THESIS

THE LANGUAGE OF SHAME:

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VULNERABILITY AND FLOW IN

TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL LIVES

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2021

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ABSTRACT

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Social emotional intelligence (SEI) strategies and curricula have been developed for over a decade, but the impact of incorporating SEI into education has only recently begun to surface. The majority of research conducted incorporating SEI into the classroom focuses primarily on student impact, whereas, little to no research has been done on how these strategies can be incorporated into professional development and educator sustainability. This study looks specifically at how addressing the emotional complexities of shame and vulnerability, experienced within the teaching profession, is connected to whether or not educators can reach flow state within their classroom. By comparing secondary English teachers' experiences to those of teachers in other secondary disciplines through a survey, narrative journals, and focus group interviews, this study uses grounded theory to investigate how English teachers uniquely experience shame, vulnerability, and flow within their career. Implications from this study may help open up professional dialogue around shared experiences of shame and vulnerability in small teaching communities, as well as helping educators consider implementing strategies that encourage flow within classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2015, the final month of my maternity leave for my second child, I was faced with a difficult question: should I leave teaching? Being a mother of two children and falling into a stay-at-home mom routine worked well for my family, so this question seemed to have a clear answer: yes! Transitioning out of the profession was seamless. I conducted myself in all the right ways. I had meaningful conversations with all my department members. I spoke with my principal and thanked her for the opportunities given, and I got all of my papers filed with Human Resources. After nine years of teaching at the same school, I made a clean break and felt good about my decision.

However, I should have known that physically removing oneself from a decade-long profession and mentally removing oneself were two different tasks. Time away from the stressful day-to-day of teaching allowed me to return to the joys of pedagogical imaginings, and I jumped at the opportunity, during my nonexistent free time, to join a think tank of creative educators to redesign a new public charter school in my town. After three years of researching, writing, marketing, fund-raising, and defending our proposal to the school district, we opened the doors to our school in the fall of 2018.

The celebration and excitement of our team's achievements did not come without consequences. Members of the teaching community I so responsibly left at my previous job did not share our new school's vision and viewed our work as a disruptive or traitorous act that indicated the hard work done within the long-established public schools. Even though I saw our new school as an addition to the great work done in other local and state schools, and I was not

ashamed of the innovative school redesign our team had created, I could not help but feel consumed by the dark shadow of shame that I experienced in response to some of my former colleagues' reactions. The depression I sank into was so intense that I became afraid to leave my house for fear of running into a former colleague. I deleted all of my social media to become as invisible as possible and even drove on different roads in order to not feel anxious passing by my former school.

Shame--a feeling I had felt time and time again in my academic and professional experiences in education. Still, I could not identify this emotion until the aftermath of our district's school board meeting to approve our charter. During these dark months, I found comfort in the work of shame researcher Brené Brown. In her SXSW TEDtalk "The Power of Vulnerability", Brown (2010) defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging–something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection."

Feeling "excommunicated" from the only professional community I knew, the "unworthiness" buried itself deep into my being. Of course, this was not the first time I've felt shame, and the more I explored this topic, the more I realized that I have felt my deepest moments of shame in academic contexts. In Brené Brown's SXSW EDU talk "Daring Classrooms," (2017) she notes that 85% of people admitted to having a shaming moment in schools that forever changed them as learners. Since this was the case not just with me, but also with the many educators in attendance in Brown's audience, I began to wonder, if so many people in the general population have experienced shame in schools, why do so many of them go on to become educators? How many educators repeat the same shaming acts on their students?

Upon further reflection, I realized that my own shame experiences in education began when I was a student and that these memories of my academic inadequacy continue to haunt me to this day. Those punctuated moments of spelling a word wrong, misinterpreting a poem, or seeing a red outlined grammatical error on a term paper not only had detrimental effects on my academic performance, but the power that these seemingly minor incidents have had on my confidence as an English teacher continue to baffle me. Through mental and written reflections in pursuit of my own healing, I've come to realize that I am a product of an education system that uses shaming techniques "as a rel[ied]-upon emotion" for achieving classroom management and behavioral change (Stearns, 2017). These experiences led me to ask: *am I, specifically as an English teacher, alone in my professional shame*?

I cannot be the only teacher who has felt "unworthy." When public opinion expects teachers to possess the qualities that are "marked with a halo" or contain "celestial radiance," how can anyone live up to these expectations (Goldstein, 2015, p.4)? These external expectations can be crippling for any creative professional, which is why I wanted to investigate strategies to help teachers in particular to mitigate shame and restore creative joy. Years of practicing intentional vulnerability have helped me to regain creative inspiration. I was curious if my own journey held validity for others; if vulnerability reduces shame, can it also restore creativity?

The above realizations led me to address the following questions in this study:

> 1. How do the shaming experiences of English Language Arts teachers compare to those of teachers in other disciplines?
>
> 2. How is vulnerability viewed by English Language Arts teachers in comparison to teachers in other disciplines?

3. How is a "flow state" experienced by English Language Arts teachers in comparison to teachers in other disciplines (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)?

In order to provide historical context for these questions, I begin the next section by examining how shame experiences have been institutionalized in the field of education since its early beginnings.

The History of Shame in Education

Historically, shame has been deeply embedded in education in the United States, though the definition has evolved over time. As Stearns (2017) documents in his book *Shame: A Brief History*, Shame in the U.S. has morphed from a tool to instill religious righteousness and civilized public codes of conduct to one's recognition of his self-worth. From the infamous letter "A" sewn to Hester Prynne's garments, early concepts and use of shame in the Puritan era "serve[d] the community well while allowing reintegration." Shame was an emotion "designed to maintain social discipline" and religious conversion.

At the turn of the century, new philosophies, such as Romanticism, celebrated the well-being of the individual, beginning with childhood. Society put a new emphasis on "families creating cheerful environments for their children," and a newfound recognition of self-worth challenged the use of corporal punishment (Stearns, 2017, p.76). During this philosophical transition, the word *shame* was no longer used or recognized as it had been previously in mainstream culture. Stearn elaborates:

> The exploration of this new attachment to self [had] not, to be sure, been applied directly to shame, but the connections are fairly obvious. Self-focus would make community sanctions less tolerable, both to victims and potential enforcers; and it was often accompanied by a shift in the sense of privacy, which would further jeopardize the traditional approach (p.73).

In contrast to a family setting, however, shame became the ultimate method in "retaining control" (Stearns, 2017, p.77) in the classroom. Shaming as a classroom management tool became the alternative to physical discipline. The rise of this technique "heightened claims to moral as well as academic superiority," and many educators took "pride in relying on shame" instead of physical punishment (Stearns, 2017, p.77).

Fast-forwarding to the present, an explicit reliance on shaming as a classroom management tool has virtually disappeared and has been replaced with a pedagogical focus on the emotional and intellectual well-being of the whole child. However, even with highly-trained, better-qualified teachers, "75% of high school students connect their school experience with negative emotions" (Brackett, 2017). Shame is still largely present in schools but is "ignored, in part because the emotion [is] no longer discussed" (Stearns, 2017, p. 81).

In his book, Stearns continually shows how the use of shame in education and everyday life has changed over time. His work made me curious to see if the use of the word *shame* in all printed text has also shifted overtime as well. Using Google's Ngram Viewer, I generated this figure to represent the pattern of shame in printed texts from 1800 to present, as depicted in Figure 1. The use of the word *shame* in printed text over time dropped dramatically towards the turn of the century, which correlates with Stearns' observation of the emergence of "the self."
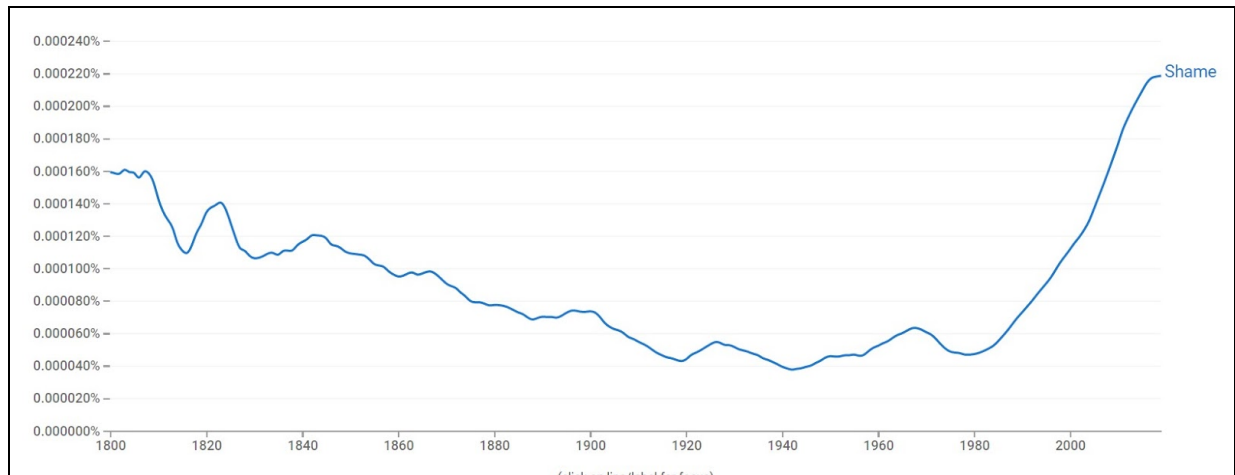
Figure 1

As mentioned previously, however, even though the word *shame* was less commonly used in mainstream culture during this time, it persisted as a classroom management tool. The timing and consequence of this mismatch plausibly resulted in generations of students who experienced an unidentified, yet negative emotion connected to school. I speculate that the increase in the printed use of the word *shame* since 1980 may be attributed to an increase in shame research, as well as a growing understanding of social-emotional intelligence research that demonstrates that one's ability to name emotions helps to reduce their "intensity" (Brackett, 2020).

Bringing Shame to the Forefront of Contemporary Culture

Most recently, the work of shame researcher Brené Brown has helped advance emotional-intelligence theory into mainstream culture, particularly in the area of naming and sharing emotions like shame and vulnerability. In addition to conducting large-scale studies on shame, Brown is an endowed professor in the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work; a best-selling author, lecturer, and podcast host; and the founder of a professional

training and certification program called "The Daring Way," which focuses on the topics of vulnerability, courage, shame, and empathy. While most of Brown's work addresses the population at large, a recent spin-off of the program, called "Daring Classrooms" tailors the program specifically to educators.

One of the top viewed TED Talks of all time, Brown's 2010 speech, "The Power of Vulnerability," has over 51 million views. In this talk, Brown provides a renewed focus on shame as a construct and gives audiences "the language to understand that complex world of emotion and behavior and thinking, and that language allows [people] to be brave with ... life and know [we] are not alone" (Ward, 2016).

During her TEDtalk, Brown mentions her six-year research study collecting qualitative data on vulnerability, the inescapable pattern Brown uncovered was "this unnamed thing called shame" (Brown, 2010). Brown found that nobody really wants to talk about shame, but the need to connect through common experiences and the permission to be vulnerable has led millions of people to engage in discussions about their experiences with shame. However, big new ideas that excite and disrupt the status quo, such as naming our shame, and becoming highly vulnerable in our personal lives and workplaces, are often adopted too quickly without a real strategy of implementation. We buy the kit, bring in the guest speaker, and move forward at that moment. Are we willing to "lean into the discomfort" of re-evaluating what, for many of us, are the ingrained, systemic methods of shaming students that yield complying adults (Brown, 2010)?

In her book *The Gift of Imperfection* (2010)*,* Brown points out that unless a person is part of the small population of "whole-hearted" individuals who authentically view their vulnerability "as a beautiful necessity of their being," most of us try to "numb" vulnerable emotions. Brown

advises that emotions cannot be isolated. If one "numbs vulnerability, they are also numbing joy, gratitude, happiness, etc." (pp. 69-75). This common reaction to unwanted emotions does not prepare people for uncertainty. Instead, people harden themselves in order not to feel vulnerable by making the world as "certain" as possible, which in turn makes us "more afraid; afraid of failure, afraid of unworthiness, afraid of being unloved" (Brown, 2010, in press, 2017).

Applying these findings to education begs the question, what happens when the desire for certainty seeps into our classrooms, thus eliminating the possibility of vulnerability? According to Brown's "Daring Classroom" (2017) talk, the cost is high since "eliminating vulnerability, is eliminating love, belonging, gratitude, courage, empathy, trust, innovation, creativity, accountability, adaptability, hard conversations, feedback, problem-solving, and ethical decision making"--all of which are central to teaching, learning, a sense of belonging, and community.

The Price of Shame

As reviewed in previous sections, shame's elusive history has allowed the word to be associated with guilt and humiliation, but distinguishing the difference between these definitions is important. Brown reminds her "Daring Classroom" TEDtalk (2017) audience that guilt is "I did something bad," humiliation is "I did not deserve what happened," and shame is "I am bad". Understanding and developing a common language around emotions is an early step in reestablishing vulnerable classrooms where students feel free to take emotional and intellectual risks.

Brackett's work (2020) on Social-Emotional Learning and Emotional Literacy provides insight into how these skills can be integrated into education. His team's findings reveal that developing emotional skills in educators is "at the core of building students' social and emotional

capacities" (Brackett, 2020). The research informs the "Collaborative for Academic, Social & Emotional Learning" (CASEL), which highlights the following roles that emotions play in learning:

1. Emotions affect human attention, memory, and learning

2. Emotions play a role in decision making

3. Emotions drive our social relationship

4. Emotions are the driver of much of our health

5. Emotions are connected to creativity, effectiveness & performance

According to findings by CASEL (2020), "[u]nless we have the emotional skills to manage the emotions we feel, we give up." Due to the scant attention paid to emotional competency and well-being in schools, approximately "75% of students [report] feeling tired, bored & stressed," and a high number of teachers experience burn-out (Brackett, 2020).

Among earlier studies of emotional-intelligence, Nathanson's article "Shame Transactions" (1994) describes the "complex adult presentations of shame," exploring specifically how the emotion is altered when not addressed. The Compass of Shame is a visualization of his findings that is utilized in the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP). According to the IIRP, shame will never be eliminated, but appropriate strategies can be implemented to intelligently address shame in order to help prevent the actions displayed in the Compass of Shame, such as "withdrawal, attacking self, attacking others, & avoidance" (IIRP, 2021). By their very nature, restorative practices, "provide an opportunity for us to express our shame, along with other emotions, and in doing so reduce their intensity" (Nathanson, 1997).

