student achievement. Students struggled to complete the work when the teachers responded to their students' poetry assignments focused on sound pedagogy and criticism. However, when teachers provided empathy and understanding about the students' work, their academic and emotional understanding improved. Teachers who valued "care" as part of the practice learned that students' responses and understanding improved.

## **Teacher Practice**

Teacher practice, as defined above, is how teachers comprehend and implement instruction. As reflected in the following studies, teachers' values and knowledge, combined with their practice, superseded practices born out of directed outcomes and professional traditions, thus impacting student achievement. A longitudinal study by Flores and Day (2006) observed a cohort of 14 new teachers as they embarked on their careers. The study focused on how teacher practice encompassed personal, professional, and contextual factors that shaped and reshaped the school setting. The data collected consisted of pre- and post-interviews over each school year, a mid-year questionnaire based on interviews, reflective writing, and student responses to questions about their teachers' evolution through the school year. The researchers learned that teacher practice could not be separated from values and knowledge and is constructed and reconstructed based on biography, preservice training, and context.

Guerra and Wubbena (2017) interviewed and observed a group of elementary school teachers trained in cultural proficiency. The researchers observed the teachers grappling with the new information and reverting to their practice's original personal and cultural beliefs. The researchers learned that the teachers' preconceived personal and cultural beliefs about certain students influenced their preparation and impacted student achievement and outcomes.

Finally, Keyes' (2019) study of 31 high school students revealed how teachers' practices impact student learning and success. The researcher learned from semi-structured interviews that teachers positively impacted students when they instituted student belonging and engagement. Instructional practices that included building teacher-student relationships and relevant lessons and supporting students socially and academically promoted positive student achievement.

Overall, teachers' beliefs and practices strongly influence student success academically and emotionally. The studies discussed above touch on how beliefs influence how teachers perceive students' academic success and how their personal beliefs hurt or help students' perceptions of their achievement. This study will add to the small body of research in form and content. This narrative inquiry study provided rich descriptions and insight into the teachers' thoughts and knowledge about their roles. Additionally, the research provided voices and captions of classroom experiences that were not prevalent in previous research.

## **Role of the Researcher**

As a participant researcher, one must be cognizant of the dual roles of literacy coach and data collector. The literacy coach role involved nurturing and mentoring English language arts teachers. The participant researcher observed and recorded the actions of the individuals involved in the study. The researcher's interest in this topic stems from personal experience as a novice teacher questioning one's beliefs and practices and their impact on the students. Now in a position to tacitly observe and mentor new teachers, one can document how teachers' beliefs affect students' academic and emotional positivity. As a result, this study reflects the importance of recognizing human interactions and values' role in educational outcomes.

## **Method**

### **Design of the Study**

This qualitative narrative inquiry method was chosen in this study to reflect the voices of two early career English language arts teachers' lived experiences as they learned and grew in their beliefs and practices. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), the power of narrative stories provides a portal through which individuals enter the world to construe their experiences and make them personally meaningful. Moreover, narrative inquiry focuses on personal or small narratives of experience and has a three-dimensional distinction of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These three dimensions are essential characteristics of this study. It allows the researcher to gather a thick description of the participants' views and applications and provide a first-person account of their experiences told in story form with a beginning, middle, and end (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The structural nature of narrative stories is a framework for the data collection and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Richards, 2011; Riessman, 2008) because it allows the scholar to identify common themes between and across the participants' experiences as they plan, execute, and review their pedagogical knowledge and implementation.

