

**Creating Equitable & Engaging Spaces for Students:
A Theory of Action for Open High School Families**

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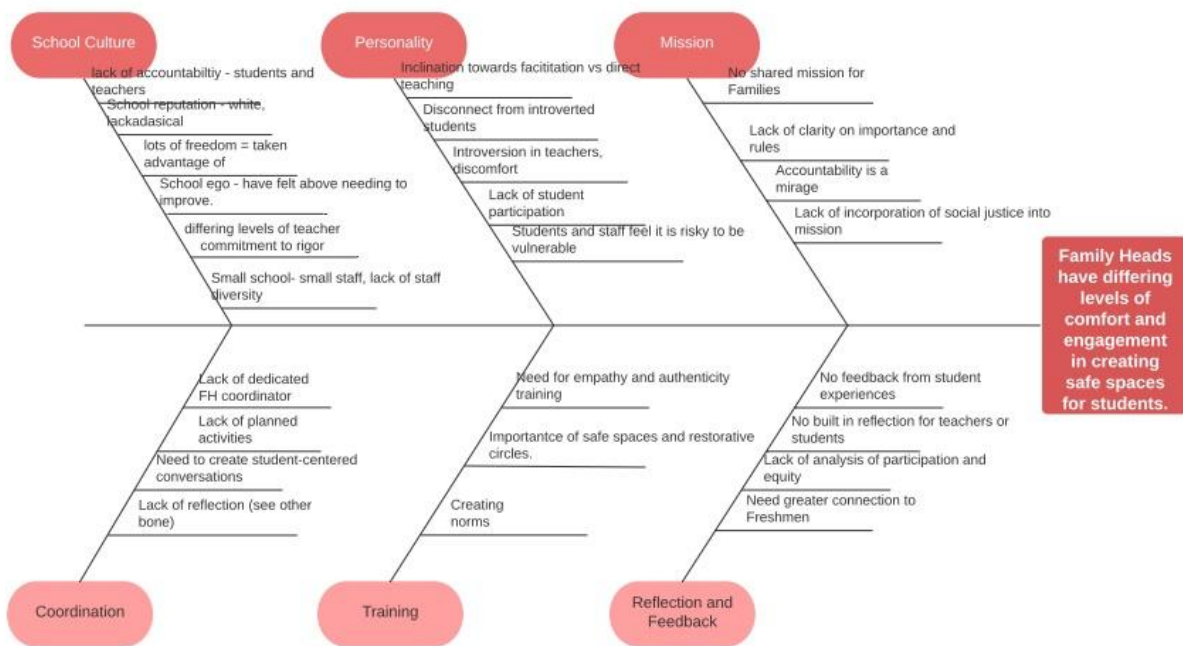
Issue/Focus of Practice

Open High School is a specialty admissions-based high school in the city of Richmond. The ideology and mission behind its “specialness” is that it hopes to grow great human beings who are committed to making the world a better place. Its small personal setting and emphasis on curiosity, creativity, and community, allow students to develop into their best selves while pursuing a college preparatory education. Some of these tenets are supported by our weekly “Family” meetings that are meant to be safe spaces for students to express themselves, discuss issues of interest, and facilitate deep and meaningful relationships. Each student is placed randomly into a Family. Seniors have an opportunity to choose their Family Head. Each Family consists of 15-18 mixed grade level students. However, even though the concept of Family is at the core of our school culture, there has been little training or accountability of the facilitators, “Family Heads,” which has led to inequitable experiences for students. While some have experienced truly cultivated activities and a deep level of trust with their facilitators, other students have simply sat in a room for an hour. Over the last few years, there has been an effort to improve the quality of the Family experience but little has been done to identify specific issues, develop and initiate plans, and provide training in the social, emotional learning of students.

Problem statement: Family Heads have differing levels of comfort and engagement in creating safe spaces for students.

