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BUILDING BELONGING THROUGH COHERENCE: HOW STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF A REGGIO EMILIA-INSPIRED SCHOOL SUPPORT TEACHER IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

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BUILDING BELONGING THROUGH COHERENCE: HOW STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF A REGGIO EMILIA-INSPIRED SCHOOL SUPPORT TEACHER IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand how a structured school model can foster belonging in early childhood educators. Over the course of one semester, twelve participants from an early childhood education center were interviewed and observed to gain insight into how their school's instructionally coherent framework supports the teachers' sense of belonging. Social Identity Theory was used as the guiding theory for understanding the experiences observed. Results indicate that a common instructional framework was used effectively by school leaders to facilitate belonging through cognitive and relational processes involved in identity formation.

Keywords: instructional program coherence, coherence, teacher well-being, teacher sense of belonging, structural alignment, cognitive alignment, social identity theory

Introduction

The retention of early childhood educators, as defined as educators who work with children under the age of six, is a challenge faced by many education centers in the United States (Fiegener & Adams, 2022; Pendergast & Dewherst, 2020). Teachers face an increasing workload each new year, and are expected to manage multiple, complex demands, often without additional support. Classroom and workplace challenges include implementing new curriculum programs, connecting with parents, attending diverse professional development sessions, an increased focus on meeting student milestones, and managing suboptimal student behavior (Burger et al. 2021; Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). These demands add pressure to teachers who are already overwhelmed or on the verge of burning out (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). The well-being of teachers is directly impacted when pressure increases, and isolation brews in uncertainty (Pendergast & Dewherst, 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

Educational leaders can take purposeful action to improve teachers' well-being and sense of belonging. One action is to craft a coherent instructional environment (Newmann et. al., 2001; Honig & Hatch, 2004). A coherent environment with a clear instructional framework and alignment of structures and practices with the framework (Newmann et al., 2001) appeals to the social and psychological processes that support belonging (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). These conditions are encapsulated by the term "Instructional Program Coherence." Instructional Program Coherence is defined in this study as a coherent framework for instruction that aligns structural elements, such as curriculum, assessments, and the physical environment, with cognitive factors, including professional development and social engagements (Fiegener & Adams, 2024; Salloum, 2022; Youngs et al., 2011). When teachers experience an environment

with higher levels of coherence, they are more likely to report better well-being and an increased intent to stay in the profession (Salloum, 2022; Youngs et al., 2011).

While there is much research on the well-being of teachers in general, and the sense of belonging in particular (Burger et al., 2021, Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Ussher, 2010), there is little research that directly examines how Instructional Program Coherence might support early childhood educators' sense of belonging. Instructional Program Coherence has been established as a predictor of teacher well-being (Fiegener & Adams, 2024; Huić et al., 2024). Research on how instructional program coherence works to support positive teacher psychological states, including their sense of belonging, is limited.

In particular, empirical work has not yet examined *how* Instructional Program Coherence might specifically support early childhood educators' sense of belonging. This understanding is critical for school leaders considering the importance of teacher belonging in retaining early childhood teachers (Pendergast & Dewherst, 2020), particularly in areas with high turnover rates. Thus, the research question guiding this study was: How are structural features of Instructional Program Coherence used to support teacher sense of belonging?

Review of Literature

The well-being of educators is paramount to the success of a school. Teacher well-being includes feeling a sense of belonging, socially and emotionally, and this may be supported by instructional program coherence (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Youngs et al., 2011). Teachers need to be immersed in an environment where they can build social connections and experience relatedness (Ussher, 2010). It is suggested that a method of supporting a teacher's need for belonging is to provide them with a school environment that is coherent in as many ways as is feasible (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

Traditionally, Instructional Program Coherence has been used to study the outcomes of coherence, primarily through student achievement (Newmann et al., 2001). While there have been multiple studies on teacher belonging and well-being, few have explored the influence of Instructional Program Coherence and a coherent instructional framework on teachers' sense of belonging and well-being (Burger et al., 2021, Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Ussher, 2010). To address this gap, this study examines the relationship between structural elements of Instructional Program Coherence and teachers' sense of belonging through careful evaluation of the experiences of early childhood educators.

Instructional Program Coherence

Although the generic term "coherence" has long been discussed as a factor involved in curriculum and student advancement, the term Instructional Program Coherence was not formally introduced as a measurable concept until 2001 (Newmann et al., 2001). The definition of Instructional Program Coherence has evolved over time. In 2004, Honig & Hatch began to move away from "coherence exists" to "coherence must be intentionally crafted." Bryk et al. (2010) discuss coherence as the alignment of instructional guidance, professional learning,

leadership, and organization supports around a common instructional focus. Their definition moves beyond overtly visible elements and begins to emphasize leadership and organizational systems within schools, building on the work developed by Honig & Hatch (2004). More recent literature, as defined by Youngs et al. in 2011, focuses more on teacher experiences, mental and physical resources, the professional culture within a group, and emphasizes social and cognitive dimensions of coherence.

For the purpose of this study, Instructional Program Coherence is defined as a coherent framework for instruction that aligns structural elements, such as curriculum, assessments, schedules, and the environment, with cognitive factors, including professional development and social engagements (Fiegener & Adams, 2024; Salloum, 2022; Youngs et al., 2011). Key aspects behind the development of coherence are the strength of the administration, a shared frame of mind among the teachers, a democratic approach, a common instructional framework, and an investment in resources that are aligned with the common framework (Newmann et al., 2001).

Instructionally coherent schools generally have support systems in place that help early childhood educators feel more confident and ready to face challenges (Newmann et al., 2001; Ussher, 2010). In many cases, the most visible support involves a common framework, a consistent message from leadership, and strong interpersonal connections (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

The literature suggests that the presence of a common framework keeps teachers from feeling unprepared or overwhelmed. Having guidance for curriculum development, materials that align with the curriculum, and steady structures in place make up a large part of the success of new teachers (Youngs et al., 2011), as does social and emotional support from their peers and mentors (Laker et al., 2008). In many situations, this framework is built from a school-wide

belief that the method of instruction implemented is the most effective way to educate students. A strong feature of the common framework is that its value must be considered worthwhile enough to span the entire organization, particularly in schools. Developing a coherent instructional framework is a central portion of the successful development of Instructional Program Coherence. The framework is the foundation that is built upon by leaders to encourage and support faculty and staff (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Newmann et al., 2001).

A common instructional framework is not tied directly to a specific curriculum. While curriculum is usually part of the common instruction framework, it is not the defining feature (Newmann et al., 2001). Curriculum is only one aspect of a common instructional framework. Other structures are vital in building the framework, including the physical environment, bonds between faculty and staff, routines put in place by leadership, and the materials necessary to implement the chosen curriculum (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Newmann et al., 2001;).

Some structural elements of Instructional Program Coherence are not always visible or straightforward. While some choices are easily labeled as "structural," like curriculum and teacher evaluation, other structural elements in coherent schools run seamlessly in the background. For example, casual collaboration through conversation may seem inconsequential, but it is still part of the school structure (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Newmann et al., 2001; Youngs et al., 2011).