The narrative inquiry design's selection avoids providing grand, sweeping narratives with lofty educational objectives that build on observable, classifiable behaviors (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Conversely, this study offers first-person accounts of two teachers' rich and intensive experiences. Epistemologically this study refers to sociocultural theory because the participants learn on the social and individual cognitive levels (Vygotsky, 1978). That is, the researcher identifies common themes from the social and cognitive functions of the participants. As the themes are identified, the participant narratives unfold. Like a story plot, as the participants plan, execute, and review their practice, the underlying themes reveal growth and change in the teachers' beliefs and practices. Thus, the researcher draws on Fullan's (2001, 2006) change theory in teacher education, what teachers consistently do to improve their practice. The main advantage of this type of design is it allows the researcher to situate themselves in a relational space with the participants. The researcher takes part in real-time within the active classroom environment. Then, the researcher and participant construct and co-construct the field notes (Clandinin, 2013). This unique position of the researcher and participant is a process that requires building relationships of trust and understanding long before the research commences. Therefore, this study is unique because the living stories occur side by side as they unfold, which cannot be replicated elsewhere. So, they provide a teaching tool and a window into the pedagogy and their teaching practices.

### **Participants and Sampling Procedure**

Using purposeful sampling, the participant researcher selected two early-career English language arts teachers. The purposeful sampling procedure was followed to provide insights into the lived experiences of two secondary English educators' beliefs and practices. Patton (2002) emphasizes purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative methods to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources. The participants were given pseudonyms and chosen from the following criteria: 1) the participants taught ELA in the intermediate elementary school where the researcher worked at the time of the study; 2) the participants were early career educators between one and five years; 3) the participants voluntarily worked with the researcher as a literacy coach; and 4) the participants willingly shared their experiences with the researcher and actively participated in the study. Accordingly, Palys (2008) emphasizes purposeful criterion sampling involves participants who meet certain conditions or have specific experiences. Moreover, following the International Review Board's ethical standard process when selecting participants, the benefits outweighed the risks to the individuals in the study. The participants' choice was equitable and written informed consent was secured.

As stated in the selection criteria described above, the researcher looked for novice English language arts teachers. The small sampling of two was consistent with the selection criteria and the choice of only four sixth-grade English language arts teachers at the study site. Of the four teachers, one was a seasoned educator, one was not interested in participation, and another left before the study commenced. As a result, the two chosen participants were part of the study because of their desire to participate and willingness to work with the researcher for two hours per week over nine weeks. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) emphasize the participants must be knowledgeable and experienced in the subject matter of the study. Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) add they need the availability and willingness to participate in the study and the ability to express their opinions, views, and experiences openly.

The small teacher participant sample size is appropriate because the researcher sought in-depth stories that represented two ELA teachers' experiences in early-career teaching. Accordingly, Nash (2004) emphasizes rich personal narratives to help understand one's experiences and intentions are rarely documented in the teaching profession. The two participants were given the pseudonyms of Betty and Mary.

Betty is a second-year teacher but a first-year English language arts teacher. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in English literature. She agreed to participate in this study to broaden her teaching style. Mary is a fourth-year teacher in her second year as an English language arts teacher. She has a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in elementary education. She agreed to participate in this study because of the researcher's relationship with her as a mentor and mentee in her first year. Both participants agreed to volunteer in this study to improve their teaching practice.

The researcher developed relationships with both participants before the study, so their willingness and openness were established before the commencement of the study. Some disadvantages of purposeful sampling are the vulnerability of errors and researcher bias. Although other participants may have been available at other school sites in the district, an essential aspect of participants' willingness is building relationships between the researcher and participants.

The study occurred at an intermediate elementary school where the researcher was a literacy coach. The school district is a medium-sized semi-urban area in the southeastern United States. Students were from lower to middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds. The student body comprised approximately 1000 children, about 70% White and 30% minority (African American, South or Central American, the Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Indian, and Asian). The school site was unique as it was the only one that housed grades three through six.

Typically, elementary schools are K-5, and middle schools are 6-8. The intermediate model targets ages 7-12, a pivotal emotional and academic development time.

### **Data Sources and Data Collection Procedure**

The study was designed based on the Clandinin (2013) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) narrative inquiry research design. Data collection occurred during the third nine weeks of a four-quarter school year between January 8, 2018, and March 30, 2018. Before collecting the data, the participants signed consent forms as part of the International Review Board's (IRB) approval for this study.