Figure 1

Fishbone Diagram of Root Cause Analysis



Root Cause Analysis

In the effort to create better safe spaces at our school, it has become evident that while both school culture and its policies and practices are at play in the inequity of Family experiences, another underlying and potentially more important factor stems from the level of comfort that teachers feel in their facilitation of activities that revolve around sensitive issues, such as race, gender, politics, etc. As Harpalani confirms, “the goal of safe spaces is to facilitate engagement of uncomfortable issues and to provide a supportive atmosphere for this endeavor” (2017, p. 127) and the importance of leaning into that discomfort is what marks an effective practice. Through the empathy interviews of Family Heads (see Appendix A) conducted after an initial professional development given (see Appendix D), it is evident that their individual willingness to be authentic and empathetic in front of students in what are often difficult conversations differs and has caused inequitable experiences for students. Digging deeper into teacher personality, training and coordination of SEL led activities and the lack of consistency in reflective practices will illuminate areas of growth that are tangible and actionable.

Personality - Authenticity, Empathy, Introversion

Authenticity, empathy and introversion are three realms of personality that affect student relationships and efficacy in SEL delivery which is the main component of creating safe spaces with students. In a study conducted by De Bruyckere & Kirschner (2016), high school students found that a teacher’s willingness to be themselves, demonstrate passion for the subject matter and the creation of unique and deep relationships were markers for that which they perceived as authentic. This then creates a culture where students feel that they can show up with their authentic selves. As the primary drivers of excellent SEL delivery, teachers must authentically believe and be committed to cultivating comfort and culture through empathy, practice and passion (Bracket, et al., 2012). In addition, it has been increasingly evident that a teacher’s personal level of introversion can indeed influence their comfort in discussing difficult subject matter, and thus providing specific, planned, and include prescribed structures for teachers in SEL contexts is crucial (Chuhkran, 2020). Chuhkran lists preparedness as one of the main factors in introverted teacher comfort, as it allows them to know what is ahead and mentally construct both their intellectual and emotional responses (2020).

SEL Training & Coordination

Even though my school prides itself on its culture of relationships and whole child education, our school does not offer any formal training for teachers in SEL. As Schmoyer discusses, if the teachers don’t have a good sense and control over this aspect of their own social and emotional lives, then the students will feel that from them (2020). Hence, both personal work and the practices of creating ground rules, norms, and practices directly influences the ability for “people across cultures and settings to peacefully and safely discuss the most sensitive and charged topics.”

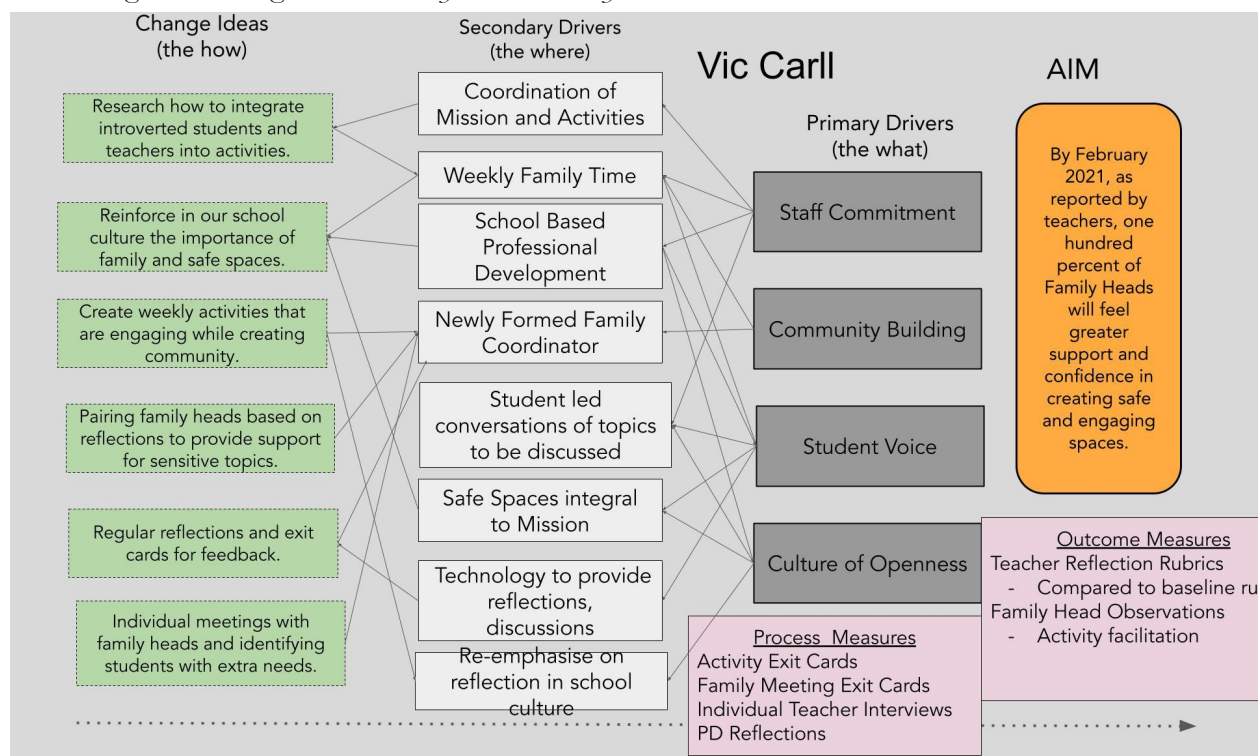
(Silverman & Mee, 2018). The direct effect of SEL competencies and student achievement are well known, and yet my school has not sought to implement training. However, according to Schmoyer, this is not a rare issue, as “teachers are getting limited preparation in the area of student SEL” nationwide (2020). Delving into the types of SEL programs shows that there are several approaches from which teachers can learn and integrate consistent practices. Circle of Dialogue Wisdom (CDW), an indigenous practice now mainstream educational practice, provides a scaffolding practice through creating affection, co-creating solutions and taking solutions to practice (Moreno-Cely, et al., 2021). Other programs, such as CASEL, RULER, Mindfulness Interventions, CARE and MSBR provide similar frameworks that echo those of CDW. Deeper investigation is needed in order to match an SEL program and our school. Through the new Family Head Coordinator position, these decisions and program implementation can be coordinated and delivered to the staff through professional development training.