Bringing conversations about shame into a classroom requires courage for both teachers and students and is, therefore, vulnerable work.

The Compass of Shame
Adapted from D.L. Nathanson, Shame and Pride, 1992

Withdrawal:
• isolating oneself
• running and hiding

Attack Other:
• 'turning the tables'
• blaming the victim
• lashing out verbally or physically

Attack Self:
• self put-down
• masochism

Avoidance:
• denial
• abusing drugs and alcohol
• distraction through thrill seeking
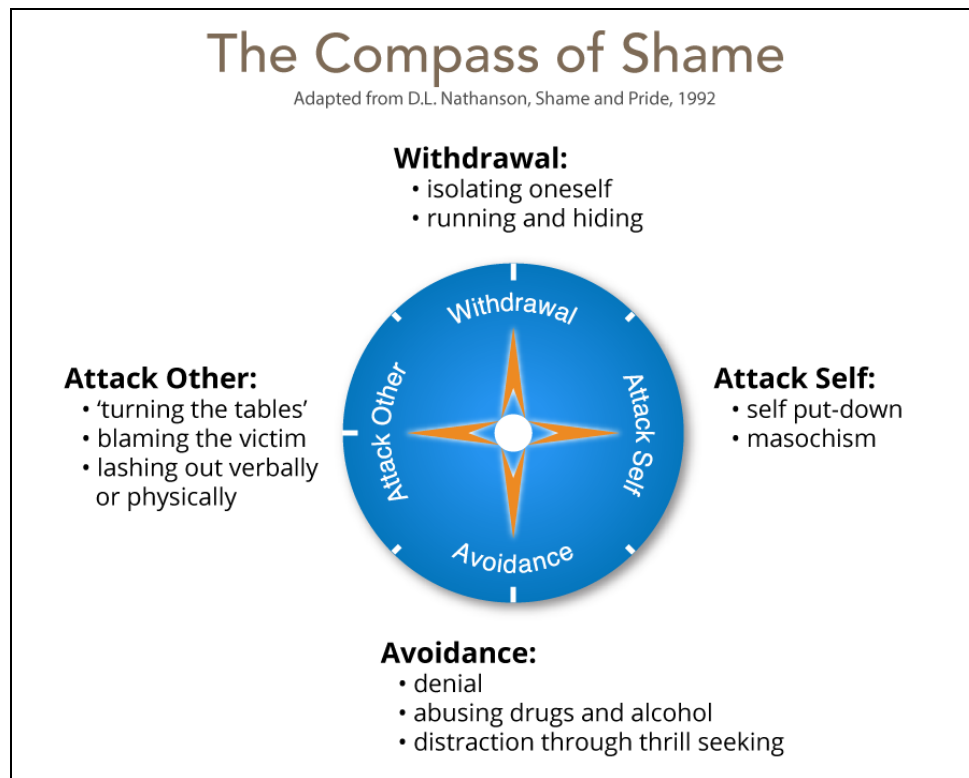
Figure 2

The Relationship Between Shame, Vulnerability, Flow, & Creativity

Like shame, vulnerability needs to be clearly defined. Brown defines vulnerability in her "Daring Classrooms" TEDtalk (2017), as "the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy,...creativity" and learning. The misconception that vulnerability equals weakness can only be broken if the concept of boundaries is attached. In her book *Dare to Lead,* Brown cautions that "[vulnerability without boundaries] is not vulnerability. It's confession, manipulation, desperation, or shock and awe, but it's not vulnerability" (Brown, 2018, p. 39).

Willingly choosing to be vulnerable and doing so with boundaries in place can still set a person up to be hurt, but doing so is necessary if one is to feel connected, and therefore seen, as teachers want all students to feel in our classrooms. Educators who intentionally practice vulnerability with boundaries in their classrooms foster healthy competition and high expectations. Vulnerable classrooms are "interactive, provide immediate feedback, and safe opportunities to build skills" (Kelly, 2014).

The characteristics of a vulnerable classroom are also present in classrooms that foster a high degree of *flow*, which is "a highly focused mental state conducive to productivity." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In his book *Flow,* Csikszentmihalyi (1990) further defines this phenomena as a state where "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost" (p.4). He goes on to explain that an "optimal [flow] state" occurs when people "confront a task we have a chance of completing" if we concentrate on it for an extended amount of time. The task must provide "clear goals" and provide "immediate feedback." When experiencing flow, one "acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life." This deep concentration allows a person to "exercise a sense of control over their actions." In instances of flow, , the "concern for the self disappears" and the sense of the "duration of time is altered" (p.49).

The description above sounds like every educator's ideal classroom, which is why Csikszentmihalyi's theories are being incorporated into recent educational reform. Shernoff (Kelly, 2014) observes that current educational policies "stack the odds against creating optimal learning environments" and that student disengagement is "pervasive" in our current system.

However, the "flow perspective on engagement is fundamentally optimistic about educational reform." Flow engagement occurs when "teachers create a sense of community, belonging, and support," ultimately a place of high vulnerability.

While a lack of flow is one of the consequences of high shaming in schools, the consequence of trauma is more dangerous. *Educational trauma* is defined as "the inadvertent perpetration and perpetuation of harmful systemic and cyclical practices in schools" (Olson, 2016). The historical and intentional use of shame is one of these "systemic and cyclical" practices. Modern-day examples of shaming, especially in charter schools, include "public apologies, publicly sharing a student's economic status, publicly posting grades with student's names visible, refusing to let a student sit in class for a missing assignment, color-coding uniforms to single out misbehaving children" (Goodman, 2017); Hester Prynne's scarlet "A" returns. Charter schools like Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) utilize these techniques to no avail. Tangney reports that "shame fails to inhibit future acts of wrongdoing and may even make matters worse" (Goodman, 2017). Even though finding quantifiable data on an individual's shaming experiences is difficult and unreliable, shaming in any form should be considered a "violation of fundamental human rights" (Goodman, 2019). In essence, the act of shaming an individual tells them they are not worthy to exist.

In her study, *Wounded by School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing up to Old School Culture*, Kristin Olson discovered that "the shadows of pain, disappointment, even cynicism in [adults] recollection of schooling...recalled deeply embedded wounds that still bruise and ache, wounds that still compromised and distorted [one's] sense of themselves as a person and professional" (Olsen, 2016). She reports that one of the top wounds is of "creativity."

Olson's informants who live creative lives reportedly did so "despite" schooling, whereas the majority of participants "rarely think about creativity once they lost it in school" and do not recognize this as a "wound" (Olsen, 2016).

Olsen's research described above diagnoses the issue of lost creativity, but does not provide a remedy. Csikszentmihalyi's research spans a variety of professions, and adult creativity, so *where can creativity thrive within schools?* The English Language Arts classroom can and should be the place where creativity is perhaps born and sustained, thus it is important that the same expectations that hold for students to expand creatively ought to extend to teachers. In order to cultivate creative classrooms, teachers are charged with building classroom communities that welcome vulnerability, creativity, and flow. Therefore, teachers must serve as models for students. This means they must have access to the same conditions that these researchers are arguing are necessary, which involve opportunities to deal with shame and to inhabit environments that make room for vulnerability and thus foster creativity and flow.

Shame in the English Classroom

How many English teachers can visualize the rebellious scene in *Dead Poets Society* where Robin William's character rips out the formulaic introduction pages explaining how to analyze poetry? How many young English geeks thought about becoming teachers after being inspired by that scene? However, the rise of standardized tests that, which link teacher evaluation to student achievement, put teachers back in the position where they feel compelled to desperately paste back together those ripped pages from Robin William's Introduction to Poetry textbook informing them how to teach English the "right" way. In fact, "an underlying cause of burn-out among English teachers… is a deep-seated, passionately felt sense that the moral,

person-related basis of their work is being eroded, to be replaced by formal accountability and the accountancy of cost-effectiveness" (Nias, 1999). For over twenty years since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the message to teachers is that if they fail to withstand the gaze of the standardization microscope, they are failing our children. These realities inevitably create feelings of unworthiness and foster imposter syndrome.

These are dangerous experiences. According to Brown, in her book *Dare to Lead* (2017), when we experience shame we go into self-protection mode by "assembling our armor" (p.51) . She describes this emotional progression as follows on page 51-52:

1. I'm not enough.

2. If I'm honest with them about what's happening, they'll think less of me or maybe use it against me.

3. No way am I going to be honest about this. No one else does it. Why do I have to put myself out there?

4. Yeah. Screw them. I don't see them being honest about what scares them. And they've got plenty of issues.

5. It's actually their issues and shortcomings that make me act this way. This is their fault, and they're trying to blame me.

6. In fact, now that I think about it, I'm actually better than them.

The resulting isolation incited by this emotional sequence has the potential to create a

culture of individualism [which] tends to increase emotional stress for its

members by fostering an illusion that others are coping and that one's own fears

are born of a unique incompetencies; by requiring individuals to pretend to

feelings they do not own; by failing to promote the habit of day-to-day communication so that small interpersonal or professional differences build up into major problems (Nais, 1999).

If English teachers approach instruction from such a position of fear and isolation, their approach to the study of English may become too black and white. In such cases, "students are at the mercy of their teachers, the only ones with 'vision' to judge the results" of creativity, and "once the meaning is identified--the singular meaning provided by the teacher (or test)--all pleasure empties" (Stein, 2010). Similarly, if teachers give feedback without modeling vulnerability, many students experience "negative feedback on something they have written... as negative feedback on themselves," (Whitney, 2018) causing shame to continue to grow within the discipline.

By the time students are in high school, more and more secondary English teachers are finding that they have to help students "unlearn their fear of writing," (Mora, 2005) poetry, and literature with minimal success. However, the English classroom has the potential to intentionally teach vulnerability where reading literature and poetry are "innately wild, frequently uncivil, and fundamentally rebellious acts [which] have been neutered" (Mora, 2005). The underlying culture of shame that many English teachers are likely to have experienced may tempt them to "ignore" the vulnerable side of their discipline "rather than nakedly chance their own supposed intellectual limits or risk their emotional lives in front of students" (Stein, 2010). As a result, the schoolmarms return, ready to access their toolboxes of shame, discouraging students and teachers alike from risking vulnerability or creativity because settling for the certainty of the right answer is safer than being exposed as an imposter.

Education in the United States was built upon the socially acceptable norms of public shaming, but overtime, as shame no longer served society, it still continues to be institutionalized in the field of education. Through organizations like the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and shame researchers like Brené Brown, individuals and communities alike are uncovering instances of shame by using tools to help people become more comfortable with vulnerability, which, in turn, creates more creative and collaborative working and personal relationships. Educational communities must begin or continue addressing shame by being aware of our educational history around shame and familiarizing themselves with the people mentioned in this section as models on how to address shame and move forward to build healthy, vulnerable school cultures.

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the extent to which shame is a common emotion felt throughout the teaching profession, I used qualitative design for this study, informed by the research methods associated with grounded theory. In particular, my study focused on the ways that shame is uniquely experienced by English Language Arts teachers in comparison to teachers from other disciplines. I also examined how shame cycles that are left unaddressed by teachers may strain student-teacher relationships and professional sustainability. As stated in my introduction, I was originally drawn to these areas of investigation before I even conducted the study because of the need to understand my own personal experiences with shame as a teacher. Since Brené Brown's work on shame and vulnerability was on the rise during this same time period, this topic resonated, and continues to resonate, with me as a result; the same is true for the research methodology, grounded theory as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), that Brown uses to arrive at her findings in these areas.

Although Brown writes for mainstream audiences, she is careful to point out that her work is deeply informed by years of research in the area of shame; in fact, her best-selling books, as well as her website, are unusual in that they include sections devoted entirely to her research methodology. Brown's initial shame research in 2006 led her to the development of "Shame Resilience Theory" (SRT) which is a theory "concerned with how people respond to feelings of shame." The theory emphasizes that the universal emotion of shame "can have serious negative consequences" (Selva, 2020) when left unchecked. Brown provides context for her development

of SRT on research in the appendix of her book *Daring Greatly* and also provides the same text on her website page. She shares:

> After fifteen years of social work education, I was sure of one thing: Connection is why we're here; it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The power that connection holds in our lives was confirmed when the main concern about connection emerged as the fear of disconnection; the fear that something we've done or failed to do, something about who we are or where we come from, has made us unlovable and unworthy of connection. I learned that we resolve this concern by understanding our vulnerabilities and cultivating empathy, courage, and compassion— what I call Shame Resilience (Brown, 2021).

Even though my entrance into grounded theory may seem coincidental because of the timing of my study, it was not merely a convenient choice. In fact, Brown herself describes the difficulties that are inherent in this approach. In Brown's article, "Trust in Emergence: Grounded Theory and My Research Process," (2021) she states that "the most difficult challenges of becoming a grounded theory researcher are:

1. Acknowledging that it is virtually impossible to understand grounded theory methodology prior to using it,

2. Developing the courage to let the research participants define the research problem, and

3. Letting go of your own interests and preconceived ideas to "trust in emergence."

Because I could find no research on the shame experiences of educators specifically, I determined that the research methods associated with grounded theory were especially

appropriate. To fully understand these experiences, it was essential that I worked my study's data from "the ground up." Thus, as I describe in more detail in the following sections, I relied on my participants to share their stories through a survey, journaling, and focus group interviews.

Context of the Investigation

I conducted the study in the secondary school where I currently teach, The Journey School, which is a free, public charter school located in a mid-sized city in the Western United States. At the time of the current study, the school was in its third year of operation. Students are admitted to the school through a lottery process. The student population consists of approximately 165 students, ranging from grades 6-12. Eighty-seven percent of the students identify as white, with the remaining 13% of the students identified as "non-white" by the school administration. Twelve percent of the students are free-and-reduced lunch recipients. Seven percent of the students are on individualized educational plans (IEPs), 18% have a 504 plan (i.e., a blueprint for how a school will support a student with a disability), and 21% have been identified as gifted and talented. Our unique school model has attracted teachers who are determined to create a teaching-learning community that is characterized by acceptance.

Toward this end, the social-emotional intelligence curriculum is at the heart of the school. One strategy our staff uses is building a group charter. We follow the five areas of emotional intelligence which are Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, Regulating (RULER) model which describes a charter-building as:

> "... a deliberate process [that] builds positive emotional climates by creating
> agreed-upon norms for how we want to feel and how we can help each other
> experience these feelings. Instead of typical classroom rules that are

teacher-directed, the Charter is an agreement that is based on feelings"

(www.centerforearlyeducation.org/, 2021).