The pre-interviews served to gain in-depth knowledge of the participants and create the narrative framework with a beginning, middle, and end. The interviews consisted of open-ended semi-structured questions about the participants' backgrounds, education, theories, and beliefs about teaching and practice. The pre-interviews were on a curriculum planning day, at lunch, and face-to-face in their classrooms. The participants responded to the questions conversationally, and the discussions were a give-and-take between the researcher and participants.

The post-interviews occurred at the end of the quarter after the completion of the observation data. The interviews transpired in the participants' classrooms during a teacher planning day. The participants reviewed and reflected on their pre-interview answers before this post-meeting. The researcher added additional information discussed with the participants and reviewed the notes after the post-interview discussions. The informal meeting consisted of give-and-take discussions about their experiences. Participants typed, saved, and checked the pre- and post-interview responses for accuracy. The interview process is vital to this narrative inquiry because, like Dexter's (1970), Patton's (2005), and deMarrais' (2004) research, it allows the researcher and participants to share what is on their minds and partake in focused discussions on the research study's hypothesis.

Weekly observations of the participants took place during the third nine weeks of the school year between January and March of 2018. The participants taught three ninety-minute six-grade English language arts block classes a day. The researcher observed the participant teachers' first or last block class of the day once a week for nine weeks. The researcher documented the agenda for the day, the participant's lesson delivery, and the interaction between the students and the instructor. Weekly observations of the participants' teaching allow the researcher to witness and gather information as it is happening. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) emphasize, observation is the ability to record behavior to provide knowledge of the context. Interim field texts were created halfway through the study, and the participants conducted member-checking for reliability and accuracy. Then, at the end of the study, the researcher and participants checked the completed field texts, and the researcher revised and finished the final texts.

### **Data Analysis**

For the narrative inquiry, positioning the field texts within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of temporality, sociality, and place is the best way to open questions for analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). So, the first analysis stage is to "re-story" the data into a narrative. The researcher employed Labov's (1972) six narrative elements: abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, and closure/coda. Creswell (2007) adds that re-storying is reorganizing stories into some general framework. The chronological sequence provided the narrative structure to code common phrases and sentences and identify patterns across the



narratives. The organization of these elements created a series and illustrated teacher beliefs and practices from theory to action, specific to the focus of this research study.

In the first stage, the researcher rereads the data to "re-story" the narratives into a framework that makes sense. The researcher employed Labov's (1972) six narrative elements and Daiute's (2014) dynamic narrative analysis of meaning-making in use, relationships, and practice settings. Accordingly, re-storying is the process of reorganizing the stories into a framework. The narrative elements provided a research template, and Daiute's three guidelines aligned with the research questions and the findings. Within each of Labov's elements, there is a three-dimensional space of the past, present, and future experiences which align with Daiute's use-or a sense of place of the narrative; relationships-bringing together past, present, and future experiences, and settings of practice – the recognition that narratives are embedded in our lives and the different narratives within and across individuals. The recognition of Daiute's view of the narrative within a three-dimensional space creates a round narrative reflecting fluidity and change as the story unfolds.

In the second stage, the researcher reread the narratives employing open coding and memo creation to identify words or phrases that reflected the guidelines outlined above and the answers to the research questions about teacher beliefs and practices and student outcomes. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasize, with open coding, the data must be analyzed line by line; thus, this process was tedious and required multiple readings of each text. This initial analysis of the texts provided rich language and descriptions of the teachers' narratives in three-dimensional space. For example, Betty's beliefs about teaching created a sense of place in the narrative. Mary's practices with her students elicited how she developed relationships. Finally, the participants' practice settings are represented toward the end of the narratives as they grow and change.

