

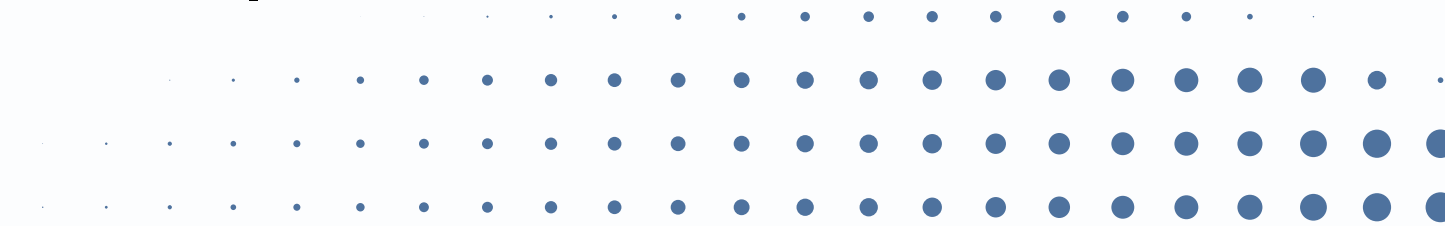


**UNIVERSITY OF  
THE SOUTHWEST**

**Empowering Student Voice in Rural New  
Mexico Schools:  
A Phenomenological Study of Administrator  
Perceptions**

**Julie Ann Dunn  
November 2024**

**University of the Southwest | 2024**

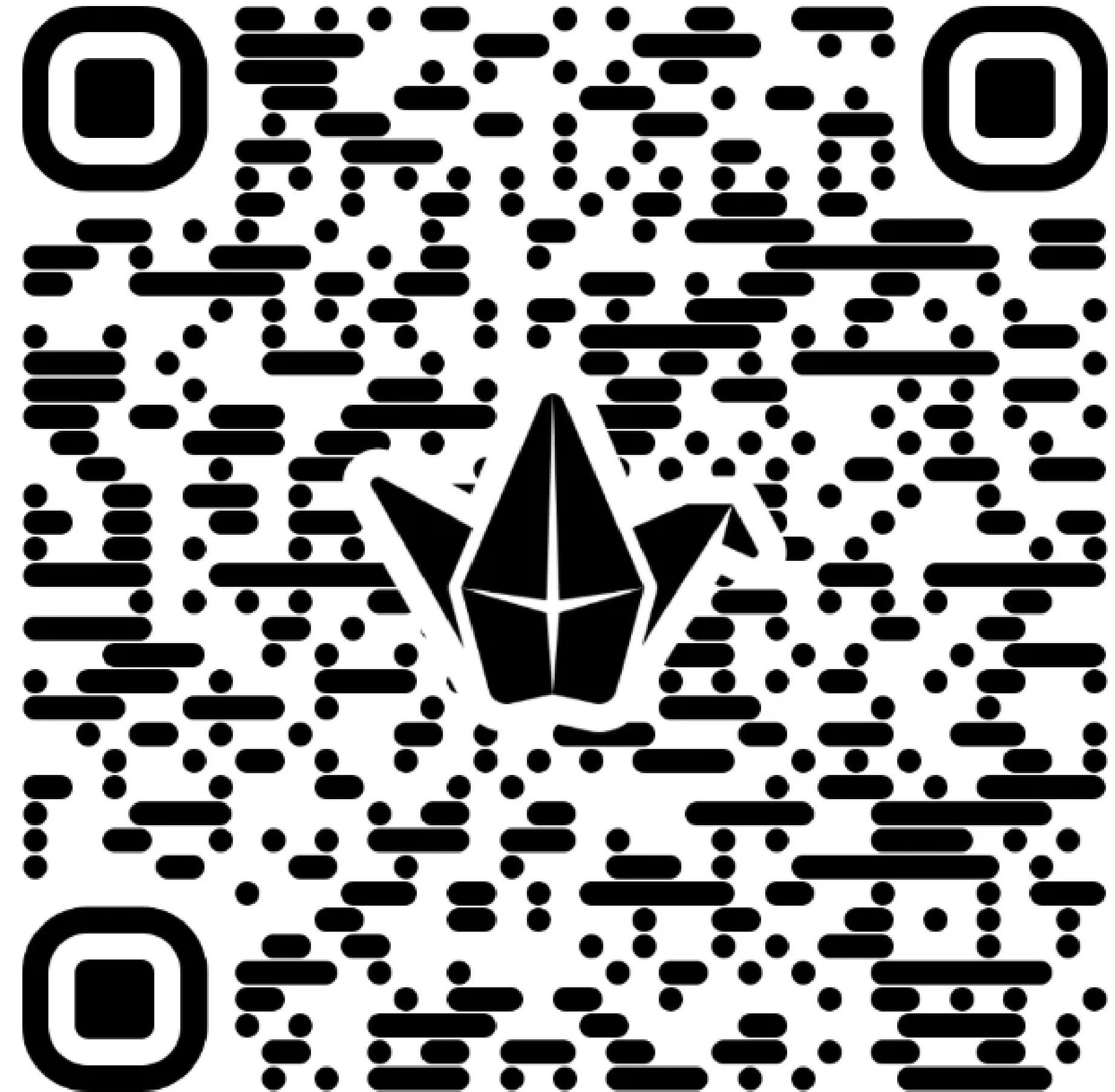


# Welcome!

## Join, Post, and Share

<https://padlet.com/julieannndunn101/1-how-has-your-educational-journey-shaped-your-voice-and-per-44g8h48lrlimw6mj>

1. How has your educational journey shaped your voice and perspective?
2. What do you remember being proud of accomplishing in school?
3. How might we embrace change in educational settings?