As coherence emerges, teachers develop shared understandings of teaching and learning and a sense of shared responsibility (Fiegener & Adams, 2024; Honig & Hatch, 2004). When a common framework is not in place, teachers' abilities to find social acceptance with their mentors and colleagues are limited (Youngs et al., 2011). Honig & Hatch (2004) place an emphasis on the necessity of organizational alignment. This is achieved and maintained by not

only the compliance of educators, but also the school or organization's leadership (Salloum, 2020).

Teacher Sense of Belonging

The term "belonging" has been defined in many ways in many different fields. In the field of education, academic belonging is the most relevant definition. Lewis et al. (2016) describe academic belonging as "the extent to which individuals feel like a valued, accepted, and legitimate member in their academic domain." In practice, belonging appears in many forms (Carter, 2021). Erik Carter, a researcher who examines academic belonging as it relates to individuals with special needs, has identified 11 dimensions of belonging in schools (Carter, 2021). Key indicators of Carter's work on teacher belonging include feeling welcome, involved, needed, and supported. Carter (2021) offers indicators that help staff feel that they belong, like engaging in authentic conversations, collaborating with colleagues, being involved in decisions that shape the school's environment, and sharing resources and ideas. For the purpose of this study, "teachers' sense of belonging" will be discussed in relation to Carter (2021) and Lewis et al. (2016)'s definition of academic belonging.

For early childhood educators, feeling as though they are in an environment that fits their needs is an important aspect of their decision to stay in their school (Weiss, 1999). Belonging is well-documented as having positive outcomes for teachers, particularly for their physical and emotional well-being. (Jones et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2016; Ussher, 2010). Studies have demonstrated that pre-service teachers were more committed to teaching when they felt a sense of belonging (Pendergast & Dewherst, 2020). Social connection is a strong indicator of whether someone feels as though they belong; for teachers, this may involve collaboration efforts, connections with coworkers, and feeling liked and respected (Carter, 2021; Fisher & Frey, 2024;

Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Community is especially important: belonging does not develop in a vacuum. Being part of a teacher community is an essential factor in determining if a teacher will feel as though they belong in their role (Pendergast & Dewherst, 2020). Teachers reported higher satisfaction when they experienced elements of social cohesion, supportive leadership, and support from colleagues, which aligns with Carter's research on academic belonging (Fiegener & Adams, 2022; Carter, 2021).

Pendergast and Dewherst (2020) note that building connections with mentors is an indicator that a teacher will find belonging in a professional setting or that they will leave the profession. Several studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between pre-service teachers' sense of belonging and supportive relationships with other teachers and mentors (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Izadinia, 2015; Laker et al., 2008) which influences their commitment to the field (Fox & Wilson, 2015). Communication, both positive and negative, is also considered essential to teachers' social connections that support their sense of belonging (Fox & Wilson, 2015). Teachers should also feel welcome, included, and confident that their peers accept them (Carter, 2021; Johnston, 2016; Passy, 2013; Izadinia, 2005).

The working conditions teachers experience also affect their ability to feel as though they belong (Fiegener & Adams, 2024; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). In some cases, teachers reported that their decision to stay in the profession was based on the positive working conditions, including the social and relational aspects of working as a team, as well as structural supports, including the intentional design of spaces where teachers can comfortably spend time together (Fiegener & Adams, 2024; Newmann et al., 2001; Weiss, 1999). Collaboration and positive interactions with school leadership have been cited as important factors that benefit teachers (Honig & Hatch,

2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). Clear and consistent communication from leaders creates a stable environment where teachers can flourish (Youngs et al., 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory (SIT) was used as the driving theoretical framework for this study to understand how structural features of instructional program coherence are used to facilitate the development of early childhood educators' sense of belonging. SIT is a framework for understanding identification within groups and organizations. Ashforth and Mael (1989) provide a definition of social identity theory with the following three parts: 1) social identification is the perception of belongingness to a group; 2) SIT focuses on the question of "Who am I?"; and 3) social identity is cognitive and relational, not motivational or emotional. Due to the theoretical framework's focus on groups and understanding how groups function, SIT is well-suited for studying organizations and institutional settings, like schools, where people are a part of a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Cummins & O'Boyle, 2014). Many schools purposefully group teachers in systematic ways. For example, Professional Learning Communities are often arranged so that teachers from the same subject area or grade level spend time communicating closely with each other (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Newmann et al., 2001; Youngs et al., 2011).

As Ashforth and Mael (1989) address, social identity is cognitive and relational. People understand themselves as members of social groups, and those group memberships become psychologically meaningful (Hogg et al., 1995). Identification is a cognitive self-definition and not a behavioral outcome. Individuals classify themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, and people in groups that have higher symbolic value experience higher levels of social identity (Huddy, 2001). SIT offers a detailed account of the cognitive processes that create group behavior: individuals depersonalize their self-concepts and perceive themselves as part of the

group more than individual actors (Hogg et al., 1995). Group identities differ in meanings for members, and the meanings have a more powerful effect on behavior than just being part of the group (Hennessy & West, 1999). This leads to group norms serving as behavioral guides, which can override personal preferences (Hogg et al., 1995).

Self-definition and evaluation processes can be altered by strong identification with a group (Suzuki, 1998). Their membership with that group can become a way for individuals to find meaning and motivation, but this can keep them from pursuing positive relationships with people outside of their group (Hennessy & West, 1999). Consequences of intense in-group development include self-stereotyping, cognitive dissonance, groupthink, and the chance that individual people will act in ways that fit the group norms instead of their own intrinsic beliefs (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The deidentification of individuals in a group can lead to disinterest and dissatisfaction with leadership activities (Haslam et al., 2020; Hogg et al., 1995). Leadership is an identity that develops within social group structures inside schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Nolan et al., 2025). From a SIT perspective, active leadership depends on whether teachers perceive leaders as an in-group they trust (Haslam et al., 2017).

Without addressing group dynamics, leadership changes can deepen exclusion and undermine teachers' sense of belonging (Nolan et al., 2025). It is therefore important that group members have a common sense of purpose and a shared understanding of their role within an organization (Hogg et al., 1995). The influence of SIT helps to understand why people conform to group practices. Identity is a central mechanism that links organizational structure with individual behavior. SIT assumes that group identification immediately follows categorization and ignores empirical evidence that suggests group identities are adopted in multiple ways, depending on the individual (Huddy, 2001).

Identities vary in intensity and stability. Identity salience fluctuates and changes depending on the context (Hogg et al., 1995). Fostering identity within groups can improve communication and collaboration (Suzuki, 1998); members of in-groups are more comfortable communicating with each other, and the members are more likely to interpret situations in a positive light, while members of out-groups are often cautious when sharing information and speaking with others (Suzuki, 1998).

