A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS WITH SEEKING SUPPORT

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I dedicate this to my family, my partner Justine and my children Abigail and Edwin. None of this would have been possible without your support, encouragement, and love. Thank you to my mother, Eileen, for all of the child care, time and energy you provided as well.
I love you all very much.

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Abstract

This research explores the experiences of two elementary school (K-6) teachers with seeking support. Informed by narrative inquiry methodology, this research inquired into the perceptions and experiences of two elementary teachers as they sought support from administrators, colleagues, and digital media. Through critical dialogue, discussion, and inquiry I engaged with and learned alongside two in-service teachers. Through an analysis of the field texts, three narrative threads emerged that intertwine between the stories. The threads are: "I can ask him anything," "They accepted me with open arms," and "If I was in a position to speak up, I would have been like, that's not okay!" This research was conducted to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that shape the support-seeking behaviour of teachers.

Keywords - *seeking support, trust, school culture, vulnerability, elementary teacher*s

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Introduction

I have been teaching for eight years at the same elementary school located in a small community in rural Alberta. I was fortunate to begin my teaching career at this school, the same school where I completed my senior pre-service teaching practicum, immediately upon my graduation. I am a product of the Alberta public school system. In many ways that system was designed for me. As a white, cisgender man who grew up playing competitive sports, I directly benefited from a system which so often creates barriers for those who experience the intersections (Crenshaw, 1989) of systems of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny . The smooth path I travelled, completely "at-ease" (Lugones, 1987) both in school and in my familial 'world', free from systemic barriers and bias, was suddenly challenged by a series of traumatic family events early in my career. Upon reflection, these events revealed my tendency to turn inwards and avoid vulnerability with others.

In my second year of teaching, while being considered for a continuous contract[1], an abrupt and tragic series of events caused a momentary pause in my career and personal life. With looming evaluations on the horizon (necessary for the prodigious continuous contract), the vulnerability of being a beginning teacher coupled with immense personal stress clouded my judgement and led me to make the decision to return to work quickly so as to not derail my career path. The few days of personal leave I allowed myself to take were simply not enough time to process, reflect, grieve, or heal from these events. My return to work seemed, at the time, to be the best solution given the power of receiving the continuous contract. The choice I made to return to work so quickly was motivated by my hopes to advance my career, with little

[1] A teaching contract that remains in effect from year to year without further documentation being required (ATA, 2022).

consideration for my own personal wellbeing. As a beginning teacher experiencing significant personal-life stress, I felt unable to seek support from my colleagues, administrators, and other district resources due to a fear of being storied as ignorant, weak, unreliable, or incompetent. I internalised my experiences to maintain a professional façade, rather than admitting vulnerability and seeking support.

As a beginning teacher I was not familiar with navigating the system to take a leave of absence, where would I even start with that? Was I allowed to take a leave of absence without being on a continuous contract? Does grief count as sick days? Would I lose my chance to get a continuous contract if I miss my evaluations? I swallowed these questions and pretended they were never on my mind. I'm fine, man up[2], get back to work! At my most vulnerable, seeking support from other people was not something I wanted to do. Whether it was fear of showing vulnerability stemming from unhealthy hegemonic masculine values (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) instilled in me via competitive sports, or fear of seeming incompetent during times of evaluation, I did not want to reveal to the world that I desperately needed help. Therefore, with my most sensitive questions, I turned to a place that (in my view/opinion) held no judgement: the internet. By turning to the internet with my questions, I avoided human connection and became susceptible to false information, bad advice, misinformed opinions, and most importantly, the subjective nuance of my lived experience could not possibly be adequately considered in the internet solutions I encountered. Because of these experiences, I decided to research the experiences of other elementary teachers to better understand the reflections and wonderings I continue to have about teachers' support-seeking behaviours.

[2] This term has roots in toxic masculinity. Traditional, hegemonic, masculine values instilled through gender role socialization likely impacted my ability to openly seek support (Gorski, 2010). Gorski (2010) explained this concept poignantly by stating, "When a boy is taught the masculine ideology that 'real' men do not show emotion and do not ask for help, it influences how he will view help-seeking acts and behaviours in the future" (p. 1).

Coming to the Research

This research project, informed by narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is designed to explore the personal experiences of elementary school teachers (grades K-6) with seeking support. Initially, my curiosity, research, and personal experiences led me to wonder about the role of internet searches in teaching and learning; however without attending to the milieu (Schwab, 1973) of teachers and students, I later realized I was missing the point. Why would someone turn to the internet in the first place? What forces are at play that deter an individual from seeking support from another human being within a school? I recognize, however, as a white, cisgender man, my experience with seeking support could be very different than someone from a marginalized community or someone at a different stage in their career. To understand the complexities of navigating the school system and seeking support as a teacher more deeply, multiple worldviews must be considered.