After the researcher completed the second stage, the narratives were reread for patterns across the texts in the third stage. The words and phrases across the text coded in stage two were formulated into common themes. The major themes identified in the data became the relevant results of the research study. Next, the researcher combined the results into an in-depth description of the common themes through textual illustrations and explained how the themes answered the research questions proposed at the beginning of this study. These three stages: the initial reading and highlighting of common words and phrases, the grouping of the words and phrases (open coding), and the identification of the common themes across the narratives are reflected in the findings.

### **Trustworthiness and Ethical Consideration**

Member checking was applied for reliability to assure correctness and credibility. The researcher and participant reviewed the observation field notes during the weekly reflections over the nine weeks of collection and again after stage one analysis. Accordingly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that member checking is an authentic way to ensure trustworthiness. In line with Merriam (2009), the participants read and reread the data for accuracy to assure reliability and credibility.

Before commencing the study, the participants signed consent forms. The forms contained detailed information and explanation about the research and advised they could drop out anytime. All the relevant notes and documents were stored in a secure place. To ensure the privacy of the participants, they were given pseudonyms.

## Findings

Data were analyzed for the quality of the study's research questions by framing all aspects of the teachers' beliefs and practices and their students' success. The findings based on the questions and themes are presented below.

### **Question #1: In what ways do two teachers' beliefs and professional knowledge influence their teaching philosophies?**

The first research question of the narrative inquiry investigated how teacher beliefs and practices influence their teaching philosophies. Three main themes emerged from teaching philosophies: beliefs about learning, pedagogical styles, and curriculum and content planning. Each theme focuses on teaching and personal and professional beliefs' impact on that process. For instance, in Theme 1, the participants' beliefs about learning show what drives how and what one will teach. Next, following beliefs, Theme 2 identifies the participants' pedagogical styles and presents what they want their students to learn. Then, Theme 3 recognizes the teachers' curriculum and content planning practice. Given the narrative's chronology, these themes unfolded naturally in the data analysis.

#### ***Theme 1: Beliefs about learning***

The participants had distinct beliefs about their role in student learning. The teachers agreed their position is subjective because they must adapt to their student's learning and emotional needs, but they differed significantly in approaching those varied needs. These differing approaches were evident in their initial interview responses. For example, when Betty was asked about her role as a teacher, she responded: "I would say I see my role as a guide more than anything because kids are capable of learning incredible things. So, I am here to help them find the place and strategies to find the right mindset." This statement reflects Betty's big-picture view of her students' learning and her awareness that she must fill in student learning gaps to support all learners. She attributes this belief system to her experience volunteering in her mother's elementary classroom in the same school she now teaches. The second participant, Mary, responded to the same question as follows:

I believe my role as an English teacher is first to nurture, teach and then be a facilitator within the classroom setting. In college, one of my undergraduate professors said, "Your students will not care about anything you teach them if they feel like you don't truly care about them." This quote inspired me to nurture and build a meaningful relationship with each of my students.

This response reflects Mary's view about the importance of building relationships with students to be successful learners and the impact instructors have on student learning outcomes.

Though the participants' beliefs about their teaching roles vary, they reflect a level of care and desire to ensure that students are successful. Their beliefs show a delicate balance between the teachers' beliefs and student success. Betty's view, though a little idealistic given the students' diverse learning needs and her past experiences at the school, shows a working knowledge of her environment. Mary's response, grounded in constructivist teaching, was to build relationships with students, although she recognizes there are limitations to relationships that must be in place to ensure learning and growth. Though Betty recognizes her position is to fill in the gaps in learning, she still grapples between emotional and academic support; she recognizes that emotional support is the basis of academic success.

### ***Theme 2: Pedagogical styles***

Teaching style is essential in successfully executing the content and student understanding. Again, Betty and Mary exhibited different teaching methods. Betty used the technique of student inquiry, whereas Mary's was a skills-based approach. How the participants disseminated their content was another significant part of their beliefs and practices.

Betty's technique of student inquiry holds the students accountable for their learning. She stated, "I assist students by building the background knowledge of what I am teaching the students, and through questioning, I hold them accountable for what they are learning." Betty learned that this style only worked for some students, so she added scaffolding for students who needed more support to reach higher-order thinking skills.