Context matters when addressing identity and group behavior through SIT (Huddy, 2001). In real-world organizational settings, Hennessy and West (1999) found that patterns of identification within groups shaped cooperation and in-group favoritism. While workplace groups are often encouraged in organizations, including schools, SIT suggests that identification can strengthen the boundaries between groups, which can create unwanted competition between groups, particularly in the workplace (Hennessy & West, 1999). When there is conflict or uncertainty in the organization, group members rely on each other more and the boundaries present between groups become stronger (Suzuki, 1998). When addressing school dynamics, norms and boundaries may develop in closely-knit teacher communities such as Professional Learning Communities or spaces shared by specific teachers and teaching assistants (Hogg et al., 1995; Hennessy & West, 1999; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In highly coherent instructional environments, group norms and boundaries are more visible and consistent (Newmann et al., 2001). Social Identity Theory helps explain how that visibility influences educators' sense of belonging (Nolan et al., 2025). Coherent environments do not eliminate in-groups and out-groups – nor should they – but a coherent environment can help to develop a culture where the groups are able to work together to reach shared goals and expectations (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Higher levels of coherence encourage clearer norms through clear expectations for members of

the group, which helps foster cohesion within groups (Hogg et al., 1995). Due to this relationship, Social Identity Theory is a lens that can support an understanding of how instructional program coherence relates to a sense of belonging among members of an organization (Haslam et al., 2017).

Methods

This research study was designed to understand how structural features of Instructional Program Coherence are developed to cultivate teacher sense of belonging, and document how teachers in an early childhood education center setting experience a sense of belonging when structural features of Instructional Program Coherence are present. This was a qualitative single-case study, which was appropriate because of the specific aspects of Instructional Program Coherence already present in the early childhood education center. Instructional Program Coherence takes time and extensive effort to build, and teachers' sense of belonging is not something that is easily measured through quantitative efforts. Belonging is experienced within a specific environment, and this study explores how organizational and contextual structures influence those experiences. The researcher wanted to understand perceptions, experiences, and how those experiences are related to the presence of Instructional Program Coherence within their organization.

This study explores:

1. *How are structural features of Instructional Program Coherence used to support teacher sense of belonging?*

Methodology and Study Setting

Data collection took place at one early childhood education center in a large, urban district in the Midwestern part of the United States. For the sake of confidentiality, the school

will be referred to as “Redbud Circle Early Childhood Education Center,” or “Redbud Circle.” Identifying details of organizations, locations, and participants have also been anonymized.

Redbud Circle was purposefully selected because of its history of high instructional program coherence and their use of a strong instructional framework. The school had the highest mean score of structural program coherence in the district. On a scale from 1 to 6, Redbud Circle scored a 5.08 in structural program coherence, as reported by an annual state-wide report in 2024 (State Education Policy Organization, 2024a). In the same state-wide policy report, faculty at Redbud Circle reported high levels of faculty belonging (5.31), competence satisfaction (5.38), and an enabling school structure (5.25) (State Education Policy Organization, 2024a). Parents surveyed reported high levels of satisfaction with the school across several indicators, including parent/guardian satisfaction (5.47) and the quality of the instructional program (5.75) (State Education Policy Organization, 2024a). In a second report published about the school district that Redbud Circle is a part of, mean faculty scores were significantly lower than the scores reported by Redbud Circle, which further informed the researcher’s decision to study Redbud Circle’s instructional methodology and teacher experiences (State Education Policy Organization, 2024b).

Reggio Emilia-Inspired Framework

Redbud Circle Early Childhood Education Center describes themselves as a “Reggio Emilia-Inspired," center, and their decisions are guided by that philosophy. Schools and centers that successfully implement the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework require leaders, teachers, teaching assistants, and support staff to have a shared mindset, values, and passion for the philosophy (Gilman, 2007).

The Reggio Emilia education model originated in the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy after World War II when Italy moved away from a dictatorship (Hewett, 2001). The city's parents, teachers, and community leaders sought to build an educational environment where their students could learn about democracy, independence, and the importance of critical thinking (Jacobson, 2007). These principles guide the design and construction of the Reggio Emilia schools. Over time, the city's educational philosophy spread across Italy and then to the rest of the world.

One of the most relevant guiding principles of the Reggio Emilia model comes from teacher and psychologist Loris Malaguzzi's *Hundred Languages of Children* (Scott, 2023). Malaguzzi posits that children express themselves and explore concepts in many different ways. This supports the foundational concept that children have rights, including the right to express themselves through constructive and thoughtful actions. They should be given both agency and autonomy when it comes to their education and should be seen as strong and capable (Ghirotto & Mazzoni, 2013; Gilman, 2007). Because of these philosophical demands, the early childhood education center selected for this study has unique instructional methods, such as play-based learning and a flexible curriculum that addresses students' needs and interests.

Redbud Circle was not always a Reggio Emilia-Inspired education center, but it was built to be a model of the potential outcomes of a community-centered, intentionally designed learning environment. A change in school leadership around 2016 further cemented the transition to the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework. There is no specific date associated with the official transition to the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework; the model's influence grew over time.

An instructional framework such as the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model requires commitment from all team members. The framework serves as the foundation for crafting,

developing, and maintaining Instructional Program Coherence through strict adherence to the model and a strong understanding of the goals defined by the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model.

Participants

Purposeful criterion sampling (Merriam, 2015) was used to identify teachers and leaders with various backgrounds and who had served for at least one year. The researcher made an effort to select participants who had a wide range of experience and tenure. Information regarding the teachers was provided by the school's principal. Participants who met the first criterion of serving for at least one year were emailed directly. The email invitation explained the purpose of the study, outlined the consent form, and included information regarding compensation.

To examine Early Childhood Educators' sense of belonging in a school with high Instructional Program Coherence, the researcher interviewed participants directly. Twelve employees were interviewed, including six teachers, four teaching assistants, an instructional coach, and the school's principal. The present study examines the experiences of teachers and teaching assistants. Participants who met the sampling criteria were provided with a $100 gift card as compensation for their time. Participation in this study was voluntary, and a description of the goals of the study was distributed to participants along with a consent form before data collection began. Participants were made aware of the researcher's interests but assured that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions asked.

Demographic Data

Table 1. Demographic Data of Teachers and Teaching Assistants

Participant	Role	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of Experience
001	Master Teacher	Female	White	14
002	Teacher	Female	Asian	14
003	Teacher	Female	White	15.5
004	Teacher	Female	White	4
005	Teacher	Female	White	13
006	Teacher	Female	White	10
101	Teaching Assistant	Female	White	19
102	Teaching Assistant	Female	Hispanic	10
103	Teaching Assistant	Female	White	5.5
104	Teaching Assistant	Female	White	4

Table 2. School Leader Characteristics

Participant	Role	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of Experience as an Administrator
201	Principal	Female	White	16
202	Instructional Coach	Female	White	2

Data Collection

The researcher visited Redbud Circle's Early Childhood Education Center four times during the 2024-2025 school year, usually for 2 hours at a time. Twelve members of Redbud Circle's staff were interviewed. The interview questions (see Appendices D and E) were open-ended, and the researcher did not enforce a time limit. Interviews with participants were recorded on iPads or iPhones with participants' written and verbal consent. The interviews ranged in time from approximately 15 minutes to 90 minutes. During the interviews with teachers and teaching assistants, the researcher asked questions pertaining to the teachers' experiences and interactions with other members of the school's community, with the goal of discovering how the

instructionally coherent education model was successfully implemented, and how that fostered a sense of belonging.

