

Dignity by Design:

Belonging Infrastructure Supports Relational Wellbeing

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Abstract

This study examines how a regional networked professional learning initiative intentionally designed relational conditions that support educator wellbeing as a foundation for sustainable school improvement. Grounded in dignity and social engagement, the study conceptualizes professional learning as a relational process embedded within whole-school and cross-district systems. Using an integrative qualitative design, practitioner-generated data from climate surveys, collaborative inquiry artifacts, mentoring reflections, and professional learning communities were analyzed. Findings suggest that when professional learning environments cultivate psychological safety, recognition of inherent worth, and opportunities for co-regulation and teacher leadership, educators reported reduced overwhelm, increased collective efficacy and wellbeing. Participating educators also described shifts in instructional climate, relational trust, and perceptions of belonging. The study proposes educator networks as forms of belonging infrastructure that support human flourishing in schools. Designing professional learning systems around relational wellbeing may contribute to educator retention, equitable learning environments, student engagement, and more sustainable approaches to educational change.

Keywords: *educator wellbeing, dignity, belonging, psychological safety, co-regulation, social engagement theory, regional educator networks, rural education, educator voice*

Across the United States, educators are experiencing escalating professional demands associated with resource constraints, classroom complexity, extended work hours, and expanding expectations for student support (McCarthy, 2019). These pressures have contributed to unprecedented levels of stress, isolation, burnout, and emotional exhaustion within the profession (Vandernoot Lipsky, 2018). Compounding these challenges, dominant educational paradigms of

neoliberal accountability emphasizing efficiency, compliance, and performance outcomes have often marginalized fundamental human needs for autonomy, competence, and connection (Ryan & Deci, 2017), contributing to diminished professional dignity and sense of worth among educators over time (Krownapple & Cobb, 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these longstanding systemic tensions. Sudden school closures and rapidly evolving instructional

responsibilities placed educators in conditions of acute uncertainty and overload (Kaufman et al., 2024), thus nervous system dysregulation. Emerging research has documented the resulting individual and collective trauma within educational systems (Cloninger, 2018; Cupchik et al., 2024), as well as significant impacts on educator mental health and wellbeing (Baker et al., 2021; Kush et al., 2022; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023; Zamarro et al., 2022; Kupers et al., 2022; Mendoza & Dizon, 2024; Hascher & Waber, 2021). These conditions have prompted renewed attention to the relational and organizational environments in which educators work and learn.

A growing body of organizational research highlights psychological safety as a critical condition for enabling learning, collaboration, and performance in complex and uncertain environments (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Within educational settings, similar relational dynamics are reflected in research on classroom emotional climate, which demonstrates that emotionally supportive learning environments foster student engagement and academic achievement, through strengthened relationships, autonomy, and responsiveness to learners' needs (Reyes et al., 2012; Pianta et al., 2008). Scholars have increasingly called for systemic, whole-school approaches to social and emotional development that extend beyond classroom-level programming, to address professional learning structures and positive school culture (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

The Southern Oregon Regional Educator Network (SOREN) was created by state legislation to elevate educator voice, expand access to high-quality professional learning, and strengthen educator retention through collaborative, regionally responsive approaches, statewide (Educator Advancement Council, 2023). Multiple sources of regional data showed that educators

were navigating heightened stress, trauma exposure, and inequitable conditions due to a lack of sufficient relational or systemic support (Oregon Education Association, 2019). The systems that prioritized compliance over connection undermined relationships and viewed people as problems to fix, thus encouraging deficit thinking mindsets in education.

In response, the Network (SOREN) designed a regional climate survey to discover what types of support teachers needed to navigate stress, and experience emotionally supportive learning environments. Thus, the guiding question explored in this research is: What conditions enable educators to experience dignity, safety, and belonging—and how can systems cultivate these conditions?

First, authors describe research foundations on how humans experience safety in Nervous System Regulation and dignity frameworks needed to feel belonging. In the Methodology section, authors describe ways SOREN listened to teachers' voices by intentionally designing professional learning as a whole-person endeavor, emphasizing dignity and co-regulation in psychologically safe professional environments. The conceptual framework considered social and emotional learning as a holistic process embedded within professional learning systems, rather than as a discrete initiative. Results will first be presented from the Panorama teacher climate survey, then from two Professional Learning communities: Partner Schools and Mentoring Project; both implemented across multiple interacting levels — classroom practice, school culture, and cross-district learning networks. Analysis of practitioner-generated data across multiple professional learning contexts revealed three themes on conditions that influenced educator experiences of wellbeing: (1) Safety, Significance and Belonging (See Table 1: School Climate Data); (2) Emergence of Collective Efficacy (See

Tables 2 & 3: Partner School Data); and (3) Co-Regulation and Professional Growth (See Table 4: Mentoring).

Literature Review:

Why Safety, Dignity, and Belonging Matter

Teachers play key roles in establishing and maintaining relationships (Parameswaran, et. al, 2023; Bath, 2008). Clearly, a link occurs between wellbeing and relationships (Seligman 2012; Gu and Day 2013; Bath, 2008; Cobb & Krownapple, 2018; Porges, 2022). Together, the Social Engagement Theory and Dignity framework describe both the biology of co-regulation (i.e., giving and receiving cues of safety to each other), and the possibilities as to why humans may or may not feel safe in relationships (e.g., elements of dignity honored or violated), which are needed for wellbeing.