Reflection

In addition to lacking any coordinated activities or SEL training, overall, our school has not implemented reflective practices as an important component of the creation of safe spaces. There has not been a focus or space created that encourages sustained personal or collaborative professional reflection. According to Smyth, sustained critical reflection is the keystone to creating environments in which teachers better themselves while cultivating relationships and practices to inform them. “If teachers are going to uncover the nature of the forces that inhibit and constrain them, and work at changing those conditions, they need to engage in four forms of action with respect to their teaching: describe, inform, confront and reconstruct” (1989, p. 12). Developing a reflective practicum involves looking beyond the assumption that “reflection is a natural trait” to providing meaningful mechanisms to move from mere “thinking back” to transformational reflection which is highly important in the realm of educational practices (Slovak, et al., 2017). Without inclusion of consistent reflective practices, teachers will be less prepared in providing and improving SEL practices in their classrooms.

Figure 2

Driver Diagram including AIM, Primary and Secondary Drivers



Preliminary Theory of Action

The aim of this work is to provide, through the role of Family Head Coordinator, training, activities and practices to help teachers enhance their comfort in providing safe spaces for students. Teachers should feel supported in their personal growth and development as well as be provided with specific practices that aid in the development of SEL practices. There needs to be the use of transformative reflection as a means of developing the environment of authentic personal relationships where both students and teachers feel willing to lean into the discomfort that is important in the work of restorative pedagogy and practices. In this year, post pandemic it is even more important than ever to prioritize key socio-emotional skills, as hoards of students have lost a sense of belonging which has had a direct correlation with student engagement at school (Salmela-Aro, et al., 2021).

Hence, sharing information about the importance of the work that they are doing in providing social emotional competencies will help set a tone for teachers about the work we are about to begin. Seeing that there is not a single state that includes SEL teacher education standards and often professional development training in SEL often comes as a single class or workshop approach it will be utterly important for teachers to fully dedicate themselves to improvement in their practices (Murano, et al., 2019). Potentially even more difficult, may be teachers' commitment to practice meta-reflective practices to evaluate their own socio-emotional practices (Ojala, 2020). Yet, this is the foundation on which all other training will be built. Hence, this will begin the process

of learning how to be uncomfortable. Because, according to Ojala, “the explicit acknowledgment that discomforting emotional aspects are part of educating about sensitive and controversial societal issues and that educators and students need to engage in a critical inquiry of emotional positions toward the issue at hand” (2020). It will be utterly important that through my new role as Family Head Coordinator, that I consistently frame the professional development training through the lenses of authenticity, modeling, and reflection in order to cultivate a culture of willingness for others.