My research explored the following guiding question; what are the experiences of two elementary (grades k-6) teachers with seeking support? My sub questions were: What are the experiences of elementary teachers with seeking support from administrators? What are the experiences of elementary teachers with seeking support from colleagues? What are the experiences of elementary teachers with seeking support using digital media?

Discussion with the Research Literature

Seeking Support: Trust

As I began to engage in the literature regarding support seeking behaviour, connections to my own story and lived experiences became apparent. Before engaging with the participants, I tried to better understand my own lived experiences and the factors that influenced my support-seeking behaviour. In the context of this paper, when referring to seeking support, I am

referring to teachers taking action to improve or maintain their overall 'wellness.' As Wickramarathne et al. (2020) indicated, wellness is a multidimensional concept that includes emotional, physical, social, occupational, spiritual, and intellectual domains. As teachers identify imbalances in any of these components in their personal or professional lives, and take actions to seek an equilibrium, it could be said they are "seeking support." According to Weston et al. (2018), schools and districts alike ought to create a paradigm shift from "'being well' at school to making school a 'well place to be'" (p. 113). Additionally, the authors emphasized the importance of educators' mental wellness to create resilient school systems, asserting, "There can be no resiliency apart from resilient systems" (Weston et al., 2018, p. 113). Appropriate and thoughtful district-level policy and programming are undoubtedly important to offer specific support(s) and to create healthy schools for students and faculty. However, it is ultimately the school's normative culture that is the driving force behind sustainable wellness (McIsaac et al., 2013). Therefore, an individual's ability or willingness to seek support within a school is predominantly an issue of school culture.

For individuals in a school to feel comfortable enough to seek support, there needs to be some level of trust. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) explained that trust is foundational to a school's effectiveness and defined trust in schools as "a general confidence and overall optimism in occurring events; it is believing in others in the absence of compelling reasons to disbelieve" (p. 342). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) also stated, "Trust can be defined as a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to someone else in the belief that your interests or something that you care about will not be harmed" (p. 68). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) elaborated that trust is a mutual understanding that an individual, group, or organisation can be relied on.

In schools, there are a variety of examples of relationships that require a foundation of trust where individuals must be relied upon; students-student, teacher-student, teacher-administrator relationships, and so on. Additionally, it is not only essential that the behaviour of an individual, group, or organisation can be relied on, it is also essential that actions be done in "one's best interest" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, p. 342). A school culture that fosters trusting social relationships, which Cranston (2011) refers to as "relational trust," creates the conditions necessary for individuals to be vulnerable (p. 62). A school culture that is attentive to relational trust and develops normative behaviours of "safety, risk-taking, and change orientation" (Cranston, 2011, p. 70) can promote collaboration and willingness of individuals to take risks and engage in critical dialogue about sensitive issues. In the absence of trust, professional risk-taking, asking critical questions, and the willingness to seek support are diminished (Cranston, 2011). Individuals in the school community must trust that when they are seeking support, they will find reliable, fair, and honest information and that no harm will be done to them in the process (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998).

Trust is the foundation for seeking support and dealing with sensitive issues. Conversely, a lack of trust clouds the time and space required for critical dialogue and vulnerability (Cranston, 2011). White educators like myself, despite having intentions to support social justice, can perpetuate injustice and damage the potential for trust by remaining inattentive to the ways in which racism operates in education, schools, and classrooms (Curl & Lesnick, 2017; Gorski, 2019). Students' understandings of themselves and the world are not developed in isolation, rather they are interwoven in the stories they tell of themselves and of others (Chung, 2009). As educators, our personal identities and the "embodiment" of our subjective realities (Riveros,

2012) shapes our interactions and relationships with school stakeholders. For me, as a white, cis gendered man, I consider how it was difficult for me to trust that seeking support would not be storied as me being 'less-than' within the masculinity narrative I was positioned with. Also, I consider how I felt this way in a system that was designed for people like me. Through my conversations alongside research participants and engagements with the research literature, I recognize that it is necessary to engage in a critical introspection into the manifestations of my own colonized education and maintain a willingness to embrace change (Curl & Lesnick, 2017) in order to remove barriers and meaningfully create deep relational trust with all teachers and students. The trust needed for vulnerability and the willingness for my colleagues to seek support from me is impacted by who I am. The same thread can also be applied to other levels of relationships in the school (student-student, administrator-teacher, etc). In a situation where an individual feels trust is absent, or they do not feel "at-ease", they may not seek the support they need. In my experience, trust was temporarily eroded by circumstance causing me to find support where I felt there was no judgement: the internet.