Social Engagement Theory

Self-regulation is helpful for understanding the role that other people play in belonging, a central foundation of relationships and wellbeing. Levine (2010, 2014) and Porges (2022) describe self-regulation as a multi-step process, in which the nervous system (via sensory input) constantly scans both the internal (body) and external environments (classroom) in a bi-directional pathway looking for signals of safety or threat. When people receive cues of safety internally (e.g., physical health) and externally (e.g., safe environment), they can access the neocortex for reasoning, learning, and access language for self-advocacy to get their needs met (i.e., self-regulation). The process of self-regulation, “allows people to handle high states of arousal (e.g., panic, fear or difficult emotions), and provides the basis for the balance between authentic autonomy and healthy social engagement” (Levine, 2010 p. 13).

When the environment is assessed as unsafe, such as relational conflict, excessive demands, or lack of voice, the nervous system shifts into a defensive state and prioritizes survival over social engagement, and releases stress hormones that accelerate heart rate and breathing. For example, survey data showed that teachers felt dysregulated with “very big feelings in reaction mode” (Partner School transcript, 2023). In these survival states, educators are unable to recognize cues of safety from their environments (Porges, 2011), and their neocortex shifts to deficit thinking and distrust (Krownapple, 2025). Chronic activation of stress responses has been linked to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and diminished professional efficacy among teachers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Self-regulation can therefore be understood as a socially embedded process influenced by both internal physiological states and external relational contexts (Levine, 2010, 2014). Interpersonal cues such as attentive listening, warmth, and accessibility function as signals of safety that facilitate feelings of physical and psychological safety, allowing for trust, collaboration, and shared learning with others. Therefore, wellbeing emerges through the processes of co-regulation with others, in which supportive relationships help individuals return to states of emotional balance (Porges, 2022).

Co-Regulation

The process of *co-regulation* is when a caring person with a regulated nervous system gives positive cues of support and belonging to another through:

warm welcoming facial expressions, and gestures of accessibility, which serve as cues of safety to a dysregulated person, thus helping them shift out of disorganized and fearful states. Together these pathways connect behavior to the nervous system and form the basis for social

communication, cooperation, and connectedness (Porges 2022, p. 8).

When people give and receive cues of safety to one another (such as listening, openness, patience), they assess relationships as safe. Porges (2022) further expands on the biology of relationships:

Feeling safe.... conveys the feelings of safety to another. Resilience, as a process, could be summarized as the capacity to spontaneously foster feelings of safety in both self and other.... and supports social engagement as an adaptive strategy to co-regulate with others to mutually support health, growth, and restoration (p. 11).

Therefore, wellbeing can be defined as people experiencing self-regulation (i.e., feeling physically and psychologically safe), and utilizing adaptive strategies of connection (i.e., cooperation) with others for co-regulation (See Figure 1). A regulated person experiencing wellbeing can take care of their own needs (autonomy and agency), thus take care of others, which cultivates belonging (See Figure 1). When educators can feel safe in their bodies, minds and classrooms, they are able to experience dignity (i.e., self-worth, self-realization, self-awareness), wholeness of body-mind-heart connections, and love for learning.

Dignity and Relational Leadership

While neurobiological perspectives explain how safety is experienced, the Dignity Model provides an ethical lens for understanding why individuals feel valued or devalued within professional systems. Hicks (2011) argues that dignity is inherent rather than earned, a distinction that has significant implications for adult learning. When educators perceive that their worth is contingent upon compliance or performance, they may feel

unsafe at school, trust may erode, and engagement diminish (Hicks, 2018; Krownapple & Cobb, 2016); Dignity violations often accompany compliance-based environments, including experiences of exclusion or silencing, and can function as relational threats that activate stress responses and undermine participation (Porges, 2011).

Conversely, consistent recognition of inherent worth supports agency, reflection, and shared responsibility within professional learning communities (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015); and support relational repair across networks (Krownapple & Cobb, 2016). Therefore, educators experiencing self-regulation and dignity can give cues of safety to peers and students such as listening, openness, and patience, thus creating a culture of dignity. In reciprocity, a person can receive these cues of safety and feel seen and heard through acknowledgement, appreciation, compassion, identity acceptance and dialogue, which function as signals, communicating whether individuals are included, and create conditions for belonging (See Figure 1).

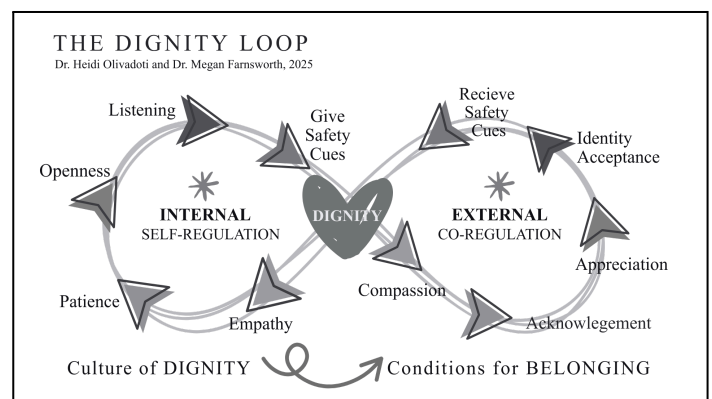


Figure 1: Inspired by Cobb & Krownapple, 2018.