In addition to interviews, both informal and formal observations took place in classrooms and during teachers' collaboration time. When observing the educators' collaboration time, the researcher utilized a narrative supervision method to further understand how the participants interacted with each other and their surroundings. During the observations, the researcher intentionally took note of the physical setting and informal interactions between teachers. Field notes from the observations can be found in Appendix G.

Ethics

The researcher worked to clearly explain the study to the participants, obtain consent forms from everyone involved, and ensure the confidentiality of each participant by assigning them a participant number. Approval for this study was granted by the institutional review board prior to data collection.

Trustworthiness of the Data

The qualitative, single-case study design was best suited for this study due to the unique perspectives found in a Reggio Emilia-Inspired school. The researcher worked to build relationships with the teachers and teaching assistants to put them at ease, which allowed for detailed transcripts that included not only the formal responses to interview questions, but also anecdotal statements and "small talk."

The detailed transcripts of the conversations were fully analyzed. The use of unfiltered transcripts that included pauses and filler words allowed the researcher to fully examine the reactions of the participants to the interview questions. During the coding process, the researcher did not simply look for items that confirm or support the research question, but also topics that

might be perceived as “negative.” For example, the interview question of motivation was examined thoroughly, and when demotivating factors were stated instead of, or in addition to, motivating factors, the demotivating factors were well-documented throughout the coding process. The findings were grounded in direct participant quotes, and interpretations of the findings were made in the discussion section, which allowed for an objective description of the study’s findings.

The researcher acknowledges that their positionality may have an influence on the research. The researcher has a background in early childhood education, academic experience, and familiarity with coherence and belonging, and may notice or prioritize examples of structural or cognitive coherence. To address this, the researcher visited the site multiple times at different times of the day, and in addition to interviews and observations, they examined materials provided by the school to avoid relying on limited perspectives. The additional materials can be found in Appendix H.

Like many qualitative single-case studies, this study cannot be replicated or generalized. Due to the nature of the program, lesson plans, classrooms, materials, and educator interactions change rapidly and often without substantial notice. The structures in place that support the teachers, however, can be implemented in a number of ways in various instructional and organizational settings, as considered in the discussion.

Data Analysis

To address the research question, the researcher analyzed data from twelve interview transcripts and four observation sessions. Transcripts of the interviews were generated using Otter.ai and an additional online qualitative analysis tool, Quirkos. Prior to reading through the transcripts, the researcher revisited the purpose of the study, and kept this thought in mind while

reading: How do teachers and teaching assistants describe their experiences? The researcher then read through the data to become familiar with the responses from Redbud Circle's staff.

As they read, the researcher looked for patterns and noted repetitive comments. As the questions posed to the teachers and teaching assistants did not directly address the term "Instructional Program Coherence" or ask participants to address their sense of belonging, care was taken to note terms and descriptions that supported or rebuked the theories surrounding instructional program coherence and teachers' sense of belonging. The researcher also looked for responses that aligned with the theoretical framework, Social Identity Theory, with priority given to verbiage surrounding the teachers and teaching assistants' development of groups that might shape their identity.

Once familiar with the responses, the researcher began to open-code the transcripts, which resulted in 27 initial codes, including items such as collaboration, motivation, and accountability. Although the research question was kept in mind, the researcher did not limit their notation; any and all patterns were open-coded. A secondary analysis supported 19 of the 27 initial codes. The codes were grouped into five categories: 1. Inclusive Environment, 2. Support Systems, 3. Accountability, 4. Community, and 5. Mindset (see Table 2).

Table 2. Categories and Codes

Category	Codes
1. Inclusive Environment	Teamwork Collaboration Inclusion of TAs Shared Mindset
2. Support Systems	Leadership Support Peer Support Autonomy Family-Oriented Environment
3. Accountability	Accountability to Students Accountability to Peers Accountability to Families Accountability to Profession
4. Community	Community Connections Family Involvement Family Communication
5. Mindset	Outside Influence on Hiring Shared Jargon Trauma/Trauma Informed Care Low Turnover

The researcher refined their analysis until three key themes were solidified: *Belonging Lives in a Commitment to a Shared Philosophy, Intentional Organizational Structures, and Community Engagement.* While these themes do not directly answer the research question, they reveal insight into feelings of belonging and how the elements of instructional program coherence are perceived and experienced by teachers and teaching assistants at Redbud Circle.

When reviewing the field notes from two of the formal observation sessions (see Appendix G), the researcher prioritized the notation of data surrounding elements of Instructional Program Coherence, including shared jargon, the arrangement of the physical setting, and any evidence of the integration of new learning in lesson planning. This information

was not included in the coding process but rather used as a method for contextualizing the visits to Redbud Circle.

Findings

Supporting teachers' sense of belonging occurs in a myriad of ways, including implementing structural features of Instructional Program Coherence. Through interviews, observations, and material examinations, the researcher sought to understand systems in place and how they are used to support teachers' experiences and develop group dynamics. Data analysis revealed three key themes that relate to the research question: 1. *Belonging Lives in a Commitment to a Shared Philosophy*, 2. *Intentional Organizational Structures,* and 3. *Community Engagement*.

Belonging Lives in Commitment to a Shared Philosophy

Commitment is often discussed as an intentional process to encourage members of organizations to "buy in" to the company or organization's work. The results of this study posit that belonging and commitment are built through small actions and interactions, not through loud and public incentives. Instead, this work considers belonging to be a result of commitment to a shared philosophy. There is not a formula for this construction, but instead a gradual process that relies on passionate connections between teachers, teaching assistants, and leaders, and their outlook on the importance of the implementation of their model. Belonging is made clear in Redbud Circle's setting through the shared actions, visions, and identities related to the shared philosophy provided by the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework.

Passion for the Reggio Emilia-Inspired Philosophy

The Reggio Emilia-Inspired philosophy was introduced at Redbud Circle slowly, allowing teachers and staff to become comfortable with the model. Elenor, the principal,

explained that “they started with environments, just began changing out materials, more low lighting, aesthetic, pleasing, homey feel. And then after that, they kind of took the next step of looking at documentation,” and that they “then slowly began just making some changes" over a three-to-four-year period. Not all of the staff were able to adjust to the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model. Elenor shared that the school lost some of their staff during the change. The faculty and staff that stayed, though, developed a passion for the philosophy and curriculum over time.

When asked to describe the impact of the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model on their school, most teachers and teaching assistants shared a similar message: the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework is important, and other frameworks do not provide children with adequate early childhood education. Maresha, a classroom teacher, left Redbud Circle to pursue an opportunity as an instructional coach, but quickly returned to her position at Redbud Circle. She stated that during her time as an instructional coach, it was difficult to coach teachers in traditional classrooms because they did not share her philosophy of education. The other school’s environment, she explained, “was a lot more rigid and the teachers didn’t have a lot of autonomy in the classroom.” The teachers she coached often and openly questioned her worldview and beliefs, which left Maresha feeling unfulfilled and questioning her ability to coach teachers who did not share her values and passion. Maresha’s return to Redbud Circle demonstrates how strongly teachers and staff are committed to the school, and, more specifically, the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework.