The Role of Dialogue

The subjective experiences of each student as they navigate their lives both in and outside of our schools is their lived experience or "lived curriculum" (Aoki, 1993, p. 258). These lived experiences can become a "multiplicity of lived curricula" (p. 258) that when awakened through dialogue, story-telling, or narrative inquiry not only create transformative learning experiences, but also a foundation for a healthy democratic society. Friere (1970) elaborates on the role of dialogue in education by stating that

> dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot

> be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants. (p. 126)

Learning is not something that can be done *to* students, it is something that is constantly happening *with* them, and it is awakened through dialogue. The same thread could be applied to teachers. The lived experiences of teachers' experiences shape how they approach creating meaningful learning experiences for students. Rosiek and Clandinin (2016) explained, "there is content in teaching experience that, if paid attention to, could open unique possibilities of thought and pedagogical action" (p. 297). The underlying assumption here is that there is time and space for dialogue so that educators can create meaningful experiences, and seek support if and when needed. Additionally, with the allure of accountability in the education system which, in public education discourse is meant to assure stakeholders that teachers are following the mandated curriculum, paves a path towards standardization and universalizing what is to be learned all in the name of creating "equity" (McNeil, 2000). In reality, equity is not the result. A standardized curriculum minimizes any cultural understandings, lived experiences, or any other "side bar experiences" where students often do their best learning (McNeil, 2000, p. 276). In my experience, when the time and space for dialogue was not possible for me as a teacher, I turned to the internet in lieu of engaging with another person. By doing so, my ability to remain attentive to the subjective needs of my students was impacted due to an overreliance on digital sources and lessons created by a third party.

Google searches have been referred to as a "digital truth serum" because the need to find accurate information online hinges on asking honest questions in the search bar (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2017). Internet searches are therefore open, honest, and vulnerable in their own way. To ask these questions and find answers appropriately in digital spaces requires a

certain level of digital literacy. Spires (2017), offers a definition of digital literacy that includes three domains: "(a) locating and consuming digital content, (b) creating digital content, and (c) communicating digital content" (p. 2235). As it relates to seeking support, the first domain "locating and consuming digital content" is pertinent to this research because, in the absence of interpersonal trust, individuals may turn to the internet with their questions. The digital reading required for effective (a search that yields trustworthy and accurate information) internet searches is more cognitively demanding than traditional reading (Yamac & Ozturk, 2019). Yet, digital literacy and locating and consuming digital content is widely considered a necessary skill in the 21st century (Spires, 2017). Searching for and reading from digital sources requires the cognitive ability to develop search terms to find information, evaluate credibility, and synthesize information to create new understandings (Yamac & Ozturk, 2019). An individual must complete all these cognitive tasks, while simultaneously managing distractions from advertisements and social media (Dwyer, 2016).

In her book iGen, Jean Twenge (2017) discusses the worrying trend of adolescence displacing human connection for digital equivalents, resulting in what she refers to as the "in-person deficit" (p. 299). The trend for young people to interact less with their peers in-person, which was already raising concern before the pandemic, plays a role in rising mental health issues and social skill development (Twenge, 2017). The displacement of in-person interaction also affects how we, as educators, consider the role of dialogue in curriculum making. Schwabb (1973) offered four "commonplaces" of curriculum making: teacher, learner, subject matter, and milieu. It seems that digital spaces and their role in curriculum-making are creating an additional layer to Scwabb's commonplaces. As Wickramarathne et al. (2020) explained,

"digital wellness" is becoming an even more important consideration to wellness, curriculum-making, and seeking support in schools.

Identity and Hegemonic Masculinity

Every individual who enters a school building is entering a "world" (Lugones, 1987) created by the social norms within the school's culture. Lugones (1987) uses the term "world" to conceptualise the lived experiences within dominant and non-dominant social constructions of gender, race, and other identities (p. 10). A 'world,' Lugones (1987) explained, "need not be a construction of a whole society. It may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society. It may be inhabited by just a few people. Some 'worlds' are bigger than others" (p. 10). Her description of "worlds" is experiential in nature and references the interactions of individuals within the norms of the "world" they find themselves in. Individuals can (and often do) exist in one or more "world" and may or may not agree with or even understand the construction of themselves, or others, in that "world" (p. 10). "Being at ease in a world" (p. 12) is a state of being resulting from understanding and embracing the norms of the specific "world," sharing human bonds/relationships, and having a shared history with others in the "world**"** (Lugones, 1987). Individuals who are outside of the dominant cultural narrative and organisation of life then become "world-travellers" (Lugones, 1987) as they navigate the complexities of shifting norms and social constructions while moving between worlds.

As mirrors to society, schools perpetuate Eurocentric patriarchal ideals which center the middle-class white, male, heterosexual experience (McMahon, 2007). As individuals travel into the school world, they may or may not feel "at-ease" in that environment adding a layer of complexity to the already challenging task of existing in the school system (Lugones, 1987). The conditions necessary for what Lugones (1987) refers to as "playfulness" draw parallels to the

conditions necessary for seeking support: openness, vulnerability, understanding the normative culture, and feeling “at-ease” are foundational to seeking support. The intersections (Crenshaw, 1989) of seeking support while also “world-travelling” in a system designed to perpetuate the status quo and celebrate whiteness (McMahon, 2007) creates additional barriers for individuals who most need it.