On the other hand, Mary's approach is more tangible. She stated, "I post clear and concise directions and provide scaffolding through instructional hand-outs and graphic organizers." Mary's style worked well for the students; however, she learned some students completed the work quicker than others, so she added supplemental higher-order thinking materials for students who needed more challenging assignments.

So, the participants' pedagogical styles represent their comfort level in executing their curriculum and what they deem necessary for their teaching audience. Though both participants are steadfast in their teaching styles, they modified and supplemented other styles to address diverse student needs.

### ***Theme 3: Curriculum and content planning***

Understanding the participants' curriculum and content planning provide insight into what they teach and why they hold certain beliefs and styles about their practice.

Betty, who focuses on higher-order thinking skills of student inquiry, follows similar methods in her planning. Betty first talked things out during planning, listened to others' suggestions, and tweaked things into a rough plan to fit her teaching style.

Mary's building of skills teaching approach is based on her desire for organization and concrete planning. During planning, Mary is sequential, discussing a plan to clarify her thoughts and then completing a teaching unit.

Betty and Mary utilized the same curriculum and planned their lessons together. Betty is verbal and visual in her planning, while Mary is verbal and tactile. Betty's planning approach is common for early-career teachers. She has a sense of what to teach, but instead of keeping copious notes, she wings it as she goes along. In contrast, Mary takes detailed notes and executes her lessons step-by-step.

The participants' teaching philosophies tended to drive less what curriculum they chose to teach and more content planning. Betty's constructivist approach to teaching and student learning reflects her content planning form through her presentation and student-inquiry response. With Mary's prescriptive approach, a more traditional approach to teaching was evident where Mary provided the content and structured assignments with scaffolding that targeted specific skill knowledge.

### **Question #2 How do these teachers' beliefs and practices influence student outcomes?**

The second question sought to answer how these teachers' beliefs and practices influence student outcomes. The three themes were levels of student engagement, the relationships with students, and the classroom environment with the beliefs that support them.

These themes focus on how the teacher's beliefs and practices discussed in the answers to the first question influence student outcomes. Such as, in Theme 1, the level of student

engagement is determined by teacher strategies to engross the learner. Then, in Theme 2, building relationships with students is vital for trust and desire to learn. Lastly, in Theme 3, an inviting classroom environment creates a space for all learners to grow and learn. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

### ***Theme 1: Levels of student engagement***

Understanding the levels of student engagement allows teachers to determine whether students are astute and involved in the active learning of the classroom. Betty and Mary's beliefs and practices about the levels of student engagement assess student understanding and success.

Betty conducts classroom discussions and measures student understanding. She uses wait time and positive reinforcement to keep students engaged. She adds, "when the class is asked a question and only a few students raise their hand to respond, I engage them by saying something like 'awe come on only three and repeats the question.'" This familial action creates a comfort level in the classroom where students are willing to answer questions and obtain support from their classmates.

Mary utilizes small-group accountability. Students work in groups and actively move around the room, solving problems and answering questions together. Mary states, "I believe students learn a lot more when they are active learners in the classroom. Therefore, I try to implement as many hands-on and engaging approaches as possible to captivate student interest." Mary's small group approach provides peer support and allows her to assess student understanding quickly.

The participants' student engagement techniques hold all students in the classroom accountable. These constructivist approaches align with the theme of pedagogical style from research question one. Betty's practice of student inquiry engages all students through wait time, and Mary's skills-based approach is evident through small group assignment rotations.

### ***Theme 2: Relationships with students***

Building relationships with students to enhance their learning, though not new, is an uncommon practice among educators. However, the participants of this study share similar beliefs and practices about the importance of building positive student relationships.

