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CRISIS IN EDUCATION: ROLES AND SOLUTIONS

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

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I couldn't have completed this project without the love and support of Pancake, Bean, and Easton. To my advisory team, thank you for your enthusiasm; you have no idea how many times I was running on empty. Also, thanks to Murph Dog for being your authentic self. You shaped much of my life; you will never know the extent of your impact.

“The great oscillation of hope and despair.”

- B. S., friend and colleague

“Smile sweetly, and don’t let it show.”

-My Personal Jiminy Cricket

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

K-12 public education in the United States has problems. According to the media, politicians, teachers, and community members, the system strains to chug along, and our students underperform. As a public school teacher I have seen budgets cut, classroom size swell, and angst blossom while students navigate their most formative years in public education. Worse, as time progresses, additional—often not new—problems reemerge. The crises sprout like the heads of the hydra: test scores, Common Core, State Standards, and the Achievement Gap, to name a few. To remedy these crises, we compare our systems and results to those of neighboring districts and states and to other countries, looking for panacea. We analyze all sorts of data, implement new initiatives, and wallow in vain.

Fight, flight, and freeze responses to intense stimuli are animal behaviors that are clearly observable in the struggling education system. Many Americans fight every day for quality education. Students fight to provide themselves excellent opportunities for their present and future selves, to embrace their identities, and to support their schools and communities. Parents share in the fight and often bring their expertise into schools to enrich these communities. Teachers fight to do their part in ensuring students and families and the community grow in the best ways possible.

Sometimes “flight” occurs when students switch classes, schools, and districts. Maybe a student is ill or over prepared for a particular course; maybe their first choice school cuts arts education or another academic focus. Parents, like their students, might flee schools and districts when their students need support and stability but cannot find it in one district. When they switch schools, parents and students hope for a fresh start, a place that will meet their needs, and hopefully, they have chosen a suitable environment where the student’s needs can be met and their strengths can shine. Teachers might flee a school or district to obtain full time work in a single building, or they might flee the profession in which they invested heavily due to burnout, depression, or a higher paying, less stress-inducing field.

“Freeze” might manifest as a student’s head down on a desk during a test or as a heavy backpack filled with papers from seven classes, all mashed in a single wad, or a YouTube video competing with an empty notebook. For a parent, freeze might be overwhelmed hands in the air during parent-teacher conferences or waiting until next semester for their student’s grades to improve or completely disengaging from school and leaving it up to the student to figure it out. For a teacher, freeze could be an ungraded stack of papers, a professional development book collecting dust, or a movie day lesson plan.

The challenges we face as Americans in public education ultimately concern us because the education system reflects the greater U.S. society. Just as individual schools reflect their surrounding communities, if our school system is in crisis, what does that say

about the health of the nation? Part of the problem may be there is a lot—maybe too much—going on in the American school system.

There are many purposes of education. In addition to academics, schools provide meals, mental and physical health care, training in socialization, and more. I believe charter schools were an attempted solution to the frustration of a bogged down system charged with so many responsibilities. The struggles of the schooling system had become so rampant, it was easier for charter schools to separate themselves from traditional schools. They took it upon themselves to do on their own what they felt was best for their students and communities—an escape from bureaucracy and failure—a page taken from the private school handbook. Perhaps too much stress is exerted on a single institution that is supposed to do nearly everything for K-12 students and their families. Maybe this is why education is in crisis; it does too much.

As an educator, I wonder about the roles of education and how it continues to evolve as an American institution and how I fit in this space. My teacher licensure program incorporated awareness of social justice issues, and I had the good fortune of working for a school community which emphasized a commitment to racial equity and arts integration. Contrarily, I feel disheartened when I speak with exhausted parents, struggling students, and feel the sting of high teacher turnover, which only exacerbate the challenges my community feels. I have lost more coworkers than I could have imagined in such a short period of time, and my students don't feel prepared for life after high school.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm talented or capable enough when I have seen hard working professionals become frustrated and leave the profession. I've heard from families that they've bounced from district to district to try and find one that is suitable for their child. I've been to student graduation parties where the adults ask me how school is going and whether I plan on sticking with it because the school is in trouble. As I explore, I discover more affirmations—from professionals, my local community members, and my wonderfully aware students—that with the breadth of educational duties come a muddling of problems or crises. So, I seek to research: *What do practicing educators perceive as obstacles to innovation and reform in education?*

My Journey to Education

I am relatively new to education; though, I have participated in it for as long as I can remember. I did not grow up around educators, and I hadn't decided on education as a viable choice of profession until my sophomore year in college. Even then, I didn't take a direct route to teaching. I graduated with a BA in Latin American Studies and years later committed to teaching. Teacher training was like entering a new world in which I had already lived for about 17 years, from Pre-K through college. From licensure through the first years as a high school classroom teacher, I underestimated what it meant to teach. I recognized there was a lot to know in education; though, it continues to amaze me how often I discover something new.

I credit my interest in teaching to my positively fantastic high school biology teacher. He was amazing because he taught well, and he was kind and dedicated. He was exceptional because of his consistency in the classroom, and he organized several

life-changing ecotourism trips to different parts of the world. We snorkeled in the Bahamas and traveled to Ecuador and explored the Galapagos Islands. The trips were inspiring, and I was lucky my parents could afford to foster my love of nature. I enjoyed these adventures so much I wanted to become a marine biologist. I later decided on Spanish, so I could remain linguistically and culturally close to the Caribbean, Latin America, and the mesmerizing wildlife of the tropics.

When I began pursuit of a K-12 Spanish teaching license, I envisioned a fulfilling and meaningful career I could enjoy for thirty-plus years. Before teacher training, I expected a steady stream of work, and I knew to practice flexibility because I would be working with adolescents and adults who worked with adolescents. After some years, the good news is I still find teaching gratifying and purposeful, and being a public school teacher is fun, nearly all of the time. I experience a lot of joy in teaching, but that joy is often accompanied by struggle and frustration.

What is This Project?

My immediate interest in this project is analyzing the complexity of the roles of education, what it does, and how educators, in particular, are affected. My research question, stated previously is: *What do practicing educators perceive as obstacles to innovation and reform in education?* Examining the purpose and condition of public education in the United States interests me because the institution is immense, the basis of our society, and it does not always prioritize academics. As a part of this system, I witness high levels of frustration alongside the rewards of education. But, does schooling

have to be so arduous, oftentimes leading to disenfranchisement of the people vested in it?

When I think of education, I think of the different people who inhabit schools. In any school, there are the students, teachers, and support team members. Some of these team members are the administrators (deans, assistant principal, principal), nurses, guidance counselors, sociologists, psychologists, specialists (special education teachers, reading specialists, English as a Second Language (ESL) specialists, and more), librarians and media staff, office staff, kitchen staff, and custodial staff. Many schools benefit from other invaluable teammates, such as paraeducators, especially in schools with larger populations. In addition to these regulars in the school building, even more play important roles who are not always on site, such as parents, guardians, family members, community members, and school district staff, certainly not limited to superintendents. Outside of the individual school buildings and district offices are community organizations, local governments (city, county), state governments, and federal agencies. It is an enormous system. Who's steering this ship? How many captains are there? And, where are we headed?

By looking at the range of individuals involved in teaching a student, one recognizes education is not always directly about teaching and learning. Education has many functions. The role of the school counselor helps with job placement and sustaining an evolving workforce that is capable in an ever-changing global economy. Special education teachers, school psychologists, sociologists, nurses, and kitchen staff address

and care for the mental and physical needs of students and families. ESL and ELL teachers help bolster a pluralistic and multicultural society. Schools do everything.

One of the earliest non-academic functions of American schools originated as a means of separating the American colonies from England by purposefully distinguishing the way colonists spoke. Over time, in addition to encouraging the populace to become better educated to further individual and communal economic prosperity, education developed into the method of fostering democratic ideology and has become a means to ensure social equity and its ugly inverse, as with the attempted cultural genocide of Native American populations. It would be difficult to contradict that education has been an incredibly significant avenue of transmission of social norms, U.S. identity, and American politics to future generations. Education is a foundation of American society, ideally supporting freedom and democracy.

If the United States schooling system is in crisis, then recognizing the challenges becomes the foundation for my ensuing research. So far I have made a connection between the crises of education and the important impact of that system. At the heart of education are the students with the professionals who engage with them daily. I previously described a little of my journey to education. Next, I will describe the remainder of this project.

To gather the necessary information, I will conduct a literature review. This will be summarized in Chapter 2. This chapter explores four topics: 1.) the crises in education, 2.) the lack of innovation, 3.) the roles of the system, and 4.) the issue of support of education. Chapter 3 describes the research methods I will use to explore my

research question: *What do practicing educators perceive as obstacles to innovation and reform in education?* To answer this question I will conduct a case study of interviews of teachers I have worked with to provide insight into the challenges of education. Chapter 4 analyzes the data I will have collected and my new insights. The final chapter will summarize the project in sum. By analyzing crisis in education, perhaps light will be shed and policies adjusted to make for a more effective system, which will be a more positive reflection and future indicator of the health and vitality of the United States as a whole.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

A review of available literature begins the journey to the revelation of the answers to my research question: *What do practicing educators perceive as obstacles to innovation and reform in education?* I am positive that infinite responses to this question may be found, and I will begin by investigating four related topics.

Topic 1 will address the level of crises in education and what the problems are. Then, I will present what I have discovered pertaining to the historic lack of innovation, fear of failure, and even opposition to reform in education in Topic 2. In Topic 3, I hypothesize education does too much; provided the number of roles and responsibilities, the system lags. This will lead to subsequent questions of funding and support and the importance of education as an American institution in Topic 4.

Topic 1: The State of Crisis in Education

During his 2013 appearance on TEDTalks, Geoffrey Canada asked his audience “why haven’t we fixed this?” (Canada, 2013). Canada demonstrated for the last fifty or so years that the American model of education has taken what did not work from the previous years and continued to do the same things the following years. Citing a general reluctance toward innovation in the profession, he argued America has changed in many ways over the last five decades, but education has not. “We’re still teaching the same way,” he said. The school calendar, with its three month summer vacation, is just one example in which education has remained stagnant. Canada stated studies repeatedly

show that students with fewer economic resources lose ground during the summer. The studies suggest we should do something, but the system does not allow us to change the way we do things in education (Canada, 2013). This is just one example of a systemic lack of innovation that must be a catalyst for reform in American schools.

The broken system Canada described took roots from a model of education inspired by the factory efficiency of the Industrial Revolution (Rosemay, 2012). This model, still widely used in the United States today, made standard the school model of groups of about 28 students of roughly the same age taught by one teacher in a production line sort of progression. Thankfully, this education reform from the 1800's helped provide students with access to publicly-funded education across the country. Disappointingly, modern education, with bell schedules, credit requirements, age-based grade levels, and the physical classroom; has remained largely unchanged (Rosemay, 2012).

Almost 100 years later, the U.S. federal government announced that the education system was struggling in its 1983 report, "A Nation At Risk" (Rosemay, 2012). Coincidentally, this year also marked great innovation and progress for the technology industry; Microsoft released MS Word and Apple introduced the new Apple IIe. Some predicted the demand for better schools, combined with the supply of new computers and software, would revolutionize education, but little research-based evidence shows these revolutionary tools had the anticipated restorative impact (Rosemay, 2012).