Unpacking the gendering process of children is complex and well researched. For the purposes of this research, the majority of the focus will be on boys and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the pattern of masculinity that is most honoured in any given setting. As Connell (2008) explained, within the pattern of masculinity that develops in any culture or institution, there tends to be a version of masculinity that holds a dominant position. The existence of hegemonic masculinity creates an illusion that there can only be one version of ‘manhood’ possible in a particular setting. The dominance of this masculinity hinders people from seeing alternatives that can, and do, exist in the same setting (Connell, 2008). Hegemonic masculinity puts pressure on all boys and men to live up to those expectations, whether or not they match that pattern of masculinity.

Boys' gender identity, like girls, is learned through a tremendous amount of learning that occurs via human relationships (Connell, 2008). A boy's understanding of what it means to be a ‘man’ is directly influenced by the people around him and the narratives of masculinity he sees playing out in front of him. Schools are one of the many institutions that have a pivotal role in the gendering of children. Gender is not an inherent property of an individual, rather, gender is embedded within societal institutions (ex. schools) via divisions of labour, power relations, emotional relationships, and organisational cultures (Connell, 2008). In schools, Connell (2008) noted that the gendering process is not accidental, but rather deeply embedded in their historical

and current operations. This notion is highlighted by the long standing gender imbalance in primary teaching as well as senior leadership positions in education (Conell, 2008). Within and out of schools, competitive sports also play a significant role in the gendering of young boys, particularly regarding hegemonic masculinity.

Boys involved in competitive school sports, particularly competitive team sports, are positioned to a hegemonic masculinity that values toughness, strength, and winning at all costs (Messner, 1989). In this world of 'manhood' boys are conditioned to believe that 'real' men do not show emotion or vulnerability because emotions are unnecessary and too time consuming (Gorski, 2010). Additionally, not only do 'real' men not show emotion or pain, playing through injury and pain is actually celebrated in the hegemonic masculinity of sport (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Positioned with the notion that emotional toughness and playing through pain is a positive attribute of a 'real' man, boys in competitive school sports are socialized to believe that asking for help and seeking support are negative things. As Gorski (2010) explained, the avoidance of help seeking behaviour that is engrained in boys through the gendering process in schools, and competitive sports, can impact their willingness to seek support as adults.

Research Strategies

This research was conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus research conversations with participants were primarily conducted online (through Google Meet). The digital space needed to conduct the research conversations added an interesting layer to this research. As I listened to and conversed with the participants, I was acutely aware of how the digital space impacts our ability to form relationships and become vulnerable with each other. Was our ability to develop trust impacted by the screen? As my research sought to investigate

stories of seeking support, digital spaces have emerged as a pertinent consideration during this time of reduced in-person contact due to COVID-19.

Using an outline of open-ended questions (Appendix A) to ground the research conversations, and informed by narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013), I inquired into the experiences of two elementary teachers seeking support from administrators, colleagues, and digital media. Guided by the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I engaged with, listened to, and learned alongside two elementary school teachers, who openly reflected on their careers and personal lives and through reflection, participants and I became increasingly awakened to the intersections between the two. I used a combination of purposeful sampling and "snowball sampling" (Creswell, 2019, p. 143) to leverage my network of contacts to intentionally invite participants into the research. The first participant, Rebecca (pseudonym), a white Canadian woman, has one child, has been teaching for six years, and is also the product of the Alberta school system like myself. Her stories revealed the significance of developing trusting relationships both for the benefit of others and for ourselves. The second participant, John (pseudonym) is the son of political refugees who were forced to leave their homes in Guatemala in the 1980's. His stories illuminated the significance of acceptance, inclusion, and developing a culture of trust for teachers and students. Through our conversations, the stories we tell of ourselves, and the stories others tell of us, emerged from and collided with our lives as teachers and human beings.

Field texts (commonly referred to as research data) were collected through two conversations using open-ended questions to allow for a natural conversational flow to the discussions. The local COVID-19 protocols at the time of these interviews moved both of my

research conversations with Rebecca online. One research conversation with John was conducted in person while the other was online. Each research conversation was between one and one-and-a-half hours long to ensure sufficient data was collected. Google Meet and the Google Chrome extension “Tactiq" was used to create a transcript of the research conversations (regardless of whether the interview was in person or not). Recording the research conversation via the ‘record’ function in Google Meet allowed for complete and accurate transcriptions. During our conversations, I also used a reflective research journal to make note of insights that occurred during the conversations. A thematic analysis of the field texts using ‘in vivo’ coding (Creswell, 2019)[3] was done to identify themes and narrative threads (Clandinin, 2013)[4] within and between participants' stories. After several readings of the field texts, the emerging themes and narrative threads were shared with participants to ensure their stories and responses are accurately represented. The research conversations were conducted in October and December of 2021.