Another Social-Emotional Intelligence (SEI) tool that I used in my study to help establish a safe emotional space among participants is the *restorative circle*. According to the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP), the restorative circle--or "Circle," for short-- is defined as "a versatile restorative practice that can be used proactively, to develop relationships and build community or reactively, to respond to wrongdoing, conflicts and problems. Circles give people an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in an atmosphere of safety, decorum and equality" (IIRP, 2021).

We at The Journey School use Circle daily to connect with students during an Advisory class, to address conflicts among students, to check in at the beginning of every staff meeting. Circle may seem unusually out of place in some schools, but the format "echoes ancient and indigenous practices employed in cultures all over the world, from Native American and First Nation Canadian to African, Asian, Celtic, Hebrew, Arab and many others" (IIRP, 2004). In order to authentically participate, all members must adhere to the Circle protocols of listening with the heart, speaking from the heart, speaking spontaneously and leanly or concisely, using a talking stick, and agreeing not to break the circle by interrupting the speaker or leaving the Circle while someone is speaking. If participants agree to these expectations, Circle has the potential for establishing a "deep connection between justice and spirituality...to maintain or restore harmony and balance" (IIRP, 2004). Another tool used to begin a restorative circle is Marc Brackett's "mood meter," which is "based on the circumplex model of affect" and, "defines emotions as having two dimensions, pleasantness and energy" (Brackett, 2020).

Along with a social emotional intelligence curriculum, The Journey School uses design-thinking techniques alongside community partnerships to engage students in meaningful competency-based opportunities. The humanity-centered design (HCD) techniques, used by the school, originated out of the Innovation Design Engineering Organization or IDEO, a global design company focused on creating positive change through design, which begins with a problem statement or question. Ideally, a creator follows the stages mapped out in the image below that I co-created with my school colleagues.
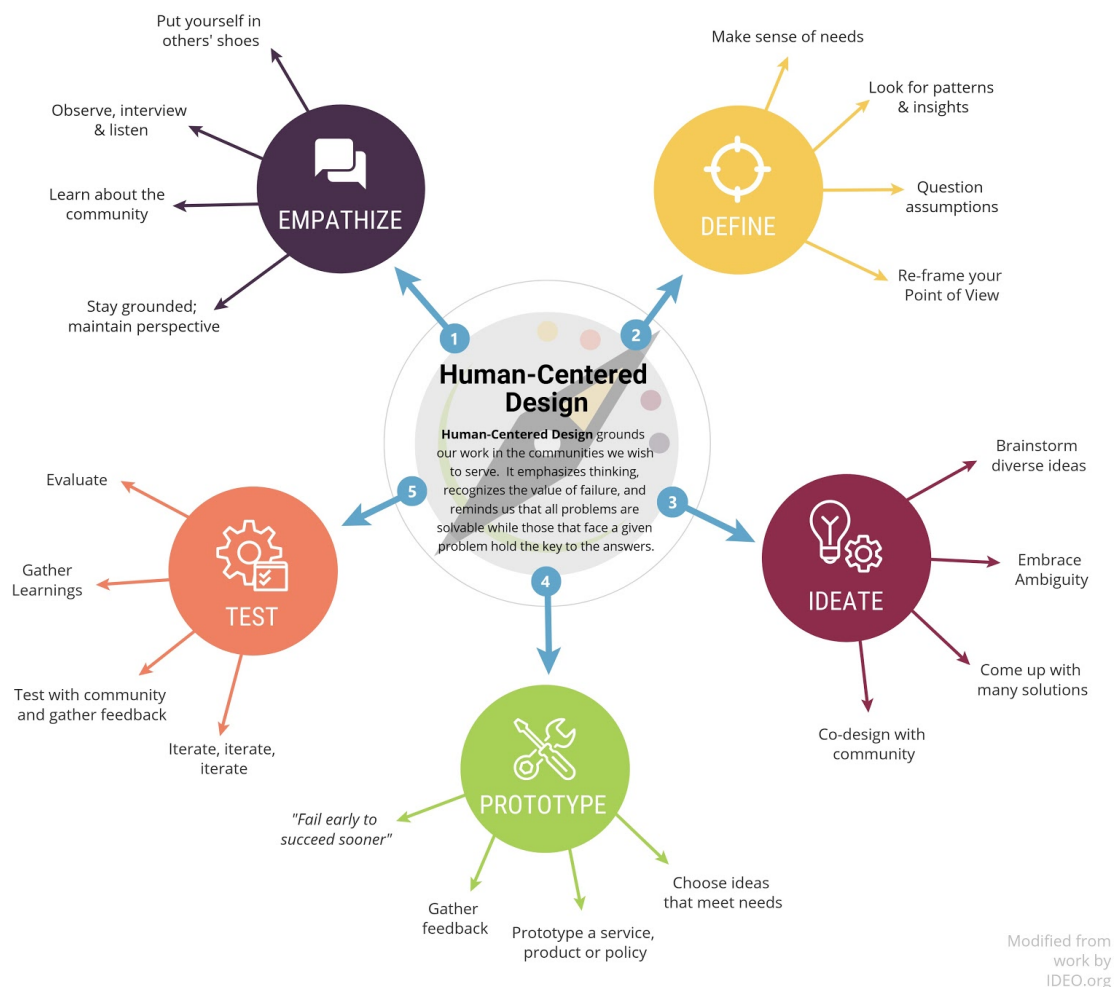

Figure 3

To provide a unique educational experience for these students and in order to be on the cutting-edge of school reform, we collaborate with other leading innovators, including organizations like the High Tech High Schools out of Southern California, which have paved the way for design-thinking education over the past decade. We have also adopted the advisory, student-centered model from the "Big Picture Learning" organization out of Rhode Island. This organization is guided by a vision of "unbridled, fearless curiosity...to foster learning spaces which create the wake in which students can freely, and with courage, pursue their passions and interests" (Big Picture Learning, 2021). We are also a pilot "No Barriers" School. A nationally recognized non-profit organization, "No Barriers" believes that "[w]hat is in you is stronger than what's in your way," and one of their missions is "to give kids the real-world tools to achieve more than they thought possible by giving teachers the resources to help them" (No Barriers, 2021).

Study Participants

Teachers at The Journey School hold secondary teaching licenses and follow the Humanity-Centered Design (HCD) and Social Emotional Intelligence (SEI) curriculum. Teachers are seen as both advisors and co-learners. Each teacher facilitates an Advisory class, with whom they meet daily to explicitly model and teach Emotional Intelligence lessons, which are also woven across disciplines in students' regular classes. Staff members from all disciplines also conduct book studies with students and create cross-disciplinary, teacher-led projects to engage the community around specific problems. These class projects are designed to be authentic learning experiences which allow students to apply their knowledge in real-life contexts outside of school.

I chose to work with the staff in my current school because they were guaranteed to have gone through the social emotional intelligence (SEI) training of CASEL, RULER and 6Seconds. These training sessions have provided our staff with tools described in the previous section like restorative circles, Marc Brackett's "mood meter," and group charter agreements. I also implemented these tools during focus groups to help study participants safely address difficult issues and to use emotional regulation to creatively problem-solve around the issues connected to shame, vulnerability, and flow in the teaching profession. I would not have felt comfortable conducting this type of research in schools that are unfamiliar with these training. An important note for future study is to recognize that the staff at The Journey School have worked together consecutively for three years implementing SEI into the school's culture. Other schools who wish to incorporate these same strategies should consider investing meaningful time and expectations to build culture around whole-school SEI work.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "50% of teachers quit between their first and fifth year of teaching" (NCES, 2019). Because I was interested in the shame experiences of *career* teachers, I deliberately selected participants for the study from the school's staff members who have been teaching in the profession for more than seven years. The nine participants in the study had an average of twelve years of teaching experience and came from a diverse set of backgrounds. Before teaching at our school, most participants held other positions in local, public secondary schools, teaching in their specific disciplines. However, two participants previously taught out of state, and one participant taught internationally. Several have held other professions and degrees outside of education. Seven out of the nine participants hold Master's degrees. All participants are certified teachers in the following disciplines: two in

English Language Arts, three in science, one in math, one in Spanish, one in social studies, and one in special education. Three participants identified as male, and six as female.

Methods of Data Collection

In line with the framework of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory, I used inductive methods to guide my data collection. I drew on both the research reviewed in my literature review and my own teaching narrative to design prompts in the areas of shame, vulnerability, creativity, and flow, which I then used in the initial survey, teacher journals, and focus group interviews. I collected the data in four phases, each phase informing the next.

During Phase One, I administered an empathy survey to participants, which I describe in more detail in the next section. In Phase Two, I asked participants to journal for twenty minutes about a time in their teaching career where they personally felt flawed and/or therefore unworthy in the profession. A few weeks following the journal prompt, I held approximately an hour-long focus group interview where participants debriefed their journal responses and other observations around the topic of shame. During Phase Three of my data collection, participants again wrote for twenty minutes on the prompt, "To what extent has the act of vulnerability been, intentionally or unintentionally, incorporated into your class foundations?" Participants had two weeks to complete this prompt, just as they did during Phase two of data collection. After two weeks, I held another hour-long focus group interview to debrief their responses. In Phase Four of data collection, participants were given twenty minutes over the course of two weeks to respond to the final prompt: "Describe specific moments where you have experienced flow during the course of your teaching." After participants completed these journals, our final

hour-long focus group interview addressed participants' experiences around flow, as well as asking questions to conclude the study.

The following section describes each data collection phase in more detail, beginning with a description of the empathy survey, followed by an explanation of the methods I used to administer and collect each journal response, and finally, a description of the format of each focus group interview session.

Data Collection for Phase One: The Empathy Survey

My decision to include a survey was informed by the same humanity-centered design (HCD) techniques found on IDEO's website, www.ideo.org/tools. My colleagues, our collaborators, and I relied upon these techniques to develop The Journey School. Entrepreneurs and designers who implement HCD are encouraged to empathize with their users before presenting solutions by using "empathy surveys" (www.ideo.org/tools, 2021). Although my study was not intended to provide "solutions" to any shame experiences my participants might have faced as teachers, I did want to have a baseline understanding of their familiarity with the topics of shame, vulnerability, and flow so that I could appropriately tailor the prompts for journaling and the focus group interviews in the next phases of the research process. This approach provided the added advantage of allowing me to triangulate my data by comparing participants' initial survey results with their journal entries and responses during the focus group interviews.

I worked alongside a colleague at the school with expertise in SEI work in order to construct survey questions that would be both emotionally sensitive to my participants and

would also yield valuable information in relation to my research questions. My survey questions included a mix of Likert-scale responses, short answers, and paragraph responses, as follows:

- On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being Unfamiliar and 5 being Very Familiar, how familiar are you with Brené Brown's work on shame and vulnerability?

- On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being Unfamiliar and 5 being Very Familiar, how familiar are you with feelings of shame?

- How do you view shame (in others? In self?)

- On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being Unfamiliar and 5 being Very Familiar, how familiar are you with feelings of vulnerability?

- How do you view vulnerability (in others? In self?)?

- On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being very uncomfortable and 5 being very comfortable, plot your level of comfort,, with writing and discussing personal experiences within the teaching profession around shame and vulnerability.

- What would make you feel more comfortable sharing experiences of shame and vulnerability?

- On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being Unfamiliar and 5 being Very Familiar, how familiar are you with the theoretical work on Flow?

- What additional information would you like to share with the researcher before we begin our study?

The survey was administered through a Google form, so it was not anonymous, but it was confidential.

In the following sections, I describe the data collection techniques I used in Phases two-four of the study.

Data Collection for Phases Two through Four: Journals and Focus Group Interviews

In Phases two-four of my data collection, I asked participants to complete journal responses in one of three categories related to my research questions--*shame, vulnerability,* and *flow*--followed by a focus group interview to debrief their journal responses. Phase Two addressed the concept of *shame*; Phase Three addressed the concept of *vulnerability*; and Phase Four addressed the concept of *flow* in tandem with *shame* and *vulnerability*. In the following sections, I provide detail on the processes associated with journaling and discussions.

The Process That Guided Participants' Journaling

After participants completed the empathy survey during Phase One of the data collection process, the results helped me realize that I needed to provide specific definitions of the terms *shame, vulnerability,* and *flow* before jumping into the journal prompts. Therefore, Part One of each journal prompt asked participants to define the term focused on during that phase of data collections in their own words. Part Two of each prompt provided a research-based definition of the concept at hand, followed by a prompt that asked them to connect the concept to their professional experience.

Participants were given one prompt a month that corresponded to the phase at hand. Journals were submitted confidentially through Google Classroom. Participants had two weeks to answer the twenty-minute prompt for each phase. I then convened focus groups to debrief their responses.

The Process That Guided the Focus Group Discussions

I facilitated focus group debriefing discussions over Zoom for Phases Two through Four of data collection, which took place over the course of three months. These discussions were held in a Circle format, as previously defined, to allow all voices to be shared and heard. I recorded discussions on my iPhone, converted them to mp3 files, and stored them on my personal, password-protected Google Drive. The focus group questions stemmed from my research questions, survey responses, and participants' journal responses.

Each focus group meeting was approximately one-hour long. I began each focus group session by addressing techniques to help participants feel more comfortable identifying moments of *shame*, *vulnerability* or *flow*. These questions were less specific to the journal prompt, but asked questions, such as, "Where do you feel this emotion in your body? What shade does this emotion metaphorically appear to you?" These warm-up questions led into discussing specific moments of experiencing shame, vulnerability, and flow. Since my survey revealed to me that some people did not feel comfortable discussing these emotions with the group, I framed my questions by giving the participants a choice to either share moments that they experienced or that they had observed in others. This approach was meant to alleviate any pressure to share their personal stories that participants wrote in their journal responses. I subsequently transcribed the focus group sessions myself in order to gain close insight into the participants' responses.

Below, I provide a phase-by-phase review of the journal prompts, paired with the prompts for the focus group discussion.

Phase Two Prompts: A Focus on the Concept of *Shame*

Journal Prompts:

Part One: In your own words, define the word *shame*.

Part Two: Shame researcher Brené Brown defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection." With this definition in mind, journal for at least twenty minutes about a time in your teaching career where you personally felt flawed and/or therefore unworthy in your profession.

Prompts for Focus Group Discussion:

- How did you feel in your body while responding to the prompt?

- What other emotions were brought up?

- Share a time where you were shamed or a time you witnessed shaming. (Only share what you feel comfortable with.)

- Based on what you know now and the experiences that you had, what would you have needed in that moment?

- What would you do differently, or how do you feel differently now?