Psychological Safety

Within networked professional learning systems, attending to both neurobiological safety and relational ethics may be essential for creating

Classroom Emotional Climates (CEC) that are restorative, responsive, and sustainable. Psychological safety has been shown to influence communication, innovation, engagement, and collective problem-solving across diverse professional contexts, particularly when work is highly interdependent and adaptive learning is required (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). Dignity creates inner stability, and a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves, such as the school community. People who feel that they are “seen, included and recognized for their contributions are more willing to extend themselves for this greater good” (Hicks, 2021, p.70).

Methodology

Research Context

Two months prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Southern Oregon Regional Educator Network (SOREN) was formally established as one of ten statewide Regional Educator Networks through Oregon Senate Bill 182 (2017). This network serves predominantly rural communities characterized by geographic distance, socio-economic disparities, small and mid-sized districts, and limited staffing capacity. These contextual features shape educators’ professional experiences in distinctive ways, often intensifying isolation, role strain, and the need for sustained, locally relevant professional learning opportunities (OECD, 2020). Research on rural educators highlights both persistent structural challenges and important cultural strengths, including strong community attachment, commitment to place-based advocacy, and a desire to improve opportunities for students facing similar barriers (Longhurst, 2017; Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Farnsworth, 2021). SOREN’s design intentionally seeks to leverage these cultural assets by creating relationally grounded professional learning structures that foster trust,

shared responsibility, and collective efficacy across districts.

The framework explored in this study emerged through iterative cycles of listening, data analysis, and co-design with practicing educators seeking to address persistent challenges related to professional isolation, inequitable access to high-quality learning opportunities, and workforce sustainability. Integrating trauma-informed practice, culturally responsive pedagogy, relational leadership, and continuous improvement methodologies (Hammond, 2015; Cobb & Krownapple, 2018; Nelson, 1987; Porges, 2011; Bryk et al., 2015), SOREN’s approach offers a promising model for advancing educator wellbeing, and equitable student outcomes in complex and resource-constrained educational systems.

In contrast to traditional centralized professional development delivery models, the network functions as a networked learning ecosystem that connects educators across roles, districts, and career stages. This approach reflects interdisciplinary research suggesting that adult learning and professional growth are strengthened when environments support psychological safety, relational trust, and core human needs for autonomy, competence, and belonging (Porges, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2017; OECD, 2020).

The network’s theory of change emerged through an iterative process of regional needs assessment and responsive design. Multiple data sources informed this process, including educator surveys, structured dialogues between novice educators and mentors, and regional workforce and retention data. Survey results consistently indicated that educators were navigating heightened stress and used their voices to request support for their own nervous system regulation and mental health, needed to support student success.

Research Design

This study employed a practice-embedded qualitative design informed by principles of improvement science and practitioner inquiry. Data were generated through iterative cycles of professional learning implementation within a regional educator network. Data Sources included climate survey responses, reflective mentoring artifacts, collaborative inquiry documentation, and field notes from professional learning communities.

Authors also utilized an integrative approach to inquiry that combines qualitative listening structures, participatory sense-making, and context-responsive data use, approaches consistent with holistic, relational, and systems-oriented research traditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bryk et al., 2015). Listening functions not only as a method of inquiry, but as a mechanism for strengthening safety, significance, and belonging; conditions that make meaningful improvement for adults in educational systems. SOREN approaches listening as a form of holistic inquiry in which educators are understood as knowledgeable agents whose lived experience constitutes essential data for understanding system health and guiding improvement (Hicks, 2011; Cobb & Krownapple, 2018).

Teacher Climate Surveys

In collaboration with the Design and Advisory Team, Panorama Education (U.S. based education technology company), and K-12 school leaders, SOREN created school climate surveys to measure social-emotional learning, school climate (i.e., safety, significance, belonging), and general well-being among school staff, teachers, and administrators. The survey consisted of both qualitative and quantitative data, consisting of multiple-choice questions and free responses. The questions were separated into six categories: (1)

School Climate, (2) Educating All Students, (3) Belonging, (4) Cultural Awareness and Action, (5) Safety, and (6) Well-Being. All questions were optional. At the end of the survey, there were two optional sections designed to elicit demographic and school information. The data utilized for this research came from Spring 2023 with the free response question asked to the teacher group: What can leaders at your school do to better support your well-being?

Participant Recruitment in Survey

Over 1,000 adults in 13 school districts were invited to participate in the school climate Panorama survey (given over four years: 2021-2025). For purposes of this research, data was analyzed from 650 licensed teachers from Spring 2023. This group includes adults (over the age of 18) who hold Oregon teaching licenses granted from Oregon Teacher Standards and Practices Commission. Participants were encouraged to complete the surveys through email communication. In the interest of building capacity for data literacy, SOREN shared results with districts, schools, and partners with focus on noticing trends, and inspiring actions to improve experiences for adults and children.

