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Effective Instructional Strategies, While Using Experiential Learning, to Encourage Student Engagement in a Rural, Distance Learning Setting

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Effective Instructional Strategies, While Using Experiential Learning, to Encourage
Student Engagement in a Rural, Distance Learning Setting

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of the Department of Leadership Education

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by

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many school districts to move all traditional face-to-face classes to distance learning settings. As a result, educators were left with the challenge of keeping students engaged from a remote location. This study determined what instructional strategies 4K-8 educators found most effective in fostering student engagement while using experiential learning in a rural, distance learning setting. 4K-8 educators were asked to complete an anonymous, confidential survey to gather information about their emergency transition to distance learning experiences and what instructional strategies they found most beneficial in fostering student engagement while using experiential learning. The study analyzed the qualitative data using thematic coding and meta-synthesis. The results of this study found that building personal relationships with students, adding movement into lessons, setting expectations early, and providing encouraging and positive instruction were effective instructional strategies for promoting student engagement in a rural, distance learning setting.

Keywords: Distance Learning Setting, Remote Learning, Student Engagement, COVID-19 Pandemic, Instructional Strategies, Experiential Learning

Chapter 1: Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic most school districts shut down in-person learning and turned to distance learning to keep students and staff safe. According to Ali (2020), distance learning was a necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a brief period, students and educators transitioned to distance learning. The emergency transition left educators without the tools needed to successfully engage students during distance learning lessons. Educators were forced to use experiential learning to determine effective instructional strategies to engage their students while remote. Experiential learning involved focus on real-world problems and application of knowledge to apply needed skills. Experiential learning contributed to improvements in crisis response skills (Danko, 2019). Educator's used experiential learning as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic to determine effective instructional strategies that foster student engagement during distance learning.

Findings from Ali (2020) suggested resources, staff readiness, teacher confidence, student accessibility, student motivation, and student engagement played a significant role in student learning in a remote setting. The most important of these necessities was student engagement because student engagement was widely accepted as a key element in student learning (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Educators were faced with the challenge of providing engaging, online lessons to their students without the proper training.

During the emergency transition to distance learning K-12 school districts were seeing stalled student learning (Lloyd & Xinchun, 2020). Educators were experimenting and trying new strategies to determine which were the most effective in fostering student engagement. Perets et al. (2020) observed that student engagement was negatively impacted by the emergency

transition to remote learning and found that lectures engaged students less after the transition to remote learning. With the unpredictability that goes along with the COVID-19 pandemic school districts must continue to be flexible and provide remote learning options. To provide high quality education during distance learning school districts and educators need additional research on the most effective instructional strategies determined by educators using experiential learning to engage students online.

Problem Statement

Student engagement was widely recognized as an essential factor leading to student achievement and learning (Kahu, 2013). For this reason, educators designed and implemented a variety of instructional strategies to motivate and engage students. According to Tanner (2013), some of the most effective instructional strategies for promoting face-to-face engagement include wait time, allowing students time to write, hand raising, progress monitoring, small group work, and assigning class reporters. Although these strategies were effective in a classroom environment, they may not be helpful in a distance learning setting.

During the Spring of 2020 school districts worldwide were forced to transition to distance learning. According to Perets et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic made the need for distance learning, more relevant than ever before. In a short period of time educators adapted their lessons to an online, distance learning setting. Many educators turned to experiential learning and the process of trial and error to determine what instructional strategies were most effective in fostering student engagement in a distance learning setting. Experiential learning involved educators trying out various concepts and seeing for themselves what works best and which tools they want to implement (McHauser et al., 2020). This study builds upon the face-to-face instructional strategy research and existing online instructional research by analyzing educators'

perspectives on which instructional strategies they found most effective, while using experiential learning, to promote student engagement in a distance learning setting.

The general problem is that the emergency transition to distance learning created unprecedented disruptions for students and educators across the nation. The education field can gain valuable knowledge from the experience of educators during this crisis (McDaniel & Joo, 2020). The specific problem is that educators were not trained to make the emergency transition to distance learning, resulting in the use of experiential learning theory to design instructional strategies to engage students online. Experiential learning can help contribute to improvements in crisis management (Pasco et al., 2012). With the crisis of the pandemic continuing to linger there is a need to share educators' perspectives on effective instructional strategies to engage students in a remote setting.

Background of the Problem

Due to the emergency transition to distance learning in the Spring of 2020 educators were left without the proper training to engage their students. Past literature highlighted deficiencies due to the emergency transition to distance learning including inexperience of teachers, information gaps, and complex environment at home (Ali, 2020). According to Raes et al. (2020), the potentially low level of engagement for remote students' needs to be taken seriously. To combat this problem, educators took on the role of the student by using experiential learning to determine which instructional strategies would engage students in a distance learning setting. There is a need for further research on educators' perspectives of instructional strategies that promote student engagement in a rural, distance learning setting.