Phase Three Prompts: A Focus on the Concept of *Vulnerability*

Journal Prompts:

> **Part One:** Finish this statement: *I grew up believing vulnerability was…*
>
> **Part Two:** Brené Brown sees vulnerability as "the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity" and learning. With this quote in mind, to

what extent has the act of vulnerability been, intentionally or unintentionally, incorporated into your class foundations?

Prompts for Focus Group Discussion:

- I grew up believing *vulnerability* is …

- Based on Brené's definition of *vulnerability,* share a time in your career when you felt vulnerable.

- Where do you see the benefits of intentional vulnerability in our professional work?

Phase Four Prompts: A Focus on the Concept of Flow (in Tandem with Shame and Vulnerability)

Journal Prompts:

Part One: In your own words, define the word *flow.*

Part Two: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the word *flow,* which he describes as a moment when "My mind isn't wandering. I am not thinking of anything else. I am totally involved in what I am doing. My body feels good. I don't seem to hear anything. The world seems to be cut off from me. I am less aware of myself and my problems."

With this idea in mind, describe specific moments where you have experienced *flow* during the course of your teaching.

Prompts for Focus Group Discussion:

- Thinking back on the shame you shared early on, what would you consider the shade of that experience (Ex: blackout, fog, grey...etc) ? What has been the cause and the consequence of that shame?

- What would stop you from being able to safely express vulnerability?

- Share your *flow* experience and the conditions necessary to feel *flow*.

- What can you do to help facilitate *flow* for others?

Taken together, the data collection methods of the initial survey, journal responses, and focus group discussions allowed me to collect a variety of different experiences around the topics of *shame*, *vulnerability* and *flow* in the teaching profession. Starting with an empathy survey helped me create common vocabulary around my topics, and once participants better understood each topic they were able to write authentically compelling narratives in their journal responses. Journal responses led participants to tap into other experiences, and the focus group discussions to debrief participants' journal responses revealed additional stories concerning the three topics, while also helping the group feel connected through shared experiences.

Methods of Data Analysis

The data collected was interpreted through thematic analysis, which is the "method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data" (Braun, 2006). Journal entries were read and re-read to identify common themes related to the research questions that were held by participants in all teaching disciplines. I then conducted a second round of analysis of journals written by English Language Arts teachers in order to determine themes specific to this content area. I followed the same process to analyze transcripts of the focus group debriefs.

All themes were analyzed for the following components, suggested by Braun (2006):

- What do the themes mean?

- What are the assumptions underpinning each?

- What are the implications of the theme?

- What conditions are likely to have given rise to it?

- Why do people talk about this topic in this particular way?

- What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic?

In order to identify the theme that emerged in relation to each research question, I created a Venn diagram in order to visually compare and contrast the responses from teachers in English with those from teachers in other content areas; commonalities present in both groups' responses were represented in the center.

Position of the Researcher and Possible Limitations

Identifying one's positionality in qualitative research is particularly important because interpreting data can be "colored by an individual's values and beliefs that are shaped by their political allegiance, religious faith, gender, sexuality, historical and geographical location, ethnicity, race, social class, and status, (dis) abilities and so on (Holmes, 2020). In conducting my study, I specifically identified areas of my own positionality that might cause biases or skewed interpretations of my data collection. These categories include my age, race, gender, professional history, and relationships. I am a middle-aged, white female with thirteen year years of teaching experience, and I am also a co-founder of the school where the research was conducted. The impact of this positionality resulted in both possible benefits and limitations on

the framework of my study, my relationship with participants, and the interpretation of my results.

On one hand, the benefits of my positionality are that I have more than ten years of teaching experience, which helped me understand the ebbs and flow of the profession that my participants also described. In addition, I co-founded The Journey School, which gave me perspective into how social-emotional curriculum can and should be foundational in designing a new school. Being a founder has also given me opportunities to attend national conferences focused on incorporating social-emotional intelligence and design-thinking into schools.

Other benefits revolved around my relationships among my participants, which is one of a trusted colleague and friend. These relationships were crucial to how quickly we were able to address the topics of shame, vulnerability, and flow. As a group, we were already trained in restorative circles, and I've facilitated them regularly outside of the role of researcher. These established norms made gathering data quicker and resulted in fewer surprises.

On the other hand, limitations around my positionality stem from the very same factors described above. Because I am a middle-aged, white female, I recognize that this might have limited the extent to which participants shared personal experiences with me, considering their own backgrounds, values, and beliefs. Also, the role I have in the development of The Journey School could have limited participants' openness to critically discuss our school model or operating methods. The relationships I have with my participants might also create limitations. Many of the incidents described in the participants' journals and the stories they shared during the debriefing discussions were ones I witnessed or experienced alongside them. These shared experiences may have made it difficult for me to not fill in the story from my own memory. By

keeping these possible limitations at the forefront of my mind and by implementing Braun's protocol for thematic analysis I sought to counteract these possible limitations.

Impact of COVID-19

Regrettably, during the time of my data collection, the world was in its eighth month of isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so Circle looked a little different. I did maintain the same protocols of an in-person Circle, but Zoom Circle do not compare to the connection felt when actually together. Looking back, I'd have liked to ask participants if they would have felt even more open to sharing their experiences in-person, and if and how virtual Circle hindered their ability to be vulnerable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following sections, I describe the results of each phase in the chronological order I used to administer them. I begin by presenting the results of the empathy survey conducted during Phase One of the study. As previously explained, in correlation with the grounded theory approach, the survey functioned as a baseline to help develop questions for the preceding phases. The survey questions and results are listed in chronological order and are then followed with a brief discussion of trends and comparisons I found between participants' responses as a whole group, as well as a specific view of the English teachers' responses.

My presentation of the results from Phases Two through Four of the study focus on the journal responses and focus group discussions that correspond with each respective phase. First, I introduce the individual journal prompt and the results collected from participants' written responses. I present responses from the teachers from content areas other than English, followed up by responses from the English teachers. Next, I present responses to each prompt in the focus group discussions by consolidating responses from the teachers in other disciplines, then separating out the English teachers' responses.

At the end of each section for each phase, I discuss the results by restating the research question associated with that particular phase, including the aforementioned Venn diagram, and then presenting the overriding theme that emerged when I compared and contrasted the experiences of teachers in other disciplines compared to those of English teachers.

Phase One: The Empathy Survey

As previously described, the empathy survey included a mix of Likert-scale responses, short answers, and paragraph responses. The first question I asked was for participants to rate their familiarity with Brené Brown's work on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being Unfamiliar and 5 being Very Familiar. As depicted in the following graph, results showed that a little fewer than half of the nine participants were Unfamiliar with Brown's work, whereas no one was Very Familiar with her work on shame and vulnerability.

How familiar are you with Brene Brown's work on shame and vulnerability?
10 responses
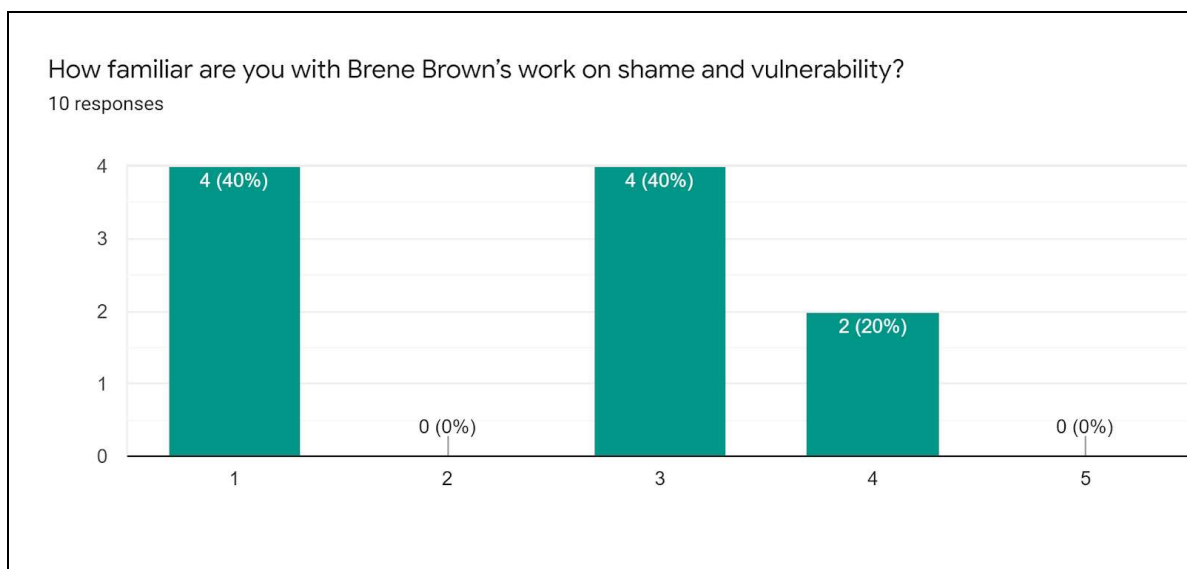
Figure 4

The second question I asked was, "How familiar are you with feelings of shame?" As with the question on Brown's work, this question asked participants to rate the degree of their familiarity on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being Unfamiliar and 5 being Very Familiar. I purposely did not include a definition of *shame* in this question because I wanted to compare participant's own definitions in later phases of the study with their initial survey responses. As depicted in the following graph, results revealed that approximately three quarters of the participants felt Familiar or Very Familiar with feelings of shame.

How familiar are you with feelings of shame?
10 responses
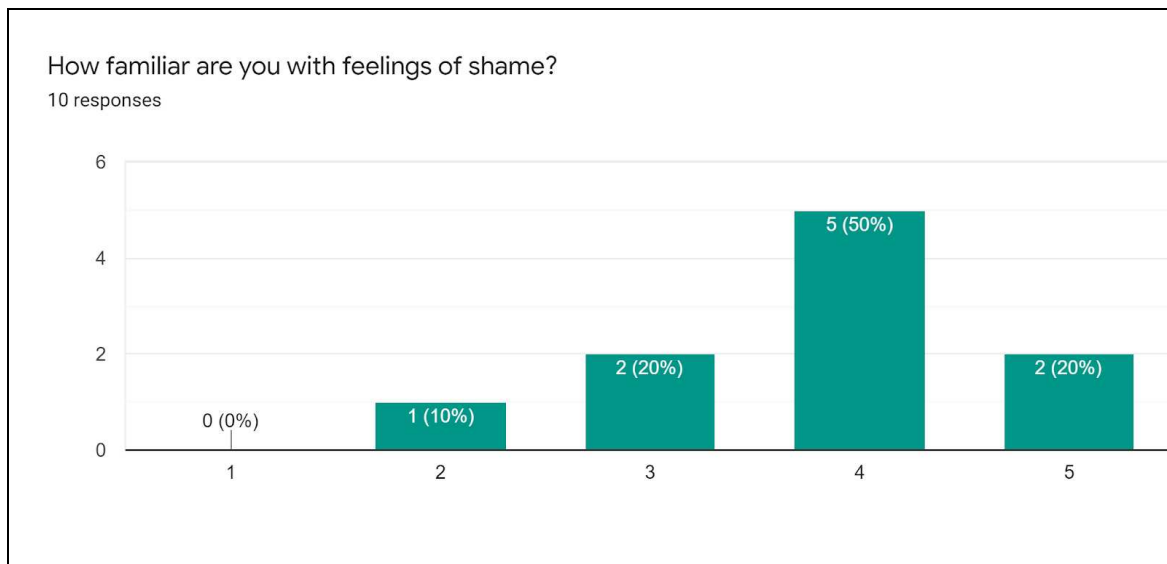
Figure 5

The third question, "How do you view shame (in others? In self?)," was multiple-choice. Response options included: a.) an emotion I try to avoid; b) I recognize the emotion, but I rarely reflect on it; c) I recognize the emotion, and I find it useful in my work and life. As depicted in the following chart, the majority of participants identified *shame* as "an emotion [they] try to avoid."
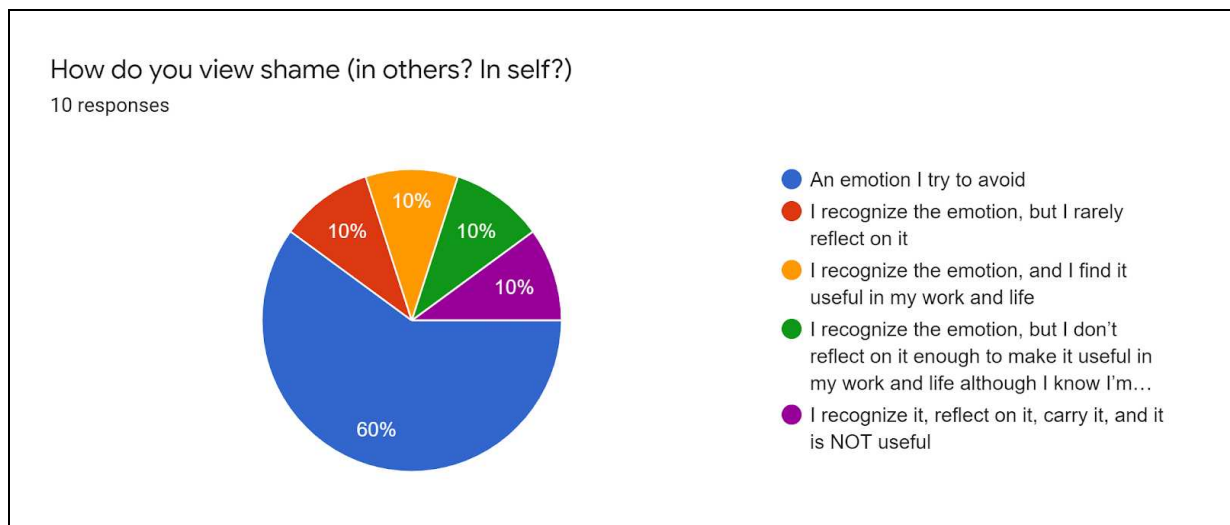
Figure 6

Questions 5 and 6 asked participants to rate their familiarity with the concept of *vulnerability* and followed the same format used in the questions on Brown's work and the concept of *shame*. In contrast to their familiarity with *shame*, more participants indicated that they were Very Familiar with the concept of *vulnerability*, as depicted in Figure 8. Likewise, unlike with *shame*, more people identified *vulnerability* as serving a useful purpose in their work and life, as Figure 8 illustrates.

How familiar are you with feelings of vulnerability?
10 responses

Figure 7

How do you view vulnerability (in others? In self?)?