Data Analysis

With attention to voice, meaning, and lived experience, data were analyzed through a multiple-step process as outlined by Marshall and Rossman (2011). Inductive data analysis was used to organize patterns, categories, and themes (Creswell, 2009). First, authors viewed and transcribed data (teachers' responses) stored in the Panorama platform using Google voice dictation. Utilizing discourse analysis in the second step, authors coded words and phrases that were repeated or emphasized, and then organized them into themes such as relationships, safety, health, agency, dignity, behavior, and belonging. Based

on these themes, qualitative data were analyzed using theoretical frameworks (1) the Social Engagement Theory (Porges, 2011; 2022); and (2) Dignity Model (Cobb & Krownapple, 2018; Krownapple & Cobb, 2025; Hicks, 2011; 2018; 2020). Results will first be presented from the Panorama teacher survey, then from two Professional Learning communities: (1) Partner Schools and (2) Mentoring Project.

Results

Analysis of practitioner-generated data across multiple professional learning contexts revealed four themes related to how relational conditions influenced educator experiences of wellbeing:

(1) Safety, Significance and Belonging (See Table 1: School Climate Data); (2) Emergence of Collective Efficacy (See Tables 2 & 3: Partner School Data); and (3) Co-Regulation and Professional Growth (See Table 4: Mentoring).

Table 1

Teacher Voices: Relational Conditions for Belonging
SOREN/Panorama Regional School Climate Data, Spring 2023

Theme	Representative Teacher Voices	Representative Teacher Voices (Examples from Raw Data)
Safety & Behavior Support	Need proactive behavior systems and consistent consequences. Lack of support creates unsafe and stressful environments.	“Provide a less stressful, safer work environment... students wander campus with little consequence.” “Have behavior support plans in place... proactively teaching expected behaviors.”
Overwhelm & Emotional Load	Classrooms increasingly feel like counseling spaces. Teachers report exhaustion and desire more staffing and mental health support(s).	“The classroom has become a counseling office and babysitting station.” “Teachers are exhausted from being teachers and parents to kids.”
Wellbeing Supports	Requests include hybrid meetings, wellness activities, and permission to take mental health days without stigma.	“Use social-emotional learning strategies with us, not just talk about them.”

		“Allow us to take care of our health... without repercussions.”
Professional Trust & Dignity	Desire for autonomy, reduced micromanagement, and recognition as professionals.	“Trust us as professionals to do our job and not micromanage.” “When people are allowed buy-in, they are more motivated.”
Voice & Communication	Teachers want meaningful input in decisions and clearer expectations from leadership.	“I feel my voice is not heard... there is no communication.” “Ask us what we need rather than assuming what is best.”
Belonging & Collaboration	Need time for peer dialogue, shared professional learning, and teacher-led initiatives.	“We need time dedicated to listening and learning from other staff.” “Help teachers lead professional development.”
Co-Regulation & Leadership Presence	Educators value visible, empathetic leadership and shared responsibility for student support.	“We need supportive leaders who understand when teachers are overwhelmed.” “It would be valuable for administrators to teach... and engage in learning communities.”

Theme 1: Safety, Significance and Belonging

Panorama data showed that teachers’ assessments of their environments were deemed unsafe, in which they could no longer read cues of safety in their internal (bodies) and external environments (classrooms), which resulted in disconnection from self and others, more isolation, and a loss of dignity, which is at the heart of relationships (Cobb & Krownapple, 2018; Evans and Vaandering, 2022). Nervous system dysregulation at school caused teachers to request mental health resources; however, they feared repercussions from speaking up that indicated they did not feel psychological safety. “When this kind of domination and control feels like an inevitable consequence of the hierarchical power structure within an organization, resentment accumulates” (Hicks,

2020, p. 65). The highest number of respondents requested behavior support for dysregulated students. Teachers felt unseen and unheard, thus the dignity violations of acknowledgement and accountability, which led to dismissal and disempowerment (Hicks, 2020; Evans & Vaandering, 2022). This exclusion activated stress responses that undermined their participation in school leadership. Teachers desired co-regulation from other adults through recognition, acknowledgement of trustworthiness, independence, trust, respect, validation, and autonomy (See figure 1). They viewed professional learning and behavior plans as one-size-fits all compliance measures, which undermined their agency, voice and creativity.

Teachers communicated their desire (survey data) for psychological safety so they could take interpersonal risks, and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally (See Table 1). They wanted to get tasks done, overcome barriers for effective teamwork, learn and transfer knowledge, use their voice by speaking up, and be creative (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Insights gained prompted a foundational shift—from viewing student behavior and educator burnout as individual problems to understanding them as signals of systemic misalignment requiring adult learning, relational repair, and structural change (Bryk et al., 2015).

SOREN designed several Professional Learning opportunities as bridges to relational spaces that cultivates self-regulation, agency and responsiveness, rather than reaction. They all are invitational collaborative projects that reframe Professional Learning from skill delivery to relational reconnection. Next, data are presented for Partner Schools, whose partnership with SOREN began in the midst of the global pandemic (2020).

Research Context: Partner School

Decisions to pilot schoolwide models, cultivate local trainers and coaches, and sustain learning over time align with networked improvement and capacity-building methodologies that emphasize local context, practitioner voice, and iterative learning (Bryk et al., 2015). The main challenges at The Partner School before SOREN collaboration: (1) Staff felt they were constantly reacting to situations. (2) Teachers were stressed and overwhelmed. (3) Difficult to distinguish between teacher stress being projected onto students versus actual student issues. (4) Initial

perception was that students were defiant and not listening (The Partner School Educator Reflections, 2024).