Previous studies have identified the importance of engaging students in a distance learning setting. Low levels of student engagement while remote need to be taken seriously as

student engagement is associated with positive learning outcomes (Raes et al., 2020). It is essential to ensure instructors can engage their online students (Baule, 2020). Instructional strategies such as well-being check-ins, class discussions, student presentations, and video feedback have all been determined to maintain student engagement while learning virtually (Lowenthal et al., 2020). The current research gap is in rural school districts. The purpose of this study was to identify instructional strategies that 4K-8 educators found most effective in promoting student engagement while using experiential learning in a rural, distance learning setting.

Research Questions

According to Baule (2020), the move to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic was quick and often without the professional development and other infrastructure supports historically provided to faculty when transitioning to distance learning. The following research question guided the study,

RQ1: What instructional strategies did 4K-8 educators find most effective in promoting student engagement while using experiential learning in a rural, distance learning setting?

Limitations/Delimitations

Limitations of this study included the sample size and participant vulnerability. The sample size was small and participants in the study were volunteers. They may not have been willing to participate or have had the time to respond to the survey. The study involved participants who work in the same school district the study is taking place. Participants could have feared repercussions for survey responses and answers could have been fabricated to satisfy their colleague's research.

Some study limitations originated from conscious choices made by the researcher; these limitations are also known as delimitations. They are created to narrow the scope of the study (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). This study has been narrowed down to 4K-8 educators in a small rural, private school district in Wisconsin.

Definition of Terms

Student engagement was defined as the behavioral dimension, the affective dimension, and the cognitive dimension. The three dimensions make-up student engagement and seriously affected the student learning outcomes (Raes et al., 2020).

Behavioral dimension included students focus, attention, participation, effort, and involvement (Raes et al., 2020).

Affective dimension which included the student's interest, frustration, and enjoyment level (Raes et al., 2020).

Cognitive dimension which involved the learning outcomes, metacognition, and self-regulated learning (Raes et al., 2020).

Distance learning was defined as digital technologies put forth as an answer to the changing educational landscape during the COVID-19 pandemic (Raes et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic began in the spring of 2020. It is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus affecting people world-wide. According to the Center for Disease Control (2021) K-12 schools should be implementing preventative measures to ensure that their students and staff are safe. To prevent the spread of COVID-19 many school districts made the choice to transition to remote learning.

Instructional strategies referred to equitable teaching techniques that are rooted in the research of learning (Tanner, 2013).

Experiential learning was defined as the process by which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. (Serhart, 2020).

Experiential learning theory was defined as a four-stage cycle involving the active experimentation, concrete experimentation, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization (Serhart, 2020).

Educators were defined as teachers with at least one year of teaching experience. They have taught in both a remote and face-to-face settings. The educators in this study were from a rural K-8 school district in Wisconsin.

Summary

Chapter One of this study outlined the importance of defining effective instructional strategies for educators that foster student engagement during remote learning. It emphasized the need for further research and explanation on remote learning instructional strategies because little research has been done to help improve student learning while remote. The chapter included the purpose and problem of the study, background of the problem, the research question being addressed, limitations and delimitations of the study, and a definition of terms. Chapter Two will discuss relevant literature involved in finding instructional strategies that are most effective in fostering student engagement during remote learning. Chapter Three will present the research design and methodology used to complete the study. Chapter Four will describe the results and examination of the study and Chapter Five will present the conclusions on what instructional strategies educators found most effective in fostering engagement during remote learning.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Before the instructional strategies that 4K-8 educators found most beneficial in fostering student engagement during distance learning are determined, the background and history of the research must be evaluated. This chapter will review the student engagement and distance learning literature. The first section of Chapter Two will review and discuss the historical overview of the problem including remote learning before the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of student engagement to student learning, and common instructional strategies used by educators to engage their students pre pandemic. The second section will cover current remote learning and student engagement research, including the emergency transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of remote learning on student learning outcomes. The final section will address the theoretical framework and how educators used experiential learning theory to determine effective instructional strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Historical Overview of Student Engagement

Historical research on student engagement and student learning outcomes determined that a student's engagement level will have an impact on student learning outcomes (Taurina, 2015). It is crucial that educators are presented with research on effective instructional strategies to promote student engagement in the classroom and online. In addition, historical research emphasized student engagement as a key element in the development of learning. (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Student engagement is a crucial factor in ensuring that students are learning. As educators it is important to continue to learn and develop new ways to engage students in the classroom and online. This study builds upon current student engagement literature by offering

effective student engagement strategies determined by educators' perspectives in a rural, distance learning setting.