Without new systems or ideology in education, modern and innovative technological capabilities are little more than shiny additive measures to keep doing the

same things we have always been doing, just in a more modern way. For example, the chalkboard turned into the whiteboard, which later evolved into the smart board.

Unfortunately, without actual educational innovation, instruction remains the same on all three boards, regardless of their color or implied intelligence.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development or ASCD continued the conversation on educational lag and released a policy brief in 1996, suggesting education might be in jeopardy, and determined to investigate the roles of education to see what could be done to help strengthen and gain support for education (ASCD, 1996). The document cited the growth of charter schools, tuition vouchers, parent rights groups, and the rise of homeschooling as indicators of widespread disappointment in American schools (ASCD, 1996). All of these measures suggested the continuing need for innovation and reform.

In his March 2014 appearance at the Teaching and Learning Conference, the former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan acknowledged there are still many challenges facing education today, and reform still has a lot further to go in spite of the tremendous progress already made with closing achievement gaps and keeping pace with international competitors (Ed.gov, 2014). Duncan articulated empathy toward the frustration many teachers felt about over-testing and standardized tests and called upon teachers to take more leadership in shaping education through the proposed Teach to Lead initiative, in which teachers lead reform from their classrooms. Duncan said he had heard from many teachers who were tired of the heartbreaking choice between serving

their students and serving their profession, suggesting teaching is one full-time profession, while education reform is another (Ed.gov, 2014).

The need for reform in education has even gone so far as to strain long lasting political relationships. The partnership of democrats and teachers' unions, appears to be straining due to policies many teachers oppose. One such policy is the use of performance ratings that link student test scores to teacher evaluations and decisions about promotion, tenure, and firing (Rich, 2014). As a result, the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers' union with almost three million members, passed a resolution at its convention in Denver calling for the resignation of Secretary Duncan. Some teachers were angered by Duncan's support of a judge's ruling in California, which argued teacher tenure laws deprive students of their right to an education under the State Constitution (Rich, 2014). This event goes against the trend of the NEA endorsing democratic political figures as it had done since presidential candidate Jimmy Carter in 1976. And, in a complete role reversal, both the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers, the country's second-largest teachers' union, made financial contributions to the campaigns of Republican lawmakers who opposed tenure changes and test-based teacher evaluations in California (Rich, 2014).

Test-based evaluations are closely tied to Common Core State Standards, about which many teachers feel negative; although, Linda Darling-Hammond and Randi Weingarten clarify the main concerns are not the standards themselves but the consequences of high-stakes tests attached to the standards (2014). Using an outdated testing model tied to punishments for children, educators, and schools as a means of

bolstering accountability disrupts excellence in education (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2014). A large focus on testing has had a narrowing effect on curriculum and limited deep understanding and critical thinking, as the tests do not reflect many important aspects of teaching. Nor does it encourage development of essential skills in students, such as problem solving, inquiry, team building, communication, collaboration, and persistence, among others. Evidence shows, rather than improving learning, sanctions stifle innovation, incentivize schools to boost scores by driving out struggling students, hasten the flight of thoughtful educators from the profession, and generally disrupt learning for students. Interestingly, the problems of high-stakes testing are not universal; the way policymakers hold schools accountable determines how standards are implemented and how they are received (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2014).

For example, New York has focused on a narrow test-based accountability system adopted under NCLB (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2014). This use of high-stakes tests holds students back, denies diplomas, fires teachers, and closes schools; continuing inequity in schools between rich and poor students and their families. National assessments show New York outperformed the national average in fourth and eighth grade mathematics a decade ago but now lags behind with a cumbersome testing program. There are now over 100 standardized tests in use in New York City as part of teacher evaluation requirements. Testing and test preparation have stolen valuable time from instruction and have begun to invade early childhood education (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2014).

In contrast, California is developing a new program of accountability that directly encourages teaching focused on productive learning, supported by adequate resources to schools based on students' needs, as opposed to test scores (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2014). State leaders eliminated the old standardized tests and allocated \$1.25 billion in professional development to support teachers' ability to teach Common Core. State funding helped modernize schools, improve instruction, increase technology, and expand successful career academies. California's Local Control Accountability Program guides and evaluates school spending using multiple assessments of learning, such as Common Core assessments, English-language proficiency, and AP scores, as well as other indicators, like students' access to strong college and career-going curriculum, parent involvement, graduation rates, attendance, and school climate. As a part of the local control program, communities are directly involved in decisions about how to use resources and how to measure success. The post No Child Left Behind (NCLB) direction in California has been succeeding. In addition to registering the highest graduation rates in its history, at more than 80%, California had, between 2011 and 2013, the greatest growth it had ever had in student achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, with gains three times larger than national averages in eighth-grade reading and math, far surpassing the improvements in most other states (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2014).

The examples of New York and California demonstrate the different directions education can go. The case of New York depicts a system of crisis, lacking in innovation and in need of reform. The cases Geoffrey Canada, the ASCD, Secretary Duncan, and

Teacher Unions present are reminiscent of this system in which students, teachers, and families are struggling. The approach California has begun to take is encouraging; however, such stark differences in reform occurring at two of the country's leading centers for innovation and culture is troubling and confusing. There still exists great disagreement in teaching best practices, the role of testing, accountability, and much more. The U.S. education system can be successful and equitable, but parts of it are archaic.

Topic 2: The Lack of Innovation in Education

Revisiting Geoffrey Canada's speech at TEDTalks, Canada claimed that the same way of doing education hasn't worked for the last 55 years, so he suggested trying something new (2013). As an example of innovation in education, Canada cited charter schools. He accepted that some charter schools fail while others succeed, and he emphasized that although some charters fail and should close, it doesn't mean innovation should stop. Canada suggested that sometimes we don't try new things because of the fear of failure, but education needs to keep innovating until it hits something right (Canada, 2013).

A remedy to crisis is reform and innovation; education is supposed to continue evolving and improving, which is good news. The bad news is a historic lack of change. The Information Age has facilitated a reinvention of nearly every industry except education, so it is time to stop conducting education as it has always been done and start designing new models that are found to best meet the unique needs of each individual

student (Rosemay, 2012). These students are not mass produced products, so the system needs to shed its factory-like origins and move on.

Phil Schiller, Apple Computer's Marketing chief in 2012, stated educational innovation is less about increasing processing power or incorporating software updates and more about the opportunity to remove traditional assumptions regarding how instruction is organized and delivered (Rosemay, 2012). Modern education is about empowering students to thrive in a world focused on innovation, where the best jobs might be the jobs students invent themselves (Ed.gov, 2014). These new classrooms not only inspire and support children to become masters of knowledge but to reign as powerful thinkers. These classrooms aren't about lecturing and listening but about inquiry and invention, acting out a constitutional convention, or piloting a flight simulator. This kind of teaching pushes kids to be active thinkers and participants in their learning (Ed.gov, 2014).

2007 Arkansas teacher of the year, Justin Minkel, posits that teachers have traditionally consumed educational policy, professional development, curriculum, and research, when teachers should be a force in designing necessary changes (2014). Minkel suggests building systems that support every teacher willing to put in the work it takes to move from novice to competent, competent to excellent, and beyond. Including himself, Minkel says the teachers at his school are dramatically better than they were five or ten years ago because they worked with their principal to design a culture of collaboration, innovation, and peer observation, with time built into the school day for purposeful professional development to take place. As a country, if schools provide mentoring,

collaboration time, and job-embedded professional development, the vast majority of teachers will continue to improve (Minkel, 2014).

In his address, Secretary Duncan admitted education is something teachers are not satisfied with, and teachers need to take the role to lead the innovation. Teacher leadership means having a voice in the policies and decisions that affect students, the day to day work of teachers, and the shape of teaching (Ed.gov, 2014). It means guiding the growth of colleagues and that teaching can't be a one-size-fits-all job; there must be different paths based on interest and need (Ed.gov, 2014). If we want students to innovate, collaborate, and solve real-world problems, teachers need to do the same things (Minkel, 2014). Misguided developments, such as scripted curricula, standardized test prep preparation, and micro-management are detrimental to students, schools, and teacher autonomy, effectiveness, and retention (Minkel, 2014). For the sake of our students and the teaching profession, the changes in education need teacher leadership (Ed.gov, 2014).

The new and innovative education system is the one teachers help create, where the boundaries between school and the world outside the classroom are permeable, with more field trips, classroom visits from working professionals, such as scientists and engineers, and opportunities to apply new learning to real-world context. Every child, regardless of identity or circumstance, deserves a great teacher, and one of the simplest ways to make sure children get those teachers is to ask talented teachers what they need to best serve their students (Minkel, 2014).

Perhaps counterintuitively to common sense, there are also those who do not favor advances or reform in public education. Some of the strongest opponents to teacher

leadership may be the non-practitioners who are furthest from students but want the biggest say when it comes to determining educational policy. Corporations who profit from testing; think tanks that use students for political means; and politicians who cut food stamps and early childhood education—people who are secure in the knowledge that their own children and grandchildren will never need these programs (Minkel, 2014). With the added weight of these political anchors, innovation lags, and is even sabotaged.

Topic 3: The Numerous Roles of Education

With proper leadership and support, innovation and reform can take place, but it has not occurred uniformly across the country, as witnessed in California and New York. One supposition why innovation and reform might lag is because there are so many functions of the education system that it is difficult to address and manage all of the necessary change. At the Teaching and Learning Conference, Secretary of Education Duncan spoke of the many roles education plays before innovation and, ironically, academics. I think that for many of us a teacher's role is to teach, and the role of school is to provide the appropriate environment for learning and exploration. Beyond these more easily noticeable functions of schools, what are the responsibilities of education that are potentially complicating and hindering innovation? This section explores some—not all—of the roles of education; it might be impossible to include them all.

Schooling is a dominant force in an individual's life, for twelve, sixteen, twenty or more years. For the years students attend schools, they and their families experience education in many ways beyond academics. Schools are largely responsible for the development of well-adjusted, independent, and successful adults who contribute

positively to society. Schools meet the many needs of students, whether those are educational, socioeconomic, emotional, cultural, and/or health-related. (Robinson, 2012). The gamut of roles is extensive, including instilling democratic values and culture; the socialization of individuals; building an equitable society; encouraging economic prosperity and ensuring employment; and encouraging competition. Looking at these functions provides insight into the complexities of the larger institution that is education.

Public education in the United States emerged in part to prepare people to become responsible citizens and to promote cultural unity in a democratic society (ASCD, 1996). The industrialized model of education of the 1800's intended to do more than provide access to classroom academics; it was to create a tolerant, civilized society (Rosemay, 2012). Through textbooks, celebrations, and the Pledge of Allegiance, the nation's past is glorified. Heroes like Abe Lincoln become legendary, and military operations are justified. (Argawal, 2013). Schools emphasize democratic values, such as cooperation, good citizenship, doing one's duty, and upholding the law, while fostering participant democracy (Argawal, 2013). Literacy, which has been incredibly important for civil rights activists, allows for full participation of the people in democratic processes, like voting, and remains one of the primary focuses of standardized tests to this day (Rosemay, 2012).

In addition to fostering democratic patriotism, more and more regularly in American society it has become an added responsibility of the school system to train children by the means of developing honesty, fair play, consideration for others, and a sense of right and wrong, among other values (Argawal, 2013). This is to say education

takes part in the socialization process, sometimes even playing a dominant role. Education helps families, parents, and guardians socialize school-age students by encouraging the acquisition of new skills and interacting with people of different backgrounds (Argawal, 2013).