Krownapple & Cobb (2025) describe research showing predictable patterns of teachers' vulnerability for reactionary responses when they feel unsupported or exhausted. Being in states of dysregulation, teachers do not have access to reasoning skills; therefore, are more likely to react rather than respond, and to misinterpret student behavior as disrespectful, and peer behavior as threatening. "A defiant or disconnected disengaged student may be evidence that they don't feel valued" (Krownapple & Cobb, 2025, p. 4). When these stressful interactions occur, dignity violations and deficit thinking increases with negativity bias, thus disrupting adult relationships in schools.

Over the course of four years, SOREN facilitated the process of teacher-led data teams to create a sustainable system for school-wide problem solving, and continuous improvement. This process served as a bridge for staff to look critically at student behavioral referrals and out-of-class time spent in the school's Learning Center

Table 2
Partner School Outcomes: Evidence of Relational and Systemic Shifts

Evidence Area	Findings and Representative Educator Voices
Shift in Understanding Behavior	Staff reported moving from reactive discipline toward relational interpretation of student needs. <i>“We have worked as a staff to shift our thinking about behavior. We chose to view behavior as communication.”</i>
Collective Reflection & Adult Learning	Professional learning supported deep examination of adult responses and school systems over time. <i>“We have participated in deep work to examine adult responses to behavior... There is no quick fix.”</i>
Reduced Stress & Increased Support	Educators described improved emotional climate and stronger collaborative response structures. <i>“It feels less chaotic and stressful... There is a team always there to help. I never feel alone.”</i>
Disciplinary Outcomes	Office referrals decreased from 1,232 to 916 -- indicating reduced reactive responses and improved regulation conditions.
Instructional Climate	Classroom disruption referrals decreased 48%, increasing instructional time and strengthening teacher–student relationships.

Note: Written reflections from Collective Learning Sessions, 2024

Table 3
Comparative Data - Partner Schools vs. All Schools

Evidence	Findings and Representative Educator Voices Regionwide Control (n=347) vs. 10 Partner Schools (n=116)
Regional Survey Comparison	Partner schools reported higher belonging (+35%), safety (+36%), collaboration (+31%), and wellbeing (+24%) compared to district averages

Note: SOREN/Panorama Regional School Climate Survey, Spring 2025

Theme 2 - Emergence of Collective Efficacy

Data showed that teachers developed co-regulation together by meeting as trusted professionals to share expertise. Shared dignity allowed them space to reflect and move out of survival mode and reduced stress to shift their mindsets to view students' behavior as communication, and an unmet need, thus disrupting deficit narratives (See Table 2).

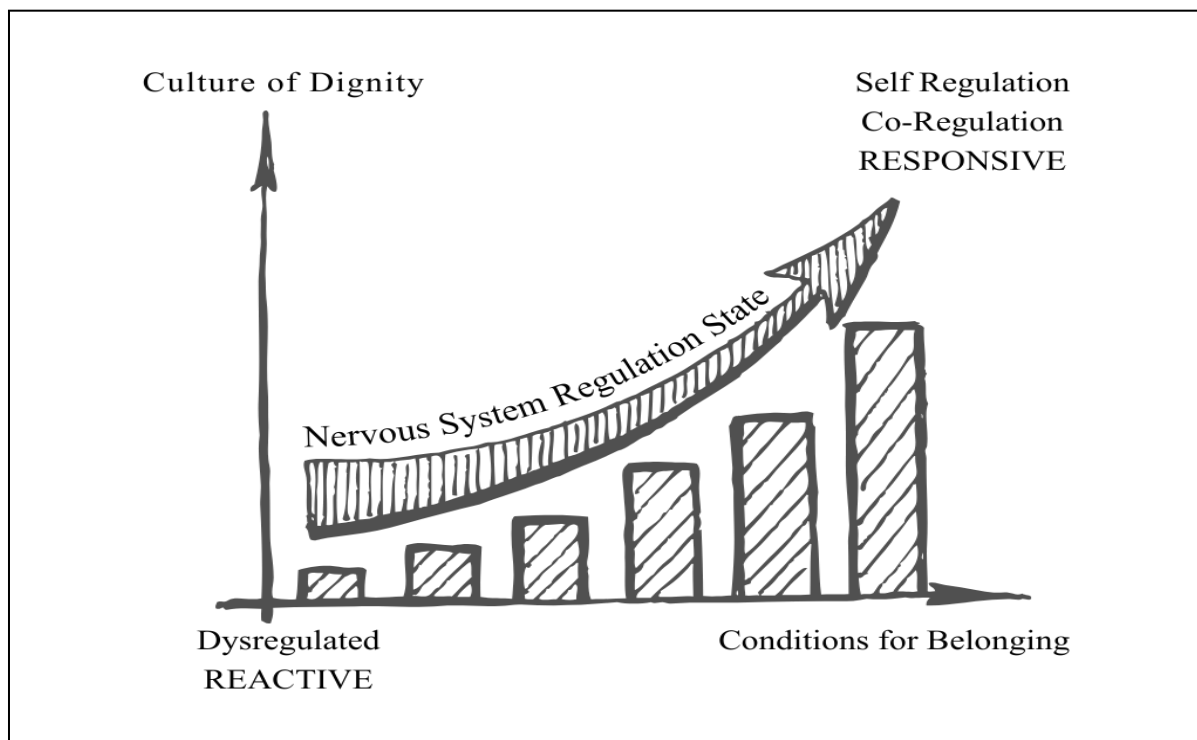
Adults' nervous systems were regulated over time (four years), thus creating conditions for staff and student belonging through relational persistence (See Figure 2).