Past research determined that effective instructional strategies for student engagement involved giving students opportunities to think and talk about the academic subject, encouraging and actively managing participation, building an inclusive classroom for all, monitoring behaviors, and teaching to all the students (Tanner, 2013). Research by Caram & Davis (2012) determined that asking the right questions is an effective instructional strategy for student engagement. Educators should create a classroom that is open to dialogue. The educator should use positive responses when answering student questions to ensure that the students feel comfortable sharing in the classroom. According to Lay (2016), movement was another essential factor in increasing student engagement. Further research is needed to determine if these traditional classroom engagement strategies could also be effective in a distance learning setting.

Historical Overview of Distance Learning

The research on the emergency transition to distance learning was relevant to the times, but a gap in the research exists in rural school districts. The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to quickly transition to distance learning formats. According to Lowenthal et al. (2020) during this difficult transition to distance learning it is important for educators and faculty to model effective online teaching techniques. Some examples of online teaching techniques suggested by past literature include building in one-on-one time between the educator and the student. Other strategies included using small groups, giving the students time to hang-out together on their own, giving the students a chance to move, and teaching to the times. There has been a misguided tendency to cram as much content as possible into distance learning. Instead, educators should acknowledge the deeply traumatic pandemic (Minkel, 2021). Research has

emphasized the importance of offering emotional support to students during distance learning (Lowenthal et al., 2020). Additional research by Baule (2020) found that discussion threads, introductory videos, and synchronous study sessions contribute to student engagement in a distance learning setting.

Despite the growth in popularity of distance learning, research found that students' perceptions of distance learning were primarily negative (Owens et al., 2009). Owens et al. (2009) used a meta-analysis to determine student perceptions. The study found that the satisfaction levels of students enrolled in distance courses was much lower than students studying in a face-to-face environment, making students more vulnerable to drop out. Consistent with this, the study identified students in remote areas as an equity target group. The target group determined that their physical and geographical isolation created barriers to successful study outcomes. The meta-analysis study determined that several variables contributed to online learning outcomes including type of communication, mode of delivery, relationship with teaching staff, technology and support, interaction, and course content (Owens et al., 2009). Most research before the COVID-19 pandemic found that students' perceptions of distance learning were negative and traditional face-to-face classes were preferred (Elison-Bowers et al., 2008).

Current research found that distance learning class sessions often turned into long lectures, encouraged multitasking and distraction, and were difficult to take part in depending on situational factors like home life and internet connection. Distance learning can leave students feeling frustrated and fatigued (Lowenthal et al., 2020). Outside factors can affect a student's engagement level during distance learning. Ali (2020) mentions several other concerns involved in the emergency transition to distance learning including student equity and motivational

concerns, spotty internet, and lack of support for teaching staff. McDaniel and Joo (2020) found that students desire more consistency and flexibility around course expectations to help them meet their learning goals while dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. Current studies identified student and teacher concerns toward distance learning. This study looked to build upon the current research to determine which instructional strategies educators found most effective in fostering student engagement while using experiential learning in a rural, distance learning setting.

The Emergency Transition to Distance Learning

Before the emergency transition to distance learning, research was centered around universities and online learning students in other countries who voluntarily signed up for distance learning. For instance, Owens et al. (2009) developed a study involving college students from remote locations in Australia. Due to rapidly developing technology in online education, distance learning has changed the way that institutions deliver classes. Students are completing their classes outside of the typical face-to-face environment and relying on online instruction. These students chose to take part in distance learning because they are in other countries. Students and educators during the COVID-19 pandemic were not given this choice. Educators were forced to transition to online learning due to safety concerns during the pandemic. This quick transition did not allow teachers to prepare fully for distance learning. Educators used experiential learning to determine the most effective ways to engage their students while online. Before the COVID-19 pandemic educators were aware that classes would be offered remotely and were given time to prepare. Research on distance learning before the COVID-19 pandemic primarily focused on distance learning where the students are in other countries and choosing to take courses online and educators were given more time to prepare for distance learning before the pandemic.

Further research is needed on helpful instructional strategies that educators can use to engage their students during the transition to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Distance learning literature stated that it is the educator's concern and challenge to identify individual students who may be negatively impacted by the transition to distance learning and provide these students with the appropriate assistance (Perets et al., 2020). Perets et al. (2020) determined that prioritizing class activities and assessments, implementing an attendance policy, and establishing principal guidelines all contributed to positive learning outcomes during distance learning. It can be difficult to provide this type of support when educators were given little preparation time. Educators traditionally received little, if any, preparation on how to teach remotely (Lowenthal et al., 2020). During the emergency transition to distance learning educators were not given the tools to successfully engage their students. Educators used experiential learning to determine what strategies were the most effective. This research added to the current distance learning research, by examining what instructional strategies educators found most effective in fostering student engagement in a distance learning environment while using experiential learning.