Shared Point of View

Outsiders often struggle to understand the mindset teachers and teaching assistants have that allows them to work in “controlled chaos,” as Maresha explained. She recalled a former staff member who questioned the “chaos.” People who are not well-versed in the Reggio Emilia-

Inspired instructional model “get very overwhelmed because they feel like they’re not doing anything.” The contrast between Reggio Emilia-Inspired teachers and people who do not understand the model is stark and helps to solidify the boundary between in-groups and out-groups.

Maresha shared her frustration with members of the out-group who questioned the non-traditional setting. "There's a difference between, like, letting them run wild and it being crazy, and there being nothing happening in the room, as opposed to ‘they’re doing what they want to do but in a controlled, calm environment.’" The environment may be atypical, but the line it creates between “us” and “them” influences how well teachers and teaching assistants experience belonging.

To address the issue of outsiders not understanding the model, each member of Redbud Circle’s staff was purposefully chosen because they were seen to have the potential to fit in. Their background and experience allow them to engage with and support the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework and build connections within the school. Maresha stated that the desire for a traditional preschool environment has to change for a new teacher to become comfortable with the “controlled chaos.” Maresha shared that “for teachers who switch, who aren’t really versed in Reggio [Emilia-Inspired Philosophy], before they come to [Redbud Circle], get very overwhelmed because they feel like they’re not doing anything, or they feel like they’re letting the kids just kind of run wild.”

The teachers and teaching assistants “have to be on board with [the philosophy]” to understand its value as an instructional framework, according to the principal. The school’s expectations of their students contrast with traditional pre-school standards, so new teachers must acclimate to the somewhat unusual climate. Once they are acclimated to the new

environment, they join the rest of the school in its passion for educating students through the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model.

Bonds Between Teachers and Teaching Assistants

The bond between the teachers and their teaching assistants is vital to the staff's ability to maintain instructional coherence and in-group relationships. Maxine, a teaching assistant, described the communication between herself and the lead classroom teacher as "dating each other;" they take note of each other's needs and ideas. Maxine appreciates the direct support from the teacher she works with, especially when it comes to how the children perceive her. She is not just another adult in the room – Maxine's classroom teacher makes sure the children understand that Maxine is a member of their team. Maxine referenced this when asked about her relationship with the classroom teacher and shared:

> She's [Lead Teacher] really good about like if I say, 'Oh, [student], go put that away,' and then the child doesn't do it, she'll be like, 'Ms. Maxine said to put that away,' so she makes sure that I'm the teacher as well, and I really like that, that she treats me as a teacher as well, not just a helper.

Many teachers that the researcher spoke with take care to validate their teaching assistants and make sure the students respect all the adults, not just the lead teachers. Interactions such as the one Maxine described demonstrate how collaboration helps to build ties between teachers and teaching assistants, and how important teamwork is in an early childhood setting (Carter, 2021). Laura, a classroom teacher, also shared that "...having a teaching assistant with me at all times is great because when we're feeling the chaos, we can just look at each other and take a deep breath."

Together, these examples demonstrate how commitment to a shared philosophy is built, and the benefits of shared beliefs and values. They also emphasize how important it is for bonds to develop not only among direct peers, but also between all team members, regardless of their role in the classroom or their official level of education. The framework helps to build a shared identity and understanding of education and reinforces the development of in-groups within organizations. These understandings are not just the result of close-contact and shared beliefs, but also from the intentional structures developed by leadership, which is evidenced by the following theme where structural elements are examined.

Intentional Organizational Structures

In many cases, architecture conditions behavior. This is evident in the details unearthed by this study. Structures, both visible and invisible, provide the backbone for the belonging that is developed between staff members. In this theme, the intentional structural supports implemented by school leadership are discussed with regard to how they set the stage for teacher belonging.

Teacher Collaboration Structure

Time for collaboration is deliberately prioritized by the leadership at Redbud Circle. Leadership considers the collaboration time to be "critical in developing" connections with other teachers, as noted by the principal. Teachers are given two hours each day to plan lessons and interact with the other teachers in groups affectionally nicknamed "Teacher Pods." All of the pods include four teachers, but the teachers vary in experience and training. This time is spent documenting observations, discussing the results of the most recent provocations, sharing ideas for future provocations, and giving teachers a chance to build relationships with their colleagues. Some teachers describe it as a time to "blow off steam" and process the day's events. These

informal collaboration meetings cement the development of a sense of community among teachers in the same pod. The principal, Elenor, shared that the collaboration is useful "for new teachers because they don't feel like they're on an island," but also for experienced teachers, since the curriculum "is constantly evolving and responsive to what [the educators] are doing."

During one formal observation (see Appendix G for observation field notes), the researcher noted that while lesson plans and daily activities are individualized by each teacher, the other teachers in their pod provide feedback and share ideas. Christina, a classroom teacher with over fifteen years of experience, explained that planning happens organically and formally. Teachers in each pod do have daily responsibilities to complete during their planning time, but they also spend time building relationships and sharing ideas. Those interactions are often considered an essential part of teachers' sense of belonging (Carter, 2021).

Christina considers the most valuable part of her tenure at Redbud Circle to be her team. "On my good days, they've got my back; I know if I'm having a struggle with a kid, they'll be the first to step in." This was further expanded upon by Laura, a classroom teacher in a different pod. She stated she felt supported by "the collaboration and getting to work with other staff members."

In Christina's case, her pod consists of a first-year certified teacher, a teacher is who working to become certified, and a Master Teacher, Elizabeth. Elizabeth not only collaborates with the other teachers in the pod, but she also acts as a leader. During a formal observation, the researcher noted that the other teachers looked to her for advice, both professionally and personally.

Most collaboration is informal and communicated through daily conversations, but the school does have a more formal practice of allowing teachers to branch out from their pods to

see how other pods are functioning. Formal school-wide collaboration meetings are held once a month, with the teachers assigned to collaboration groups outside of their teacher pods. Christina particularly enjoys the benefit of "having another set of eyes" who can offer new ideas from other teacher pods within the school. Although most of the formal collaboration is between lead teachers, the teaching assistants are included as much as possible, which encourages them to further commit to the philosophy and their position at Redbud Circle.

Professional Development

While Redbud Circle's philosophy and framework may not be fully understood by outsiders, the district is aware that Redbud Circle is *different*, so Redbud Circle's team members are not required to participate in teacher learning exercises with other schools in the district. The school's leadership understands that maintaining Redbud Circle's independence and status within the community relies on outsiders' beliefs that Redbud Circle is successful in educating children. The principal explained that "so much of [district-wide professional development] just doesn't apply," so professional development days at Redbud Circle are independent of the requirements of other schools.