# WHAT IS THE RIGHT WAY TO SAY...

- EITHER
- CARAMEL
- PECAN
- REESES
- DATA

-VOICE- CULTURE- IDENTITY-EXPERIENCE DETERMINE THE CHOICE-

# BACKGROUND

What is student voice, and what is the historical context?

- **Student Voice:** The unique set of ideas, values, and thoughts students bring to education
- **Self- Determination:** Individual need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2023).
- **Students who view themselves as unique, valuable, and capable, excel in learning and confident engagement in schools** (Guay, 2022; Howard et al., 2021).
- **Positivity, persistence, and understanding to create, innovate, and change their world** (Guay, 2022; Howard et al., 2021).

# BACKGROUND CONTINUED

## Redefining Educational Leadership and Systems Planning

- Leadership includes all people in the system (Mayes et al., 2019; Wilson-Heenan et al., 2023; Young, 2022).
- The teacher should not be an isolated author of all learning experiences.
- Students are human, with a unique set of ideas all their own.
- Brain-Based Learning (BBL) strategies
- Intrinsic motivation and meaningful engagement (Amjad et al., 2023).



# PROBLEM STATEMENT

## Hook

Students in America have a constitutional right to a free, appropriate public education with their unique cultural, linguistic, motivational, and socioeconomic needs being considered, yet their voice, opinion, and input are often excluded in the planning and evaluation of the system that serves them (Benner et al., 2019; Rozalski et al., 2021; Wildau, 2021).

## Anchor

According to Yazzie-Martinez court case findings, New Mexico has consistently failed to provide an adequate education, ranking 50th in the nation in childhood poverty levels and educational outcomes (Bobroff, 2019; Martinez, 2021; Rodríguez, 2019; Sanchez & Martinez, 2019).

## General Education Problem

The general educational leadership problem is that principals struggle to incorporate meaningful ways to include all students as the most critical stakeholders in decision-making and planning appropriate educational systems (Baumbusch et al., 2020; Debnam et al., 2021; Yell et al., 2023).

## Specific Education Problem

The specific educational leadership problem is that school principals in rural southeastern New Mexico lack the strategies to effectively provide students with opportunities to become self-directed and independent learners who can advocate for change, participate in research-based planning, and use their unique voices to achieve their definition of academic success.



# PURPOSE STATEMENT

**The focus: To explore the lived experiences and successful strategies for use by public school principals in rural southeastern New Mexico to empower students' voices on their campuses.**

- **Principals determine the school culture (Eger & Egerova, 2023; Wilson-Heenan et al., 2023).**
- **Study's contribution to education: More student-centered empowerment strategies in rural NM.**
- **The study's social impact: Educational systems will advance individual equity and justice reform.**

# RESEARCH QUESTION

**What strategies are identified by administrators as contributing to the empowerment or disempowerment of student voices in rural New Mexico schools?**



# CONCEPTUAL OR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Self-Determination Theory/Richard Ryan, Ph.D. and Edward Deci, Ph.D. -1985**

The three critical components:  
Basic human psychological  
needs for autonomy,  
competence, and  
interconnectedness (Ryan &  
Deci, 2022; Vansteenkiste et al.,  
2023).

- Decision-making, school ownership, voice, and choice are an integral and essential part of their school (Conner et al., 2022; Kahne et al., 2022).
- Promotes well-being and consistently demonstrates better outcomes for the individual (Howard et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2022).

Correlation between  
student interest,  
achievement, attendance,  
and outcomes.



# **METHODOLOGY & DESIGN**

## **Method**

**Qualitative:**

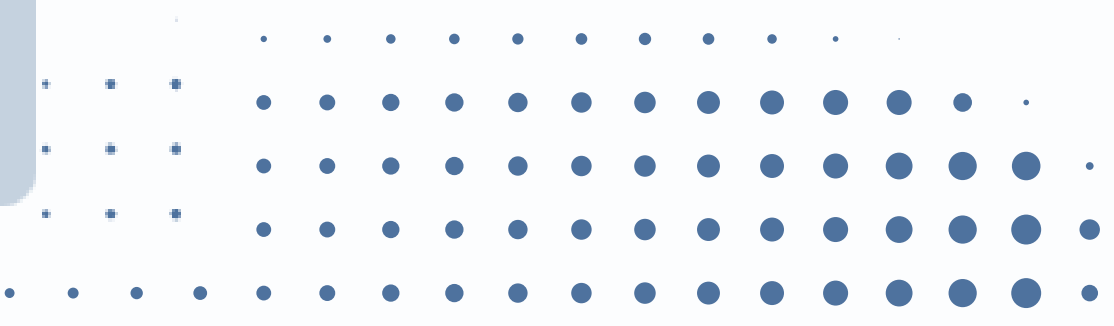
**Through the administrator/ school principal lens.**