Incorporating vastly different people into American society and addressing social inequities, such as the aforementioned Achievement Gap (racism), have been tremendously important responsibilities of education. Many marginalized students have lived and continue to live in communities that were denied real educational opportunity (Ed.gov, 2014). Tragically, racial segregation has worsened since the Civil Rights era, as children in schools only miles apart continue to learn under drastically different conditions, and we have known this for a long time (ASCD, 1996). Fortunately, the nation's high school graduation rate as of 2014 stands at 80 percent, the highest in American history; dropout rates are at historic lows; and college attendance rates are sharply improved with minority and low-income students accounting for much of the progress (Ed.gov, 2014). Improvement is still necessary, and schools are where we mark and make the progress.

Another gap, which could be called the "meal gap", exemplifies the progress still to be achieved. Cleveland Metropolitan School District provides an acute example in which 45,000 free meals are served daily to students of financial hardship from kindergarten through 12th grade (Goldberg, 2014). In 2013, across the nation, 19 million students received a free school lunch, while another 2.5 million benefited from a reduction in price. To address food insecurity, some school districts hand out additional

food on Fridays to tide students over until Mondays. Many districts have also created programs to feed students over summer, and the beloved “snow day” of winter is feared in some locales where a day off of school means kids don’t get fed (Goldberg, 2014). Schools have become so important in ensuring students receive meals, equity and opportunity.

Educational opportunity helps students earn their livelihood, affecting individuals’ occupation and social status, as well as micro- and macroeconomics (Argawal, 2013). An easily recognizable correlation shows students who finish college with a bachelor’s degree generally earn more than one and a half times as much as those who have a high school diploma; therefore, education plays a direct role in attaining employment and the amount of monetary compensation an individual receives. (Pew Research Center, 2014). Thus, education correlates to one's social status, which may be determined by what kind of education one has received. Occupation, income, and style of life are factors of the result of the type and amount of education one has had (Argawal, 2013).

Akin to status and employment in a capitalist society, education instills cooperative values through civic and patriotic practice, while emphasizing personal competition. For each subject studied, the students are compared by percentage of marks or rankings, like company earnings. Teachers praise students who do well and encourage those who fail to do better. The traditional school’s ranking system serves to prepare for a later ranking system in capitalism (Argawal, 2013).

These descriptions of some of the roles and responsibilities of education may provide insight into the lack of innovation in the greater system. With so much to do, where would someone begin? Secretary Duncan and Justin Minkel both support teacher leadership, but in a busy profession, where is the time? At his address, Secretary Duncan cited surveys that show nearly a quarter of teachers are interested in hybrid roles that allow teachers to work both inside and outside the classroom, the partial transition suggesting teachers are moving out of classroom roles because they need to, not because they want to (Ed.gov, 2014). Another of the cited surveys showed 59% of administrators said they would have stayed in the classroom if they could have received the same compensation (Ed.gov, 2014). So, what are the solutions to addressing education's crisis?

Topic 4: Support and Solutions for Education

From the previous three topics a natural progression of inquiry arises as to the nature of the support of public education and possible solutions to innovate. Understanding how schools are funded might suggest how well or not schools are supported. Also, it makes sense to look at what is being done in other places—in the United States and abroad. In California, as previously mentioned, there was an investment in the school community and a distancing from standardized tests. Other earlier suggestions included teacher leadership and reinvesting in summer. What else is being done to aid the system?

The United States spends more on the military than the next seven to eight countries combined (Carroll, 2016). This is a factoid I have heard for many years, and I wonder how government funding for the military and for schools compares. According to

National Priorities, in 2015 the federal government spent over 102 billion dollars on public K-12 education (2018). The federal government also spent nearly six times as much on the military—more than 609 billion.

Data from Governing.com (2018) and National Center for Educational Statistics (2017) show there were 50.7 million students in public elementary and secondary schools and 1.3 million active duty service members in 2017. That comparison means there were 39 times more individuals being served by federal money in education than active military. This also means that per person over \$460,000 were spent per military personnel, and about \$2,000 were spent per student in k-12 public schools. More surprisingly, one trillion 280 billion dollars were allocated to social security, unemployment and labor; and another one trillion 50 billion were spent on medicare and health (National Priorities, 2018)

Examining the money per individual in the military and education, the federal government invests heavily in the military, granted most personnel are not receiving this money as salary. Not even half that \$460,000 would go toward a general's salary. Regardless, the United States invests a lot more into safety nets, vastly outspending what it does for the military on health, social security, and unemployment. From this data, new questions arise. Could making education more of a priority shift the need for such large social safety nets? Would emphasising education be integral in reducing health care, debt, and unemployment? That might be my educator's bias.

Considering the large amount of money the federal government adds to education, in reality it is only a fraction of the investment. Public school funding in the United States

comes from federal, state, and local sources (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Nearly half of the total funds come from local property taxes, which allows for large funding differences between high- and low-income communities. The differences exist among states, among school districts within each state, and even among schools within specific districts (Biddle & Berliner, 2002).

In 1998 the state with the highest average in public school funding was New Jersey (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Adjusted for differences in cost of living, the annual funding rate was \$8,801 per student. The state with the lowest average level was Utah with \$3,804 per student. A difference of \$5,000 per student is staggering. What is truly awe striking, however, is that some students from high-income communities attend public schools with funding of \$15,000 or more per student per year; whereas, some students from poor communities attend schools with less than \$4,000 per student per year (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). That's more than \$11,000 per student. In a school of 1,000 students that's 11 million dollars in difference—110 teachers each earning \$100,000 different. And the vast majority of educators do not take home that much in pay with benefits.

Funding differences in the United States create disparities in the quality of school buildings, facilities, curriculum, equipment for instruction, teacher experience and qualifications, class sizes, availability and training of support staff, and more (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). To further confound the issue, the U.S. also pays more in GDP than the average of other OECD — Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development —countries by about one percent; though, standardized test scores here are lower

(Associated Press, 2013). So, it may be irrelevant to compare military spending with funding of education, since we outspend other countries in both areas.

The funding differences experienced in U.S. public schools are not tolerated in other developed countries (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Abroad, public schools receive equal funding according to the number of students enrolled, not local wealth. Funding is either equally distributed, or extra is provided to individuals or groups that need it. The Netherlands funds schools based on the number of pupils enrolled, and additional money is allocated to students from lower-income backgrounds and even more to minority students. This is contrary to the United States, where lower-class and minority children typically receive less than middle-class white children (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). So, maybe it's not how much money is spent per student, it's about who is getting what they need. When low achieving students start catching up and keeping pace with their peers, wouldn't the whole class and school and district perform better?

Stronger teacher qualifications and smaller class sizes in the elementary level, two resources associated with greater school funding, have been tied to higher levels of student achievement (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Achievement scores from U.S. school districts with high levels of funding and low student poverty are similar to those earned by the highest-scoring countries in international studies, whereas scores from districts where funding is inadequate and poverty is high are similar to those of the lowest-scoring countries (Biddle & Berliner, 2002).

So why hasn't this changed? Why does it have to be this way? Lack of knowledge about funding disparities; complacency with the status quo of funding education; desires

to keep personal taxes low; and beliefs about the causes of poverty contribute to the opposition of school funding equity (Biddle & Berliner, 2002).

What will it take to make U.S. schools competitive? Aforementioned funding equity would certainly help, as would further adjustments in the public's mindset of education. Teachers in some Asian countries are paid and more respected than their counterparts in the United States, which may attract and retain talent (Tucker, 2016). Additionally, these teachers when teaching in low-income areas are paid equally, not less than teachers in wealthier regions, as can happen in the U.S. The government also subsidizes families who are in need, leaning toward equity based on need rather than whimsical funding decisions differing community to community. And to address mobile students, these teachers generally teach the same topics, so students generally learn the same content at approximately the same age, which builds consistency and predictability of outcomes (Tucker, 2016).

Research in the comparison of Asian schools versus U.S. schools also suggest the United States may not fully buy into the notion that all students can achieve (Tucker, 2016). In the countries investigated, ability grouping is eliminated or used sparingly, while it is more common in the United States, and students needing support services are identified early in these successful circumstances. Students then work with trained and experienced specialists to catch up to their peers. Contrarily, it has been found in the United States' education system when students fall behind, they often stay behind and their efficacy may drop, which may lead to dropping out. In effective systems, the

expectation and insistence are that all students will meet high standards (Tucker, 2016). In the United States we attempt and want to serve all children, but we fall short.

We also might look at the school calendar to further bridge funding and student support in search of improved student outcomes. Summer, perhaps one of the most iconic elements of school, ironically and problematically, can be a period of great uncertainty, worry, and very little learning. Wonderfully, while in school, students of different backgrounds can achieve at similar rates (Pictock, 2018). When schools are out of session, however, various gaps widen.

In 1996 a math teacher, Harris Cooper, found the average academic loss attributed to summer slide was about 2.6 months of math skills (Pictock, 2018). And, research has shown that roughly two-thirds of the 9th grade achievement gap can be attributed to how students spend their summers in elementary school (Pictock, 2018). If students are losing this much during the summer—roughly one third of their academic year, what changes can be made?

Without effective summer learning, students lose access to books, meals, teachers, and structure. 84% of students who qualify for free and reduced price meals at schools don't have access to these meal plans during the summer (Pictock, 2018). Parents in low income situations must work for public assistance, and due to low wages, students have less opportunity to receive care at home and less money for care outside of the home. The average cost of summer programming nationally is \$288 per week—too high for many families (Pictock, 2018).

Summer learning programs can have significant effect in reducing the summer slide, as students attending perform better on standardized tests, and 85% of families support public funding for summer learning (Pictock, 2018). To be appropriately implemented, summer programs need small class sizes, individualized instruction, engaging enrichment activities, and full-day programming (Pictock, 2018). The facilities also need to be appropriately designed and maintained to sustain adequate learning space, regardless of the season; many schools still are unfit to hold class during high heat. Conveniently, the aforementioned attributes of successful schools are the same during the standard school year and during summer programming.

Earlier, I wrote that some schools and educators advocate increasing or modifying teacher leadership roles in schools. I wonder how a school can handle effective teacher leadership. I think about necessary training, accountability, autonomy, and time and workload management. Teachers are busy building relationships and lesson plans; are they capable and equipped to navigate the larger systems at the same time? More and more schools are designed and led by teachers who manage and are accountable for the success of their sites (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018). This professional responsibility is more akin to firms of lawyers, accountants, and engineers, where the professionals work and operate with greater autonomy, directness, and, probably, risk (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018).

Research has found, after controlling for the background characteristics of schools, such as poverty, instructional leadership is independently, significantly, and positively related to student achievement (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018).

There are particular elements of instructional leadership that have a stronger relationship with student achievement. Holding teachers to high instructional standards, providing an effective school improvement team, and fostering shared vision for the school all lead to greater outcomes for the school community (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018). Additionally, faculty voice and control related to student behavior and discipline decisions are shown to be more consequential for student academic achievement than teachers' authority related to issues of classroom instruction. Analysis also shows that schools with the highest levels of instructional leadership rank substantially higher in math and English language arts in their state than schools with the lowest levels of overall instruction leadership (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018).