10 responses

- An emotion I try to avoid
- I recognize the emotion, but I rarely reflect on it
- I recognize the emotion, and I find is useful in my work and life
- I recognize the emotion, but I don't reflect on it enough to make it useful in my work and life although I know I'm missing out because of that.

60%
10%
10%
20%

Figure 8

Before moving into Phases 2-4 of the study, I felt it was necessary to ask how comfortable the participants felt about writing and discussing personal experiences within the teaching profession around *shame* and *vulnerability.* As depicted in the following graph, I found that more than half of participants felt at least Comfortable in this area, while slightly more felt Very Comfortable. Interestingly, the outlier who felt the least comfortable was the same participant who was also unfamiliar with feelings of vulnerability.
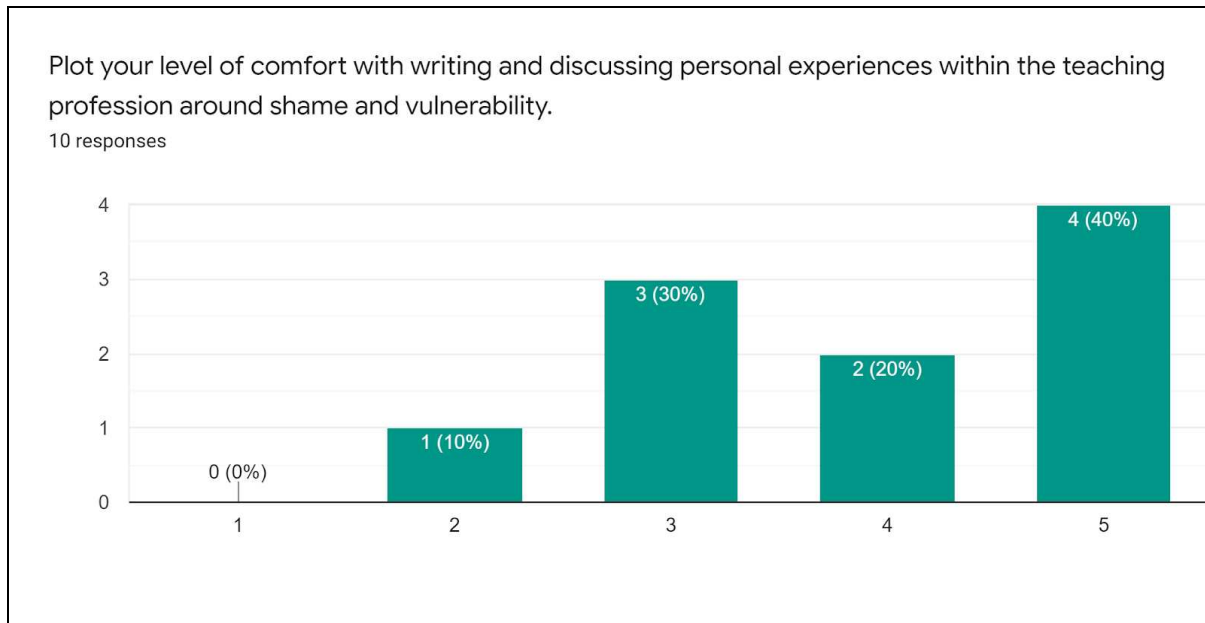
Figure 9

The follow-up question to the question above asked participants, "What would make you feel more comfortable sharing experiences of shame and vulnerability?" Participants' responses to this question allowed me to plan the focus group discussions intentionally to incorporate their suggestions. These suggestions included the following:

- haring among people I know

- I feel fine about this- probably looking forward to it!

- Journals (not on-the-spot talking) sound good so I can process thoughts and get them into words more effectively.

- Being part of a group that I trust

- Commitment from each member to be present and supportive

- Reckoning with past shame a little better

- If others open up and share too.

- A safe environment where I don't feel judged

- Everyone on the team also being vulnerable and honest

- I will gladly share!

My question on *flow* also followed a Likert-scale format. As depicted in Figure 10, no participants were Very Familiar with the concept of *flow*, and almost three-fourths were Unfamiliar or Very Unfamiliar.. This finding in particular confirmed my suspicion that participants would benefit from being provided with research-based definitions of the concepts under investigation in the journal prompts used during Phases 2-4 of the study.

How familiar are you with the theoretical work on Flow?
10 responses
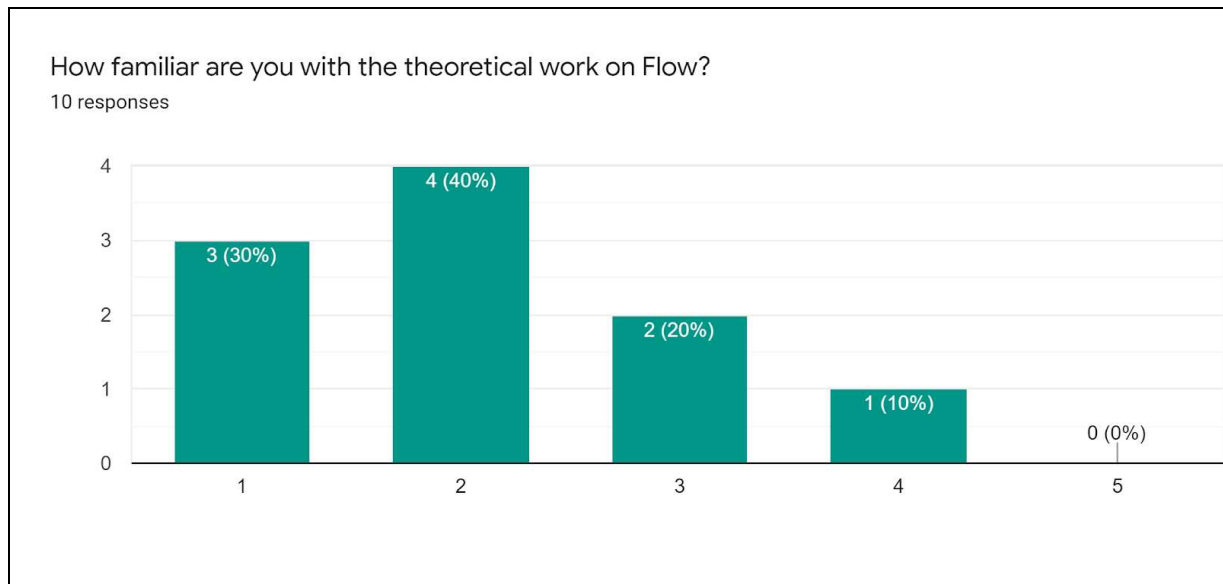
Figure 10

The final survey question asked participants to share any additional information that they felt would be helpful for me to know before beginning the next phases of the study. The responses from participants who chose to provide them were uniformly encouraging, as follows:

- Good work getting here, looking forward to it!

- I think this is amazing Kayla. I'm so happy to be a part of it!

- I've never seen vulnerability as compatible with being a teacher... so this will be interesting.
- Thank you for this opportunity!
- I think you have chosen an issue that is so central to our profession, and yet so often disregarded and/or overlooked. I am excited to participate and see what learning this yields.
- WOOHOO!

Discussion of Empathy Survey Results

I did not initially think about administering an empathy survey for my study, but through my research and use of grounded theory, I quickly realized the unlikelihood that everyone would respond similarly to the emotional vocabulary of *shame*, *vulnerability*, and *flow*. Yet one of the first lessons I learned through professional development on Emotional Intelligence was the importance of using precise vocabulary to name an emotion. According to research and recommendations from 6Second: The Emotional Intelligence Network,

> Naming emotions seems to bridge the gap between thoughts and feelings. The step from "I am this…" to "I am feeling this…," or even, "Michael is feeling this…" means that we are not that emotion exclusively. And also reminds us that the emotion is temporary. When we remember that we are greater than what we are feeling in that moment, we can be at peace with the feeling, and simply listen to what that emotional data is trying to tell us. So next time you are feeling a difficult emotion, start by labeling it: I am angry, or sad, or anxious. Just tell it like it is (Miller, 2016).

Although the study participants were familiar with this Network and the process of using emotional vocabulary strategies with students, I realized that this did not guarantee that all of them (or that I, for that matter) would share the same definitions for our emotions. Indeed, as reported above, I quickly discovered through this survey that participants were widely varied in their understanding of the three concepts I wanted to discuss, particularly the concept of *shame*. Looking through the data, I was not surprised that approximately 50% of participants were fairly familiar with feelings of shame, but I was surprised to learn that one participant selected the rating "More Unfamiliar," which made me wonder how he or she would define the concept. These results also made me concerned for those participants who scored Very Familiar with feelings of shame and helped me move forward with extreme sensitivity as I determined how to best phrase the journal prompts to be used in the next phases of the study.

I was also interested in the participants' additional comments regarding *shame*, especially the one stating, "I recognize it, reflect on it, carry it, and it is NOT useful." The urgent tone of this response as well as the fact that each of my participants identified shame as a challenging topic that does not get discussed often, again encouraged me to approach this topic with extreme caution and made me consider to what extent sharing "shame stories" in the focus group would be beneficial. In the end, however, I decided to move forward in asking participants to share their stories. Even though rehashing moments of shame can be ugly, I was persuaded by Brown's claim in her SXSW "Daring Classrooms" talk that "shame cannot survive being spoken" (2017).

In addition to examining participants' responses as a whole, I also zeroed in on responses from the English teachers in order to compare and contrast them with teachers in other disciplines. I was especially curious to see how the English teachers rated their familiarity with

the concepts of *shame*, *vulnerability*, and *flow*. In regard to *shame*, they selected the options "Familiar" and "Very Familiar," and they also indicated that they were "Very Familiar" with feelings of vulnerability. In regard to the theoretical work on *flow*, however, all of them selected the rating "Unfamiliar." These similarities increased my curiosity to learn in subsequent phases of the study whether or not a correlation existed between how these participants experienced *shame*, *vulnerability*, and *flow* in their everyday lives outside of school and how they experienced the feelings in the context of teaching English.

Finally, the open-ended responses to the empathy survey guided me in establishing norms for our focus group discussions in order to foster a culture of trust by recognizing participants' individual and collective needs.

Phase Two Data: Journal and Focus Group Discussion Focused on *Shame*

After conducting the empathy survey, I posted the first journal prompts on *shame* in Google classroom, as follows:

Part One: In your own words, define the word *shame*.

Part Two: Shame researcher Brené Brown defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging–something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection." With this definition in mind, journal about a time in your teaching career where you personally felt flawed and/or therefore unworthy in the profession.

Collectively, participants' responses to these prompts aligned with what research says about "overcommitment and burn-out" experienced by teachers (Nais, 1999). For example, one participant mentioned "the difficulty of separating one's self-worth from student's success,"

while another expressed "worry about not connecting enough with students." One participant noted the irony that because teachers are already "excluded from the group" in a classroom community based on their age and experiences, they constantly have to compete for their place in the very communities they create.

The shame experiences reported on by the teachers in disciplines other than English focused mostly on interactions with parents and administrators. These were stories of being "bullied" by colleagues and "hiding in bathrooms crying." Some participants felt guilty for not "getting their work done on time" or for making embarrassing "mistakes in the grade book." Overall, then, these stories revealed that shame was prompted by *external* factors, such as a person who made them feel bad or an action that they committed that left them feeling inadequate.

In contrast, the journal entries written by the English teachers revealed that shame came from feelings of *internal* inadequacy. These were stories deeply rooted in the fear of being "judged" for something they created like

- "grammatical errors in an email"

- "fear of being seen as an imposter in the discipline"

- "the belief that there is no room for mistakes in the discipline"

Additionally, English teacher participants admitted to feeling "creatively stifled by unspoken expectations."

Focus Group Discussion on *Shame*: Circle Round One

Two weeks after giving the prompt and journaling, participants met on zoom and used Circle protocols to address several rounds of prompts during a single focus group session. Even

though the group was gathered to debrief their journal entries on *shame*, the atmosphere of the Zoom call was joyous. This discussion was one of the first occasions we as a staff had had to connect with each other while teaching in quarantine due to COVID. Participants received an email prior to the meeting to ensure that there were no unexpected surprises, and they were informed that the meeting would be conducted in a Circle reflecting on the following talking points:

- How did you feel in your body while responding to the journal prompt?
- What other emotions were brought up?
- Share a time where you were shamed or a time you witnessed shame in the teaching profession.
- Based on what you know now and the experience that you had, what would you have needed at that moment?

After quickly mingling, I began the meeting. Regardless of the focus of the meeting I am facilitating, I like to begin with breathing exercises. Taking a few deep breaths helps me, and hopefully the meeting participants, transition into the topic of discussion. After the brief breathing exercise, I asked participants to help establish norms by using the Zoom chat feature to share how they wanted to feel after our Circle debriefs. Answers included the following:

- "cathartic"
- "supported and not judged"
- "trusted, nurtured," and therefore "fearless"
- "to be present, listening, not doing other work"
- "allowing each of us to tell our own story and not have others fill it in for us"

- "relaxed, heard, listened to"

With these expectations out in the open, we began the first round of Circle. In Zoom, I put participants' names in the chat to indicate the Circle order. This technique helped minimize interruptions and allowed Circle to happen more seamlessly. The first discussion prompt asked participants to describe how they felt in their bodies as they wrote about the prompt on shame. Responses varied from feeling "butterflies in my stomach" to experiencing an "increased heart rate and flushed cheeks" to "holding" the feeling of shame in my shoulders" or "in my chest and my heart." Helping participants identify how their bodies react to shame might help them more quickly identify the experience in the future. Sharing these body reactions also help create connection that perhaps someone's body reacts to shame the same way another person's body does.

Circle Round Two:

The next round of Circle asked for participants to share a time where they were shamed by someone or witnessed shame in the profession. I specifically did not force them to share about what they previously journaled in case anyone felt discomfort sharing their experience. In fact, most participants did share different stories than the ones they wrote about, but most said that after writing they had thought of more examples.

Teachers in content areas other than English shared memories of people in places of authority who "were just mean and terrible." One participant recalled "these [veteran teachers who were] good old boys…they were awful to me." Another participant described the shame she felt as a student after lying to a teacher. As a consequence, she was unable to participate in an

afterschool activity because the adult told her "you were not honest with me." Similar to their

journal entries, these responses showed examples of shame coming from *external* circumstances.