## **Design**

**Hermeneutic Phenomenological:**

**Lived Experience/ Gain new insights**

**Grasp what can be discovered but not quantified**





# **PARTICIPANTS & SAMPLE SIZE**

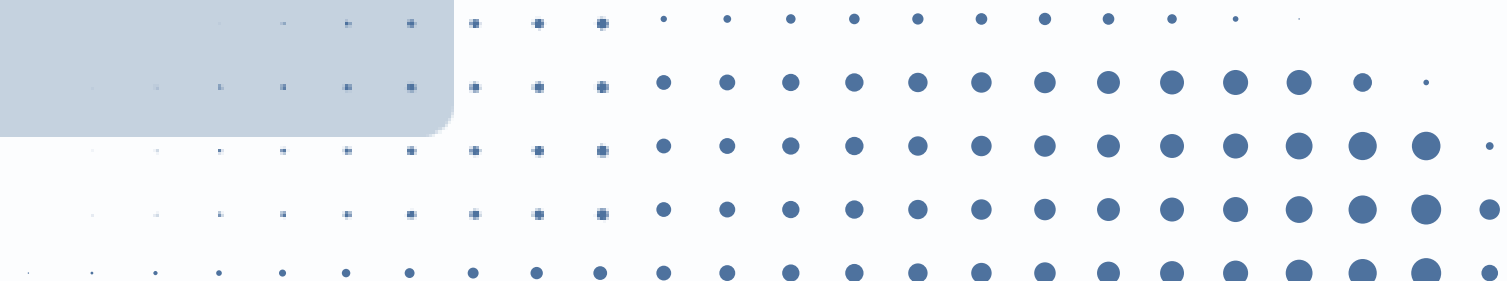
## **Population**

**Public school principals**  
**At least one year of administrative experience**  
**Located in rural southeastern New Mexico districts**  
**Actively working to uplift student voice**

## **Sample Size**

**11 participants. This number is based on similar qualitative studies and research method course texts which provide exemplars demonstrating this to be a reasonable sample size.**

**The data saturation was confirmed once participants had been interviewed with no new findings or themes arising**





# DATA COLLECTION

## Data Collection Technique

- **Step 1**

Obtained public email, phone, and compiled into list of potential participants

- **Step 2**

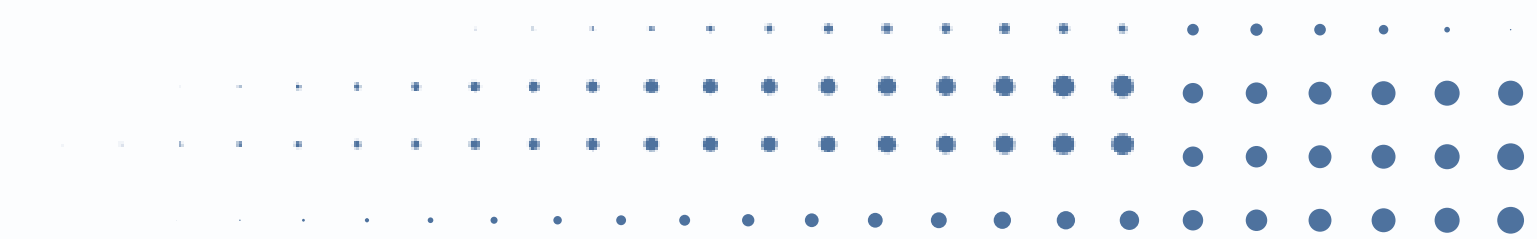
Shared recruitment opportunities via flyer in email and backup phone calls

- **Step 3**

Determined if candidates fit requirements for participation.

- **Step 4**

Obtained informed consent, went over ethics, voluntary nature, privacy, length of the interview, etc.





# DATA COLLECTION CONT

- **Step 5**

Set date and time for participation, ensure Zoom and Fathom AI Notetakers are ready, USB for saving data.

- **Step 7**

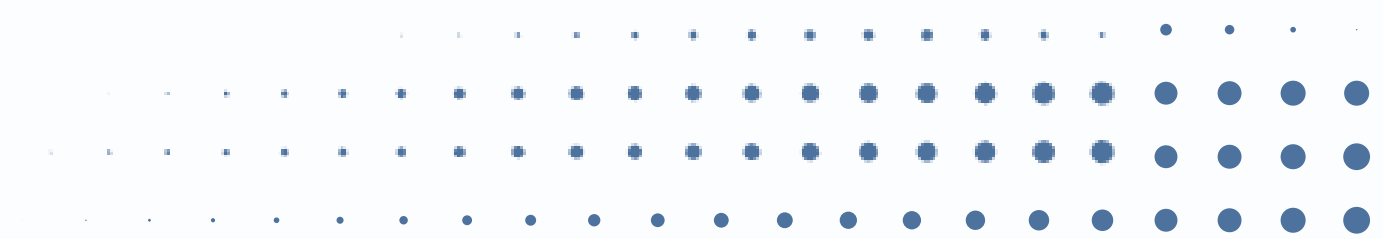
Save all transcriptions, participant codified (nonidentifiable info) into a USB Locked file, in a locked cabinet.