Professional Development sessions and teacher trainings are specialized, with Master Teachers and inspirational Reggio Emilia-Inspired experts ensuring that even the newest hire has the knowledge needed to support the school's instructional framework. Over time, Elenor has helped shift her teachers' professional learning time to sessions that reinforce the philosophy and help teachers to express themselves and their goals for education, further reinforcing the bond between the teachers and their feelings of belonging to a special, important, and "better" group. The principal noted that she considers staff meetings to be professional learning as well as

formal professional development days. The sessions also reinforce the shared mindset that Redbud Circle is special and worth the faculty's time and effort.

When asked about professional learning, Rebecca shared that "...with the Reggio philosophy, like nobody's ever a master at it. I feel like there's always areas that you can grow in." Later in the conversation, Rebecca emphasized the importance of becoming "confident and comfortable" with the framework, and that the teachers push themselves in practice when they are more comfortable with the philosophy.

Classroom Environment

The physical setting of the classrooms at Redbud Circle is considered an essential aspect of the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model. Reggio Emilia-Inspired classrooms are designed in a distinct way that encourages children to explore many realms of play. Elenor, the principal, confirmed that all 10 of the classrooms implement the Reggio Emelia-Inspired philosophy. She shared that when the school was starting to implement the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model, the first change they made was in the environment. According to Elenor, they started by "changing out materials, more low lighting, [and an] aesthetic, pleasing, homey feel."

However, teachers have the ability to customize their instructional settings. Josie, a classroom teacher, explained that:

> ...all the teachers have the consistency of the centers ... and so we all have those in common in each classroom, but the teachers have the autonomy to kind of create those spaces, and how they want them to look for their kids. And we're constantly adjusting our environments based on the needs of the children.

Her words exemplify the school's focus on the learning environment and how it supports not only the children, but the teachers and teaching assistants as well. While the decor and

classroom set-up may change, the underlying system provides the teachers with a steady, structured environment that encourages routine, albeit one that sometimes looks chaotic.

This comfortable, collaborative layout allows the teachers and students to "slow it down" and educate the children in a more relaxed setting, which Christina, a classroom teacher, "gives you more opportunity to make things happen." In a similar vein, the abundant availability of resources encourages teachers to pursue their own creativity along with the children.

Community Engagement

Part of the emotional development of teachers and staff members comes from the pride they experience when sharing their commitment to their work. Community engagement and outreach are not only structural supports of the Reggio Emilia-Inspired philosophy, but also structural supports that encourage a shared identity. Through extensive professional development sessions open to the public to everyday conversations with families, community engagement, is a valuable and effective way to reinforce group norms.

Family Engagement

Parents who are not familiar with the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model are often concerned by the lack of a traditional pre-kindergarten structure. Josie, a classroom teacher, discussed how parents have certain expectations when their children enter pre-kindergarten, like strict routines, brightly decorated rooms, and speedy drop-off and pick-up processes. At Redbud Circle, those expectations are challenged.

During the teachers' planning time each day, the teachers put together "Today We" compilations that are sent to the families, usually electronically. Josie, a classroom teacher, describes the "Today We" complications as a way to encourage parents who might doubt what the school is doing. "'Today We' is our chance as teachers to advocate for what the children are

learning through experience, like how they're using their fine motor skills." These pages give parents a snapshot of what their children are learning and how they spend their time, which encourages parents' understanding of learning through play. This also allows the educators to demonstrate their understanding of how children should learn, reinforcing their commitment to the Reggio Emilia-Inspired instructional framework.

Teachers and leaders support parental involvement whenever and wherever possible to help them understand the value of their child's education. Sara, a teaching assistant, shared the strong emphasis on helping the parents become familiar with their students' routines and experiences, often through volunteering. "If they want to come read a book to them, they can. If they want to come on a walk, they can, or ... some parents are firefighters. So sometimes they come and talk about that, or their business, something like that. So we try to get them involved and here."

Maresha, a classroom teacher, responded to a question about parental involvement:

> A big piece that we try to do is 'How can we incorporate families in understanding and believing that what we're doing here is more than just play.' Because yes, it's play, but you're always thinking of those families who are like, 'Well, you guys don't do anything all day long.' We're like 'Yes, we do play, but here's why we're playing and here's what you can see from that.' So, we do a lot of educating families.

Events like Family Nights also support parental understanding. Instead of traditional parent-teacher conferences, the school hosts "family nights," where students and their families' complete activities together while interacting with the teachers and teaching assistants. Sara explained the practice further. "We do meet the teacher, where they come and meet the

teacher. ... For us, parent teacher conferences ... we invite the families to come. We do sit with them, but we also have like an activity for them to do as a family."

Extending Vision to Community

Part of the instructional framework provided by the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model requires documentation that is available to parents, leadership, other teachers, and visitors to the school. The documentation aspects of the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model reinforce teachers' understanding of and commitment to their work. Teachers are expected to regularly communicate with outsiders to promote, directly and indirectly, the understanding of the framework and how Redbud Circle functions within the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework. Documentation plays a large role in not only communication, but also in maintaining adherence to the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model.

Documentation is used by school leadership to demonstrate the school's success. The principal noted that "all of our data that we're showing [district funding program] is showing that the model is still supporting all of the students' needs," further demonstrating that the school is, at least in the minds of school leadership, "doing more [for students] more than a traditional model for students of this age."

The structures built by Redbud Circle's leadership allow the school's vision to exist beyond the walls of the preschool center. During some professional learning activities, teachers from surrounding schools are invited to attend. Redbud Circle sets up activities to show other educators how their students learn, like going on nature walks and engaging in play. Dawn, a teaching assistant, explained that other teachers and leaders from the district come to the school specifically to learn more about what happens during the day.

The school also shares their success by attending national conferences to boost awareness of the Reggio Emilia-Inspired model. Maresha shared that "Last year, Rebecca and I, we went and presented at the NAEYC conference, because we are trying to get the word out that play is the best form of learning for this age group, especially."

This level of community outreach helps teachers feel connected to a larger mission and a part of something meaningful. It also helps to protect the teachers specifically, and the school in general, from outside pressures. The more that the community understands the value of the framework in which the school functions, the more autonomy and support they will receive. The school needs many resources from many sources, and community outreach reminds outsiders as to why those resources are needed.

The three themes explored in this section were *Belonging Lives in Commitment to a Shared Philosophy, Intentional Organizational Structures,* and *Community Engagement*. Although the themes are distinctly different, they are all part of the development of a sense of belonging through structural elements of Instructional Program Coherence. Teachers first need to have shared beliefs that benefit their understanding of themselves in the school environment, which is sustained by intentional structures built by leadership. Those beliefs and structures, when properly constructed, extend beyond the Redbud Circle's formal community and into the broader community, which reinforces the beliefs and structures.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how structural features of Instructional Program Coherence may support teachers' sense of belonging, viewed through the lens of Social Identity Theory. Prior literature has discussed Instructional Program Coherence as a methodological system meant to align various aspects of a school (Honig & Hatch, 2004;

Newmann et al., 2001). While Instructional Program Coherence does reflect an aligned instructional system, the findings of this study show it also functions as a social system capable of cultivating teacher belonging by working through cognitive and relational processes that shape identity, rather than merely a framework to organize the teaching and learning environment.