I began the conversations by attempting to compose a professional timeline of experiences with seeking support from participants’ perspectives. The research conversations were opportunities to reflect and inquire alongside one another into our stories and experiences with seeking support in elementary school settings. My goal was to have participants and I better understand our experiences with seeking support, and how those experiences may have changed throughout our lives and careers. I was aware that, when discussing previous experiences with seeking support, emotions and feelings such as; sadness, frustration, resentment, and anger could be triggered. Participants were able to stop the interviews or omit questions at any point they

[3] Using direct phrases and quotes from the interview transcripts to identify and label themes (Creswell, 2019).
[4] I identified narrative threads by looking within and across various field texts to identify continuities, discontinuities, tensions, silences, gaps, and wonders.

wanted to. Prior to and during the interviews, I encouraged the participants to contribute to the extent they felt comfortable. Using a narrative inquiry approach also allowed me to revisit and reflect on my own lived experiences, along with the stories and experiences of research participants.

This research was conducted to develop a deeper understanding of some of the factors that shape the support-seeking behaviour of teachers. It has also informed my practice as a school leader in terms of striving to develop a school culture where people feel comfortable asking questions and seeking support, or where they know where to find support if they are unwilling to ask their question directly. This research is relevant to myself and other educators because it has implications for effective leadership pedagogy and creating a safe and trusting school environment.

Shape of the Data: Narrative Threads

Moments before my initial interview with my first participant, Rebecca, a wave of nervousness washed over me. Thoughts raced through my mind; what if the recording doesn't work? What if the other person can tell I'm nervous? What if I mess this all up? Any feeling of being unqualified or underprepared quickly disappeared once Rebecca logged on to the Google Meet where we would spend the next hour and half together. The presence of another person, even through a screen, seemed to provide us both with a combination of energy and comfort. While the digital space we occupied felt almost 'normal' at this point in the pandemic, I could still feel a faint, yet distinct separation between us. I began to wonder how I could possibly make deep connections and generate mutual vulnerability through a screen with Rebecca. As the small talk faded into critical dialogue, it became immediately apparent why Rebecca identifies as someone that people can go to for help. Fortunately, I was able to meet the second participant,

John, in person. I immediately felt a connection with him and was comforted by his peaceful presence. While earlier in his career than Rebecca, John's lived experiences as a racialized Afro-Latino teacher allowed for deep and meaningful dialogue.

The narratives of both participants formed threads that continuously revealed themselves and wove together to create themes. The narrative threads (Clandinin, 2013) that emerged between their stories often initiated further discussions. Three narrative threads emerged, the first being, "*I can ask him anything"* in relation to seeking support, as both participants specifically identified individual people that they deeply trust and rely on. Secondly, "*they accepted me with open arms"* emerged as a thread which conveyed a strong sense of belonging within their schools that was discussed by both participants. Finally, the third thread was "*If I was in a position to speak up, I would have been like, that's not okay!"* as both participants identified a feeling of vulnerability created when trust has been eroded in a school setting. The conversations were lively, passionate, and at many points emotional.

Thread 1: "I Can Ask Him Anything"

It was evident in my initial conversations with both participants that human connection was a core value to them as educators and as people. When asked about where she prefers to seek support, Rebecca wasted little time to respond:

> One of my team teachers, Stacy [pseudonym], would have definitely been the first person I went to for help. She taught grade one with me and was so welcoming and always made me feel like my ideas were heard and was super supportive. I still think of her to this day in my classroom, she was just such an amazing teacher. She was willing to give me anything I needed.

As she spoke, Rebecca recalled fond memories of working with such a compassionate educator. The influence Stacy had on Rebecca early in her career, had lingering effects on her and echoes into her own practice today. Similarly, when asked about experiences with seeking support, John quickly recalled his experiences with one of his mentors as a beginning teacher:

> That's what it's been like with Kevin [pseudonym]. He's like, very open. I can ask him anything. He's always giving me feedback, without sugarcoating it which is what I like. He is so straight-up with what he tells you is good or bad and how you can improve. And you want to take him up on what he says!

The connections that both participants had with one particular person was noteworthy. In sensitive situations where the participants needed to seek support, their first step seemed to be their preferred person, or 'champion' (Stolp et al., 2015). Interestingly, in both situations the trusted individual was a peer of the same gender with a similar level of power within the inherent hierarchy of school dynamics.

As our conversation carried on, Rebecca began to reveal some trauma she had experienced that significantly affected her overall wellness. As her familial world was shaken, she felt compelled to reach out for support from multiple sources, including her school administrators. This action required her to be completely vulnerable with someone in a position of power. Her ability to ask for help and tell her story to a person who holds power, not only took courage on her behalf, it also placed significant trust in the other individual. Reflecting on this difficult time in her life, Rebecca explained:

> I've decided that this is my story. I have no shame in it. But it was so nice because I am the person who keeps it together at work. I smile when I'm sad, nobody had any idea what was going on here. I had a meeting once with my administrators, and they

> mentioned how I'm always happy, they said you're always such a blessing to have at work, you just seem to have everything together. Two days later I walk into their office and he was like, "oh you're not okay." No, I am not okay. I had never broken down like that in front of an administrator before. After we talked, it was so nice to know that he had my back completely. I was so comfortable leaving for a while then because I knew everything was going to be okay. I knew I had support.