Utilizing the CDW framework and through the lens of co-leadership and management, I will create a presentation of a few of the SEL framework to the teaching staff and administration so that as a collective, we can choose and/or adapt a current program to integrate into our school. CASEL’s framework of five competencies will be first used to explain the goal of SEL training: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (Borowski, 2019). Once we have chosen an appropriate SEL program, I will begin creating professional development training sessions and integrating our learning into our weekly Family meetings. These weekly activities will be pre-planned and discussed with the staff so that even our introverted staff members will feel supported. Through empathy interviews and the teachers’ responses to levels of comfort in discussing difficult topics, I will also pair teachers with differing styles of engagement together to help provide a balanced approach to aid in discussions of sensitive topics. And finally, and most importantly, we will practice reflection through weekly exit cards on the efficacy of the activities and Family meetings as well as have individual meetings to discuss personal growth and areas of strengths and weaknesses. It is through this information that I will continue to reshape and improve practices so that all Family Heads feel supported. Because as Srinivasan purports, teachers are the most important factor in SEL and their attitudes and level of competence directly affect the outcomes for students (2019).

Methods

Plan, Do, Study, Act

This project used PDSA cycles within the framework of improvement science to implement change in the experiences of both teachers and students in our weekly Family meetings. These meetings are central to our mission of providing a relationship-based learning experience. In previous years, there hasn’t been a central coordinator of Family activities and hence there has been zero consistency among Family Heads in how they utilize their time with students.

This year, as the appointed Family Head Coordinator, I had an opportunity to introduce a framework and weekly activities that would create equitable experiences for students. This role also required training and interaction with the Family Heads in order to set the foundation for our vision of this time each week.

Improvement cycles included professional development, qualitative and quantitative initial surveys of teacher attitudes, weekly activities with exit card feedback, student focus groups, and empathy interviews. After each iteration of training or activities, data would be collected to help illuminate areas of need and these would then inform the next cycle of improvement.

As you can see in the summary below, the focus of improvement moved from teacher efficacy to student voice, based on the data collected in empathy interviews and qualitative feedback.

Summary of PDSA Cycles

Table 1*Summary of PDSA Cycles*

| Cycle | Change Ideas | Data Collected | Drivers |
|-------|--|---|---|
| 1 | Baseline information and mission and vision building | Initial teacher attitudes, strengths and weaknesses | Information to build framework for weekly activities and professional development |
| 2 | Structured weekly activities with exit cards. | Student engagement, teacher comfort, feedback | Provide a framework to create more equitable experiences for students and Family Heads |
| 3 | SEL Observation of Family Heads** | Engagement with SEL qualities in Family time | Solidify teacher attitudes through quantitative data |
| 4 | Student Focus Group | Current Family experiences, desire for greater connection, importance of Family Heads, ideas for activities | Utilize student voice to drive activities |
| 5 | Student Empathy Interviews | Historical Family experience, current Family experiences, desire for greater connection, importance of Family Heads, ideas for activities | Utilize student voice to drive activities |
| 6 | Teacher Empathy Interviews | Snapshot of current course of action, issues and desires, emotional reactions and tolls | Understand value of activities, teacher emotional toll and burnout, discussions of moving forward |
| 7 | Pivot Structured Weekly Family Activities | Moved from less heavy topics focusing | From student voice data, creating greater |

| | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| | | on small randomized group activities and joy | community and relieving the heaviness of the world |
| 8 | Proposal to create Family Activities Committee within Student Reps | To incorporate Family activity creation into our student government to include more student voice | More student voice and choice in activities to promote connection and ownership |

Note. Cycle 2 was abandoned due to teacher burnout and relationship building among staff.