- **Step 6**

Data Collection- Zoom Interview w/ open ended questions  
Follow-up afterward to review transcript for accuracy

- **Step 8**

Complete 10-12 of these interviews, and keep transcripts organized for data analysis



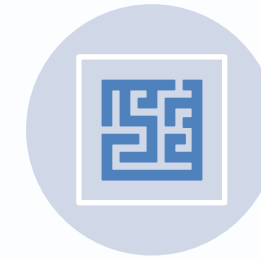
# DATA ANALYSIS



Reviewed transcriptions and Zoom recordings.



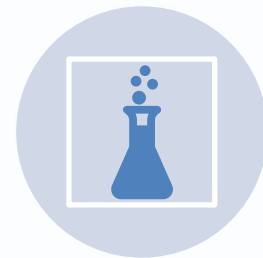
Looked at anecdotal and handwritten notes.



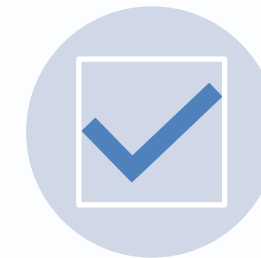
Used NVivo software for themes, codes, and ideas.



Identified quotes that captured the essence of participant views.



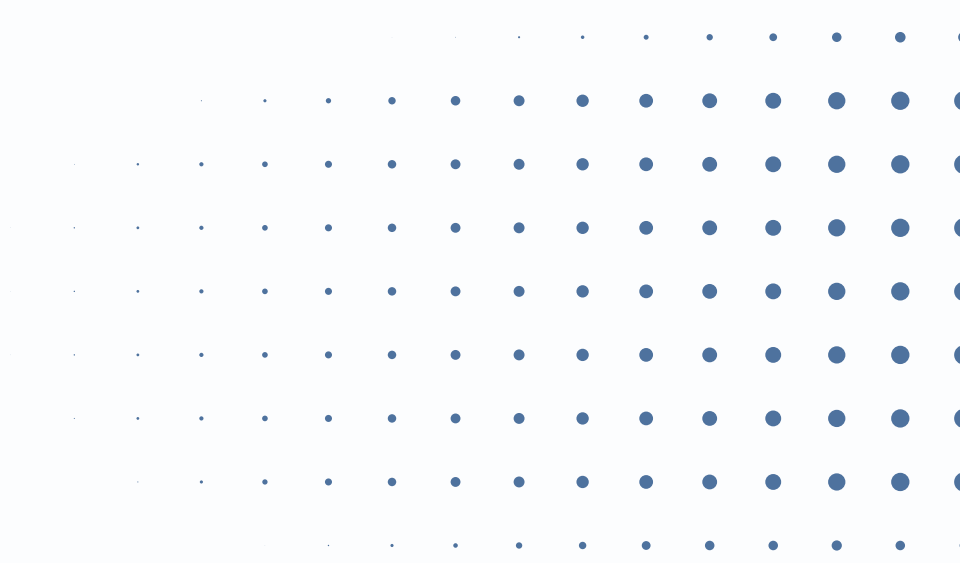
Synthesized findings into Ch 4-5.



Public defense of the final draft dissertation and PPT.



Publish in ProQuest, disseminate, present to PED, and share with leadership in NM



# PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

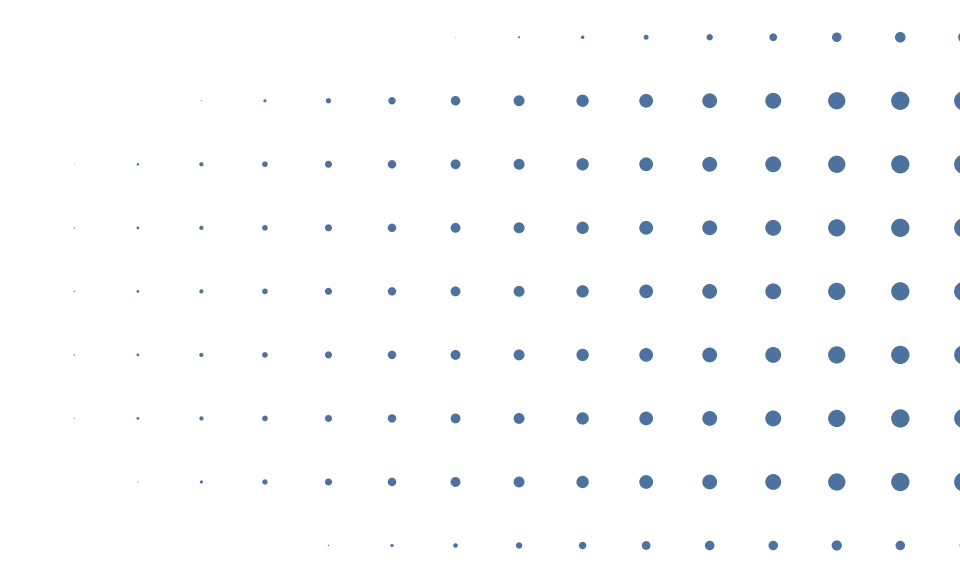
## **Research question:**

**What strategies are identified by administrators as contributing to the empowerment or disempowerment of student voices in rural New Mexico schools?**

## **Relation to Existing Literature:**

**Evidential gap in research to support specific strategies that work in New Mexico public school systems**

## **Results- Six Overarching Strategies Identified by Administrators**



- **Theme I: Tapping into Intrinsic Motivation (11/11 Participants)**

**Quote from Participant 3:**

**"You have to create that learning, curiosity, and wanting to learn more before setting them off on their own. I think collaboration, communication, and high expectations of learning mean that it is happening bell to bell, is engaging, the teacher is involved in the learning environment, and the students have a voice. If you create that classroom environment, you hold them to high expectations. You make learning purposeful for them. They want to learn; you drive it through their curiosity to intrinsically motivate them."**

**Quote from Participant 7:**

**"I think it really allows students to understand that there is not one "right way" of finding answers in learning new things. If we can prove our thinking, prove our thought process, and where we got that from, then they can have an equally valid answer even if it is totally different than someone else's. Giving them a variety of ways to express themselves as individuals. We do have children that have sensitivities and special needs or learn in different ways. Looking at a way for them to express their thoughts and opinions is important. If verbal communication does not work for them because it is too much or too loud, how can we do that with technology in some way to help it become a successful outlet for them as well? We have to be super honest and say that we can choose the way that we put things out there to children. If we want the biggest bang for our buck and we want to get more out of what we get back from them, then we have to include their choice, their passions, and their desires."**



- **Theme 2: Intentional Planning to Address Post-COVID/ Pandemic Effects (10/11 Participants)**

**Quote from Participant 2:**

**"I think the benefits include that we will create a climate where kids feel comfortable talking about and expressing themselves, which is so different from what we see right now after the COVID issue. After schools were shut down and all of that, we see kids withdraw and be unable to express themselves. We should be able to see a change in abilities with student voice academically, emotionally, and socially. These positive changes carry all the way up through high school, so how different will our entire community be in a positive way if we can start it now?"**

**Quote from Participant 6:**

**"I do think that it is very unfortunate that when COVID hit we shut the doors...We have to let that fear go away and see that it is okay to let families in. I think it is important for kids to know, hey, I am a part of this. As a teacher and educator, the job is not to teach your child. The job is to partner with parents. The best teachers are parents. Parents are their child's first teachers. They teach them that education is important. It is important to read. It is important to be respectful. Once I partner with parents, I can say, hey, let's find common ground, a foundation to start from and move forward. We have to agree that we both want what is best for the child."**

- **Theme 3: Collaborative Communication with All Stakeholders (11/11 Participants)**

**Quote from Participant 3:**

**"I think it is so important to involve everyone in the process of developing those systems, those ideas of how we can get students to develop their own goals and to be self-determined. It means getting their input on these things and developing a core team of staff that are involved...It is tough, you know, families are busy and they're constantly on the go, they may not have time to sit down and think, but involving them in reading nights, math nights, career fairs, and highlighting it through published videos that are shared in the community, can show them what learning is truly happening with our kids, how their voices are being uplifted, and that it matters."**

**Quote from Participant II:**

**"With stakeholders, allow them to see that when you give a child a chance to demonstrate what they want to do, then they put in an effort for it. You can actually see a difference between being told and them thinking that this is what they want to do; there is improvement. When they see that difference, it is a little easier to have that buy-in from all staff members and stakeholders. It is just about explaining and letting everyone see the bigger picture."**

- **Theme 4: Effective and Explicit Training (11/11 Participants)**

**Quote from Participant 8:**

**"I did probably one of the best trainings that I have ever done in all of my years of education last year. It was offered through the state. The school improvement and transformation training that they did. They were really focused on how to get teachers involved in looking at student voice. How do we get students involved in having their voice heard, and how do we use teachers and students in the collective decision-making process? Those have been really great meetings, and just being in a community school, the training has been really focused on that student voice."**

**Quote from Participant 3:**

**"I think when you are talking about student voice, some of the trainings that do come to mind are Capturing Kids' Hearts (CKH), TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports), and even a lot of the trainings with SREB (Southeastern Regional Education Board), and with my high school administrative experience as well. Each one brings a different element to developing student voice. For instance, you are recognizing positive behavior in your Capturing Kids' Hearts and PBIS. The whole goal is to reduce anxiety to increase performance so that children feel comfortable sharing their voices in class. If you are developing pathways, you can not get those without getting student input and their voice in the matter of what they see as beneficial to them. If you are not creating purposeful learning pathways that are aligned with student interests, then students are not going to join those pathways and see a purpose in them. I would say that those trainings in general, not just on student voice only, have been the most impactful."**