Teachers at The Partner School made a significant shift from a reactive approach to an intentional, responsive model, which minimized office referrals and increased instructional time and academic achievement (See Table 3). They were able to self-regulate in difficult moments

by shifting mindsets from reaction to response (See Figure 2). "A reaction is automatic, driven by emotion and impulse. A response is intentional with self-awareness, self-regulation and a commitment to honoring dignity even in difficult moments" (Krownapple & Cobb, 2025, p 121).

Participants observed the gradual emergence of collective efficacy and teacher leadership, characterized by increased trust, collaborative problem-solving, and shared responsibility for student learning. Within networked professional learning contexts intentionally structured around relational norms such as attentive listening, shared reflection, and recognition of inherent worth, participants began to describe gradual shifts in their experiences of safety and connection (See Figure 2).

Figure 2
From Reaction to Response



<i>Culture of Dignity</i> (Hicks, 2018, Cobb & Krownapple, 2019)		<i>Conditions for Belonging</i> (Othering and Belonging Institute, 2025)
Empathy	Independence/Agency	Invitation and Inclusion
Patience	Benefit of the Doubt/Trust	Connection and Contribution
Openness	Recognition/Validation	Agency & Co-Creation
Listening	Fairness	Recognition of Each Other’s Humanity
Understanding	Safety	Perspectives Embraced
Inclusion	Acknowledgment	Every Voice Matters
Accountability	Acceptance of Identity	Everyone Thrives Together

Research Context: Mentoring Project

Survey data illuminated educators' desire for adult presence (i.e., co-regulation) in their classrooms. The Network’s Mentor Program provided a comprehensive system of support for novice teachers and administrators during their first years in the profession. Research on new teacher induction suggested that novice educators who experienced consistent emotional support and affirmation of their developing professional identities from self-regulated mentors, were more likely to move from compliance-oriented survival responses toward reflective, intentional teaching practices over time (Olivadoti, 2012).

At the core of the program is full-release, non-evaluative mentoring that offers job-embedded, relationship-centered coaching focused on instructional growth, reflection, and educator wellbeing. This individualized support is complemented by a seasonal professional learning series that responds to the evolving needs of educators across the year, as well as regional professional learning communities for mentors, coaches, and school leaders. Together, these interconnected supports are designed to foster safety, significance, and belonging,

conditions that research shows are essential for educator retention and resilience.

Full-release mentoring is designed as a bridge from teacher training to teacher development by centering the whole human. Mentors intentionally slow moments of challenge, prioritizing relationship, regulation, and dignity rather than quick solutions. Mentors practice self-regulation, thus help mentees shift out of dysregulation, which “forms the basis for social communication, cooperation, and connectedness (Porges 2022, p. 8), and co-regulation. Through this lived, experiential practice, teachers develop the skills and ways of being needed to do the same for their students (SEE TABLE 4).

Table 4
Mentoring Program Outcomes:
Co-Regulation and Professional Growth

Evidence Area	Findings (Mentors, Spring 2025, n=15)
Instructional Support	Mentors reported providing substantial support in instructional strategies, lesson planning, and materials (100%).
Emotional & Relational Support	Mentors provided guidance in challenging situations (100%) and strategies for building student relationships (93%).
Professional Confidence	Mentors strongly agreed they helped mentees gain confidence as educators (100%) and improve teaching effectiveness (100%).
Student Learning Impact	Mentors reported positive influence on student engagement and classroom performance (94%).
Communication Capacity	Mentees improved communication with parents and caregivers (80%).
Relational Practice Example	<i>“I have tried to prioritize empathy over problem-solving... This has opened doors for honest communication and productivity.”</i>

Note: OR State-wide Beginning Teacher Mentor End-of-Year Survey Report

Theme 3: Mentoring as Developmental Infrastructure in Relational Professional Learning

Across mentoring reflections, collaborative inquiry artifacts, and professional learning documentation, mentoring relationships emerged as relational contexts through which educators experienced early shifts in how they understood professional challenge, connection, and growth. Participants frequently described entering mentoring interactions while navigating heightened emotional demands, uncertainty about instructional decision-making, and a sense of professional isolation (See Table 4). Within these interpersonal learning spaces, mentors were often reported to model practices such as attentive presence, reflective dialogue, and affirmation of emerging professional competence. These experiences were described as contributing to increased psychological safety and willingness to engage more openly in professional learning processes.

Over time, educators noted that mentoring relationships supported the development of professional agency through opportunities to articulate values, experiment with instructional strategies, and interpret setbacks as part of ongoing learning rather than as indicators of inadequacy. Mentors similarly described shifts in their own roles, moving beyond technical guidance toward facilitation of relational trust and collaborative inquiry. These interactions were frequently framed as foundational experiences that shaped educators’ readiness to participate in broader professional learning communities and networked improvement efforts.