Participants

Adults

Open High School has a total staff count of 18 adults, eleven of whom work as “Family Heads.” All staff members were present during the initial professional development, but only Family Heads were asked to complete surveys and exit cards. Each week, all 11 Family Heads were asked to give feedback, but completion rates varied week by week. It is important to note that among the eleven Family Heads, there is a vast difference in level of experience as teachers in general, more specifically at Open High and then as Family Heads. This has potential implications for outcomes seen and underscores the need for planned activities to level the field. Also note the lack of racial diversity in our staff.

Table 2

Family Heads Demographic Information

| Name | Gender | Extrovert Ambivert Introvert | Total Years Teaching | Total Years at Open *including this year | Total Years as Family Heads |
|----------|--------|------------------------------------|----------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| Chad | M | E | 16 | 13 | 13 |
| Mike | M | I | 15 | 13 | 13 |
| Brigette | F | A | 35 | 35 | 35 |
| Emily | F | I | 16 | 12 | 12 |
| Mary | F | I | 5 | 1 | 1 |
| Caroline | F | E | 3 | 3 | 3 (one virtual) |
| Lucy | F | A | 8 | 2 | 2 (one virtual) |
| Lorah | F | I | 21 | 21 | 21 |

| | | | | | |
|---------|---|---|----|----|-----------------|
| Richard | M | A | 3 | 3 | 3 (one virtual) |
| Molly | F | E | 6 | 1 | 1 |
| Vic | F | E | 21 | 11 | 11 |

Table 3*Family Heads Summary*

| Male | Female | Extrovert | Ambivert | Introvert |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|----------|-----------|
| 3 | 8 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Black | White | Asian | | |
| 0 | 10 | 1 | | |
| Family Heads Experience 3 years or less ** | Family Heads Experience 3 - 10 years | Family Heads Experience 10 + years | | |
| 5 | 0 | 6 | | |

Note. ** 2020-2021 Year Totally Virtual - Family Experience Limited

In addition, three Family Heads also participated in a casual, over lunch discussion on the progress of Family and our overall school culture. Two of these three teachers identified themselves as really struggling this year, with high levels of teacher burnout.

Students

Total student population at our school is 186. Twenty students participated in the Student Focus Group. All twenty students self-identified as extroverts/ambiverts. The group consisted of 7 eleventh grade students, 8 tenth grade students, and 5 ninth grade students; 13 female, 4 male, 3 non-binary.

Table 4*Student Focus Group Demographics*

| Total Participants | Male Participants | Female Participants | Non-binary | Self-Identified Introverts | Self-Identified Extroverts |
|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 20 | 4 | 13 | 3 | 0 | 6 |
| Freshmen | Sophomores | Juniors | Seniors | Ambiverts | |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|----|--|
| 5 | 8 | 7 | 0 | 13 | |
| Black | Hispanic | White | Biracial | | |
| 8 | 5 | 5 | 2 | | |

Additionally, three students acted as participants in empathy interviews. These interviews were completed by 12th grade students, because there were no senior participants in the focus group. Two of these students are black and one white. Two identified as introverts and one as an extrovert.

Two members of each Family act as student representatives which make up our REPS or student government - for a total of 22 students. REPS are chosen by election in each Family at the beginning of the year. REPS is led by two teachers who also work as Family Heads. The goal of REPS is to create whole school activities, run our school Town Meetings, uphold, edit and review our Student Constitution and to uphold our mission and vision.

Data Collection Measures

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used to collect data. Because the initial aim was to identify and support teachers, it was necessary to collect reflection data throughout the school year. In the beginning of the year, Family Heads had an opportunity to not only rate themselves on a likert scale on SEL topics, they were also asked to write about their strengths and weaknesses (see Appendix C). Throughout the PDSA cycles, exit cards (see Appendix B) were given to Family Heads to measure teacher support, student engagement, but also included a free response area for open comment. These were given after they implemented the weekly Family Activities Plan (see Appendix E). So within the exit cards, both quantitative and qualitative data was gathered.

Empathy interviews of teachers, though informal, gave a lot of insight into how they were feeling about their level of stress, the added difficulty of being a Family Heads in addition to their normal work responsibilities and the emotional toll that receiving a framework was having on their experience. These small moments captured what would later be a giant pivot in the PDSA cycle focus.