There were additional considerations when interpreting the results of previous studies and planning for future studies. Most studies on distance learning and the emergency transition to distance learning used small sample sizes and a single college or university to determine students' perspectives. McDaniel & Joo's (2020) study was based on a total of eighteen virtual focus group discussions conducted with forty-six students and thirty-seven faculty members at the participating institutions within the system under study. The research used a specific college or university in an urban, metropolitan city to determine their results. The small sample size and the use of a specific institution in an urban area made the data analysis less generalizable. To

make more valid generalizations researchers will need to recruit more participants from a variety of institutions in rural, urban, and suburban areas using different sampling techniques.

Theoretical Framework

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory guided this research. Experiential Learning Theory says that knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences (Serhat, 2020). During the emergency transition to distance learning, educators went through Kolb's Experiential Learning phases and determined which instructional strategies were effective in fostering student engagement in a distance learning setting.

The first phase involved concrete experience. In this phase educators tried different instructional strategies in a distance learning setting without any prior training. In the next phase, educators used reflection and abstract conceptualization to determine which instructional strategies were most effective in fostering student engagement in a distance learning setting. Educators were then able to plan and implement what they learned from the experiential learning process. This theory provided guidance for designing better processes in education and development (Serhat, 2020). The knowledge that educators gained through experiential learning is invaluable to our education system. With the pandemic changing the way that schools operate there is a need to build upon current distance learning research by examining educators' perspectives on effective instructional strategies to foster student engagement while using experiential learning in a distance learning setting.

Summary

Research before the COVID-19 pandemic allowed educators and students the choice between distance learning or face-to-face classes. Those that chose to take classes remotely were primarily from other countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning was the only

option. Educators used experiential learning theory to determine which instructional strategies were most effective in fostering student engagement. There is a need to share 4K-8 educators' perspectives on which instructional strategies were most effective in a rural, distance learning setting. The next chapter of this study will describe the research methodology used including research design, sample size, setting, data collection tools, and data analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine what instructional strategies educators found most effective in fostering student engagement while using experiential learning in a rural, distance learning setting. Chapter Three will cover the research methodology. This will include the research design process and rationale for the research methodology. The chapter will include the sample size, setting, instrumentation, data collection process, confidentiality, ethical considerations, and the data analysis process.

Research Design

Qualitative research was used to guide this study. Qualitative research was used as a broad explanation for behavior and attitudes, consisting of variables, constructs, and hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The results from this research sought to understand 4K-8 educators' opinions on the effectiveness of student engagement strategies, while using experiential learning, in a rural, distance learning setting.

Qualitative methodology was used in this study because it allowed for flexibility. Qualitative research involved a transformative perspective that shaped the types of questions asked, informs data collection and analysis, and provided a call for action or change (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The survey in this study allowed for flexibility because the questions were designed to be open-ended, and they allowed for each educator to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions. In addition, the study sought to transform distance learning lessons to better engage students.

Sample

A convenience sample was used for this research. A convenience sample is the selection of a sample of participants from a population based on how convenient and available that group

of participants is (SAGE, 2021). Fifteen 4K-8 educators at a rural, Wisconsin school district were invited to participate in this study. This is convenient because all participants were employed by the same school district as the researcher. The criteria for the sample included a minimum of one year of teaching experience, experience teaching in both a remote and in-person setting, and experience teaching during the emergency transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Setting

A rural school district in southwestern Wisconsin provided the setting for this research. The school was composed of one building with a student population of 135 students in grades four-year-old kindergarten through eighth grade. The student population had a racial composition of 2% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 2% Asian, 1% African American, 12% Hispanic/Latino, 83% White, and 1% two or more races. Students on free and reduced lunch accounted for 18% of the population (Wisconsin Department of Instruction, 2019). There were nine classroom teachers and four specialty teachers including music, physical education, Spanish, and computers. There were six support staff members employed at the school and the average class size was fifteen students.

Instruments

According to SAGE (2021), instrumentation referred to the tools by which investigators attempt to measure variables or items of interest in the data-collection process. This study used a survey to measure educators' perspectives on effective instructional strategies, using experiential learning, that foster student engagement in a rural, remote setting. According to Raes et al. (2020), open-ended questions allowed for flexibility and further interpretation of results. The survey consisted of four demographic questions and five open-ended questions. The open-ended

questions were designed to bring forth the educators' opinions and beliefs on the subject matter. The survey was designed and implemented using Qualtrics and sent out to all teachers in the rural, Wisconsin school district.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved an anonymous, confidential survey. The survey was developed using Qualtrics and sent out via email with a link to the survey and a participant recruitment letter. The email was sent to fifteen participants at a rural school district in Wisconsin. The participants were given two weeks to respond to the survey. A follow up email was sent to the participants one week after the original survey email was distributed.

Permission from the school where the research was being collected was obtained and presented to the review board. The research used informed consent to obtain all data. According to Grady et al. (2017), informed consent is ethically essential when conducting research and should give the participant the opportunity to understand relevant information about the research and make a voluntary decision to participate. After completion of the study all data collected was destroyed.