Participants also observed that relational norms cultivated within mentoring relationships appeared to extend into team-based learning contexts, contributing to increased

collaboration, shared responsibility, and openness to feedback across roles. In this way, mentoring structures functioned as developmental infrastructure within the professional learning system, linking individual growth processes with the emergence of collective efficacy. These findings suggest that mentoring relationships may provide early experiences of dignity-affirming support and co-regulation that prepare educators to engage more fully in networked professional learning environments designed to sustain wellbeing and continuous improvement.

Integrated Findings: Psychologically Safe Classrooms in Multiple Schools

This research was guided by the question: What conditions enable educators to experience dignity, safety, and belonging—and how can systems cultivate them? Data from SOREN-supported professional learning from the Mentoring Project and Partner School demonstrate that educator voice is a critical driver of insight and leadership. This ensures that both professional learning and systemic responses are directly informed by those closest to the practice (Bryk et al., 2015). Analysis revealed four themes about which conditions influenced educator experiences of wellbeing: (1) Safety, Significance and Belonging ; (2) Emergence of Collective Efficacy; and (3) Co-Regulation and Professional Growth. Through self and co-regulation, teachers shifted mindsets from reaction to response thereby creating emotionally supportive learning environments (e.g., managed relationships and behaviors), which increased the effectiveness of their teaching, teacher leadership, and student engagement (Reyes, et al., 2012). Teachers at The Partner School made school-wide significant shifts from a reactive approach to an intentional, responsive model, which minimized office referrals and increased instructional time

and academic achievement. This builds on prior research that showed students in high Classroom Emotional Climates (CEC) engage more in learning and exhibit fewer behavior problems, when their teachers are responsive toward both their academic and their social and emotional needs (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009; Reyes, et al, 2012).

Educators in Oregon still work in schools with escalating demands associated with resource constraints, and neoliberal accountability emphasizing efficiency, compliance and performance outcomes. However, this study showed the resilient movement of educators from survival overwhelm and saturation to school-wide psychological safety and collective resilience. Building collective resilience throughout schools, and across districts in rural communities enabled educators to build a sense of belonging through place-based advocacy (Farnsworth, 2021). Participants experienced psychological safety and dignity leading to interpersonal risk-taking to overcome barriers, engagement, and collective problem-solving. Findings contribute to the literature by showing that CEC in the study were positive, characterized by a sense of connectedness and belonging, which increased teachers' ability to use their voice, and become school leaders.

State Policy Support

With recent changes, Oregon educators are now supported by policies of infrastructure to support their wellbeing. In June 2023, Oregon adopted the *Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (TSEL) Framework and Standards*, designed to strengthen school cultures by supporting both student and adult wellbeing. This framework is unique because it explicitly includes adults (i.e., educators, administrators, educational assistants), affirming that adult mindsets and behaviors are necessary

preconditions for equitable student outcomes. This focus enables students and adults to be “affirmed in their identities, where they can develop a sense of agency and belonging, and engage in collaborative problem solving” (OR Dept of Ed, p.5). Regulated adults can meet their own needs through self-determination and agency, thus have higher potential to correctly interpret cues of safety in the environment and recruit the more advanced neural circuits that support the ability to learn (Porges, 2011). The TSEL standard of *Self-Awareness* may be the key to mediate the dignity violations teachers faced. Self-awareness and adaptability (i.e., neuroplasticity) are strengths that helped educators shift from reaction to response in relational networked communities and affirms the premise that regulated adults help students better regulate themselves (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2018; Perry, 2019).

Limitations

Several limitations affect the study design and outcomes, notably (1) sample specificity and generalizability, (2) self-reporting bias, (3) limited time frame, and (4) potential confounding variables. This study captures a specific temporal snapshot (Spring 2023). Given that neurobiological states are dynamic, longitudinal research is needed to determine the long-term impact of dignity-based frameworks on educator retention and systemic health. While the integrative approach provided rich, context-specific data, the findings are primarily reflective of the Southern Oregon region and may not be fully generalizable to disparate educational landscapes. The study acknowledges that educator wellbeing is influenced by a complex web of external variables. While this research focused on professional relational ethics, the impact of personal and societal stressors on neuroception remains a confounding factor. The reliance on

self-reported survey data introduces the potential for response bias, as educators experiencing the highest levels of burnout may have lacked the capacity to participate, potentially skewing the data toward those still actively engaged in the network.

Implications for Practice and Policy: Educator Networks as Belonging Infrastructure

This study affirms a central truth of holistic education: systems cannot ask educators to cultivate dignity, safety, and belonging for students without first creating those conditions for adults. The findings from the Southern Oregon Regional Educator Network point toward a set of next steps that extend beyond programmatic improvement to structural, relational, and policy-level change.

Educational systems and policies must move beyond compliance-driven accountability toward designs that prioritize educator wellbeing as a core indicator of educational effectiveness. Policies such as Oregon’s Senate Bill 182 (funding educator professional learning) and the adoption of *Transformative Social and Emotional Learning* (TSEL) provide promising scaffolds, yet their impact depends on implementation that honors educator voice, local context, and whole-person wellbeing. Design must explicitly protect time, resources, and structures for co-regulation, collaborative inquiry, and sustained professional learning, recognizing educator wellbeing as a necessary precondition for equity, retention, and student success. Implementation occurs across multiple interacting levels: classroom practice, school culture, leadership systems, and cross-district learning networks; with the aim of strengthening collective efficacy, and sustainable improvement capacity.