Because of teacher burnout that was pervasive, it also became clear that student voice should also be more included to not only provide student choice but also to lessen the onus on teachers to provide “engaging” activities. Leaning into what the students would consider interesting would enhance the Family experience overall and hence the student focus group was formed. The student focus group meeting was recorded, transcribed, and coded for both emic and etic themes.

When I realized that the student focus group did not include any seniors, I asked for volunteers to be interviewed, asking relatively the same questions within the previous focus group.

Below you will find a summary of the data collection measures performed from August 2021 to March 2022.

Quantitative

Table 5

Quantitative Data Collection Information

| Methodology | Participants | Time period | Specifics | Limiting factors |
|---|-----------------|------------------|--|---|
| Initial Professional Development Teacher Attitude Surveys | 11 Family Heads | August-September | Teachers were asked to rate themselves on a 1-5 scale of comfort in 12 areas of SEL content | Varying levels of experience in three ways: overall teaching experience, years at Open High and experience in Family Heads role |
| Initial Professional Development Exit Card & Feedback | 11 Family Heads | August-September | Using likert scales for evaluating richness of content, usefulness of activities, and value of time used | Varying levels of experience in three ways: overall teaching experience, years at Open High and experience in Family Heads role |
| Weekly Exit Cards - Post Student Engagement | 11 Family Heads | September-March | Using a likert scale of 1-5 to measure student engagement in the weekly Family activities | Not all teachers completed every exit card |
| Weekly Exit Card - Teacher Support Measures | 11 Family Heads | August - March | Using a likert scale of 1-5 to measure level of support teachers felt in their roles as Family Heads | Not all teachers completed every exit card |

Qualitative

Table 6

Qualitative Data Collection

| Methodology | Participants | Time period | Specifics | Limiting factors |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|---|---|
| Initial Professional Development | 11 Family Heads | August-September | Teachers were given an opportunity to discuss their strengths and | Varying levels of experience in three ways: |

| | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|----------------|--|---|
| Free Response of Strengths & Weaknesses | | | weaknesses in the role | overall teaching experience, years at Open High and experience in Family Heads role |
| Student Focus Group | 20 students | February | Students were asked a variety of questions about Family at our school including their expectations, seen limitations and wants for the future | No 12th graders All self-identified extroverts/ambiverts. No introverted students represented. |
| Student Empathy Interviews | 3 Students | February-March | Students were asked what made a great Family experience and how it has changed over time. They were also asked what makes a good Family and Family Heads | Only 12th grade students. Different expectations due to pre/post covid protocols |
| Teacher Empathy Interviews | 3 Teachers | February-March | Casual and open ended discussion of how Family is progressing | Only 3 of 11 teachers. Two who self-identified as struggling this year |
| Student Representative Proposal | 22 students and two faculty advisors | February-March | Proposal to move Family activities coordination to student reps as committee | Foreseen limitations include inconsistency in quality activities; same students in committee |

Limitations

It is important to note that there are many limitations to this particular study in improvement. Firstly, my role as Family Head Coordinator, is one in which I am responsible for training, creating and evaluating all those involved in Family; however, I have no official administrative role. I also have not had the most experience as a Family Head, so I was chosen based on my administrator's perception of being a great Family Head in the past. This puts me in a strange

power position with my colleagues, that later becomes apparent in the implementation of improvement cycles.

Secondly, we have a very white staff in comparison to our student population. This, I believe, could have significant repercussions in how students react to Family Heads and thus how they perceive the Family experience. Though this study doesn't delve into the backlash of White Supremacy Culture on our student experience, it is important to recognize its influence on our school culture and also my own evaluation and creation of school activities.

Thirdly, this study only lasted from August to March, and during this time, there were four weeks in which Families did not meet for their weekly activities, due to testing, absences, and/or administrative issues. And within the time that we did meet, there were inconsistent response levels to the exit cards given to Family Heads. Not having streamlined and consistent data, makes the control group quite small - relying on those who regularly answered the quantitative questions to provide numerical evaluations of student engagement activities.

Lastly, Covid has had immeasurable effects on both students and teachers this year. Those effects became glaringly apparent as the improvement cycle iterations occurred. This led to pivots being made throughout the year to move from SEL focused training to help Family Heads feel more confident in discussing difficult topics with students, to creating a lighter, more connected atmosphere in which joy was more palpable.