- **Theme 5: Relationship Building/ Fostering Belonging (11/11 Participants)**

**Quote from Participant I: (Team Wins)**

**"We say to our students all the time, "Why not you? It can be you! You do not have to know how it is going to go, but get out there and compete! Why shouldn't it be you?" We took our Skills USA kids to compete...One of our groups won, and the next thing we knew, we were going to Nationals. Taking them to Atlanta, and they have never flown on a plane, never worn a tie, never gone anywhere, they had never done any of these things. They walk over and ask, "Well, what do you think?" I said, "I do not know, let us go! I mean, it is just like when I put on my basketball shorts and tank top; I do not know how it is going to go- I am going to go hard. You are going to do the best you can. At the end of the day, try not to be last. Like, you already know, why can't it be you?"**

**Quote from Participant 10: (Family Building)**

**"This year, we are starting something different. On two Fridays a month, every staff member will have eight students for the last hour of the day, and that will be called their "family." This will help students feel connected, and they can do whatever their "families" want to do, whether it is learning to play a board game, drawing together, having recess, and building those relationships, helping them feel connected to the school. I think it is super important that they have another adult to go to. They also have other students, and it is across grade levels. Every "family" will have a couple of students from each grade level in it. So, we are just building and holding that connectedness within that aspect."**

**Quote from Participant 8: (Student Groups)**

**"I think we had five kids at the first student council meeting. By the end of the year, we had at least fifteen attending regularly... A young lady who ended up being president of our student council talked (through a district-published video platform) about what a great place that was for her and other students to have a voice and choice...and we ended the year with students feeling like "I have a place where I can go and say what I want, and I know I will be heard there, and I know they will take that into account, my voice." It was very empowering."**



- **Theme 6: Embracing Change in a Historic Era of Education (11/11 Participants)**

**Quote from Participant 8:**

**"I heard a gentleman speaking last weekend, and he said that one of the things that we do not say enough in education is that every single student who comes through our door has potential. Not every student has the opportunity. That is so powerful because it is so true, and if every student was given the opportunity to be successful, what would our education system look like? Every day, that is the question we should be asking ourselves: "1. Is this what is best for students, and 2. Am I giving them the opportunity to show what they can do? Every decision we make in our building should be based on those two things."**

**Quote from Participant 3:**

**"You are growing future leaders. It is not what is happening in the present; it is what the outcome is later on in life for them... It creates stability within the school culture, allows creativity in the school culture. It creates learning within the school, both for the behavioral and academic needs of students. There are many benefits to engaging students. When we do not engage them, we see acting out... You are going to see fewer problems, negative behaviors, and more commitment to learning. We will have more successful students and better outcomes for them in the future. We must be committed to the process, be purposeful, be part of it, and you will see the empowerment of students in the long run... So, it is not just student voice. You are empowering students to be leaders in their own education."**

# RELATION TO SELF-DETERMINATION FRAMEWORK



Self-determination Theory:



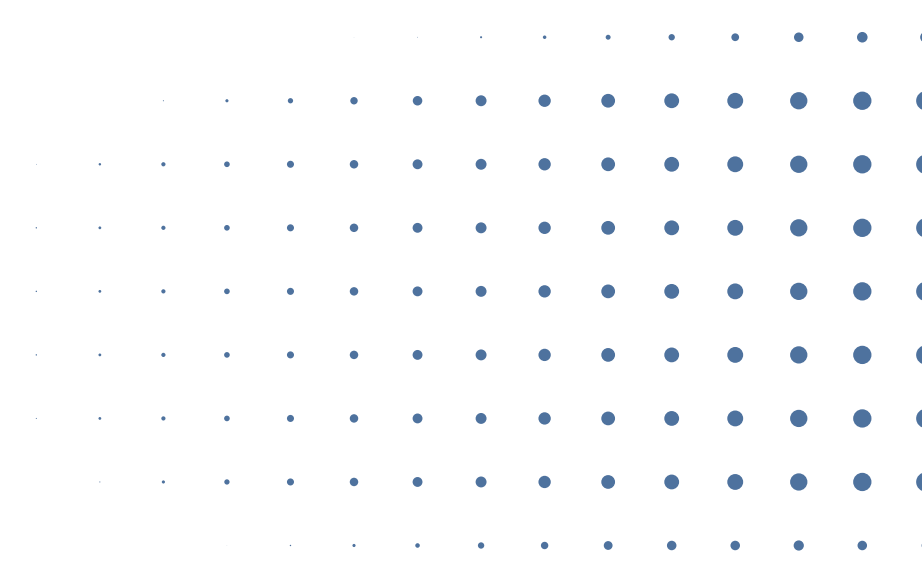
Basic human psychological needs (autonomy, connectedness, competency)



Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation in personality and functioning



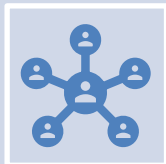
Affects behavior and decision-making in each individual (Ryan & Deci, 2020)



# RELATIONSHIP TO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE



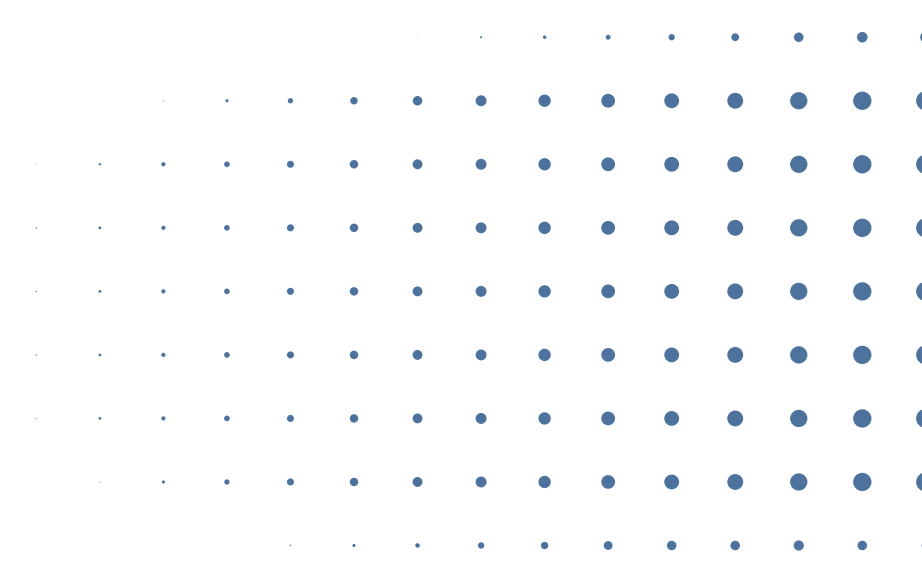
Leaders shared a common vision of a future of education in which each student feels heard, valued, and in control of their own destination in educational pursuits through student voice, choice, and agency.



Freedom to exhibit autonomy, engage in connections with others, and demonstrate competence in their own unique way.



Importance of being an adaptive and inspirational leader who values risk-taking, social justice for all, and courage as priorities in advancing schools.



# IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

- **Potential to change educational settings for the better**
- **Improve student attendance, satisfaction, and educational attainment**
- **Foster more productive environments for diverse learners**
- **Address challenges that come with childhood poverty, lack of resources, and absence of family involvement, especially in the wake of COVID-19**
- **Champion students as the most important stakeholder in their own education**
- **Relationships, successes, and experiences that matter to the individual**



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

## Recommendation 1

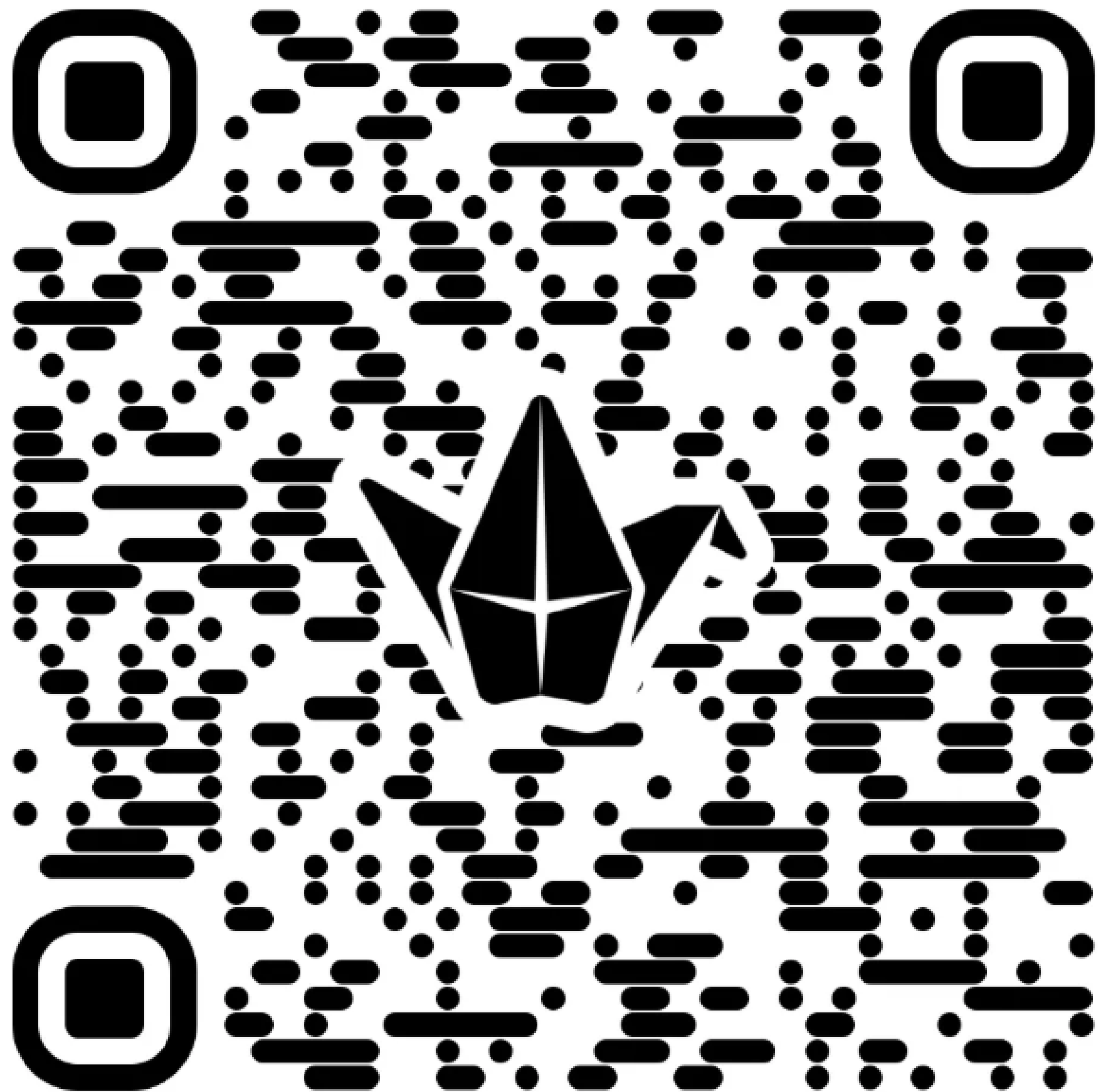
Offer Actionable and Practical Professional Development