By contrast, responses from English teachers revealed that shame was prompted by both

external and internal factors. As an example from the first category, one English participant's

example of shame was prompted by an interaction with me and other members of the English

team at our school. This participant recalled early last summer when we were trying to decide

what books to order for the upcoming fall and had started a text thread to bounce titles back and

forth to each other. In recounting the experience, she shared,

> ... I don't know why I am getting emotional [while sharing the story in our focus group]. I
>
> remember when we were talking about books for ordering and … we were talking about
>
> a lot of these novels and many of them I didn't know the authors or the titles and I
>
> thought that I really am an impostor.

This same participant also spoke about her journal entry. She recalled working at her previous

school where she was employed for 15 years. She shared,

> I was so terrified about making a single mistake that every time I wrote an email I had to
>
> reread it 25 times, and it took me hours to send the slightest little email to my colleagues
>
> whom I worked with for 15 years, not even to the whole school. I hardly ever showed my
>
> work...I was always so worried about the criticism and people analyzing every single
>
> detail because that is what they were like.

This participant already felt like an impostor in her profession, so she seemed to be looking for

moments that validate her internal shame. Even if interactions with colleagues are seemingly

innocent, unintentional shaming can easily happen when a person has already built a narrative of themselves of being unworthy.

Circle Round Three:

The final debrief question asked participants to describe what they would have needed in their moments of experiencing shame. Participant's responses were similar across the board. Representative phrases included the following:

- "my allies"

- "a supportive community"

- "people who encourage me to stand up for myself"

- "courage to talk to the people I trust"

I ended the debriefing discussion by inviting participants to share statements of gratitude, a culture-building strategy we commonly use as a staff. Participants offered the following responses:

- "We've created a level of love and understanding at our school where kids can shine, and that has everything to do with the staff and commitment to our kids."

- "I don't feel ashamed for sharing my shame."

- "I feel at one with you and I am grateful for that."

- "I am grateful to hear your stories of not belonging because I feel like I have my allies now."

- "I am grateful to talk to you all in a casual way...I miss being in the building."

- "I am grateful for you, Kayla, that in your research you are turning into our little therapist. I've been to therapy, but I haven't felt this good after therapy. I feel like I let a lot of stuff go."
- "I think that is a good feeling that we as teachers we have common points and common problems and common situations."
- "Thank you for helping not make me feel flawed but helping me grow."

Looking back through the gratitude prompt comments, I feel validated that participants left our first focus group meeting with lower shame, and a deeper sense of connection and vulnerability towards each other.

In the section that follows, I provide a discussion of my first research question that is based on these results and is preceded by a Venn diagram that summarizes the similarities and differences among participants' responses by discipline.

Research Question #1 Discussion: How do the shaming experiences of English Language Arts teachers compare to those of teachers in other disciplines?

SHAME

Teachers in other disciplines

- Expectations of parents
- Mistrusting Leadership
- Being caught for doing something wrong
- Parents judging
- Getting work completed on time

(overlap)
- Teachers are already excluded from the group
- Vulnerability brings possibility of shame
- Connecting meaningfully with students
- "Am I in the right profession?"
- Treating students wrong
- Self worth = student success
- Overcommitment
- Being enough/saving students

English Teachers

- Reaction to something I've created
- "Control" of curriculum
- Teaching grammar is boring and bad
- Stifled creativity
- Imposer in my discipline
- No room for mistakes
- Judgment from other teachers
- Embarrassment for not knowing texts
- Isn't an event, always ongoing

Figure 11

Shame on You vs. Shame on Me

Among the responses from both journals and focus group debriefs, participants shared the idea that shame is "long-lasting," a feeling of being "unwanted & unloved." More than half defined it as a feeling one has based on one's "own actions." Only one participant described shame as "feeling little, insignificant, and worthless about who you are." These responses echo Brown's differentiation between guilt, humiliation, and shame. The definitions that mention feeling bad about one's own actions, according to Brown and Tangney (cited in Goodman,

2017), are considered feelings of guilt. The participant's description of shame as "feeling...worthless about who you are" is more aligned with Brown's definition of shame which she mentioned in her 2010 Tedtalk, which is "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging" (2010).

The subtle, but important difference between the journal and discussion responses from teachers in other content areas and those from English teachers is that the shame experiences in the former group were largely prompted by *external* factors, whereas the English teachers recalled moments when *internal* self-talk made them feel shame. In both the journals and focus group discussion, I also saw a distinction between what Brené Brown qualifies as "guilt" vs. "shame." The teachers in other content areas were humiliated by a boss or colleague, or felt guilty for making a mistake where they felt responsible. In the examples shared by English teachers, however, no one actually humiliated or guilted the participants or called them out in front of a group. Rather, the English teachers' responses were narratives of fear--the fear of judgment, exposure, failure, and "unworthiness" which resulted in shaming self-talk, as exemplified by the participant who mentioned feeling like an "impostor" because she hadn't read many of the books her colleagues were mentioning on a text thread.

In the gratitude circle, however, one English teacher shared, "I do not feel ashamed for sharing my shame" corroborating Brown's assertion in her "Daring Classroom" talk, that "shame cannot survive being spoken" (2015). This statement of gratitude and those shared by other participants suggest that discussions around shame may have set us up to be better colleagues for one another, and ultimately better teachers, by helping us identify when we have felt shame in our experiences as teachers and students. Furthermore, these discussions clearly helped some

participants recognize that they can take the risk to share their shame with trusted allies, if they choose to do so.

The theme identified which I've titled *shame on you vs. shame on me* delineates how external shame can be more easily addressed and/or worked through, but internal shame is kept hidden or ignored. If this theme is common among English teachers, then they need intentional opportunities to address and speak these feelings so that the shame can be lessened or even eliminated.

Phase Three Data: Journal & Debriefing Discussion Focused on Vulnerability

A few weeks after our focus group discussion on *shame,* I posted the journal prompt on vulnerability in the Google classroom. As with before, participants had two weeks to respond to the following prompt::

Part One: Finish this statement: I grew up believing *vulnerability* was…

Part Two: Brené Brown sees vulnerability as "the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity" and learning. With this quote in mind, to what extent has the act of vulnerability been intentionally or unintentionally incorporated into your class foundations?

Part One of this prompt came from Brené Brown's book *Dare to Lead* and is one that she and her team ask of themselves. My participants wrote that they grew up believing vulnerability was:

- " a part of life"

- "Being real and honest in sharing who you are"

- "WEAKNESS!"

- "Living in a way that it gives other people the power and permission to hurt you"

- "Related to my insecurities"

- "Vulnerability was not practiced or accepted [in my family]."

- "I grew up thinking it was a weakness."

- "Essential"

- "Absent in my childhood"

Among the teachers in content areas other than English, vulnerability in the profession was viewed as mostly "negative," "raw," and "exposing." Participants commented that vulnerability "sets yourself up for criticism from parents," and that it positions one "to feel like an impostor." One participant said that to be vulnerable "is to brace yourself for criticism and hurt." When writing about times they *intentionally or unintentionally incorporated vulnerability into their classroom*, some participants in this group thought that showing vulnerability was not appropriate because it reveals one's "personal life in school." Another participant observed that vulnerability "is important to show kids but not beneficial to the curriculum or classroom."

The English teachers in the study, however, viewed vulnerability in a positive light, specifically in regard to incorporating it in the classroom. In their journal responses, participants equated vulnerability with "authentic learning" and valued it because it "encourages new things." They commented that vulnerability allows "students to more willingly open up in their work," especially in settings like Socratic discussions, and that it encourages "students to create profound ideas on their own!" Vulnerability is authentically incorporated in the English classroom, but when shame is present, teachers find it difficult to get classes to vulnerably share which is crucial to the study of the discipline.

Focus Group Discussion on *Vulnerability*: Circle Round One

As previously stated, data collected through grounded theory helps guide researchers to new questions and new discoveries, so after reading through participants' journal responses in Phase Three, I wanted all participants to hear more of Brown's thoughts on vulnerability. I began this focus group by reading a passage from *Dare to Lead* in which she argues that

> to feel is to be vulnerable. Believing that vulnerability is weakness is believing that feeling is weakness. And, like it or not, we are emotional beings [who]...often fail to realize that without vulnerability there is no creativity or innovation. Why? Because there is nothing more uncertain than the creative process, and there is absolutely no innovation without failure (p.42).

We then re-visited our norms from the first focus group discussion and moved into the first Circle prompt, which was the same as the first journal prompt, **"I grew up believing vulnerability was…."**

Digging into this prompt further with our focus group revealed that childhood circumstances, especially in relation to gender, ethnicity, and parent involvement, played a big role in how participants viewed vulnerability. One participant shared, "Our neighborhood growing up was exclusively with...a whole crew of boys who ran around day and night. Classical machismo...generated from boys...not being vulnerable in that crew, and then trying to grow out of that as an adult." Echoing this comment, another participant said, "When I was a teenager with a lot of masculinity ideas, you needed to be tough. More than the masculine issue is when I am insecure and unable to do work. I feel vulnerable." Another participant mentioned that he and

his brothers were "raised by our mom. My dad wasn't around so I think vulnerability was celebrated" due to his mother's influence.

Other participants mentioned cultural expectations. One participant shared,

> it may be stereotypical, but the fact that my family is all from Spain and Italy, I grew up thinking, even though not intentionally thinking it, I grew up believing vulnerability seemed like a weakness. And I don't know if you want us to say what we think now…[but after] going through therapy for many years, my views have really changed. To me, now, vulnerability...is really about showing strength and empathy and I totally see that now.

The final childhood circumstance that influenced participants' take on vulnerability was their parents' view of the concept. One participant mentioned that she

> grew up believing vulnerability is--all I could really write is [that] I grew up not believing vulnerability was anything. It and many other emotions and concepts of this nature was not something people in my family talked about. I know that sounds sterile, but I had no concept of vulnerability as a child.

By contrast, another participant shared that their father would

> dig down, probe and dig and make us cry…. To this day if my dad asked, 'Would you like to take a walk?,' I'd get all panicky because I know he is about to dig, 'So how do you feel that your mother and I won't be alive much longer, how do you feel about that?' So vulnerability was a huge part of my childhood."

This participant said that even though vulnerability was important for her as a kis, lately her parents seem to have "no tolerance for it."

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Another participant also received mixed messages from parents in that

> my family celebrated and was really open about [vulnerability] and was like,
> "Let's talk about everything and [what] being a risk-taker meant."...I didn't have a
> language there, but I do know that it was encouraged…. It was not looked at as
> being weak. It was looked at as a place to grow, but I did not know what those
> words were as a kid…. A pretty open place to be. However, because of that came
> the pain. Without knowing it was called *vulnerable*. When I was little, I would be
> a lot of who I am, and then I was shut down because of it, like, "You are too
> much," and "Be quiet."

Collectively, participants grew up believing that vulnerability was painful, or something that happened to you that made you weaker. Even if families welcomed vulnerability, the emotion still held negative connotations. None of the participants' responses saw vulnerability as a loving place of belonging.

Focus Group Discussion on *Vulnerability*: Circle Round Two

In the next round of Circle, participants were told to share their journal response or something new related to the topic of *vulnerability* that may have come up for them. The discussion prompt was again the same as the journal prompt which asked participants to read Brené Brown's definition of vulnerability and then to discuss the extent to which vulnerability informed the foundation of their classroom.

The first response by a participant from a content area other than English seemed to set the tone for how the rest of the participants in this group responded. The participant said, ,

> I am certainly not disagreeing with Brené Brown, but times that I feel vulnerable

are times that I feel anxious and scared of things. And I understand the definition

and I think there are a lot of times I am vulnerable on a day-to-day basis. For

example being in front of middle schoolers or high school kids is inherently a

vulnerable position.

They elaborated by sharing a specific example of a time when they felt emotionally exposed

during their first parent-teacher conferences. They recalled

...being like in the gym with all of my colleagues, and there is a line forming with

all of people who want to talk to me and feeling very on the spot and very--I felt

almost naked in terms of what is out there and the vulnerability of not

knowing...or not being able to hold my own. I guess I don't know if that even fits

with that definition. I felt at any moment, some parent would find out or notice

something in my gradebook that was inaccurate, and the whole thing would come

down like a house of cards. It was very like impostor syndrome….

Building on the conversation, the next participant mentioned, "I like how [they]

mentioned imposter syndrome. One of the first things I thought of when I thought of examples in

my career when I was vulnerable. I think when I saw the journal prompt, um, I never perceived

vulnerability the way Brené Brown sees it."

Feeling vulnerable around parents was again mentioned by another participant from a

content area outside of English. They expressed, "It's extremely frustrating when you feel

cornered by a parent and you are sitting there in an IEP meeting and you are defending yourself

when the conversation should be about the growth and success of the child, and you are

defending yourself, and you are defending your school."

Another participant from this group said her most vulnerable moment in the profession occurred during her first year of teaching when one of the girls on the soccer team she was coaching committed suicide, and she struggled to figure out "what it took to continue to coach these girls." Another participant expressed, "I'd feel so terrified to mess [The Journey School we've built] up, and so really if I think I am being honest this is the most vulnerable work I've done."

The final participant from this group summed up much of the discussion overall. They observed:

> [We] started off saying that teaching is vulnerable. I mean especially middle
> school and high school, right? They are just not very nice, you know? They'll tell
> you what they think and ,um, they are not always grateful…. And then we think,
> "will they like this? Am I the right teacher to teach them? Am I young enough?"
> And then you still have to be who you are, so I think our whole profession is
> vulnerable.

The English teachers in the group described their efforts to foster vulnerability in the classroom in largely positive terms. The first participant commented that the recent attempt to enact vulnerability in their profession has "actually helped me discover creativity and become more of a risk-taker and daring, and I see that being vulnerable in the workplace does bring exactly what Brené is saying. I can be totally open to the fact that I can try new things."

Another English teacher participant read to the group their journal response, which described their journey in shifting from a non-vulnerable classroom to a more vulnerable classroom. In describing their non-vulnerable classroom, this participant admitted a fear of

"being eaten alive by students and their parents," which led them to believe that they needed to have complete "control" over their classroom. They eliminated vulnerability to become "the puppet master" of a classroom where students discovered the exact "aha" moments that this teacher planned for them to have. Admitting that this approach was limiting, the teacher asked, "Could it be that I was actually narrowing the field of what they might actually take away from a lesson?" The teacher then described how discovering the power of Socratic Discussion Circles "opened my world and the world of my students":

> The first Socratic Circle I did [was] with my sixth-grade students...We all teared up and bonded in a way I had never experienced before...We all felt so proud of each other...we were a real TEAM in a way I didn't think possible....and I felt those real feelings right along with my students!! I was terrified of what might occur when I equipped them with the skills and then "took a backseat,"...and it was messy, and awkward, and scary, and, and and and...AND TRULY KICKED ASS!!! Kids had creative and profound ideas ON THEIR OWN….and no one was out of control behaviorally….they rose up to the maturity level that such an academic challenge mandated...I felt free, and connected to my students in a way I had never felt before...I was ready to keep going...scaffolding carefully with the goal to let go of the reins and let them lead....