As with funding and approaches to academics, schools vary dramatically in which elements of instructional leadership they emphasize and implement, as do teachers' roles across different areas of decision making within schools (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018). Most teachers report moderate or large roles in devising teaching techniques; on the contrary, in less than 10% of schools do teachers provide input on how budget will be spent, establishing student behavior policies, engaging in school improvement planning, and determining professional development (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018). Likewise, teachers often have little discretion over the types of rewards or sanctions used to bolster or enforce the rules. These limitations can undermine teachers' ability to take charge of their classrooms, successfully meet their responsibilities, and positively impact their schools (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018).

It makes sense that strong teams with effective collaboration would be most successful. Community members, teachers, students, parents, and district personnel play major roles in the success of their schools already, but what is the organization? Regardless of who is the leader in a building, for schools to function, teaching and learning must be the primary focus of those making the decisions (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018). Ineffective schools are more likely to implement elements that enhance accountability and teacher evaluation, which have the weakest ties to student achievement. Effective leadership and delegating a large role to teachers in schools' improvement planning are among the most important practices associated with improved student achievement. School poverty level is also a key factor, as nine of eleven faculties in high-poverty schools rated their instructional leadership lower than faculty of low-poverty schools in terms of support of teachers and having an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018).

Community schools can add another layer of strength, resiliency, and development to neighborhoods. Such schools are collaborative sites that create a network of partnerships to allocate resources that foster engagement for students, schools, and beyond. Educators partner with organizations, parents, and students to work together on development, governance, and improvement of school programs (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam, 2018). These teams cultivate urban schools into social centers that address the needs of the community and act as sites for open discussion with people from various class and political backgrounds (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam, 2018). Really, they sound like idealistic environments with high buy-in and support.

Increasing economic inequality and residential segregation have triggered a resurgence of interest in community schools as places where children can learn and thrive, even in under-resourced and underserved neighborhoods (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam. 2018). These holistic schools can mitigate economic hardship, violence, and suffering from societal forces. Students benefit from a spectrum of engagement opportunities for families, ranging from providing information on how to support student learning at home and volunteer at school, to welcoming parents involved with community organizations that seek to influence local education policy (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam. 2018). This builds trust and builds upon community-based competencies and supports culturally relevant learning opportunities.

Successful community schools do not all look the same, but they serve children and adults alike (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam. 2018). They are most effective when data is used to grow and evolve the programming and when given sufficient time to fully mature. Ideally, a trained and dedicated staff, a community-school coordinator, manages the complex joint work of multiple schools and community organizations (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam. 2018). Perhaps some would suggest teacher leadership, but without some sort of compromise in hours and work-life balance the role would be unsustainable.

Meaningful family and community engagement found in community schools is associated with positive student outcomes, such as reduced absenteeism, improved academic outcomes, and student reports of positive school climates (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam. 2018). This can increase trust among students, parents, and staff, which also has positive effects on student outcomes. Young people might receive any number of

supports, not limited to counseling, medical and dental care, and transportation assistance. With these supports and connectedness, students then show improvement in attendance, behavior, social functioning, and academic achievement. To invest in their youth, the community addresses out of school barriers to learning, such as achievement gaps for students of various backgrounds: wealth, ethnicity, and ability. These networks can also help community members develop skills or take classes (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam. 2018). Integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership reinforce each other.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods of Research

In the initial exploration of this research, I had already come to preconceived notions of which the reader should be aware. First, as a result of my personal experiences and the previous literature review, Chapter 2, I state education is in crisis, lags in innovation, and needs reform. I also made the supposition the number of functions or roles pertaining to education may play a substantial part in the general delay in innovation and the need for reform. I, too, am a member of the educational community in which I conducted my research. Understanding these biases as a researcher is critical. As the sole person to collect and interpret the data and to tell its honest story, I kept in mind and preserved the myriad of experiences and perspectives that emerged, regardless of my personal feelings toward them. This chapter, with these considerations, describes the methodology to explore my research question: *What do practicing educators perceive as obstacles to innovation and reform in education?*

To answer this question I employed a qualitative research design and focused on the views and understandings of research subjects or participants (Creswell, 2014). I gathered whether or not they see education in crisis, caused by its numerous roles and lack of innovation. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. In this way, the research would retain the general complexity of

education and not limit the participants' contributions as a survey might. The research is constructivist in nature due to the collection and analysis of the separate views of the participants, which I used to construct a larger and more complete understanding of the lack of innovation and need for reform in education. This will be synthesized in Chapter 4 (Creswell, 2014). I chose this design because I would not have had as complete an understanding of the lack of innovation in education before conducting the research, and I did not want to limit the research and miss opportunities and new information the participants might provide. The questions were structured and organized in a way to be reflective and elicit more solutions oriented responses.

Participants in this research are education professionals, from local schools and with whom I have worked previously. Their experiences and roles are varied. The professionals were purposefully chosen for this study, due to their proximity and ease of access, variety in roles, as well as experience. Information gathered from professionals was gathered through an in-person and telephone interview. Participants were not chosen by gender, age, or ethnicity.

I conducted six interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted throughout the spring 2019 semester. Scheduling was based upon availability of the various sources. The interview sessions were audio recorded. Pertinent information from notes and recordings from the interviews were then transcribed. Once the data was collected, the transcripts were read, compared, and organized into themes. With the information organized, I drew conclusions using the data the participants provide.

The data was validated through triangulation of the multiple data sources to find commonalities and consistency. First, my personal experiences laid a foundation, and the literature review provided a direction to pursue. Finally, the different sources of information from the research participants showed commonalities and differences amongst varied educational professionals.

The interview protocol (See Appendix A) contains the questions I set out to ask each participant. The questions arose from the literature review and the notions of crisis and roles professionals fill in education, along with the opportunity to discover aspects of education that function well and potentially ideal scenarios. In the following chapter, I interpret the information into themes and use a narrative approach to illustrate the findings.

In summary, this chapter describes and provides rationale for the methods I used for my research during the 2018-19 spring semester. The following chapter, Chapter 4: Results, will synthesize the themes and information gained from the research, which is of a qualitative and constructivist design. Final conclusions, including limitations of the study, will appear in Chapter 5: Conclusion.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This project began with the notion that K-12 public education, as an American institution, lives in crisis, lags in innovation, and needs reform. This topic was further explored by a literature review (Chapter 2), resulting in a study outlined in chapter three. That qualitative study was used to gather and understand the views of my research participants, who are all education professionals, in order to weigh the realness of the previous line of thought. This chapter describes the results of the study, the data I collected, followed by the interpretation of that data. The following and final chapter contains the conclusion of the study.

Six research participants were interviewed to answer the research question: *What do practicing educators perceive as obstacles to innovation and reform in education?* Insights from the literature helped develop the topics and questions. The information collected is organized into themes to provide a narrative description below. The first section describes the professionals and their roles. Next, the participants discuss their feelings on their roles. Lastly, the educators share their opinions on the larger system.

The Research Participants and Their Roles

Two teachers, two counselors, and two administrators were chosen to compare their responses with another professional of a similar role—counselor to counselor, for

example—and to compare perceptions from different roles—teacher to administrator, for example. All participants were asked the same questions to provide some control within the study and by which I could compare and contrast the participants’ responses along similar lines (See Appendix A). Any narrative text in this chapter should be taken as the opinion of a research participant and as data collected from interviews unless I clarify—either with the subject “I”, possessive pronoun “my”, or other similar designation.

I began by collecting general demographics of the research participants. In the group are a middle school counselor, a high school counselor, a high school visual arts teacher, a high school music teacher, a high school principal and a middle school principal— all with various levels of professional experience and roles they have held.

Middle School Counselor	High School Counselor	High School Visual Arts Teacher	High School Music Teacher	High School Principal	Middle School Principal
8 years	18 years	19 years	24 years	24 years	6 years
Grades: 6-8	Grades: 9-12	Grades: 9-12	Grades: 9-12	Grades: 9-12	Grades: 5 (Growing to 8th grade)

The above chart, Figure 1, shows the total years of experience the research participants have had in education. This chart does not, nor does my data, distinguish differences between, for example, two years as an elementary counselor, two years as a

middle school counselor, and four years as a high school counselor; I classify all of these years as eight years experience as a “Counselor”. On the chart are their current roles.

The experiences are varied. In this group are educators with professional experience, ranging from elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and adult diploma and community programs. These participants have held a plethora of additional roles at different points of their careers, including educational assistant, substitute teacher, leadership roles in various teams, arts integration specialists, district office staff, administrative assistant, dean, and associate principal.

The participants chose education for a range of reasons. A common focus was the desire to make an impact on the lives of students. “It is a tough time to be young,” the middle school counselor stated, drawing on their experience working with students with social and emotional needs, as well as with students with mental and physical disabilities. The music teacher had a similar experience as I had—a teacher who inspired them with experiences they wanted to share with their own students one day. The second teacher said they had wanted to be a teacher since they were in the 5th grade. Interestingly, both principals said they sort of fell into education. The high school administrator chose education because they had always liked it as a child and passed up medical school, so they could start a family. The middle school principal worked with immigrant students with low skills in a previous career before deciding on education to help those students and their families. In general, this group conveyed a strong desire to help others.

As the participants described their primary roles, each of them provided several roles as their primary roles. Later, I asked them about their secondary roles and about

any other things they were responsible for. One phrase that arose repeatedly was “wearing many hats” or that they needed to perform various duties in their roles. This correlates directly to what was found in the chapter two literature review (Robinson, 2012).

Counselors work with students and teachers to support students’ academic performance and provide social-emotional support and education for students. Additionally, they work with students experiencing homelessness, among other challenges, and support students and their families by locating programming and resources. The high school counselor differs slightly in that they focus much of their time auditing students’ transcripts in preparation for graduation. They ensure the students have the appropriate credits or are recovering any missing or lost credits as needed.

The teachers plan lessons and prepare materials for their classes daily. Their primary role is to inspire and encourage students to be lifelong learners and to be confident in themselves. When asked what tasks or responsibilities they could not leave for another time, they added things like recording attendance and ensuring student safety and supervising students. The teachers also acquire and maintain various materials for both their music and art programs—something they had not accounted for before beginning their careers.

The principals are the instructional leadership for their sites—they are responsible, ultimately, for the teaching and learning that occurs or doesn’t in their buildings. They are furthermore charged with monitoring various compliance tasks, such as implementation of Individualized Education Plans for students, supporting English

Language Learners, and complying with Human Resources requirements. Still on the tops of their minds are fiscal responsibilities, development and viability of their programs, and management of various staff members. Both principals manage smaller schools—less than 400 students—and commented on the challenge of limited resources for small programs.

In addition to their primary functions, each professional interviewed feels responsible for numerous auxiliary responsibilities. They vary from individual-scale to community-scale endeavors.

First, educators advocate for students. They counsel students for emotional support. Sometimes, they struggle to find additional resources, such as Title 1 math and reading interventions for students who struggle in these skills. Often they seek the expertise of social workers when students experience vast ranges of challenges like homelessness. “We can’t let the students fall through the cracks,” said the middle school counselor.

Secondly, they support each other. The art teacher helps and mentors new staff, preferably in roles similar to their own but not always. They collaborate with staff at their worksites and with other sites, organizations, districts, etc. They also assume various committee roles, such as PSWE (Positive School Wide Engagement), ILT (Instructional Leadership Team), and PDP (Professional Development Process).

Third, they plan for the long-term. The teachers had previously mentioned daily lesson planning. These teachers and counselors do not have set curriculum, especially if they want to incorporate curriculum that relates to their students; so, they plan and

research content that will engage their students. The teachers also order, maintain, repair, and replace materials, ranging from pencils and paints to piccolos. Principals similarly acquire and develop programming for their staff and sites to improve student outcomes.