Prior research regarding Instructional Program Coherence has largely focused on physical systems and how they are implemented (Newmann et al., 2001; Youngs et al., 2011). Studies have shown what Instructional Program Coherence looks like in practice and the relationship between a coherent instructional system and teacher development, school performance, and student outcomes (Bryk et al., 2010; Newmann et al., 2011). This study adds to the body of evidence by describing how structural features that shape a coherent instructional program can be used by school leaders to facilitate teacher belonging. The evidence, when examined through Social Identity Theory, suggest that 1) A shared instructional philosophy, in this case, the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework, cultivates belonging through cognitive and relational processes involved in social identity formation, and 2) Instructional Program Coherence can be used as a mechanism to leverage in-group and out-group forces to facilitate belonging.

Importance of a Shared Instructional Framework

The anchor behind the facilitation of belonging is the shared commitment to the instructional framework associated with a coherent instructional system. One of the strongest aspects of Instructional Program Coherence is the implementation of a framework that helps everyone in the organization find common ground. In this study, the framework was the Reggio Emilia-Inspired philosophy. This study shows that a framework is something teachers can rally around as a central mechanism for further development of their sense of identity and belonging. The educators' passion and belief in the proposed success of their students through the model

insulates the school from outside effects, and further strengthens the beliefs, connections, and commitment to the school felt by all staff members.

The school principal and leadership team used the Reggio Emilia-Inspired philosophy as a coherent framework to ground other school structures and processes. The school environment was designed with the principles of the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework. For example, collaboration time, working with peers during professional learning sessions, and connections between members of the pods show the importance of creating time and space where staff members can learn together. This learning time, grounded in the Reggio Emilia-Inspired philosophy, is afforded to teachers by the alignment of school structures and processes. These aspects create conditions for cognitive and relational aspects of a shared identity to develop.

Cognitive processes in identity formation affect how people think about themselves as group members, and the relational aspect points to how people connect to one another through a shared identity. The shared instructional framework based on the Reggio Emilia-Inspired philosophy develops meaningful structures that encourage teachers to identify with the values, principles, assumptions, and the practices that define the philosophy. These meaningful structures would not form without the intentional design of school structures and practices around the shared framework. Structures and practices facilitated social interactions and allowed teachers to engage in regular and consistent conversations, routines, and teamwork. Those aspects of the Reggio Emilia-Inspired philosophy bring cognitive and relational processes involved in social identity formation together, and in doing so, facilitate a strong sense of belonging among teachers and the school community.

School structures and conditions that support belonging did not emerge by chance. The coherent instructional system was crafted through intentional choices from the school's

leadership. These conditions are made possible by intentional structures or through opportunities for structures to develop. At Redbud Circle, the effects of having routines, a common framework, resources, and dedicated time for collaboration were shown to impact how teachers viewed their place within the organization. These structural and cognitive aspects of support align with Instructional Program Coherence and provide the structure necessary to help teachers feel comfortable, confident, and secure in their place within the organization, which builds the foundation for a sense of belonging.

Redbud Circle reveals the importance of using a common instructional framework: anchoring routines, decision making regarding resources, dedicated time for collaboration, and guidance for teachers of every experience level emerge from adherence the framework. The development of these structures and conditions not only results in a coherent instructional environment; they also help teachers feel comfortable, confident, and secure in their place within the organization, which builds the foundation for a sense of belonging.

Instructional Program Coherence is a Mechanism that Shapes In-Groups and Out-Groups

Social Identity Theory indicates that in-groups and out-groups play a substantial role in the development of a person's identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam et al., 2017). The results of this study suggest that Instructional Program Coherence can be used to activate innate desires and urges to belong to a group, and part of belonging to a group is creating clear boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. The leadership team at Redbud Circle used structural features of the instructional program to create this type of in-group and out-group dynamic. The environment that structural elements create is how Instructional Program Coherence supports the facilitation of growth and connections. Items outside of physical and visible structures are shown to be parts of Structural Instructional Program Coherence, and they are vital for the

psychological development of individuals' sense of self and identity. The leadership team uses Instructional Program Coherence as a mechanism to develop the ability for belonging to emerge.

By applying the lens of Social Identity Theory, the study reveals how Instructional Program Coherence creates a context that fosters both the cognitive and relational dimensions of identity development. The study's insights about identity-building processes explain why Instructional Program Coherence is often associated with stronger instructional practice and better school outcomes, which extends beyond the existing literature related to Instructional Program Coherence. The lens of Social Identity Theory points to Structural Instructional Program Coherence functioning as a mechanism through which teacher belonging develops. The development of the valuable in-groups explained by Social Identity Theory must be crafted by the social system supported by Instructional Program Coherence. The data demonstrates that an in-group, at least in the context of a school, develops through the intentional use of structural Instructional Program Coherence by the school's leadership.

An important factor surrounding Instructional Program Coherence's function as a mechanism is that the mechanism is not what *causes* identity or belonging to develop. There is no magic embedded in Instructional Program Coherence. It must be used as a tool to support the social systems that shape the identity of the group members. This study revealed how important the actions of leadership are when using Structural Instructional Program Coherence to improve social outcomes. Leadership at Redbud Circle understands, consciously or unconsciously, that belonging is experienced through everyday practices surrounding the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework, not through isolated events like pizza parties or teacher appreciation week. While those are factors that can continue to help solidify belonging, the daily aspects of educators' experiences are what keeps teachers engaged.

As identity is built, Social Identity Theory reminds us that in-group behavior is an essential aspect of allowing identity and belonging to develop. Several things help to craft the "we" aspects of a group were found in the results of this study. First, shared practices and understandings of those practices create a system of that advocates for belonging. Similar structures, like the classroom design of Redbud Circle, are used to reinforce the relationships between teachers and their support staff. Collaboration, when made possible by the prioritization of leadership, reinforces group identity.

As demonstrated by the observations of teachers at Redbud Circle through their actions and verbiage, shared language and values are marks of membership to a group. These marks of membership reinforce the "special" meaning of the group, which encourages members to feel more secure and may lead to better performance outcomes, although that is outside of the scope of this study. The data suggests that collaboration time, shared passions, a common language, responsibilities, and shared success are key to developing the teacher's commitment to the group.

One subject that stood out as a method to reinforce in-groups was through professional development. Leadership handcrafts professional development sessions to further strengthen the staff's sense of self and a continued way to reinforce the idea that some schools are better than others. Because professional development at Redbud Circle is different from the professional development required by the district for other schools, the events further insulate the school, which encourages teachers to feel like they are part of something that is so valuable that other schools do not get to experience the depth of the culture embedded in Redbud Circle's model.

The use of Instructional Program Coherence as an intentional mechanism to form groups is a way to explain how Instructional Program Coherence can be associated with better school outcomes. Having the psychological protection of being part of a group may improve

performance in the classroom. When the groups are constructed and continuously fostered, outcomes such as clear communication and belonging create a safe and comfortable environment where teachers can thrive. When teachers thrive, their students, assistant teachers, the parents of the students, and people outside of the group feel the impact.