Data Analysis

All data collected from this study was analyzed using thematic analysis and meta-synthesis. Thematic coding involved interpreting, analyzing, comparing, and developing themes to determine which strategies are most effective (Ali, 2020). Generating themes from data is a common feature of qualitative methods and a widely used analytical method. Thematic analysis is an interpretive process in which data is systematically searched for using patterns to provide an illuminating description of the phenomenon (Smith, 2011). Themes were determined and then connected to one another as part of the data analysis process to determine which instructional

strategies educators found most beneficial, using experiential learning, in a distance learning setting. Meta-synthesis allowed for researchers to further interpret existing research (Perets et al., 2020). Meta-synthesis was used in this study to further analyze the qualitative data gathered from the survey.

Summary

Chapter Three focused on the methodology of the study. A qualitative approach to conducting and analyzing data was used to explore the perspectives of 4K-8 educators, while using experiential learning, to determine which instructional strategies were most effective in fostering student engagement in a rural, remote setting. Research design, rationale, setting, and sample size were discussed. The chapter explained the use of a survey as the study's data collection instrument, ethical considerations, data collection, and the use of thematic coding and meta-synthesis for data analysis. Chapter Four will present the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Chapter Four will explore the results of the anonymous survey sent out to 4K-8 educators. The survey results were analyzed using thematic coding and meta-synthesis to determine what instructional strategies educators found most beneficial in fostering student engagement while using experiential learning in a rural, distance learning setting. The process of thematic coding used by the researcher involved reading the survey responses carefully, identifying main ideas in each survey question, and grouping the main ideas to determine reoccurring themes. Chapter Four will consist of a description of the sample and the data analysis process.

Description of Sample

The survey was sent out to fifteen 4K-8 educators at a rural school district in Wisconsin. The educators had at least one year of teaching experience and have taught both in-person classes and during the emergency transition to distance learning. Seven percent of educators had one year of teaching experience, twenty-one percent had two to five years of experience, twenty-one percent had six to ten years of experience, and fifty percent had sixteen years or more of teaching experience. Subjects taught included math, science, reading, social studies, music, Spanish, English, religion, and intervention. Twelve educators responded to the survey for a response rate of eighty percent.

Data Analysis

The data for this study was collected using an anonymous survey and analyzed using thematic coding and meta-synthesis. The survey questions were analyzed to answer the following research question:

RQ1: What instructional strategies did 4K-8 educators find most beneficial in fostering student engagement while using experiential learning in a rural, distance learning setting?

The following open-ended survey questions were used to inform the research question (See Appendix A):

Survey Question 1 (SQ1): How would you describe your experience with keeping students engaged during distance learning?

Survey Question 2 (SQ2): What steps did you take to determine what instructional strategies worked well in fostering student engagement in a distance learning setting?

Survey Question 3 (SQ3): What face-to-face instructional strategies for student engagement did you experiment with in a distance learning setting?

Survey Question 4 (SQ4): What instructional strategies worked well for you during the implementation of distance learning to keep your students engaged?

Survey Question 5 (SQ5): If you were to begin distance learning again, what would you include in your lessons to engage your students?

In response to SQ1, “How would you describe your experience with keeping students engaged during distance learning? eight out of the twelve (67%) educators surveyed stated that their experience with keeping students engaged in a distance learning setting was difficult due to outside factors. Educator number seven stated,

I did morning meeting and math in a whole class Zoom time each day. At the beginning the students were quite engaged during these Zooms because it was new to them. After a while, the uniqueness wore off and they became quite distracted by things at home, like eating, pets, or siblings.

Three out of the twelve responses (25%) stated that technology often caused issues with student engagement. Educator number two says,

I am not a technologically adapt person so restructuring virtually meant some skills were left more weakened than normal. I personally feel my students and I missed out as there were a number of them who simple did not log on and internet issues limiting our full group participation.

Educators stated that there were students who could not handle learning remotely and did not log in, other students would have their cameras off, and it was difficult to know if the students were doing their work. Three out of the twelve educators (25%) said that the unfamiliarity and lack of preparation for distance learning effected student engagement. Educator number six stated,

At first it was stressful due to the fact that I didn't know what was going to happen. Will it work? Will the students listen? Will they learn?

Survey question 2 asked, "What steps did you take to determine what instructional strategies worked well in fostering student engagement in a distance learning setting? Four out of the twelve educators stated that they used a type of experiential learning to determine what instructional strategies were most effective in fostering student engagement. Educator number nine provided this view,

Trial and error. Because it was new to all of us, we just had to go ahead and see what happened. If it worked well, we stayed with it. If not, we made adjustments.

Another step mentioned by two out of the twelve educators (17%) was collaboration. Educators stated that they relied on tips from colleagues, communicated with other teachers, and as a faculty collaborated on use of technology and teaching using Zoom to foster student engagement.