Other secondary roles of these educational professionals include engaging families and managing their sites. The importance of family engagement surfaced many times over the course of my interviews, and educators know the value of family as they relate to positive student outcomes. Principals manage budget and enrollment, sometimes with input of staff and families. Lastly, as staff supervise and discipline student behavior, so do principals with staff behavior.

Participants' Feelings on Their Roles

Only one professional brought up that old cliché—glorious summers off—when I asked what aspects of their jobs were particularly enjoyable; although, I imagine others felt similarly. Truth be told, however, not all educational professionals get the full summer break off, many work most of the summer. The most resounding response, from 5 of 6 of the participants, illustrated a joy in working with students. With this came the sentiments of feeling appreciated and wanting to do well in the profession.

More specifically, the middle school counselor feels joy in their role because they have the freedom to start new programs and experiences for their site, such as tennis, yoga, and environmental learning experiences outside of school. The visual arts teacher experiences profound happiness when their students are proud of themselves, especially when the students accomplish something they were previously convinced they could not do. The music teacher said teaching is really nice when the students “start to sound

good”. The middle school administrator said they loved just being around the children — checking in with them in the morning and at dismissal. Both principals enjoy problem solving with the adults in their buildings and supporting their professional growth and development. For these six professionals, these are the aspects of education that makes their jobs worth it.

I then asked the participants if there was anything they wished they could do that they do not get to do in their roles. These answers varied greatly, and at this point, responses tended to relate to time, or the lack thereof. One counselor said they need time to catch their breath, and the second needed more time to better support students. The music and visual arts teachers expressed a desire to provide greater opportunities for their students, such as displaying student art in more public spaces and developing the marching band—something they might be able to do with more time. One principal bluntly said there were 400 things they wished they could do. I might have asked them to elaborate on those 400 items, but I knew my interview was holding some of those tasks up. The second principal expressed a desire to be more of a teacher leader and help develop teacher practice, to promote their school, and to find additional resources for their school, all while navigating some district level policies and changes.

When I asked about difficulties of the professionals’ roles, three main themes emerged: time, support, and balance. Three professionals mentioned time specifically, and a fourth implied it. Support appeared as support from peers, support from parents, and support from district offices. And, balance meant the management of tasks, work-home balance, and balance of expectations with results at their sites.

To manage time, the high school principal expressed the importance of delegation to get everything done, and the other spoke of maintaining a sense of investment in the program, their school, even while being exhausted. For the high school counselor, there is little time to be proactive, and they need to prioritize what was really important in their day to day role. The other counselor asked “what are we doing with all this data we’re collecting?”, expressing some frustration with standardized tests and the training and proctoring they require. A significant challenge for the middle school principal is devising a way to coach teacher emotional resiliency with a solutions oriented mindset; while the second principal cited the great time investment it takes to manage adult issues and mistakes that affect students’ development and growth. With the importance of education, things take time and attention and care.

There are a great number of tasks to complete with little support—something teachers, counselors, and administrators all mentioned. The music teacher felt their program needed to be taken more seriously and given more opportunities for the students to perform, e.g. at graduation. This teacher also noted a general and problematic lowering of expectations for students’ behavior and academics. One teacher said the lack of support can make you feel like just giving up. Like the teachers and counselors who cited the lack of admin support as a challenge to their roles, the high school principal stated they lacked support from their district office, who does not know the challenges of staffing and managing a small school.

Professionals need to balance work life with home life—they can’t always take their work home with them and be effective parents, partners, or people. They feel that

the number of tasks, activities, and events, though beneficial to their students, take away from the main focus of their roles and sometimes their personal lives. Similarly, measuring proficiency on standardized tests with learning, since learning isn't a linear process and cannot be measured the same way for all individuals, is a balancing act.

My research participants cast a wide net on possible solutions to the aforementioned struggles. Time, balance, and support resounded here again with a hint of hopelessness when one teacher initially said there were no solutions to the myriad challenges. I have organized these feelings and opinions in the following paragraphs into three generalized themes; team effort, realistic expectations, and raising the institution.

For the research participants, a functioning team includes teachers, administration, parents, and district personnel. The high school teachers and counselor all commented on the struggles of working with administrators, and the principals had mentioned the need for staff efficacy. Along with trust, *buy-in*, *collaboration*, and *belief in shared agency*, are all necessary components to build a functioning team for the middle school principal. Teachers suggested calling every parent to ensure they are invested and have access to the educational process. And, principals want their schools promoted and effective means to communicate about grades, testing, events, and programming.

Both counselors felt they could be more effective with reduced caseloads, and though neither of the teachers mentioned smaller class sizes in their interviews, it is a sticking point for many educators. A reduced caseload would benefit the high school counselor, so they could organize and deliver curriculum to students to help them navigate graduation and matriculation processes. They added that they had struggled to

find and develop that curriculum, which they were responsible for discovering, building, and implementing. As such, professionals require various moments of substantial length to plan and collaborate throughout the day and week. As the visual arts teacher said, even ten minutes during lunch can make a difference.

The principals' responses sort of encapsulated those of the counselors and teachers. The high school principal mentioned several times in our interview the importance of finding the right adults to staff your building. And with the challenges these adults face, you wouldn't want to hire just anyone to educate your students. Almost mirroring the previous responses and shining them in a different light, the middle school principal said it was important to prevent burnout.

The third theme for solutions stemmed from raising or elevating the institution of education. The middle school principal thought a laser focus on academic rigor, with clarity on what is fixed and what is flexible, would benefit the system. Legislation seemed a logical suggestion for one teacher. "We need laws and plans and rules." Without a system or guidelines, it can be difficult to progress in a unified direction, and lawmakers need to invest in education. The middle school counselor asked for, on behalf of the general population and lawmakers alike, a basic understanding of what education is about, saying "they don't get what we're doing." Revisiting a previous section, teachers also want expectations for student behavior and academic performance to rise.

After I asked about the challenges to their roles, I proceeded to the innovations that have come about that have been exciting for them. Surely, with the breadth of experiences of the participants, there must have been exciting changes along the way.

The responses here ran the gamut. One teacher offered a solid “nope” in response, expressing a viewpoint that district initiatives come and go and are often poorly implemented. Others provided changes in what I think of as “skills” and “programming”. These included focusing on the turn of the century, more individualized instruction, and rethinking content and how students learn.

“21st Century Skills” has been an education buzzword for some time, and its focus was one of the positive changes these professionals mentioned. These skills are varied and evolving over time as we understand and envision what this century is about. Some of the specific skills mentioned were collaboration, research, and metacognition.

Finding new programming to engage students struck chords with most participants. Our high school counselor cited the focus on college and career readiness as innovation. The middle school counselor said they enjoy searching for new opportunities, activities, and experiences for their students. The music teacher praised the addition of keyboarding classes and is convinced that everyone can benefit from learning piano. And, one principal included their school’s developing internship program for high school seniors. Grants and partnerships with other schools and the greater community were other innovations this principal mentioned. This general trajectory, changing programming, moves from the more traditional, one-size-fits-all model of education of yesteryear to a more personalized model of education in which students experience variety and interest in their learning. This learning then also can transcend content and even the classroom.

After innovation, the participants shared what they felt had been daunting. In this topic, we covered familiar ground, as far as challenges with education are concerned.

Responses highlighted things that have changed and others that have not. They range from local to more systemic challenges.

Changes in education aren't always innovative or positive. Some such changes refer to the people involved; while others refer to the greater system. First, some educators feel students and parents have changed over the course of their careers. Some students appear to suffer from learned helplessness, as some parents seem complicit in their children's lack of engagement in school and increasingly disrespectful behavior. Another change is the shrinking of school populations, which has the result of reduced budget for schools and, therefore, growing class sizes and reduced programming and choice for students. One teacher said it was common for their students to have to decide between taking calculus or band—both classes the students wanted but were offered during the same period. A third change was standards for content, an increase in the amount of required content in the same or less amount of time. This, of course, is further constricted by preparation for and administration of standardized tests.

The above changes to education are indicative of some of the more constant facets. Multiple educators believe the district policies and practices operate on a cyclical pattern of constant change; that is, there's never an absence of change. The music teacher said it seems like they are always trying to reinvent the wheel every three or so years, and the second teacher said it's just a cycle, which causes a diminishment in importance of these initiatives. These cyclical changes or innovations being reduced to district whimsy was similarly communicated by the high school principal who said the lack of fidelity in programming, consistency, and general district commitment were all daunting challenges.

To overcome these trials and tribulations, I asked the educators what, with regard to their roles, they needed in order for students to be successful. One counselor started by stating that 60-70% of what affects a student happens outside of school, so numerous factors and experiences must be taken into consideration when determining how to help a student succeed. These factors ranged from food security and adequate sleep to various manifestations of trauma, not limited to students experiencing homelessness or having a guardian who is incarcerated. Both teachers communicated that their content, visual arts and music, almost came tertiary to, one, being a good listener and being there for their students, and, two, teaching independence and moving away from learned helplessness. These two teacher responses echo what the counselor was suggesting earlier—there are many external forces affecting students’ abilities to learn.

Three professionals said in different ways that they needed trust and autonomy from their administrators in order to best serve students. With this autonomy and trust, the high school counselor said they could figure out how to best “wear their 500 hats”; that is, how to best complete their many job functions, without the hindrance of a micromanaging supervisor. Of the principals I interviewed, they said they needed strong teachers and for those teachers to teach the standards and take advantage of every instructional minute.

Participants’ Opinions on the Larger System

In this section, I moved the interviews from the professionals’ roles to more general impressions of the American (U.S.) system of education. I followed a similar progression, moving from roles of the system to the people involved to the best parts of

American education, its future and its faults. This section shares many commonalities with the previous section, so I will choose to highlight more novel notions or resounding big picture themes.

My six educators shared great similarities with the primary role(s) of the American education system. They described it as a machine that was designed to provide the population with a basic set of skills that “would lead the masses” to be self-reliant, productive, and able to make their own decisions. Some subtle differences emerged, such as a strong focus on math, and the need for 21st century skills. In general, education is for everyone with the intent that everyone learns the same things.

The current state of education is different from the definitions the participants previously provided. The educators took two directions when responding to this; it appears the system is both doing and not doing what it was designed to do. Some stated the system is not reaching everyone. “It’s broken.” “It’s inequitable.” “It’s chaotic.” Others said that, yes, the system is doing exactly what it was designed to do—to protect and promote privilege, particularly white normative values. Regardless of the response, U.S. education in these terms is not meeting the intended definition the educators provided earlier, that is, teaching a general population basic information to contribute to society.

Part of the issue stems from lack of attention and aid from some parents, community members, and legislators who blame teachers when students are unsuccessful. According to these participants, there is little consensus both nationally and at the state level on how to best operate and how to best serve students and families. There is

confusion because everyone is doing education differently. Even teachers and parents, those who interact with one another, aren't always in agreement on what education should do or be. "Sometimes we're thought of as a place that will fix kids," said the music teacher. And, although, education is run by well-meaning adults, for many students, schools are in and of themselves sources of triggers and trauma.

According to the teachers, there is a lot of room for improvement when some schools have holes in the ceilings, and district boundaries are defined along racial lines and socioeconomic factors. The middle school principal frankly stated that some students enter kindergarten not knowing their ABC's and are automatically two years behind their peers, and some high school seniors graduate with their diploma, not knowing how to read, do basic math, or how to learn for themselves.