The fear of giving up responsibility for the children in her care impacted her decision to take a leave of absence from work. The compassion, empathy, and care given to her by administrators reassured her that taking time away from her job would be okay. As a result, she was able to take steps towards healing.

Thread 2: They Accepted Me With Open Arms

As our conversations continued to ebb and flow, both participants began to tell stories of the sense of belonging they feel and have felt in the past within their school faculty. John, recently moved from a school with a very racially and culturally diverse student population, yet predominately white staff, to a Spanish language school where the students and staff share a cultural background. On this recent change John explained:

> I'm actually in a good situation now. The school I'm at, Kevin recommended I apply there, and I got the job. It's a Spanish school and the staff feels a little bit closer because we all speak Spanish. It kind of brings us together in a certain way. Everyone has been really helpful and encouraging. The school culture is cohesive. They accepted me with open arms.

He continued to contrast his previous school culture to his new school context. He explains:

> It was different, because like I said, a lot of those teachers at the first school were surplused. They didn't choose to be there, they were placed, and they were like all white. The school had a student population that was like a majority Filipino and new immigrants from Africa. It felt like the staff had an attitude of like, there's us and then there's everyone else. Whereas, at my new school it's like we are all Spanish speakers together as a group.

The cultural bond and sense of belonging John felt in his new location was powerful for him. He seemed to feel isolated in his first school and particularly vulnerable as a young racialized teacher navigating the system trying to gain long-term employment.

While different for a variety of reasons, Rebecca also explained how she was embraced and welcomed into her school faculty/community and why this was so important for her:

> I'm a people person, which is a fault and a great thing. Sometimes I put pleasing people ahead of my own needs. I also have generalized anxiety disorder so I sometimes overthink and try to control situations. But that's why Stacy has been really good for me. Because I can go to her, and it immediately feels better.

Rebecca elaborates on the school culture in her building:

> When I came back to work from my leave, it was like coming back home for me. It was never overwhelming to return to work because I knew that I had support here and that everyone was here for me.

In both stories, when the participants identified a sense of belonging and a cohesive school culture, they were more willing and able to seek support and be their whole selves.

Thread 3: "If I Was In A Position To Speak Up, I Would Have Been Like, That's Not Okay!"

In the absence of trust, teachers are less likely to seek support, ask critical questions, and take pedagogical risks (Cranston, 2011). John clearly identified this sentiment through his stories, particularly in relation to his experience as a racialized beginning teacher. He described a situation he was placed in with a more senior teacher who made racist jokes about a student's name in the staffroom. John elaborated:

> If I was in a position to speak up, I would have been like, that's not okay! But I felt like I couldn't speak up because I didn't want to ruffle feathers. I was in a spot where I wanted to be in these people's good graces, constantly people-pleasing and always saying yes. So, in that position, I just didn't feel right, or maybe I didn't have the confidence to be like hey, that's not right.

John was placed in a situation where his vulnerability as a beginning teacher who is also racialized and trying to obtain a more permanent contract held him back from saying what he wanted to say at that moment. The actions of the other teacher in this situation eroded any trust that had been created for John on that school faculty. As a result, he began to pursue other positions.

Our conversation shifted slightly towards a historical account of John's family lineage and his new position. As the child of political refugees, the values instilled in him by his family to respect all people, value diversity, and learn from the stories of people in the margins, are now able to fully emerge in his teaching. In his new school, he has identified a sense of belonging which seems to have empowered him to take strides to becoming the teacher he wants to become. As the time and space has been opened for him to explore how his stories come to life

in his teaching practice, it is evident that he is also empowering his students to do the same. In relation to his teaching practice, John stated:

> I have gratitude and appreciation for the life that I've had here, that's the number one thing I've learned. And I always try, as a teacher, to present multiple perspectives on stories, not just the story that is presented. Whatever resource I'm using, I try to show how, you know, there's another group of people here and they've got something to say about these sorts of things. I feel the need to use all that experience so that people in the margins can have their stories heard. Because like, no one really knows much about Guatemala and the assassinations and civil war. It's been ingrained in me, mostly through my dad, because he always told me that I need to read and get informed on these things.

Conversely, Rebecca seems to have been in a position where trust had already been established in her school context, allowing her to speak freely about some of the trauma in her life. She seems to have embraced the role of a "wellness champion" (Stolp et al., 2014) and has worked to empower others (teachers and students) to seek the support they need. Using her stories as motivation, she seems to be energized by removing barriers for others. She explained:

> I went full circle and realized, this is a job that I love and now I have more energy because I'm not hiding things from anyone. I've realized that how you make people feel is so much more important than the curriculum. I just feel like helping people come to be the people they are going to be is really important.