Responses to SQ3, “What face-to-face instructional strategies for student engagement did you experiment with in a distance learning setting?” stated the importance of including brain breaks, movement, and small group work into distance learning lessons. Four out of the twelve educators (33%) believe brain breaks and other forms of interactive movement helped keep students engaged. Educator number one says, they experimented with shared online and do-it-yourself activities. They also involved dance breaks and off-screen breaks. Educator number eight shared that interactive household scavenger hunts helped to keep the students engaged. In addition, educator number four used white boards and planned birthday celebrations and games to engage their students while online.

Responses to SQ4, “What instructional strategies worked well for you during the implementation of distance learning to keep your students engaged?” included the importance of positivity, establishing expectations, and the need for games and movement breaks. Three out of the twelve educators (25%) stated that giving positive feedback and being energetic was necessary. Six out of twelve educators mentioned that brain breaks, and games worked well during distance learning. Educator number one provided this list of beneficial instructional strategies,

Acknowledge expectations for the day (work or behavior). Activities with participation more so the do-it-yourself ones. Work done together, where students help solve the problem. I write it down on a shared screen and they copy onto their papers. Just for fun games/ involvement activities, dance breaks, and off-screen breaks.

In response to SQ5, “If you were to begin distance learning again, what would you include in your lessons to engage your students?” three out of twelve educators (25%) would include a lesson on clear distance learning expectations. Four out of twelve teachers (33%) would include

daily check-ins, morning meeting time, or one-on-one teacher student time. Four out of twelve (33%) would use brain breaks and movement in their distance learning lessons. Three out of twelve educators (25%) mentioned adding differentiation to their lessons to reach all levels of learners. Lastly, two out of twelve educators (17%) would incorporate other forms of technology including Seesaw, Google Classroom, Bitmoji classroom slides, and online science investigations. Educator number six stated,

Number 1 priority would be to have time, like a morning meeting, to make those connections with my students. In the daily lessons, I would make sure to include a time for sharing and teaching, by students, about their work.

Summary

Chapter Four discussed the themes and results from the four demographic survey questions and five open-ended survey questions. The open-ended survey questions helped to inform the research question. Themes from SQ1 included difficulty, unfamiliarity, and lack of preparation. Themes from SQ2 involved the use of experiential learning to determine what instructional strategies worked and collaboration with other staff members. In SQ3 educators experimented with face-to-face instructional strategies including brain breaks and small group work. Themes from SQ4 highlighted the importance of positivity and encouragement, establishing expectations early, and interactive games. Lastly, themes for SQ5 included setting expectations, creating student relationships, brain breaks, differentiation, and the use of technology. Chapter Five will discuss the conclusions from the data, leadership implications, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the qualitative study was to determine what instructional strategies 4k-8 educators found most beneficial in fostering student engagement, while using experiential learning in a rural, distance learning setting. Previous chapters discussed the problem of student engagement in a distance learning setting during the emergency transition to distance learning, the current and historical literature on distance learning, the research methodology, and the results of the study. The final chapter will present the discussions and conclusions for research question one. It will discuss the theoretical connection to the framework, leadership implications, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion and Conclusions

A qualitative research design was determined as the best approach to analyze 4k-8 educators' experiences and opinions on what instructional strategies were most beneficial using experiential learning. The following research question guided this study,

RQ1: What instructional strategies did 4K-8 educators find most beneficial in fostering student engagement while using experiential learning in a rural, distance learning setting?

During the data collection and analysis process four themes emerged to answer research question one. The themes that emerged were the importance of building relationships with students, the importance of movement, the importance of establishing expectations early, and the use of positive energy while teaching online.

Theoretical Connection

Experiential Learning Theory provided the theoretical framework for this qualitative study. Experiential learning is a process in which the learner acquires and applies knowledge and

skills through direct contact with reality. In an academic context, the learner is in direct interaction with the topic of study instead of simply memorizing an intellectual description or reflection (Quesada et al., 2020). In this study the learner was the educator applying their past knowledge and skills of student engagement to determine the most effective instructional strategies for fostering student engagement in a distance learning setting.

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning involved four stages concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Serhat, 2020). The educators in this study went through each of these steps to determine the most effective student engagement strategies while online. During the concrete experience phase, several participants identified engaging students during distance learning as unfamiliar and difficult. Educator number two and ten felt unprepared to transition to distance learning. The participants used reflective observation to determine what instructional strategies they would include in their distance learning lessons in the future. Several participants mentioned going through abstract conceptualization to conclude that expectations, brain breaks, and daily check-ins should be a part of future distance learning lessons. Lastly, participants mentioned active experimentation. Many educators stated that determining effective instructional strategies during distance learning involved trial and error and problem solving. For instance, educator number four referred to the process as hit or miss experimentation.