With the above challenges, I next asked what education would be in it's best form, with no limits. My respondents shared their views on many topics. I've categorized these into programming, structures, equity, and resources. The majority of the improvements revolved around programming. The innovations primarily regarded standards, experiential learning, and balancing childhood with academics.

State and national standards guide education to provide a relatively similar knowledge base, as the participants previously stated the system should do. One principal laughed when they said the standards may be imperfect, suggesting a strong opinion to that effect. Educators want students to take advantage of more hands-on learning, where students are making things, experimenting, and collaborating with one another. I will grant that this shift can and does occur without changing or modifying

standards; however, several participants felt this kind of programming was not emphasized or encouraged or feasible in the current way of doing things.

Recess, gym, and social-emotional learning—all take away from academics in a sort of direct comparison, but in reality, they allow students greater access to academics by focusing on students' mental and physical health. This balance of childhood with academics, as one counselor stated it, increases student access to education by supporting the students holistically. "We used to have breaks, but now we're only focused on instructional minutes."

Several professionals feel by bridging programming with structure, the system or school model can change in a variety of ways. The middle school counselor and principal echoed that the school year can be expanded, to reduce summer lag and increase productivity and educational minutes. The classroom and school can also be expanded to take advantage of communities and local experts and to provide access to authentic learning in the field—the real world. The high school principal advocates for student internships as a part of their graduation requirements. In this scenario, students work with an advisor, learn on the job, and attain state standards outside of the vacuum of the classroom. Ideally, this program would also provide some monetary compensation, as students would work with real companies, doing real work. Students would receive job training and be expected to perform job duties, ideally in a field interesting to the students, such as marketing, graphic design, or music.

The middle school counselor gave an additional structural change—less people and more spaces. Some research conflicts on the importance of reducing class sizes, but

intuitively, it makes sense that educators would be more effective with a manageable student population, relative to the scenario and educator. Increasing the variety of spaces taps into the individuality of learning, where each student partakes in novel, engaging, and varied opportunities.

Again, from the middle school counselor, education is in the equity business, where all students have ease of access to educational opportunity. In this system, all students achieve, regardless of any challenges they may face—identifying physical and mental characteristics, beliefs and thought systems. In this system, everyone gets what they need, as an individual, in order to have a level playing field. To build to this standard of equity, educators furthermore suggest ensuring school staffs look like their student bodies; i.e., the students identify with their educators.

Finally, educators need resources to provide opportunity to their students. The two resources mentioned are money and time; though, these respondents did not say they needed to increase their salaries. The money they are looking for would develop new programming, hire additional teachers, repair and maintain buildings, and purchase supplies and equipment. As for time, teachers feel great urgency during the school year. Schools must navigate testing schedules, professional trainings, conferences, and various other deadlines. The school year feels like great urgency, paused by a break with nothing, continued by great urgency until the next break. The visual arts teacher stated that summer is a release from the stress of schedules, deadlines, and working day and night, consistently. Schools rush and cram each fall, winter, and spring; and everyone catches their breath in the summer.

How to go about building the above-mentioned, more idealistic, system was a bit of a head scratcher for the group. Half of the participants were not optimistic in their responses. One said “burn it down” in order to build a new system from scratch. Another said they didn’t know how to get the system their students deserve. And a third didn’t believe we could build their ideal educational system. The second half of the group proposed loosening constraints, better teacher training, and aligned focus.

From the music teacher, along with resources, educators need less focus on schedules and more focus on learning because education looks different for all individuals. Time constraints push teachers to continually move forward, and students are classified more by graduation year, perhaps expiration date, rather than by mastery of content. Flexibility with space, too, would benefit students and teachers. Some students may find more success outside of a traditional school and inside a more individualized workspace, like the shared work spaces that working adults utilize.

To provide the best educational outcomes for students, the system and society, both separately and collaboratively, need a general commitment to education, which both high school educators and the high school counselor believe is lacking. With commitment, comes an understanding of what is important for students to learn. What do students really need to know, how do we measure that, and how long do we give a student to learn something? Questions like these no doubtedly fueled the construction of state and national standards, but the question I feel this group raises is “when will ‘what we fund’ be aligned with ‘what we expect’?” Or, “when will we walk the proverbial talk”?

We don't want to waste time reinventing a functional wheel, so where is education done well? Some pointed to Europe and Asia as models where education is successful. The respondents noted dedication, discipline, and respect for teachers in Japan, China, and Singapore. One teacher noted that we have a more heterogeneous population, made of many different kinds of people with different beliefs and opinions, so these examples may be too unlike the United States for our educational system to replicate. From Europe, educators appreciate the earlier introduction of more career oriented schools, so students can specialize in technical skills or medicine or other options.

Some examples of education working well are closer to home. A common theme is that education looks different for different kids. So, the educator needs to build relationships with students and bolster creativity in the classroom—"the art of a great teacher" as one respondent stated. Along with relationships, educators must have shared vision and work collaboratively. An example of a shared vision the participants offered was that of a Montessori model of exploration and experiential learning. One teacher believes these models are directed in a top-down approach, where building administration sets the tone for the program. If these perceptions set the standard of success, how well does the system operate currently?

The researched professionals shared their insights on how well U.S. education serves students. For those who rated the system, on a scale of one to ten, education earned a 4, a 5, and a 6; so 5/10 for an average. Professionals cited equity as the major issue of the system. Education well serves students without trauma, whose parents speak

English, and come from backgrounds without significant money concerns. Education poorly serves students of lower socioeconomic status, those with physical and cognitive disabilities, and students of color. One counselor believes that maybe 50% of students are well served by their school system and only about 85% graduate high school. Summarily, the current system better serves white students, without challenges, who have access to resources.

U.S. public K-12 education doesn't serve all students well, but how does it serve families? Generally, these educators believe the system serves families even worse than students. One teacher noted there are some great pockets where families are well connected to their students' education, but a lot of the time families are seen as an afterthought. Again, this comes down to whether the families have the tools, the resources, or the general wherewithal to navigate the system. If the previously mentioned students aren't all finding success, it may be true that education also poorly served current students' previous generations. Educators believe the disconnect between families and schools worsen as students age and that there needs to be a strong drive to engage and welcome families into the schools.

In their interview, one counselor described teachers as high-maintenance or needy, especially with regard to how educators are treated, respected, and valued. They continued to say that teachers complain and often have an "us versus them" confrontational mentality with administration. The second counselor provided a slightly different angle, however, stating that counselors are often more respected than teachers.

What do educators think is the best part of the American Education System?

Some of the earlier negativity lifted in these responses. From the participants' responses I identified two themes: the system as a work in progress, and admirable school culture.

The middle school counselor stated the system isn't quite figured out yet. The change is occurring, but it's not finished yet. The music teacher, with nearly two decades of experience, feels the system is getting better about accepting differences and becoming more multicultural. The high school principal added that everyone is educated, regardless of their needs; and, this doesn't happen in all countries. "There are some great schools out there. When done right, school is fun and hilarious." These sentiments from the middle school principal show the expectation for the system, as if to say the system isn't perfect, yet. With new leadership, policies, and legislation, the high school counselor feels we can get there.

"We inspire kids—even if they don't believe it. We need them to get to see their greatness, to be curious," our visual arts teacher said. The music teacher compared the Asian way of doing school, which makes it so all students do the same thing, to the United States' style, which is to recognize individual differences. "Whether we can help all the styles is a different thing." One recognizes the importance of differentiation; although, it's not always implemented well. This cultural expectation that students are treated as individuals and their needs are met at an individual basis were resounding positives from the participants throughout the interview process.

What do these educators look forward to in U.S. education? Five of the six participants believe change is on the horizon. The change, as they see it, is needed in

federal politics and state systems. Further change is needed in the professionals, the school staff, whether that's training, increased autonomy, trust, or something yet identified. Of utmost consideration, they believe kids are the future, so they're hopeful for their students to take the reins from the previous generations and make a difference for themselves.

In the profession, the middle school teacher is looking for people to “calm down.” They praise trauma-informed teaching, training, and understanding, drawing the conclusion that educators are growing and becoming better suited to address their students' needs. Similarly, the middle school principal is hopeful the system will continue to become more collaborative and less isolated. On a larger scale, both high school teachers denounced the politics of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and President Donald Trump, further adding that if the United States truly valued education, funding would increase to address all the needs of all students.

At the end, I asked them what the system needed. The middle school counselor said there needs to be a focus on smaller class sizes, addressing individual needs of students, and specialized settings for specific needs. The high school music teacher is looking for solutions, saying the system must better care for teachers. “If you're not taking care of your teachers, you're not taking care of your kids.” They added that split positions—working at more than one site, as a classroom teacher—are demoralizing and not good for students. The middle school principal wrapped up the interview saying within their district, all students will graduate with a “real” high school diploma—one

with value, demonstrating knowledge and mastery of standards; and many will receive scholarships. “I think there is hope.”

Interpretation of the Data

Recall the research question: *what do practicing educators perceive as obstacles to innovation and reform in education?* Here, I will tie what I learned in my literature review (Chapter 2) to what my participants shared with me. The interpretations here contain three general themes: pressure, innovation, and support. Generally, I outlined them in that order, but these themes are intertwined and go hand in hand.

At no time did I ask the participants if there was crisis in education. I didn’t want to lead the participants to that mentality, so I tried to mask that idea by focusing on their roles, alternating on the positives and negatives therein, and on the U.S. education system as a whole. I felt the ebb and flow of joys and challenges might allow a more balanced view to emerge. Throughout the interviews, more than crisis, I felt the word “pressure”—pressure to perform and pressure to manage the many tasks simultaneously vying for one’s attention. And, through pressure, I heard frustration.

At various times, the participants stated they felt like they had no time to complete their “400 things to do” or manage the “500 hats” they wear. The various tasks educators complete are numerous, so they must juggle them. Complex time management is not surprising for professionals in important and demanding fields. This juggling, however, complicates the professionals’ abilities to produce results and, additionally, be agents of change, as some would like them to be (Minkel, 2014 and Ed.gov, 2014). This tends towards “burnout” and why so many educators leave the profession after a short

while and why other brilliant people would never choose the profession in the first place: cost-benefit analysis. Simply, it's not worth the hassle.

“The numerous roles of education,” as they correlate to the research participants, might change from roles to tasks, responsibilities, and to-do lists. Each participant identified multiple primary responsibilities and more secondary responsibilities. In the past, I had not thought a principal would need to “grow” their program, but both principals said it was a major component of their position, lest their schools shrink and disappear. Similarly, both teachers said they spent a lot of time finding, obtaining, and maintaining equipment; granted, they are music and art teachers. Their “specialist” positions may differ compared to “content” teachers; although, the counselors, too, had to create their programs, find their materials, etc.

In comparison to another field, albeit an imperfect comparison, I can't imagine a surgeon needing to find their own scalpels, x-ray machines, or IV bags while simultaneously preparing for surgery. Perhaps surgeons do these things and I don't know. I would feel better, though, if my hypothetical surgeon already had their materials waiting for them, so they could focus on keeping me alive and well. So, how does one complete their primary tasks, while developing the systems and materials as they go, while researching, investigating, and initiating change? It should be noted that all of the participants I interviewed work in smaller schools (less than 400 students enrolled), so the resources allocated to these individuals can differ from those of a larger system.