Conclusion

This study examined how the structural features of Instructional Program Coherence support teachers' sense of belonging in a Reggio Emilia-Inspired Early Childhood Education Center. The school's use of the Reggio Emilia-Inspired framework demonstrates how Instructional Program Coherence is intentionally crafted by leadership. The results indicate that school leaders can create environments where teachers feel comfortable, wanted, competent, and a sense of belonging within their organization. While this study was conducted at a single site, the structural components of Instructional Program Coherence can be implemented in many environments and settings when school leaders are dedicated to meeting the social and emotional needs of their faculty and staff.

This work expands the current knowledge of Instructional Program Coherence and why it should be prioritized by organizational leaders. Not only do structural features of Instructional Program Coherence improve school outcomes, they offer teachers the time, space, and energy to further develop their understanding of and commitment to their work. A sense of belonging emerges through everyday interactions and organizational practices, which are supported by intentional structures cultivated by leaders. This phenomenon of structural features of Instructional Program Coherence has largely been discussed theoretically; this study offers qualitative evidence to extend the current literature surrounding Instructional Program Coherence. Belonging is an essential Social Identity Theory, regarding Instructional Program

Coherence, explains why the outcome of fostering structural Instructional Program Coherence matters: when teachers have a strong connection to their work and develop ties to others in their environment, belonging emerges and deepens teachers' dedication to their positions.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this thesis.

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Appendix A: IRB Outcome Letter

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date:	09/13/2024
Application Number:	IRB-24-398
Proposal Title:	The "How" of Crafting Coherence: A Case Study of Instructional Program Coherence in a Reggio Emilia Model School
Principal Investigator:	Ashlyn Fiegener
Co-Investigator(s):	Beulah Adigun
Faculty Adviser:	
Project Coordinator:	
Research Assistant(s):	
Processed as:	Exempt
Exempt Category:	

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in 45CFR46.

This study meets criteria in the Revised Common Rule, as well as, one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. As Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit a status report to the IRB triennially.

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.
4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu.

Sincerely,
Oklahoma State University IRB

Appendix B: IRB Revised Protocol

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Application Number:	IRB-24-398
Proposal Title:	The "How" of Crafting Coherence: A Case Study of Instructional Program Coherence in a Reggio Emilia Model School
Principal Investigator:	Ashlyn Fiegener
Co-Investigator(s):	Beulah Adigun
Faculty Adviser:	
Project Coordinator:	
Research Assistant(s):	

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

Study Review Level:	Exempt
Modification Approval Date:	10/01/2024

The modification of the IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46. The original expiration date of the protocol has not changed.

Modifications Approved:
Add Personnel and Modify time of compensation
Modifications Approved: Add graduate assistant and modify the time when compensation is provided

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved.
2. Submit a status report to the IRB when requested
3. Promptly report to the IRB any harm experienced by a participant that is both unanticipated and related per IRB policy.
4. Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the OSU IRB and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
5. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Sincerely,

Oklahoma State University IRB
223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078
Website: https://irb.okstate.edu/
Ph: 405-744-3377 | Fax: 405-744-4335| irb@okstate.edu

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Reggio Study Interview Agenda and Housekeeping Items:

- Introductions, thank you for joining study
- Go over consent form (bulleted points at bottom of page where they initial and sign)
- Gift card timeline and delivery procedures
- Collaboration meeting schedule; who is on your team?
- Interview questions
- Thank you; will be in touch about collaboration meeting and later, about the gift card delivery. Make sure they have our contact information.

If we want to take any photos of the classroom setting, we can ask them permission. We will be sure to tell them no children will be in the photos.

Appendix D: Teacher Interview Questions

1. What does the Reggio Emilia model look like to you?

2. What role does the Reggio Emilia model play in your school?

3. How do you integrate the Reggio model into your teaching?

4. What structures and processes (e.g., curricula, assessments) reinforce the Reggio model in your school?

5. How does teacher collaboration support the Reggio model?

6. How does professional development/learning support the Reggio model?

7. How does the leadership in the school reinforce the Reggio model in your school?

8. How is this model applied consistently across classrooms?

9. What about this school environment makes you feel motivated in your work?

10. What about this school environment makes you feel supported as a teacher?

Appendix E: Leader Interview Questions

1. What does the Reggio Emilia model look like to you?
2. What role does the Reggio Emilia model play in your school?
3. What structures and processes (e.g., curricula, assessments) reinforce the Reggio model in your school?
4. How does teacher collaboration support the Reggio model?
5. How does professional development/learning support the Reggio model?
6. How do all teachers have a shared understanding of this model and how to use it in their respective classrooms?
7. What are the internal or external supports and/or threats to coherence in your school (example: external partnerships that do not align with the model)?
8. What about this school environment makes you feel motivated in your work as a leader?
9. How do you support teacher well-being as a leader?

Appendix F: Observation Protocol

Setting:

What evidence in the physical setting suggests a focus on the Reggio model?

- What materials do you observe in the classroom?
- How is furniture arranged to facilitate learning?
- What language and jargon are used on posters and other displays?
- What do you notice about the school and classroom décor?
- How is the physical environment set up to nurture student inquiry, curiosity, and independence (Reggio components)?

Interactions:

- Do you notice any informal interactions among teachers and leaders in the hallways, in classrooms, etc.?
- During interactions (e.g., teacher collaboration meeting):
    - Do language and jargon reflect the Reggio model?
    - Do you notice a shared sense of understanding among teachers as they plan for instruction and evaluate student learning?
    - How collaborative are the conversations (for example, is there a "lead" teacher simply transmitting information, or are all members of the team engaged in exchange of ideas)?
    - How do you see the Reggio model present in teacher collaborative planning?
    - What do you notice about teacher morale and dispositions during the meeting?
    - Is there any evidence of new learning (for example, from a recent professional development session) being integrated into the conversation? If so, is this tied to the Reggio model?
    - Are there any documents being used for planning purposes (for example, lesson plan templates, curriculum maps)?

Appendix G: Observation Field Notes

Environment:

- Soft lighting
- One-way mirrors so teachers could see the classrooms
- Cramped but cozy
- Each teacher had a "station" that was decorated with pictures/quotes
- Decor changes with the season

Jargon/Communication/Atmosphere:

- All referred to students as "friends" and parents as "mom" or "dad"
- Relaxed environment
- Very chatty
- Teachers deferred to "Elizabeth" who might have been the "master teacher"
- "Investigators" and "Provocations"
- Trusting atmosphere; teachers asked each other for advice on stuff non-school related like their children
- Discussed problems like when to call a parent about a sick kid

Activities:

- "Today We" documentation building
- Some templates were available
- Eating lunch
- Contacting parents/teachers
- Discussion of provocations for the week
    - Leaves
    - Beads and wire
    - Self-Portraits using mirrors and paint
- Discussing observations
    - Principal doesn't see everything
    - Activity "went wrong" but kids adapted (teacher didn't have the correct paint)
    - "Christina" felt nervous
    - Swivel didn't work
- Talked about the new GOLD app and how it was better than manual observations
- CST word assessment comparison
- How to use ChatGPT

"I like that I've never seen anyone do that before." - About an idea for a provocation

Appendix H: Supplemental Materials