As we continued our conversation on Google Meet, Rebecca was interrupted several times by people coming to ask her questions. Clearly, she was a person in her school that people went to when they needed help. In a way, she has become a mentor for others that she had as a younger teacher. Rebecca elucidated:

> My door is an open door, can you tell? The conversations that we have make such an imprint on the students. When I came back to the classroom last year, I had a student ask if he could stay in for recess, he was super emotional and in tears and told me that his dad was physically abusing him. I wonder if I hadn't said anything about my situation, he might not have come to me for help. To know that you can be the safe place for somebody else is the real power of our jobs.

The support that others had given her, administrators and trusted colleagues alike, empowered Rebecca to become a person in her school context who is able to speak up and advocate when things are not okay for others.

Discussion

After having engaged in such powerful conversations with both participants, it is clear that seeking support, for them, is an issue of trust, identity, and school culture. For both participants, it was the normative climate within the school that dictated where and how they sought support when they needed it. The normative culture, and the conditions that helped or hindered the support-seeking behaviour of participants, also reveals patterns of gendered differences. The interruptions during my conversations with Rebecca make me wonder how her colleagues story her as a helper. As a woman working in education, there could be an implicit expectation for her to fulfil the role of helper or caretaker to her colleagues. Similar to what Tupper (2005) explained, the interruptions to our conversations draw connections to deep rooted historical narratives (and omissions from historical narratives) about the role of women in society. Further explorations into the experiences of women seeking support as teachers in elementary schools would help create a more comprehensive understanding of how others experience these narratives.

Both participants were able to develop strong trusting relationships with a colleague that allowed them to be vulnerable and engage in critical dialogue with that person when seeking support. In order to develop such a relationship, the school culture needed to allow for the time and space for individuals to connect, engage in critical dialogue, and form bonds. It also seems that the climate of the school can act as an empowering tool that can perpetuate support-seeking behaviour by creating wellness "champions" (Stolp et al., 2015) who will act to seek out and remove barriers for others to find support. Both participants are aware of systems and individual people that helped or hindered them and are motivated to help others in the same manner. Conversely, as trust was eroded or possibly non-existent in the first place, John looked for support outside of his school context and towards a trusted peer. The conditions did not exist within his first school for him to feel comfortable voicing concerns and engaging in critical dialogue with his colleagues. As an Afro-Latino man navigating the early stages of his teaching career, I am left wondering about the intersections of hegemonic masculinity and race in John's story. His stories reveal the complexities of seeking support as a man (which actively goes against masculine hegemony) while also navigating the complexities of seeking support in a predominantly white social institution.

In my experience as a young teacher, I felt a strong sense of vulnerability that, when coupled with family trauma, led me to turn inwards and ultimately to the internet for guidance. I felt that I was not able to reach out to another person for support (which was not the case in hindsight) due to fears of being storied as ignorant, weak, or incompetent. My positioning with hegemonic masculinity created the desire within me to minimize my experiences, and play through the 'injury' (Connell, 2008). It was interesting to hear from the participants, that when they faced challenges, they turned outwards to a colleague. I did the opposite. This realization

makes me again puzzle about my own urge to hide my weaknesses and try to find information online without the stigma of perceived judgement. Although my participants did not feel this way, I wonder if others resonate with my experiences as a beginning teacher? Particularly, I wonder if other male teachers have similar experiences of avoiding support-seeking behaviour due to the masculine hegemony created and sustained in schools and competitive sports? Also, how does the intersection of race and hegemonic masculinity shape these behaviours?

My initial wonderings about internet search behaviour in schools was motivated by my original intentions to 'fix' and leverage the 'problem' into something useful for teachers. The 'problem' being individuals in schools avoiding human connection and instead seeking support from the internet. For example, I wondered if an educator could utilize the internet search data of their students as a formative assessment tool? This view of the issue was inattentive to the contextual influences that lead an individual to the internet in the first place. Why would someone need to use the internet, and not be able to ask someone in the school (or even outside of it) for help? It seems evident now, from the review of literature, and my conversations with participants, that individuals will be less likely to turn to the internet for support in the presence of a supportive and trusted person.

Future Considerations

While this research explores the support-seeking behaviour of teachers, it would be interesting to explore this topic with students. Students' support-seeking behaviour and internet use could reveal interesting insights into power dynamics, internet search behaviour, and gendered differences with seeking support from digital sources, and potential ways to better support students who most need it. Boys in particular may avoid seeking support regarding sensitive topics from teachers due to toxic hegemonic masculinity stigmas and stereotypes

(Cahill & Coffey, 2013). Additional research regarding student support-seeking behaviour and internet use would need to be attentive to issues of digital equity, a topic that this research does not adequately address.

Seeking support is a very large and multifaceted topic. It would be beneficial to continue to explore how teachers seek support, specifically using digital sources and the intersections of race and gender while doing so. It became apparent that both of the participants use digital sources to support their teaching practice; however the presence of a trusted person mitigated any over-reliance on digital sources. Although this research helped me to better understand teachers' support-seeking behaviours and motivations, I am left wondering about the impact of teachers seeking pedagogical support from digital sources. For example, do search algorithms impact a teacher's ability to remain attentive to their students' local contexts, by offering suggested lessons created for students in a different location/curriculum? What role do digital sources play in the universalization of education? In my experience, the internet felt like a safe place, as a beginning male teacher, to explore pedagogical practices without judgement. I wonder what would be uncovered if more teachers inquired into their internet use and support-seeking behaviours?