The above mentioned comparison depicts an environment where the professionals' time is diluted among numerous tasks. So, which functions are the

important ones? Who decides? And, which tasks need to be done better than others? A person can only complete so many tasks in a given amount of time, which is an interesting dichotomy in education: summer, fall, winter, and spring vacations pitted against great urgency during the school year. Taken with a grain of salt, the principals would remind me that their summer break is not as long as a teacher's or counselor's. With this dichotomy of nothing and everything, where is the balance?

All of the participants mentioned balance as a concern of theirs in one way or another, and the art teacher's comment about ten minutes of collaboration during lunch making a difference illustrates the point. Yes, a ten minute conversation can be impactful; however, so can eating lunch, clearing your head, and being social. There are only 24 hours in a given day. Eight or more of those hours are needed for sleep, and educators are human beings—some with families and most with responsibilities outside of their school sites.

I am reminded of the middle school counselor who mentioned that teachers complain; still, if one does not have support and/or time to address all of the necessary responsibilities, an individual's sense of work-work and work-home balance can lead to feelings of little to no time to establish balance. It is known that educators need to stay in the field to grow and build relationships with students and parents and amongst themselves to be as effective as possible. As such, I had not researched burnout in my literature review. Crisis had presented itself through the systemic dysfunction of the greater education system. It would stand to reason, though, if the professionals in the fields are incapable of sustaining productivity, success, and job satisfaction, burnout

would be a significant contributing factor of that systemic crisis. Lack of time, too, was missing from the literature review. Neither element, time nor burnout, is particularly surprising as a cause for concern in education—they just weren't the most apparent concerns when I conducted my initial research.

To alleviate some of this stress, and to provide the greatest outcomes for students, of course, educators must innovate, and education must be innovative. The participants I interviewed believe change is coming. Do they know, or are they just hoping? I'm not sure. They see the need for change, for things to get better. They want students to be prepared for life after school.

From my literature review, Chapter 2, I discovered a push for teachers to lead educational reform (Minkel, 2014 and Ed.gov, 2014). The educators I interviewed did not expressly say they felt teachers should be the innovators. I believe the principals want their teachers to be innovative, and I believe the counselors, teachers, and principals want to be innovative. The question that arises is, "how?", followed by innumerable subquestions.

In that eight to ten—or more—hour work day, when are educators getting together with the sole intent to innovate, create something new, push boundaries, and redesign a system? With what resources are educators publishing new materials, when some buildings are in need of maintenance or repair, when students cannot afford school lunch, and classrooms lack materials, like books? What training will the educators need in order to develop new systems, to create a model of education that works, if not for all

students, then for their own community's students? What supplementary systems will be invented, emplaced, and maintained to ensure fidelity in that new programming?

In their interview, one counselor asked, with some exasperation, what all the testing was for and where all that data goes. Someone must be analyzing that data, and to what purpose? We know U.S. school systems have funding disparities, and U.S. schools perform with varying degrees of success (Ed.gov, 2014 and Biddle & Berliner 2002). We also acknowledge some foreign countries' student outcomes outperform our own. So, those tests and analytics establish maps and baselines for success. They tell us where the finish line is and how well our students competed, which schools are better resourced and which communities are thriving. But, do they tell us how to do better? Not really.

A significant concern, therein, is the narrowing effects standardized testing has on curriculum with limited added value (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2014). OK, at the end, we know who isn't at grade level, but tests don't inform whether students learn to think, or learn to test. Are they performing on the tests because they're important, or are the tests demoralizing obstacles, a wasted day or week of learning? Where is the joy in learning, and how are students getting ready for the new century they're already in?

From the responses I found, educators are concerned about their students. They hope change is on the horizon because they know their students have a complicated and ill-defined road ahead of them. There doesn't seem to be much faith, according to the literature review or my research participants, that testing is broadening students' horizons or meeting their current or future needs. The use of standardized tests does not have to be a bad thing, however. Accountability isn't bad, but neither my literature review nor my

interview participants suggested a way to maintain accountability while allowing for freedom or honest and equitable comprehensive education of students.

A strong connection between the literature review and interviews I conducted was a push toward more individualized programming (Pictock, 2018 and Rosemay. 2012). This could be considered differentiation—where teachers plan and instruct based on individual student need. This sort of middle ground between innovation and doing the same old thing acknowledges that learning looks different for individuals and occurs at different rates and through different experiences (Canada, 2013). Some of what the participants suggested with regard to innovation seemed more like solidifying best practices—differentiating instruction, which I would argue isn't innovation but fidelity in traditional practices.

Being prepared for life after school can mean so many things. Educators often talk about 21st century skills, a curious buzzword since we're in the first third of the century. 21st century skills is a movement from assembly line workers to free thinkers, entrepreneurs, and fluid thinkers (Rosemay, 2012 and Minkel, 2014 and Ed.gov, 2014). It's interesting to think about what our students will need when considering what jobs, technology, and fields may grow, develop, or disappear. There is a lot we don't yet know about what our students will face and be required to do in the next twenty to eighty years. We can conjecture and make plans for what we think students will need to know, but we're essentially planning to teach what we do not yet understand.

If we link burnout with doubling down on best practices, we see the assembly line model of education wears people down. It's like running a machine at higher intervals,

for longer duration, and with increased load. While immediate results may seem promising when focusing on established best practices of old, this model does not serve all students, all families, and all educators. Without real innovation, Geoffrey Canada's remarks from Chapter 2 resound loudly—we keep doing the same things that haven't worked. Someone, a literal Einstein, famously stated doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result is insanity.

As a solution, one participant suggested looking to European models of 8th grade professional schools with specialization programs. With a push like this, U.S. students would be afforded greater choice with acceptance of their individual skills, aptitudes, and interests. The fabled “why are we learning this?” question might not exist in a model where students receive practical skills—relative to them, of course—and learn what is important to them. While honoring students' abilities and like, U.S. schools might “let kids be kids”, as another participant added, by increasing choice and movement and changes in school structure.

The benefits of experiential learning would be further amplified by addressing students' needs on individual bases, as is done in successful schools, domestically and abroad. This makes learning and school different for different kids, which is tough to deliver as an individual classroom teacher. I believe this is additionally arduous in a model of education where every student is treated the same, enrolled by age, and expected to learn in the same environments as their “peers”. Uniformity sounds efficient but has shown to be ineffective when we are responsible for all students.

Transcending content constraints and even the classroom may be the most significant change or innovation to education, as a system in 100 years. The high school principal I interviewed is currently working on developing an internship program for their school's seniors. This model emphasizes experiential learning, learning from experts, and providing students opportunity to put their skills in authentic scenarios. An internship program like this, like a work study, may be a reversion, a back to basics, harkening to apprenticeships, masters, and guilds. So, instead of the Industrial Revolution, schools might embrace the Renaissance.

Both the literature review and the educators I interviewed suggested changing the structure of schools. The development of charter schools was an attempt at these kinds of changes, and the success of charter schools has varied (Canada, 2013). Are they bogged down by systemic guidelines, testing, and regulation? Are they simply solidifying best practices of old? If so, the notion of teachers changing the system from within is irrelevant, if they are up against an immovable wall and no real new ideas (Minkel, 2014).

The pressure to perform such an array of duties has led my participants to feel a lack of support, whether it be from administrators, district personnel, families, and/or legislators. Some educators feel isolated and dejected as they're doing this miraculous job that fewer and fewer individuals want.

I already mentioned funding, and I state it again here. The funding disparities across the United States contribute to unequal access to education and make educational equity impossible (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Not all students, school, and educators need

the same things. So, funding does not have to be the same; it has to be better than the same. Funding must mirror the needs of the students and their educational programs, lest hypocrisy, greed, and ignorance rule.

Some of my research participants wonder about their students and their students' guardians. The teachers and counselors noted a lack of respect toward themselves contributed to challenges in teaching. Educators also noted some dismissiveness of students' behavior on behalf of guardians, increasing difficulty in teaching. My literature review did not offer insights to student behavior but alluded that the partnership of guardians, students, and teachers would enable a better serving system (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, & Lam. 2018).

The relationships of the key players of education is paramount, so they must work together and trust one another. The counselors noted the need for trust on behalf of the teachers toward their administrators. The principals stated they depended on their district personnel for support. The teachers said they needed autonomy and help from their administrators. From these three groups, I noticed something was off—the feeling of isolation—that the educators were pulling too much weight on their own, that they felt alone. An additional piece that is missing here is the student and guardian perspectives.

This concludes Chapter 4. I gathered my participants' perspectives; however, my research did not include everything encompassing the broad scope of education. Chapter 5 will discuss some of what was missed, this project's conclusions, as well as some plans for the future.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Here, I will reflect on my major learnings from this research. I will also explore implications and limitations of this project and recommend future research. Finally, I will devise a plan for using this information. Recall the initial research question: *What do practicing educators perceive as obstacles to innovation and reform in education?*

Major Learnings

With such a broad scope, there is so much that could appear here. There are some more superficial themes like, “educators go into education for the students and to make a difference”, and “education is in crisis, straining the system in different directions.” Rather than address everything, I will focus on a few themes that resound the loudest. First, education can change. Second, teacher leadership is a catch-22. Third, educational equity is problematic.

Education can change. There is no one formula for why education has to look the same or be the same everywhere for everyone, even in nations or school districts where curriculum is scripted. In effective scenarios, specialists create and modify content and learning, so all students get what they need. In these situations, the learning objectives are highly intentional and thoroughly implemented to the success of students and to get students back on track when needed (Tucker, 2016). For this to work, professionals need

the training, resources, space, time, and support to operate effectively. The only real stipulations are those put in place by people. If we can make policy, we can change it. There is no reason to continue to do something that does not work, aside from fear, self interests, and ignorance. Education, like any great organization is the successful blending of like-minded people coming together with shared vision. These collaborative partners don't need to have the same ideas but maybe the same kind of values or end in sight. They need solid relationships and creativity and collaboration.

The money can change. It makes sense to incentivize districts that struggle with higher wages, greater benefits, and increased resources and support. If a school is working, it might not need as many resources as a school with difficulties. If a school is in a low income neighborhood, why should those students be underserved, when wealthy neighborhoods can and will take care of themselves (Biddle & Berliner, 2002)? In Chapter 2, Tucker spoke of increased wages and greater respect of education abroad compared to the United States, and several research participants mentioned elevating the profession, making it more professional, more prestigious (2016). For education to be better, we need the best people working in the field, and they need to stay in the field, where they can do the most good, for as long as possible. Both principals I interviewed were teachers before they took leadership roles, and I wonder if they would have remained in the classroom had they been better compensated.

Education can transcend the classroom and the curriculum (Rosemay, 2012 and Minkel, 2014). Educational experiences don't have to be the same for every student; the standards can be accessed in a variety of settings, in variable ways. Students, families,

and educators are pushing for students to practice learning that is more reflective of “real life”, more experiential. Of course, programming already exists where students are making and building and learning in ways that mirror life with a natural approach to education, but these are not ubiquitous. One of my research participants, the high school principal, was pushing to design an internship program and to network with outside organizations, so their students could pursue learning in real ways. The middle school guidance counselor, too, was researching and implementing programming to supplement students’ needs outside of the classroom.