Future Research

Leaders in holistic educational systems function not only as managers of organizational processes, but increasingly as co-regulators and stewards of dignity within relational learning communities. This expanded role calls for sustained attentiveness to nervous system safety, connectedness, and reflective awareness of how everyday leadership practices may either affirm or undermine the inherent worth of others. When leaders model self-regulation — through presence, deep listening, emotional transparency, and thoughtful responsiveness — they help establish conditions for collective regulation and trust. Such relational climates support educators in shifting from patterns of reactivity toward greater responsiveness, restoring a sense of agency, professional identity, and shared purpose.

Within this context, educator networks such as regional professional learning communities can be understood as essential belonging infrastructure in educational ecosystems. These networks act as developmental bridges, connecting educators across roles, schools, and districts while creating space for healing, collaborative inquiry, and collective responsibility for improvement. The future research directions, outlined in Table 5, build on these insights by examining how dignity-centered leadership, neurobiological safety, and relational professional learning systems contribute to long-term educator wellbeing and sustainable school transformation.

Table 5
Directions for Future Research

Holistic Research Focus	Guiding Inquiry Questions	Potential Contributions to Holistic Education
Neurobiological safety and relational learning environments	How do experiences of emotional and physiological safety influence educators' capacity for presence, reflection, and relational attunement in professional learning contexts?	Deepens understanding of mind–body–emotion integration in adult learning and informs trauma-responsive, regulation-informed professional learning design.
Leadership evolution toward co-regulation and dignity stewardship	How do leadership roles transform over time as educators move from managing systems to cultivating relational presence, shared regulation, and cultures of dignity? What conditions support leaders in sustaining these shifts across multiple academic years?	Extends holistic leadership theory by examining leadership as an inner developmental process and relational practice that shapes organizational climate and learning capacity.

Long-term effects of leader-modeled self-regulation	How does leader modeling of self-regulation — including presence, emotional transparency, and reflective responsiveness — influence school climate, relational trust, and educator retention over time?	Illuminates how embodied leadership practices contribute to emotionally supportive school environments and sustainable educator commitment.
Dignity-centered leadership and cultures of belonging	How do leadership practices that affirm inherent human worth shape trust, voice, and collaborative engagement within school communities?	Advances holistic leadership scholarship by linking dignity, recognition, and ethical relational practice to sustainable learning cultures.
Educator wellbeing, identity, and purpose across time	In what ways do relational professional learning systems influence educators’ sense of meaning, professional identity development, and long-term wellbeing?	Contributes to research on educator wellbeing, resilience, and renewal, positioning wellbeing as foundational to holistic school transformation.
Developmental pathways from mentoring to networked learning	How can mentoring, induction, and networked professional learning be designed as coherent developmental journeys that support growth across career stages?	Builds a lifespan perspective on educator learning and highlights relational continuity as a driver of collective efficacy and professional agency.
Policy, funding stability, and organizational culture interactions	How do governance structures, policy frameworks, and resource allocation patterns influence the sustainability of continuous improvement initiatives?	Illuminates structural supports and barriers to sustaining educator-driven innovation and contributes to more coherent policy implementation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated how the Network intentionally designed professional learning as a whole-person endeavor, emphasizing safety, dignity, co-regulation, and belonging. Data show how participants experienced self-regulation and used adaptive strategies of connection for co-regulation, belonging and wellbeing (See Figure 1). While prior research

has examined educator wellbeing, often the perspectives were treated as parallel rather than integrated domains. This current integrative framework extends that research by showing that professional learning environments can be intentionally designed to provide safety and dignity across multiple schools and regional systems.

Holistic education begins not with reform, but with relationships. “Healing *towards* community strengthens resiliency, upholds equity and justice, and supports our individual and collective agency to define our paths in the world and have an impact in the systems that affect us” (Parameswaran et al, 2023, p. 10). By grounding educational policy in the dual pillars of Social Engagement Theory and the Dignity Model, schools move beyond temporary wellness initiatives toward a sustainable “belonging infrastructure.” Holistic education, then, is not an add-on to schooling but a systemic commitment. With the support of state leaders, Oregon is poised to move beyond foundational neurobiological safety toward an intentional design where dignity and belonging serve as the very infrastructure of sustainable, relational wellbeing.

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visionary educators and legislators whose policy vision in Oregon made this work possible. The passage of Senate Bill 182 (2017), the Educator Advancement Council, and the creation of ten Regional Educator Networks elevated educator voice and expanded access to locally responsive professional learning in places that had little to no access for decades before. As one of these networks, SOREN has benefited from sustained public investment and regional collaboration that allowed time to build trust, learn together, and demonstrate meaningful impact. Recognizing the complexity of implementation across diverse contexts, we hold hope that continued reflection and shared learning will strengthen these efforts over time. Thoughtful stewardship of policies that nurture relational professional learning infrastructures may help education systems remain centered on equity, sustainability, and the human conditions that support thriving schools and communities.

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Author Bios

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