According to McHauser et al. (2020), experiential learning created strong learning outcomes. This study determined what instructional strategies educators should include in their distance learning lessons. In turn the study benefited the students by increasing engagement and learning outcomes.

Research Question 1 Discussion

Theme 1: Building Relationships with Individual Students

The first theme, building personal relationships with distance learning students emerged from the study. Many students reported that their ability to work with peers, connect with faculty, and feel a sense of belonging suffered during the emergency transition to distance learning (McDaniel & Joo, 2020). Distance learners felt a significant sense of distance between their teachers and peers (Raes, et al., 2020). Past literature has emphasized the importance of offering wellbeing check-ins and student emotional support when learning at a distance (Lowenthal et al., 2020). Baule (2020) suggests adding in a voluntary study session to assist students in coping with the isolation of the pandemic. Educator number two, three, six, and eight all emphasized the importance of using daily check-ins, morning meetings, and one-on-one instructional time to make connections with students while distance learning. Educator number six says that they tried to make time to make personal connections with each student during morning meeting. Educator number four included birthday games and activities so that students had special days to look forward to. Educators found that creating positive relationships makes students more willing to participate and complete their work.

Minkel (2021) suggested finding creative ways to get to know your students. Educator seven provided scavenger hunts and share time to learn more about individual students in a creative way. Educator number nine and ten included small group activities and break out rooms into their instructional lessons. Other creative strategies used by the educators in this study included Bitmoji classroom slides, online science investigation, physical song and dance, and white board lessons.

Theme 2: The Importance of Movement

The second theme, the importance of movement and brain breaks during distance learning emerged from the study. Theme two aligned with findings by Minkel (2020). Minkel found that it is important to get students up and moving during distance learning or they could turn into zombies. He suggested incorporating snack breaks, stretch breaks, and dance sessions. Educator number one played games for fun and had dance breaks and off-screen breaks. Movement is an essential element for getting our brains ready to learn. Movement can form deeper, more meaningful connections and increase students' ability to focus (Lay, 2016). Educator number ten used brain break games and videos to get the students up and moving. This allowed the students a break from class content, which helped them focus. In addition, when the educators were asked SQ5, many responded by saying that they would include more brain breaks in their lessons in the future.

Theme 3: The Importance of Setting Expectations Early

Theme number three, the importance of establishing student expectations early during distance learning, emerged from the study. According to Perets et al. (2020), students' perceptions of distance learning were higher when the instructor posted a schedule and grading system weeks before the start of the online class. The post set the overall expectations for the course and allowed the students the time that they needed to prepare. Educator number four believed that setting expectations and reminding the students of those expectations during distance learning was important. Educator number one acknowledged the classroom expectations every day to ensure the students understood what was expected of them during distance learning. Educator number one and three both said that they would include sharing and reviewing of expectations in future distance learning lessons.

Research mentioned that when setting your expectations, it is important to consider the deeply traumatic pandemic. Distance learning students desired more flexibility around course expectations and requirements to help them meet their learning goals while dealing with the consequences of the pandemic (McDaniel & Joo, 2020). Minkel (2020), suggested teaching to the moment. Educators had a tendency to cram too much content into distance learning lessons. It is important to acknowledge the pandemic and outside factors when setting expectations.

Ali (2020) determined that educators must support the use of low bandwidth including offline solutions to effectively support distance learning students. This is especially important in rural school districts. Educator number eight mentioned that issues arose due to poor internet availability and educator number two said that students often missed out on in class participation due to internet issues. Other educators worked to combat this problem by offering offline work. Educator number three mentioned sending paper packets home for the first few weeks with an itinerary. It is important to acknowledge these internet issues in classroom expectations and offer some flexibility to distance learning students.

Theme 4: The Use of Positive Energy

Theme number four, the importance of using positive energy while teaching online emerged from the study. Research indicated that the educator's behavior was a significant factor in a positive student experience while learning at a distance (Owens et al., 2009). According to Taurina (2015), teacher behavior had a direct effect on student motivation. Three educators from this study considered the importance of creating a positive environment by remaining energetic and positive while distance learning. Educator number three responded by saying being positive and energetic was very necessary. Educator number six said positive feedback and positive comments helped keep students engaged during distance learning.

After conducting this research, four instructional strategies can be recommended for fostering student engagement in a 4k-8, rural, distance learning setting. The recommendations are based off educators using experiential learning to determine which instructional strategies were most effective. The first strategy was to build personal relationships with your students. Educators should make time in their distance learning lessons for morning meetings, daily check-ins, one-on-one time, and small group work to allow positive student educator relationships to be formed. The second strategy was to plan movement into daily distance learning lessons. Scavenger hunts, dance breaks, off-screen time, and interactive games are all effective ways to get students moving. The next strategy was to set distance learning expectations early. Students should know what is expected of them, and educators should teach to the times and offer flexibility when distance learning. The final strategy was to remain positive and energetic as an educator. Educators should deliver their lessons with enthusiasm and offer positive feedback and comments in a timely matter to their online students.