Teacher leadership is a catch-22. My initial research showed an interest in teacher leadership (Minkel, 2014 and Ed.gov, 2014); and the principals I interviewed wanted their teachers to be capable and effective. This, however, conflicts directly with what the teachers, counselors, and principals said about their roles. Teacher leadership sounds good and may yield good results, but when can educators, particularly teachers, lead when they have no time, training, or resources to do so (Minkel, 2014)?

The information I collected here is contradictory. How can teacher leadership be effective when teachers don’t have the time to lead? The systems across the country and world are not uniform. In some sites, educators can lead. They have a reduced caseload or fewer classes to teach, and they have dedicated time for leading. The schools in which I have worked, however, restrict teacher duties to particular contracts, and in those instances a teacher cannot have a salaried leadership role outside of a teaching role. They might be eligible for a stipend while maintaining a full time position. Of the six participants, only one of the teachers I interviewed had a dedicated leadership role with

allocated planning time or salary. Generally, innovative planning and extracurricular enrichment was done on their own time, and when these educators have full responsibilities at work and at home, their own time is constricted.

Educational equity is problematic. The historic and persistent presence of racial disparities in this country perpetuate the challenges in education. My research predominantly highlighted segregation and funding with regard to educational equity, which affect access to quality education. In 1996 the ASCD noted that racial segregation has worsened since the Civil Rights era, as students learn in drastically different conditions, even when they reside in the same state (Tucker, 2016). This startling recognition can be seen in the Midwest, with a vast majority white population, which leads the country with the greatest achievement gaps.

Persistent racial segregation and harm mixed with funding disparities and exhausted professionals may be the perfect storm for crippling a system. As was stated in the previous chapter, throwing more money at education might not be the panacea we are looking for—some problems lie therein. The U.S. spends, on average, more money on education than its comparable neighbors, so the amount of money spent may be irrelevant (Associated Press, 2013). One issue: everyone is not on the same page, regarding funding disparities. Individuals don't necessarily want their money to go to someone else's school, and some don't think distributing the money more equitably will have positive effect (Biddle & Berliner, 2002).

There is a lot to unpack with these sentiments. First, wealthy individuals will not rely on their local schools and districts to prepare their children for life. In these

circumstances, local schools are irrelevant to a large extent. Money will find opportunity; whether that is in the form of tutors, private schools, home schooling, or something entirely unheard of by the general population (Minkel, 2014). The sentiment that distributing money more equitably will not favorably affect low income communities may be true if it is done once, but if amplified over generations, there would likely be dramatic change in the schools serving disadvantaged students. So, this may be an oversimplified ideology.

This paragraph could appear in the following section, as it involves something missed in my research. My participants and I did not talk about summer slide, which is related to student achievement and equity, particularly for students in lower income situations (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018). The high school music teacher mentioned summers off as a perk of the profession, but that is as close as we got to discussing summer slide. Contrary to wealthy individuals being able to afford educational opportunities for their students, some students are not afforded quality educational programming based largely on the situations into which they were born.

Implications and Limitations

There was a lot that did not make its way into this project. First, the research participants were educators. It makes sense, as the research question was about educators; however, that is quite limiting. I did not interview participants based on being parents of students; though, four of the participants were parents of school-aged children. Speaking of students, I did not interview them either. I also did not reach out to people

outside of education, politicians, or district personnel. Lastly, the sample size was six individuals—hardly a wide net cast.

Multiple times in chapters two and four, I cited comparisons between the United States and other countries across the globe. In retrospect, I feel like I know very little regarding how education is done outside of the U.S. There is also a lot to learn about how schools engage students across the United States. Educational programming is vast, and I do not know the extent to which educators keep tabs on who is doing what.

Analyzing what works and where and why is paramount to creating systems that work for more and more people. My participants mentioned greater respect for education outside of the United States. Like teacher leadership, understanding education across cultures necessitates understanding context; with that context, policy can be implemented while being informed, reasonable, and attainable.

Speaking of teacher leadership, I did not directly ask the participants about opportunities for teacher leadership. On one hand, I tried to allow the participants to offer their own ideas for solutions to education; on the other hand, it could have been a follow-up question: “How would teacher leadership shape education?” From the answers I gathered, time would be the greatest obstacle to more teachers filling leadership roles while still being teachers, as a blended/ hybrid model (Ed.gov, 2014). Teacher leadership, mentorship, and development have great positive effect; although, I did not hear that from my participants (Minkel, 2014).

I could have asked about educator accountability, since in chapter 2, I cited differing methods of accountability (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2014). The high

school music teacher and high school guidance counselor both mentioned they needed trust and autonomy from their administrators. Both principals iterated they needed teachers to take care of their classrooms; so, it sounds like there is agreement between the teachers and administrators. So, what would accountability actually look like? What are the parameters, consequences, and steps to implement? I do not know. This would require district level decision making and district level investigation. The need is great, however, for highly trained and proficient professionals straight out of the gates; that is, educators need the best training and preparation before they are shown their work sites.

My educator participants did not discuss charter schools as a solution to education; although the middle school principal worked at a charter. I believe charters are evidence of professionals and communities searching for solutions for education, and I suspect significant agreement across the field (Ed.gov, 2014 and Canada, 2013).

Three Ways This Information Might Be Used

Since starting the process to reach licensure and up to this point, I have pondered attaining my education administrative license. I told myself I would teach a minimum of ten years before pursuing an administrative license because I wanted to be sure that I would know what I was talking about if I were responsible for a school, to feel confident, capable, and understanding. This master's work in no way qualifies me to be an administrator; however, I am more aware of what I do not know, what gaps exist in my knowledge. This experience has also provided opportunity to continue collaborating with other professionals, a necessary skill I want and need to continue to develop.

Local and national governmental representatives and policy makers would benefit to acknowledge the learnings of this work, even if they are already familiar with the struggles of education. They might even fund parallel studies or compile similar data from various geographies to better understand the struggles of education. I'm not sure the extent to which people who budget and allocate budget to education understand the disparities in funding and long-lasting and damaging ramifications of persistent and pervasive segregation. One fear I have is the messaging may sound desperate, pleading, or noisy. This stated, the plights of this most essential institution have fallen on too many deaf ears.

State departments of education and school districts would also serve their communities utilizing these findings. Chronologically, for an educator, preparation programs need to be more encompassing, so when educators are working, they are prepared for the work. They need to know how to network, develop curriculum, establish and maintain a classroom, navigate a school and its district, and how to innovate and change a system from within. Next, when new to the field, educators need support, training, and reduced load, so they can fully understand their roles, ask questions, adapt, and get established. This equates to managing time and stress for educators; it's unfathomable to be an expert on day one. Third, when educators are established, they need opportunities to take the reins, to find leadership opportunities and mould the system in ways that support students, while being similarly being supported, so they have a manageable load of responsibilities.

My Future Research Agenda

I am personally obliged to say I am curious about designing a new kind of public K-12 education. I do not know yet what steps I have to take to get there, but that would be a road well worth traveling. First, I need to wrap my head around the broad spectrum of educational experiences across the country and globe. Where is education working for the most disadvantaged students and providing them the greatest opportunities that might even surpass those of their privileged counterparts? I want to be involved in that movement: designing a new kind of education, building an educational funding empire, and uprooting obstacles to students' futures.

My initial thought revolves around developing a modular educational experience— something that is flexible and mouldable, while maintaining efficiency. In this century, there should be no limitations for educational opportunity. Distance learning can connect everyone across the globe to anyone else, if we allow it. Educators can work with professionals in any field to devise curriculum for all levels of ability and interest. Why can't a student play soccer for hours a day and receive credit? Why couldn't that same student read and write about soccer, analyze statistics about famous athletes, and earn English and Math credits at the same time? Why couldn't a kindergarten student learn shapes and colors from an astronaut on the moon while dreaming about the greater universe?

I imagine an immense online font of educational workshops, webinars, and quests for students to complete in their communities. These could be week-long experiences; they could be quarter- or semester-length. The classroom could change from the students' residences to their places of worship (if any), to their communities' businesses,

landmarks, and/or services. Local districts could compile learning experiences for each grade level and create standard learning plans for students to choose from. Say a student needs a number of physical education credits for a grade, and the program can list what is available in their area. And, since they are a student, they can access that activity for free. Maybe they could choose between karate down the street, rock climbing a couple of bus stops away, swimming at the rec center, weight training at the football club, or running in the park—or literally anything else.

In this scenario, accountability and remediation could be leveled in tiers. If a student is progressing fine, let them progress; if a student is struggling, they can set up a meeting with an interventionist who does home visits. There would be no need to have fast moving students stymied by the other students in the room that just so happen to be the same age. Likewise, there would be no shame for a student who struggled or needed more time because they would have access to what they needed and wanted when they needed or wanted it.

As a society, we would need to adjust; we would have to be OK with trying something new. Developing the system would take time, but it probably wouldn't take more than two years for educators in each content area and grade level to map out a pilot with two or three options per standard and deliver it. The beauty: this system could change daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc. Totally modular—if something doesn't work, swap it out, delete it, and replace it. There could still be physical sites for students to go to, as an option, or for socialization. I mean, who doesn't like a pizza/ dance social?

A second tier idea acknowledges that my initial research consisted of interviewing six participants in isolation. Another step would be to have the participants respond to the other participants' view. Once this project has the green light, I plan to share it with them and ask for their feedback. They will never know who the other participants were because I will ask multiple individuals. I am curious to uncover how well I understood their perspectives and how well I honored their views. I also want to see what other educators think about these challenges and ideas for advancing the field.

Concluding Paragraph:

This concludes this research project. Following are my research references and interview protocol, the questions I asked my research participants. The answers to the research question "*what do practicing educators perceive as obstacles to innovation and reform in education?*" are throughout this work, and might be summed as "educators, and their students by proxy, require a fair playing field, with regard to equitable resource allocation, not limited to time, budget, and personnel, from educator training through a long career.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Capstone Interview Questions/ Research Protocol

Research Participants and Their Roles
What is your current role in education?
What roles have you had in K-12 education?
Why did you choose to work in K-12 education?
How long have you been a _____? Teacher, Administrator, Counselor
How would you define your primary role as a _____? Out of the many tasks you have to do in a school day or week, what needs to get done? What cannot be left for tomorrow?
What secondary roles do you have as a _____? What are some of the other essential tasks you are required to complete?
What else would you say is part of your job description, either overtly or implicitly?
Participants' Feelings on Their Roles
What function of your job would you say is particularly enjoyable? What makes your job worth it? What about being _____ gives you energy?
Is there anything you wish you could do that you do not get to do with regard to your role?
What about your role is difficult?
What is a significant challenge to your role? What outside force is challenging?
What solutions are there to those barriers? What would lift them or make them less challenging?

What innovations or changes have come about that were exciting for you?
What has been daunting?
With regard to your role, what is necessary for students to be successful?

Opinions on the Larger System
What would you say is the primary role or function of the American education system? Why does the system exist?
How would you define the current state of American Education? Is it doing what it is supposed to do? Do you think there is a consensus about what the American K-12 system is supposed to do? What about within Minnesota?
With no limits, what would education be in its best form?
How do you/ we get there—to that best case scenario?
Do you have/ know of any examples where education works really well?
Generally, how well does American education serve students?
How well does American education serve families?
How well are staff treated, respected, valued? Locally? Nationally? At the sites you have worked? You do not need to name the sites.
What do you think is the best part of education as an American Institution?
What is something you look forward to in the future of American K-12 education? What positive change do you see on the horizon?
What is something in which you see the American system of education failing?