Betty's beliefs about building relationships with her students focused on promoting encouragement, independence, and personal expression while holding students accountable for their learning and giving them the space to learn and grow. Betty states she holds students responsible and expects them to be prepared for class, knowing grey areas. For example, a student, the researcher, had observed in another classroom the year before was always unprepared and rarely participated because of a severe stutter. In Betty's classroom environment, he blossomed. She explained:

How I approach him: I encourage creativity, and I am not so rigid. If I want him to do something specific to keep his confidence, I positively reinforce what he does. He is still unprepared, but I still hold him to a standard. He did not have his pencil today, so he did get a circle. I keep the standards high, but at the same time, I take the time to laugh at his jokes.

This complete turnaround in his behavior reflects the strength of building positive relationships, which leads to student success.

Mary believes there must be structure, proximity, and boundaries to work with students. Mary states she does not allow much leeway and holds all students accountable but realizes that some students still need more assistance. When asked how she deals with a female student who is always off task and disruptive, she said:

Flightiness, I ignore it. The student sits in the front, which is the only way she stays engaged. Accommodated folks, I put them as close as possible to me. I do call her on it. Most of the time, it is a look or a circle on the clipboard which straightens her out.

This student, whom the researcher observed in another class the year before, was always off task, talking, and sarcastic. Mary straightened her out very quickly and built a relationship with her by seating her in the front close to the teacher, creating boundaries, and giving her positive recognition when she was on task.

The participants' beliefs and practices align with building relationships with students. Their beliefs about their role as educators, how students learn, and their pedagogical styles show that relationships with students allow everything else to fall into place and promote student understanding and learning.

### ***Theme 3: Classroom environment***

The classroom environment is essential to promote a comfortable atmosphere conducive to learning and sociocultural understanding. The latter, only considered recently in K-12 settings, plays into students feeling accepted as part of the group and active learners in and outside the classroom. Betty and Mary's beliefs and practices about their classroom environment reflect a space to learn and grow.

Betty's classroom is a comfortable and supportive environment that promotes reinforcement and social and cultural expression. Betty has a knack for the students, which creates a comfortable learning environment. The student with the severe stutter who was once awkward with his peers is now blossoming in her class. He volunteers to read out loud and answer the discussion questions. The following exchange occurred while observing Betty's classroom environment: Betty asked him how he was doing. He said, "the ideas are flowing," and the teacher responded, "There is some fire coming from that pencil there, Jason...steam." This favorable exchange between teacher and student builds confidence and comfort in their learning and expression.

Alternatively, Mary is directive and instructional but has a caring classroom environment. She reiterates what students say to clarify their points and adds other points to broaden their understanding. She encourages students to express their feelings and views. She has posted expectations and directions. She uses plain language to assure student understanding. She repeats directions consistently as she walks around the room, checking for understanding. She leaves conversations open to enhance learning and comfort in self-expression. Though business-like, Mary's classroom allows students to express themselves to grow and learn.

## **Discussion**

The study of teachers' beliefs and knowledge and their impact on student success is not new to research, but what is new is the relationship of personal beliefs intertwined with professional beliefs in teaching students. The existing studies identify the impact of general beliefs and professional knowledge on student success but not one's personal beliefs and

knowledge. As discussed in the introduction, Schmid's (2018) study takes steps toward the present study, focusing on whether teachers believed if all students could learn and prosper, they would be successful but does not touch on how teachers' beliefs play a distinct role. Furinghetti and Pehkonen's (2002) study delved deeper, distinguishing between teachers' personal beliefs and knowledge. Though the study concluded that teachers' personal beliefs play a significant role in student success, they learned even with professional development and training, teachers still fell back to old habits, thus creating varied student outcomes. Pajares and Graham's (1998) study identified the use of sound pedagogy over the consideration of teachers' values and practice and concluded it negatively impacted student outcomes.