Leadership Implications

Conclusion 1: 4k-8 educators should focus on building personal relationships with students by including morning meetings, daily check-ins, one-on-one time, and small group work into distance learning lessons.

Implication: Leaders must consider the importance of building personal relationships within the organization. According to Bolman & Deal (2017) when the fit between people and the leader of the organization is poor it often leads to people withdrawing effort from the organization. But, when the fit between the leader and the people is positive, individuals will give the talent and effort needed for the organization to succeed. The quality of the relationship between the leader and the people effects how satisfied and how effective people are at work. It is suggested that

leaders spend time relating to other people in conversations, meetings, groups and committees, over coffee or lunch, on the phone, or on the internet (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Conclusion 2: 4k-8 educators should plan movement breaks into distance learning lessons including scavenger hunts, brain break exercises, off-screen time, and dance breaks.

Implication: Incorporating movement throughout the workday can maximize employee energy, performance, and health. Leaders must recognize the benefit of movement and provide policies within an organization to support movement and a healthy body. An example of a movement policy leaders can implement into their organization is movement meetings, where employees are allowed to stretch, stand, and move during organizational meetings. Other examples include moving workstations and work attire that allows for movement. Increase in movement can lead to more productivity in the workplace.

Conclusion 3: An effective instructional strategy for fostering student engagement was to set distance learning expectations early. However, educators must consider the pandemic and internet issues when setting these expectations.

Implications: As a leader it is important to create clear and consistent goals and expectations for your organization and its employees. According to Bolman & Deal (2017) when employees know their roles and responsibilities in an organization it will minimize distractions and maximize people's performance on the job. Ways to set quality expectations include carefully studying the existing policies and plans to understand what worked and what did not work, developing a new set of goals, and experimenting and reflecting on the new goals.

Conclusion 4: Educator's positivity throughout distance learning lessons affected student engagement. Educators should maintain enthusiasm while teaching and give positive feedback and comments to distance learning students in a timely manner.

Implications: Employees will emulate their leaders' behaviors. If the leader is not showing interest in the project, it is likely that the employees will not be interested either. If the leader shows enthusiasm and communicates effectively the employees are more likely to do the same. Leaders should consider their tone of voice, body-language, and eye-contact when communicating to ensure employee motivation. Leaders should also provide positive feedback to employees.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study identified several instructional strategies for fostering student engagement while using experiential learning in a 4k-8 rural, distance learning setting. Future research is needed to determine the effectiveness of each strategy at different grade levels including high-school and college courses and in urban and suburban school districts. Additionally, this study was conducted in a rural midwestern school district with a large white population. Testing instructional strategies in a more diverse community may provide additional strategies. This study looked at all school subjects including music, physical education, and core subjects. It would be beneficial to determine the effectiveness of certain strategies for specific subjects and content, as distance learning is likely to play a large role in education in the future.

Summary

There were four beneficial instructional strategies determined by using experiential learning for fostering student engagement in a distance learning setting provided by this study. One strategy included focusing on building personal relationships with students through morning meetings, one-on-one time, small group work, and daily student check-ins. Another strategy was to implement movement often into distance learning lessons. Movement could include scavenger hunts, dance breaks, stretching and exercise, and off-screen time. The third strategy was to set

distance learning expectations early in the school year. Educators should also continue to remind students of the expectations and provide flexibility during the pandemic. Lastly, educators should remain positive and energetic throughout distance learning. Tone of voice, body language, and eye-contact are important communication skills to consider when delivering online lessons, as well as providing positive feedback and comments in a timely manner. With these strategies educators can feel more comfortable and prepared to engage students and continue to provide effective distance learning lessons.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. By responding to the survey questions, you are agreeing to participate in this study.
Responding to the survey questions constitutes as your consent. Participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time. Please click “Yes” if you agree to participate in this study, and “No” if you do not wish to participate. Participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time.
2. How many years have you been an educator? (0-2, 2-5, 5-10, 11-15, 15 or more years)
3. What grade level(s) were you teaching during the emergency transition to remote learning in the Spring of the 2020 school year?
4. What subject(s) were you teaching during the emergency transition to remote learning in the Spring of the 2020 school year?
5. Survey Question 1 (SQ1): How would you describe your experience with keeping students engaged during distance learning?
6. Survey Question 2 (SQ2): What steps did you take to determine what instructional strategies worked well in fostering student engagement in a distance learning setting?
7. Survey Question 3 (SQ3): What face-to-face instructional strategies for student engagement did you experiment with in a distance learning setting?
8. Survey Question 4 (SQ4): What instructional strategies worked well for you during the implementation of distance learning to keep your students engaged?
9. Survey Question 5 (SQ5): If you were to begin distance learning again, what would you include in your lessons to engage your students?