Many of the instances shared were moments of hardship and grief that made many participants feel vulnerable, but the intentional act of bringing vulnerability into the classroom, as mentioned by the English teacher participants, created moments of trust and connection.

As I did in discussing my first research question, I provide a discussion of my second research question below that is based on these results and is preceded by a Venn diagram that summarizes the similarities and differences among participants' responses by discipline.

Research Question #2 Discussion: How is vulnerability viewed by English Language Arts teachers in comparison to teachers in other disciplines?

VULNERABILITY

Teachers in other disciplines
- Vulnerability of showing personal life in school
- Setting one's up for criticism from parents
- To make yourself vulnerable is to brace yourself for criticism
- Teacher observations is FELT vulnerability/shame
- Impostor syndrome
- Unable to control this type of vulnerability
- Modeling vulnerability is good for kids but not curriculum/classroom

(overlap)
- Most grew up with an awareness that vulnerability is weakness
- Leads to growth
- No vulnerability = inauthentic
- Masked in front of colleagues/closed door approach
- School too broken for vulnerability
- Vulnerability = lack of rigor
- Holding circle = vulnerability = real creativity/courage
- Be more curious than certain

English Teachers
- Expressed professional vulnerability
- Encourages new things
- Students more willing to open up in their work
- Authentic learning
- Socratic discussion
- Use of circles
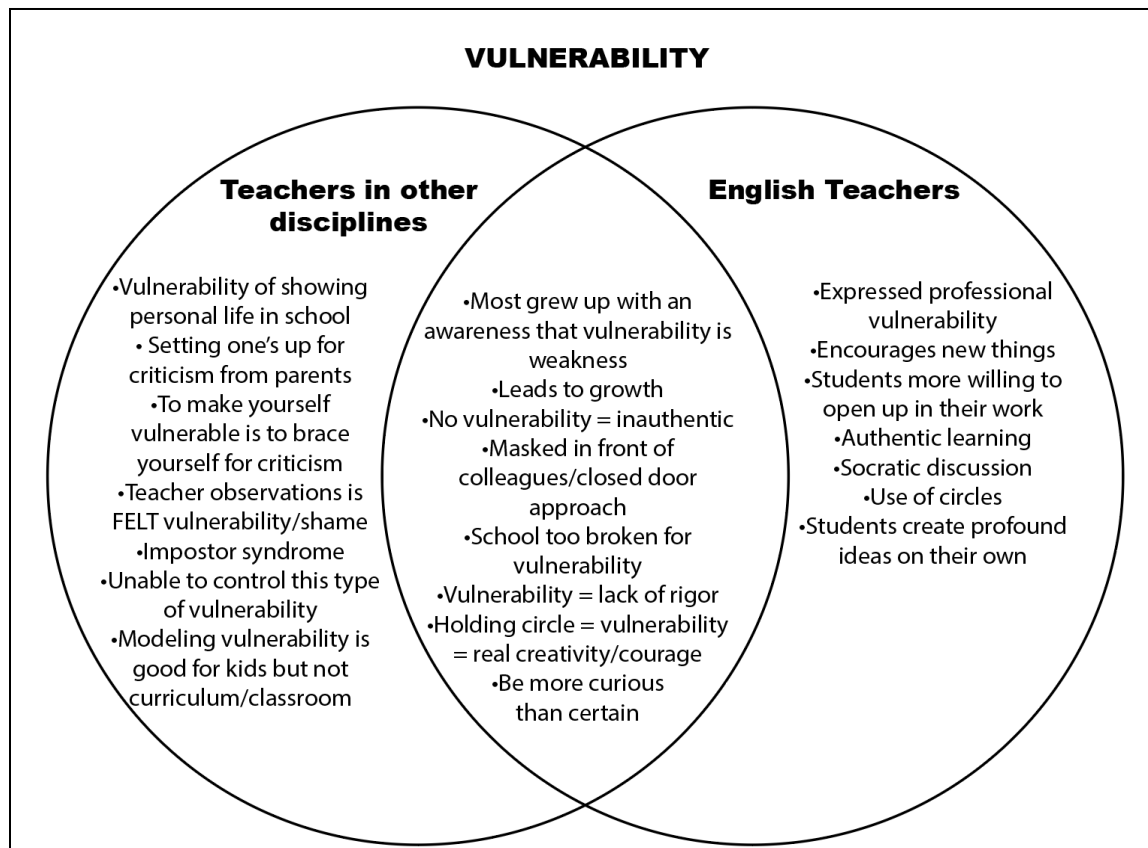- Students create profound ideas on their own

Figure 12

Vulnerability Felt vs. Vulnerability Expressed

Common patterns emerged in Phase Three journal entries. As children, all participants saw vulnerability as some kind of "weakness"; however, participants were also open to the idea that vulnerability "leads to growth" and that "no vulnerability = inauthenticity." Even though several participants viewed vulnerability differently as an adult, some still felt like "schools are

too broken for vulnerability," or that "they mask themselves in front of colleagues," and teach with a "closed door approach."

Looking back through the data, I am reminded of Brown's thoughts on vulnerability with boundaries. Again, in *Dare to Lead*, Brown (2018) advises that "setting boundaries is making clear what's okay and what's not okay, and why" and that "vulnerability minus boundaries is not vulnerability. It's confession, manipulation, desperation, or shock and awe, but it's not vulnerability" (p. 39).

The teachers in other content areas did not concur with Brown in viewing vulnerability as "the birthplace of joy...and belonging." Rather, they felt that their experiences of vulnerability within the profession were negative, shameful, hurtful, and/or harmful. Experiences like facing the death of a student, ridicule from a student's parents, or daily criticism from a teenage audience seem to lack boundaries, resulting in what I call *felt* vulnerability. *Felt* vulnerability occurs in the moments when we are set up (or set ourselves up) to experience weakness and perhaps recall similar moments from childhood.

By contrast, the English teachers in the study expressed moments where vulnerability gave them joy and helped them unlock creative expression; thus their responses echoed Brown's definition. Personal and professional experiences, as well as classroom tools like Socratic Discussions, helped these participants to establish vulnerable boundaries. As a result, they practice what I call *expressed* vulnerability by modeling vulnerability through discussion, creative writing, and collaborative learning opportunities. *Expressed* vulnerability is characterized by established boundaries that enable people to choose what they want to express

to an audience. This is not to say that other disciplines cannot have these same tools in place, but the discipline of English seems to most naturally foster this type of vulnerability.

To sum up, *felt* vulnerability is a reaction to an uncontrollable situation where someone is hurt by others or perceives themselves to be weak; as such, it appears to be connected to the external shame participants mentioned during Phase Two. *Expressed* vulnerability, on the other hand, gives an individual agency and control over when and how much of themselves they are willing to share, and results in feelings of safety, love, and self-worth. Students can experience *expressed* vulnerability when they have opportunities to share a piece of writing or an opinion about a topic. Taking healthy, appropriate risks such as these are essential in an English classroom.

Phase Four Data: Journal & Debriefing Discussion Focused on *Flow*

The final journal prompt asked participants to complete the following tasks:

Part One: In your own words, define the word *flow*.

Part Two: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the word *flow,* which occurs in moments when "[m]y mind isn't wandering. I am not thinking of anything else. I am totally involved in what I am doing. My body feels good. I don't seem to hear anything. The world seems to be cut off from me. I am less aware of myself and my problems." With this idea in mind, describe specific moments where you have experienced *flow* during the course of your teaching.

In responding to the first task, participants overall used the following phrases and sentences to express their ideas about *flow:*:

- "completely lost in something, immersed in an experience"

- "It's not cognitively demanding, it's almost spiritual in the way it consumes your consciousness."

- "kind of movement that goes relatively uniform and goes smoothly"

- "Your mind is both focused on your task and focused on nothing at the same time"

- "really into something so much so that nothing else matters"

- "My insides match my outsides which match my environment."

- "Flow is embracing the present and thus feeling a timelessness that is ultimately, beautifully freeing."

In response to the second task, some teachers in content areas other than English identified instances when they experienced professional *flow*, such as planning lessons and other learning opportunities, creating curriculum, and "dissecting data." Other participants from this group were ambivalent at best in their responses, commenting on the difficulty of finding *flow* "since time is so conscious," or revealing that "it's hard to say when I have felt in the flow with teaching." Still other participants said that they "don't find flow too often" when they are teaching. In fact, one went so far as to say, "I cannot imagine a time that I have experienced flow as a teacher. Ever. It has never occurred to me that one could achieve this in this profession." Another teacher from this group questioned, "Should a career provide flow?"

By contrast, all of the English teachers were able to identify instances when they experienced professional *flow* in the classroom. They explained that they know *flow* is occurring when "a classroom becomes a co-created space of shared energy" or when "students are so engaged in an activity that they forget that I (as teacher) am even there"; or when "you know that

a student is leaving your classroom with something more than they initially came in with." Two participants described *flow* experiences related specifically to reading and discussion, such as "when you are so deeply engaged in a read-aloud or a Socratic discussion that the time has passed and you have no idea how it went that fast." One explained, "I think I have experienced this the most when reading and discussing the reading with kids. When we are into a really good book or having an interesting conversation about a book or how it relates to our lives." One participant described *flow* in more holistic terms from a student perspective: "I think *flow* in the classroom is when you have a really good session with students, when they might say something like, 'Wow, it's already the end of class.' That feels really good." Students should have opportunities to connect flow experiences to school which increases engagement and joy. The data here shows that an English classroom is an optimal place for collective flow to take place.

Focus Group Discussion on *Flow*

I conducted only one Circle discussion in the final phase of data collection, which was centered on *flow.* Echoing the second task in the journal prompt, I asked participants to share moments when they experienced flow in their teaching profession. Teachers in content areas other than English expressed a range of responses. On one end of the spectrum, participants expressed frustration in responses such as these:

- "This made me feel like I am not in the right job."
- "I feel more flow laying bricks or digging ditches. Maybe I should go dig some more ditches, I might get paid better."

Similar to views expressed in their journals, other participants shared uncertainty about whether or not it was possible to experience *flow* in teaching, especially due to time constraints:

- "I am not sure for me if the two should go together and I cannot even relate to what it would feel like."

- "It is really hard to feel flow when you are teaching. It's really hard, it's such an interruption-driven experience."

- "I feel like we are always attached to time. I never get a chance to not check the time and just live."

Only two participants from this group described *flow* in positive terms as related to "purpose, competence, some kind of connection or relationship." Another commented, I would say my case is special because my class is [designed] to talk and present and to interact socially, and when you do that, it is pretty easy to flow at some point."

As the following examples demonstrate, English teachers discussed *flow* in positive terms, both inside and outside the classroom, just as they had in their journal entries. In the following response, one participant shares her experiences teaching at a previous school:

"I was curating moments of flow for them, and I felt like I could see that. I would watch them have learning flow, but I was watching, so it wasn't really until I let vulnerability in that I actually experienced flow with kids in the classroom, and I think my kids know that I have more confidence. When I release control--I didn't write about this--the flow I would put in designing the lesson would lead to kids experiencing flow in the classroom. And yes it does, but when you can achieve a flow with the kids in the classroom, there is nothing better than that, and I have had that experience. I don't do connection great, but it's connection, it's a feeling of connection where it's an intellectual connection where you are all working

towards the same goal. I feel like I never really authentically joined my students

in that until a lot later in my career."

Another English teacher participant spoke about her own personal flow, but within the context of reading and writing. She shared:

I don't really know when it happens... I remember writing essays in high school

and in college, and for days I would write nothing until one day I'd stay up all

night, and it just came. I feel like every time, that is how it happens to me. Every

time I am in flow in the classroom when I am reading books and we are reading

books together and having conversations, and sometimes the kids are like "Whoa!

It's already time?" ...Oh! And when I am reading, like on my own. I'll start

reading and I won't even know. Like a bomb could explode next to me, and I

wouldn't even know cause I am in the book!

Spending a life-time in a career where one has never experienced flow is troubling since flow is closely connected to optimal learning experiences; if teachers do not experience flow, how can we expect students to experience flow? The English classroom provides opportunities for shared flow experiences and connections which results in high engagement and authentic learning.

Finally, I provide a discussion of my third research question below that is based on these results and is preceded by a Venn diagram that summarizes the similarities and differences among participants' responses by discipline.

Research Question #3 Discussion: How is a "flow state" experienced by English Language Arts

teachers in comparison to teachers in other disciplines (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)?
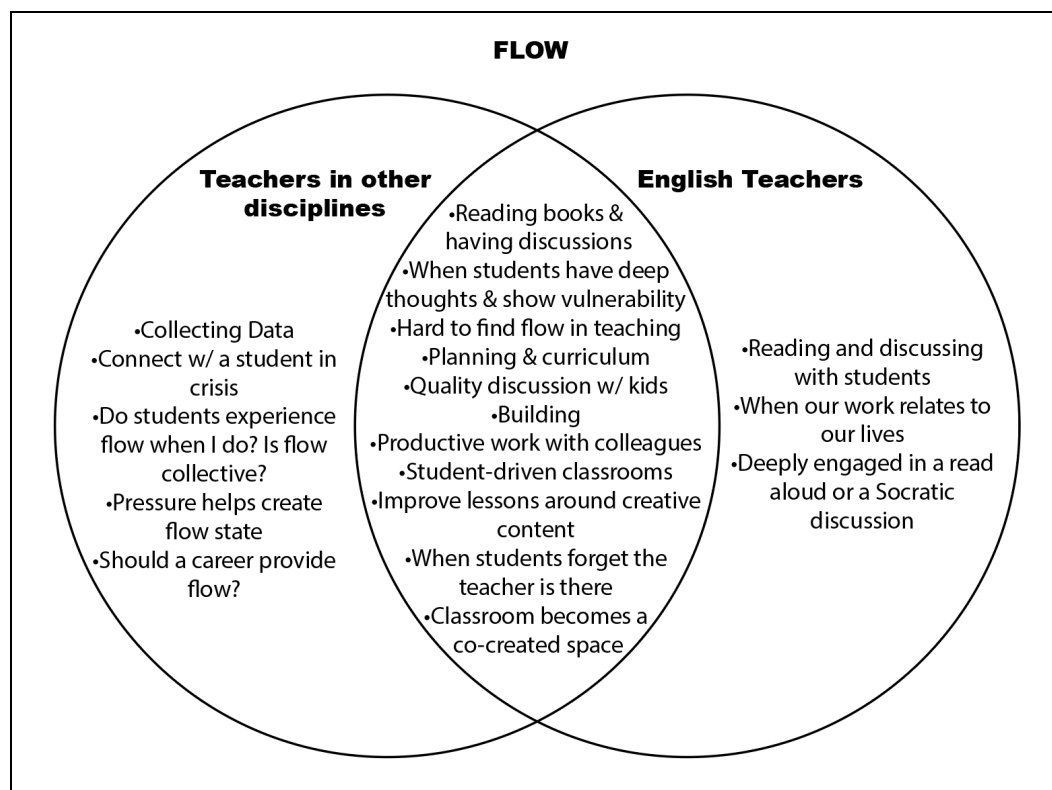
FLOW

Teachers in other disciplines
- Collecting Data
- Connect w/ a student in crisis
- Do students experience flow when I do? Is flow collective?
- Pressure helps create flow state
- Should a career provide flow?