This research moves beyond the previous studies above. It recognizes how teachers' valued beliefs and professional knowledge form who they are as practitioners and what impact these compound conscious or unconscious beliefs have on student success. The study results reflected that teachers have solid yet varied beliefs about student learning (theme 1) and obtain these beliefs through personal experiences and influences from family, peers, and mentors. In addition, those beliefs and knowledge bleed into pedagogical styles (theme 2) and curriculum and content planning (theme 3). In Betty's big-picture view about learning, she expresses similar views in her pedagogical style. She focuses on student inquiry in her class and higher-order thinking skills. However, she leaves out students with other learning styles and understands they may require additional skills such as scaffolding. Conversely, Mary tries a more concrete approach of skills-based learning and building up students to more abstract forms of learning, thus stalling higher-order thinking students.

Examining teacher practice within social science research is relatively new, given the traditional belief about teachers' roles in imparting knowledge to students. As this view shifted in the 1990s, few studies have emerged around teacher practice and its impact on student success. Pajares and Graham's (1998) study looked at the impact of sound pedagogy without student care and concluded that pedagogy alone without any care negatively impacted student outcomes. In Flores and Day (2006), teachers had the tools to reconstruct their practices to focus on student needs but needed help applying them to their practice. Like Flores and Day, Guerra and Wubben's (2017) study trained teachers to modify their approach to fit student needs. However, despite the training, their inherent cultural beliefs prevailed over student achievement and acceptance. In one more recent study, Keyes (2019) learned that teachers modified their practice and considered student belonging, engagement, and relevant lessons to support their students socially and academically, positively impacting student learning and success.

This analysis delved deeper into student engagement and environment and added the impact of curriculum planning on student outcomes. The study results reflected that a teacher's practice impacts student engagement (theme 1) emotionally and academically. If students feel emotionally safe, they will engage in class and respond to various forms of teacher practice. Positive student outcomes are achieved if the classroom environment (theme 2) is conducive to learning and shows a level of care. Moreover, not discussed in previous studies, curriculum and content planning (theme 3) is a large part of continued student engagement and positive classroom environments.

The above discussion adds to the existing research because it posits that teachers' beliefs are constant and vital to student success. Also, the study reflects the diversity of teachers' beliefs and practices and its impact on pedagogical stance and student outcomes. In contrast to previous studies that examine how educational practices attempt to streamline teachers' beliefs to create top-down learning. This study reflects how difficult it is to streamline teachers' beliefs and practices into one tidy box where everyone teaches the same, and every student learns the same.

Finally, this narrative aimed to examine how two teachers' beliefs and practices impact their students' academic and emotional success. The theoretical frameworks guiding this study are value theory and sociocultural theory. As discussed above, Schwartz's definition of values aligns with this study, as values drive an individual's attitudes and beliefs. The study results revealed that teachers have different beliefs, influencing their approach in various ways. Those beliefs differ because of teachers' backgrounds, education, and experiences. Thus, sociocultural theory answers to the teachers' diverse views on the social and cognitive levels (Vygotsky, 1978). Though the primary purpose of this paper was to reveal how teacher beliefs and practices influence student success, it became apparent that there needs to be more research on how varying teacher beliefs affect student outcomes.

### Limitations of the Study

The present study is not without its limitations. The first limitation is the participant numbers: though two participants were suitable for the design of this study, the number was kept small to gain the participants' trust and gather in-depth information about them and their teaching practices. Second, the researcher needed more time to gather in-depth interviews of past and present beliefs, memories, and practices. Finally, the present study only involved the school setting and teacher participants. A more comprehensive look across grade levels, schools, and other professions influencing social-emotional outcomes may add value.

To summarize, the conclusion of this study does not end the researcher's concern about how diverse pedagogical theories, styles, and practices impact students' diverse learning needs, and there should be more consistency among teachers' practices. It is the beginning of a new inquiry into how teachers' beliefs and practices influence our student population's changing dynamics in the United States. How are the sociocultural divisions addressed between predominately white female teachers and the diverse student body? The researcher hopes the questions raised from this research invite more studies on understanding these dichotomies.

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