## Recommendation 2

Individualize Learning Experiences

## Recommendation 3

Build Authentic Relationships



# TIME FOR CREATING/ COLLABORATING

- <https://padlet.com/julieanddunn101/empowering-student-voice-collaborative-padlet-gio1bdu43ivhal5l>

The background features a repeating pattern of light gray speech bubbles with a dark teal question mark inside. The bubbles are arranged in a staggered, overlapping grid. The text 'FEEDBACK/ QUESTIONS' is centered in white, bold, uppercase letters with a slight drop shadow.

FEEDBACK/ QUESTIONS

# SUMMARY/CLOSING

- **Student voice and agency should be seen in that the learner is placed at the center and valued for the human and unique soul that they are.**
- **Setting their own goals, reflecting on themselves as learners, and participating within the education community can offer intrinsic motivation to succeed.**
- **Empowering student voice also means freeing teachers to find their passion again, celebrating team wins, and capturing hearts through individualized support that may look different for each child, teacher, classroom, and community.**
- **Finally, to say it in several different languages:  
Together(English), Juntos (Spanish), Issho Ni (Japanese), Zussamen (German), Ensemble (French), and Razem (Polish), we can approach learning in new, exciting, and innovative ways!**





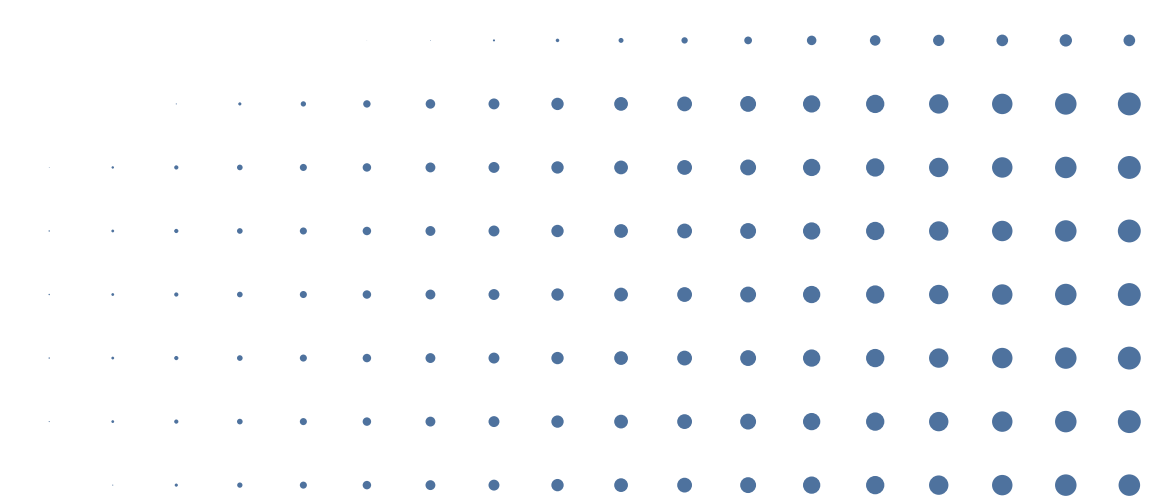
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# **THANK YOU & QUESTIONS**

## **Empowering Student Voice in Rural New Mexico Schools: A Phenomenological Study of Administrator Perceptions**

**Julie Ann Dunn  
November 2024**



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