(overlap)
- Reading books & having discussions
- When students have deep thoughts & show vulnerability
- Hard to find flow in teaching
- Planning & curriculum
- Quality discussion w/ kids
- Building
- Productive work with colleagues
- Student-driven classrooms
- Improve lessons around creative content
- When students forget the teacher is there
- Classroom becomes a co-created space

English Teachers
- Reading and discussing with students
- When our work relates to our lives
- Deeply engaged in a read aloud or a Socratic discussion

Figure 14

Individual Flow vs. Collective Flow

I did not anticipate the emotional reactions that came with discussing *flow* with my focus

group. Most teachers in content areas other than English felt like they were doing something

wrong if they didn't feel *flow* in teaching, or that they were in the wrong profession, or that *flow*

should not be connected to one's work. The participants who did experience *flow* commented

that these experiences came when they were "analyzing data" or "designing curriculum." Rarely

did they report experiencing *flow* among other people, let alone with students in a classroom.

These teachers also observed that the time restriction of a school schedule keeps them on

constant alert regarding "what is happening next," which results in restricting activities to

specific time limits within a class period. They commented on the difficulties of truly evaluating whether students are in *flow* or not and of creating collective *flow* opportunities.

By contrast, the participants who taught English reported that they often felt *flow* while teaching in a classroom, particularly during shared experiences of reading and discussing literature, which happened regularly once expectations around vulnerability were well established. In fact, when teachers in other content areas described brief moments of flow, these experiences were when they incorporated discussion or creative activities and writing assignments into their lessons.

In addition to revealing that teachers experience a wide range of *flow* experiences (including a lack thereof), the data also showed that many participants made a distinction between *individual flow vs. collective flow.* While both English teachers and teachers from other content areas were able to identify moments in an individual's life where they can independently experience *flow*, teachers outside of English rarely reported instances when they had experienced collective flow. The English teachers, however, described moments of collective flow characterized by vulnerability and high engagement. In every case, these unique moments held the potential to sustain both students' and teachers; creative passions around the study of English.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

ADDRESSING SHAME IN EDUCATION

Getting to a point where I can now ask, collect, and understand data around shame in the teaching profession has been a long and painful personal journey. I've had to confront my own failures and moments of "imposter syndrome." Reading and listening to Brené Brown's research and advice on shame and vulnerability has been a large part of my healing process. The data collected here is only the beginning of what I see as a life-long goal to help build professional education communities that provide support for teachers to participate in social and emotional practices to reimagine their roles as curators and participants of flow. Because my study was conducted in a small, specialized setting, I recognize the limitations of my findings. Future research and professional development efforts in this area should include a larger number of participants, target varied school contexts, and/or focus more specifically on the challenges English teachers face in addressing their experiences of shame in school.

In identifying the implications of my results, however, I have identified the two simple formulas, as follows, to visualize the circular connection between shame, vulnerability, and flow, which other researchers and educators are likely to find helpful::

1. HIGH SHAME + LOW VULNERABILITY = LOW FLOW

2. LOW SHAME + HIGH VULNERABILITY = HIGH FLOW

To elaborate on the first formula, when individuals are experiencing moments of high shame, they begin to "assemble their armor" (Brown, 2017) and become closed off. In these instances, a person will sever their ability to be vulnerable. Examples in my research showed that all disciplines experience shame in one form or another throughout their teaching careers, but the

English teachers uniquely experienced shame through self-talk like, "I am not worthy" or "I am an imposter", whether these internalized instances of shame are foundationally and culturally embedded in the discipline or they are connected to an individual's traumatic experiences from a specific incident, they are difficult to accept and painful to process.

Additionally, my data revealed that English teachers understand the value of vulnerability in the classroom, particularly through Socratic discussion and creative writing. Yet, these moments only occurred when the classroom door was closed or when a teacher was willing to relinquish control in an effort to minimize any potential for shame to occur. As a result, these creative moments of group discussions and collaboration were the rare times my participants said they experienced flow with a classroom of students. These findings suggest that unless shame is reduced and opportunities to express vulnerability are increased, creativity suffers for both students and teachers. Thus, future studies should examine how to support teachers, particularly English teachers, in creating such environments and opening their classroom doors to share the outcomes with colleagues and other educators.

I also found that a lack of flow experience in the teaching profession can lead to high shame as well. If vulnerability cannot exist when shame is present and unaddressed, then flow becomes impossible to achieve. Some of my participants felt shame for not finding flow in their career; however, these were the same participants who questioned whether or not flow is even important in the teaching profession. Future efforts toward professional development might be aimed at helping teachers reconcile these disparities so that they might feel permission to experience flow.

The validity of the second formula (LOW SHAME + HIGH VULNERABILITY = HIGH FLOW) is bolstered by other scholarship in the area of flow. Researchers concur that "recognizing the classroom conditions under which flow may occur could assist teachers in creating effective and engaging learning environments" (Dalton, 2014). The importance of flow in education is echoed in Shurnoff's research which discusses "many larger forces and educational policies that stack the odds against creating optimal learning environments" where students and teachers can take risks as learners. Commenting on "just how disturbingly pervasive student disengagement is," Shurnoff also notes that "the flow perspective on engagement is fundamentally optimistic about educational reform" (cited in Kelly, 2014). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), we can and should intentionally incorporate flow into our daily lives. He asserts that efforts to "find out how everyday life can be made more harmonious and more satisfying" might allow individuals to "achieve by a direct route what cannot be reached through the pursuit of symbolic goals" (p.45). Where else but in the workplace do we spend most of our time? If we cannot achieve flow state at work perhaps we need to reevaluate the system. Mill wrote, "No great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible, until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their modes of thought" (cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.9). In addition, "flow is important both because it makes the present instant more enjoyable, and because it builds the self-confidence that allows us to develop skills and make significant contributions to humankind" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.42). This is what I want for my students, my colleagues, and myself! Additional research is needed to understand the conditions that enable flow in a classroom by minimizing shame and increasing opportunities for the experience and expression of vulnerability.

In addition to these implications, I have drawn on my study findings, my personal experiences described in the Introduction, as well as the external research I previously reviewed, to pinpoint recommendations for lowering shame, enabling vulnerability, and thus increasing flow among four specific groups: practicing educators, preservice educators, secondary students, and administrators. I want to emphasize, however, that these are not meant to be prescriptive suggestions, nor are they an exhaustive list of all potential examples; rather, they should be considered within the context of a unique school.

Addressing Teacher Shame: Recommendations for Working with Practicing Educators

My research has confirmed my hunch that unaddressed shame in the teaching profession creates unhealthy, competitive environments in schools, which in turn eliminates opportunities for vulnerability to occur. I've also found that expressed vulnerability is necessary for creativity, which is also necessary for flow. Additionally, lack of creativity seems to be connected to teacher burnout. Practical solutions for addressing these concerns include the following:

- Practice journaling about their professional experiences, and practice naming and defining specific emotions around *shame*, *vulnerability*, and *flow*.

- Implement Circles, as described in this thesis, in order to build safe, professional communities with colleagues within and outside your content area where participants can speak about their experiences with shame in education.

- When possible, engage in professional development opportunities involved with organizations like CASEL, RULER and 6 Seconds.

Addressing Shame in the Classroom: Recommendations for Working with Preservice Teachers and Secondary Students

If shame begets shame, especially around academics, then the unaddressed shame in educators can lead, in turn, to shaming students (Jenning et al., 2017). Ideally, intervening in this pattern before teachers enter the classroom might reduce or eliminate the impact on preservice teachers' future students. Professional development, specifically around social-emotional awareness, becomes the responsibility and directive of preservice licensing programs. Preservice teachers who are equipped with appropriate strategies, such as restorative circles, and who have authentically participated in using these strategies in a professional setting, are more likely to empathize with students to create courageous learning environments and opportunities (Heller, 2017).

These recommendations are particularly important for future English teachers who will be leading classrooms that have the potential to be places that foster high vulnerability and flow. However, teaching in a discipline that is both heavily tested yet deeply personal seems contradictory. An English classroom that encourages intellectual, social, and emotional risk-taking through composing, reading, and discussion relies on both students' and teachers' vulnerability, but the "betrayal of vulnerability is shame" (Brown, 2017), making the English classroom a potentially fragile place for students to learn and grow. Before they enter their own classrooms, future English teachers would thus benefit from learning strategies to help students and themselves work through shame in schooling, while at the same time addressing the "delicate balance between examining humanity's beautiful flaws through studying literature and becoming competent academic writers" (Jenning et al., 2017).

Is it not in composing that we are most vulnerable in sharing our whole selves? Is it not through reading and discussing (and listening to others discuss) texts that we understand the rawest human experiences? Yet if teachers expect students to express their ideas and interpret texts in the "right" way, shame in the English classroom is likely to persist, vulnerability and creativity are likely to be thwarted, and flow is unlikely to occur. Is it not through language where we criticize others' failures, especially with critiquing reading, writing, speaking, and listening? This concentrated focus on language use sets English classrooms apart from those in other disciplines in regard to the potential for shaming experiences to occur.

The following recommendations are broken out into preservice education and secondary education, but are not exclusive to these categories and should be considered interchangeable.

Recommendations for Working with Preservice Teachers:

- Model how to establish a welcoming class culture by using Restorative Justice techniques, such as light-hearted daily Circle prompts, for the purpose of increasing opportunities for students to express vulnerability and resolve conflict.

- Model creating charters to set classroom expectations that hold all members, including the teacher, accountable. See the charter as a living document and routinely reevaluate the charter, especially when new members join a community.

Recommendations for Working with Secondary Students in English Classrooms:

- Create opportunities for students to engage in exploratory writing practices like journaling, as well as creative writing.

- Model vulnerability through sharing the teacher's own writing.

- Conduct open-ended discussion, such as Socratic seminars, often in order to encourage risk-taking.

- Choose texts and other content that specifically address shame and vulnerability..

- Ask students to reflect often on successes and failures.

- Create protocols around giving and receiving feedback that supports growth, rather than focuses on errors.

Helping Administrators Create Vulnerable Cultures

In my personal teaching experience in two different schools, some administrators have created social-emotional intelligence (SEI) professional development as whole-school experiences, but I have never had the opportunity to address the relationship between shame and vulnerability specifically in the context of my discipline as an English teacher. Through this study, however, I've seen the benefit of speaking directly about shame, vulnerability, and flow broadly through teaching as a whole, as well as through the specific discipline of English. Along with providing professional development in SEI across an entire school, administrators seeking to create a culture that fosters vulnerability in the service of learning should also seek out professional development programs that tailor SEI work to specific disciplines.

Recommendation for Administrators:

- Become familiar with the practices recommended by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing and Regulating (RULER), 6Seconds, and other similar organizations, and seek outside consulting from professionals in these organizations.

- Visit and collaborate with schools who are successfully implementing SEI work into their daily curriculum.

- Recognizing that teachers should not teach SEI unless they have the opportunity to work on SEI skills themselves. give specific weekly professional development time for teachers to reflect and debrief on naming emotions and tying them to teaching experiences.

- Build whole-school charters with staff.

- Understand that culture is created when everyone has buy-in. Be open to listening to staff members who may feel discomfort, and recognize and honor their experiences..

- Recognize that SEI work will never be finished and is ever-evolving, and be open to continual revisions to established practices.

In addition to implementing the above recommendations, educators are likely to benefit from collaboration with the networks and organizations mentioned throughout this paper, (e.g., the Institute for Restorative Practice; the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence; 6seconds; the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL); Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing and Regulating (RULER) and other organizations who share similar goals.

CONCLUSION

My research was inspired by reflection on my own teaching journey. Navigating my own shame led to healing and growth I never imagined. I have become a better educator since I let my story out, and I want other teacher professionals to benefit from the same experience. I came to the profession loaded with shame. I had a negative narrative of myself, and I couldn't shake what high school did to me as an academic. As a result, and as a young educator, I learned to act a part, and it became easier to learn the script and reuse it year after year. I've come to realize, however, that the script I used was the same script of shame that was used on me. The script of perfectionism. The script of getting it right the first time. The script of competitiveness. If I had the opportunity to know the results of my study early in my career, I would not have felt so lost.

I found that the strategies I used in my study allowed each of my participants to speak their truth and unlock the stories inside of them related to shame, vulnerability, and flow. I suspect that opportunities like this also have the potential to help educators build a healthy staff culture that in turn gets incorporated into the classroom. Cultures with high emotional intelligence understand the significance of sharing a common vocabulary to help members name and regulate emotions appropriately; this vocabulary should include the concepts of *shame, vulnerability,* and *flow*. The strategies I've suggested are not easy, and they ask educators to bring their whole selves to their work, which we want students to do everyday. The hard work teachers are asked to do in social-emotional intelligence (SEI) curricula makes it easy for these strategies presented in these curricula to get brushed aside. Schools should create missions to

hold the integrity and fidelity of the SEI components in the profession, and through my research I want to be a leader in this cause.

The results of this small study suggest that the English classroom may be the best discipline to teach SEI skills and build better humans. As English teachers, vulnerability is our business; however, the mismatch between the messy, human side of the discipline and the internalized expectations that teachers always have to be "right" prohibits educators from sharing their vulnerability and creativity. I would like to see more creativity and wonder fill our English curricula and to witness the big discoveries made as a result. In order for these magical moments to happen, we as a profession must take care of the emotional well-being of our teachers first.

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