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Appendix A

A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Elementary Teachers with Seeking Support

Interview 1 - October 2021

Central Question: What are the experiences of elementary teachers seeking support?

Sub questions:

- What are your experiences with seeking support from administrators?
- What are your experiences with seeking support from colleagues?
- What are your experiences with seeking support from digital media?

Follow-Up/Probing Questions (if needed):

- (After I introduce myself) Please tell me a little about yourself and your teaching experience
- As a beginning teacher, what were your experiences with seeking support?
    a. From administration?
    b. From colleagues?
    c. From digital sources?
- As a more experienced teacher, what are your experiences with seeking support?

a. From administration?
b. From colleagues?
c. From digital sources?

- What, in your opinion, would be helpful/useful to ensure teachers find the support they need?
- Can you describe a time where you were not comfortable seeking support from a colleague or administrator? How did you find the support you needed?
- Can you describe a time where you were comfortable seeking support from a colleague or administrator? How did you find the support you needed?
- What are your preferred methods of finding information out? Has this always been the case?

Appendix B

October 1, 2021

Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent Form

Study Title: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Elementary Teachers with Seeking Support

Researcher: Joe Knight, B.Ed

My name is Joe Knight and I am a grade 5 teacher at Sarah Thompson School located in Langdon Alberta. I am currently completing my Masters of Education in Educational Leadership at Concordia University of Edmonton. As part of my program, I will be conducting a research study that focuses on teacher's experiences with factors that impact their ability to seek support/ask questions. This letter is an invitation for you to participate in my research study and the information below is provided to help you make your decision. Please be aware that you are free to withdraw from the study at time without any consequence. This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Concordia University of Edmonton.

Explanation of Procedures

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the factors that impact teachers' ability to seek support and ask questions in school settings. I hope to gain insight into your personal experiences of seeking support at work and learn more about how you prefer to ask questions and find information. I will be using a narrative inquiry approach to this research which will involve telling stories of personal experiences about seeking support throughout the course of your career. This study will involve meeting with you two times over the next few months to learn from you and reflect on your thoughts and experiences related to seeking support. Each of our research conversations will be roughly one hour to one and a half hour in length and will be held at a time and place of your choosing (depending on local COVID-19 protocols and your comfort, these meetings can also be completed virtually). Our conversations will be recorded and transcribed. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions about the procedures of this study prior to your participation.

Potential Risks

The research will be conducted in such a way that minimizes potential risks, however strong emotions and feelings could be triggered by discussing your previous experiences with seeking support. If this happens, please reach out to the Alberta Health Mental Health Hotline at 1-877-303-2642, or the Mental Health Online Resources for Educators (MORE) website (more.hmhc.ca)

Benefits

By participating in this study, you will gain a deeper understanding of your own support-seeking behaviour and may be able to transfer some of that learning back to your classroom and school context to the benefit of your students and colleagues. This is also an opportunity to share your thoughts, experiences and feelings about teachers seeking support in schools. With your participation in this research, you will also be benefiting myself and other educators who may read research papers, or attend presentations related to this research.

Confidentiality

The privacy and confidentiality of your identity and responses are very important and will be protected at all times throughout this research. All materials, responses, handwritten notes, digital transcripts, signed

information and consent letters, and any other data collected in this study will be securely stored for 5 years after the completion of the research, upon which time it will be destroyed and/or permanently deleted. Only I will have access to documents associated with this research and they will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home to which I will be the only person with access. All digital transcripts and documents will be secured on a password-protected computer. There will be no identifying information on any of the research notes, texts, or transcripts. Your name and any other identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of this research, as pseudonyms will be used. The results of this research will be published in the form of a research paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented in professional meetings.

Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will have no consequences for you. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any point in this study any time before I submit my final research paper for publication without penalty or prejudice. You are also free to omit or refuse to answer any question(s) during our interviews.

Further Questions and Follow-Up

If you have any questions prior to, during, or after the completion of the research please contact me at the information given below.

I,_____(name; please print clearly), have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time before the publication of the final research paper. I understand that my identity and identifying information will be kept confidential.

Participant Signature Date

If:

(a) you would like a copy of your research conversation transcripts once they are available
(b) you are interested in information about the study results as a whole and/or
(c) if you would be willing to be contacted again in the future for possible follow-up research conversations, please provide contact information below:

Check those that apply:

_____ I would like copies of my research conversation transcripts
_____ I would like information about the study results
_____ I would be willing to be contacted in the future for a possible follow-up interview

Write your address clearly below. Please also provide an email address if you have one.

Mailing address:

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Researcher contact information
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