Findings

Introversion/Extroversion

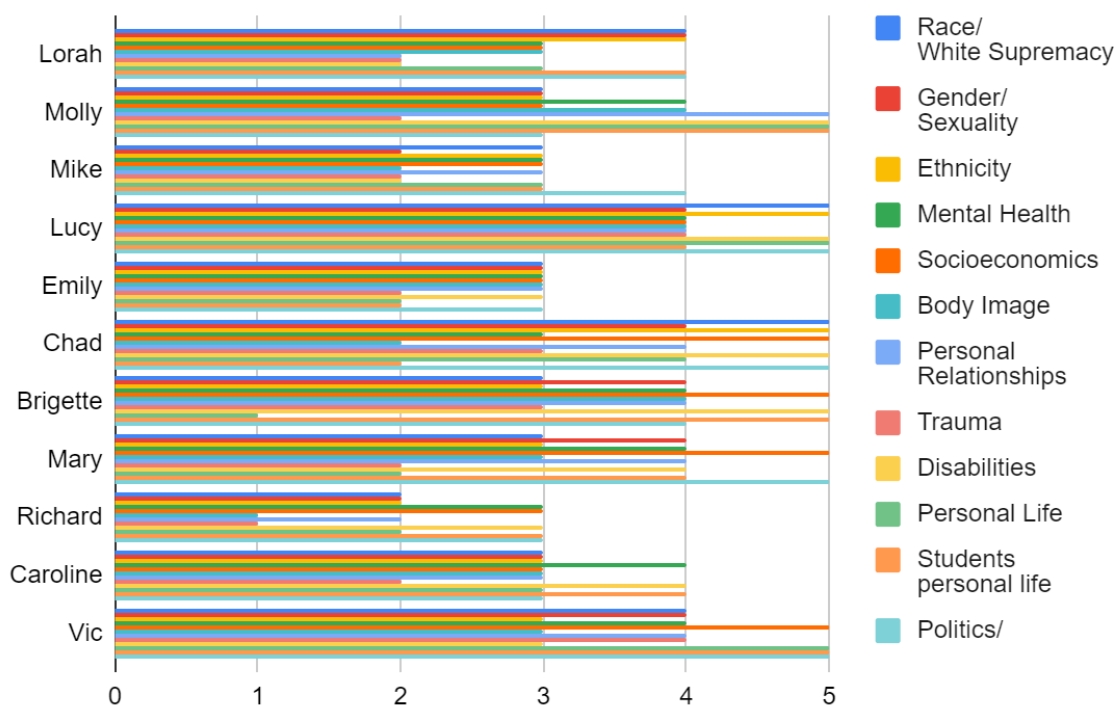
In my TOA, I explored the impacts of introversion and extroversion on participation and the need for additional structure and support. Introverts, in general, have been ignored as a group that needs differentiation in approaches to both teaching and learning. As a Family Head, a role in which the lines are blurred between teacher and mentor, it is even more important to understand how introversion may affect one's ability to approach and discuss topics that arise. When looking at the data, those Family Heads who self-identified as introverts have had the most difficult time creating deep relationships with their Families. The need for structured activities for these particular staff members was crucial, as they were more apt to engage in the curriculum. Also, in relation to this, the students identified by Family Heads, that were not engaged in Family activities, are also self-identified as introverts. When speaking to the Student Focus Group, it was made clear that these personality traits had an impact on overall engagement from either the Family Head side and the student participants.

Quantitative Findings

Initial Professional Development Teacher Attitudes Towards Sensitive Topics

Figure 3

Likert Scale of Staff Levels of Comfort on 12 Sensitive Topics



In August, during our initial professional development, on a likert scale of 1-5, Family Heads were asked to evaluate their own comfort level in speaking with students about these difficult topics. Creating safe spaces for students to discuss their lives and issues that they face is foundational to the experience in Family. It is critical that Family Heads self-reflect on their own attitudes and in relation to interactions with students and the above mentioned subject matter. You can see in this chart that there are varying levels of overall confidence at the beginning of the year.

Initial Professional Development Exit Card & Feedback

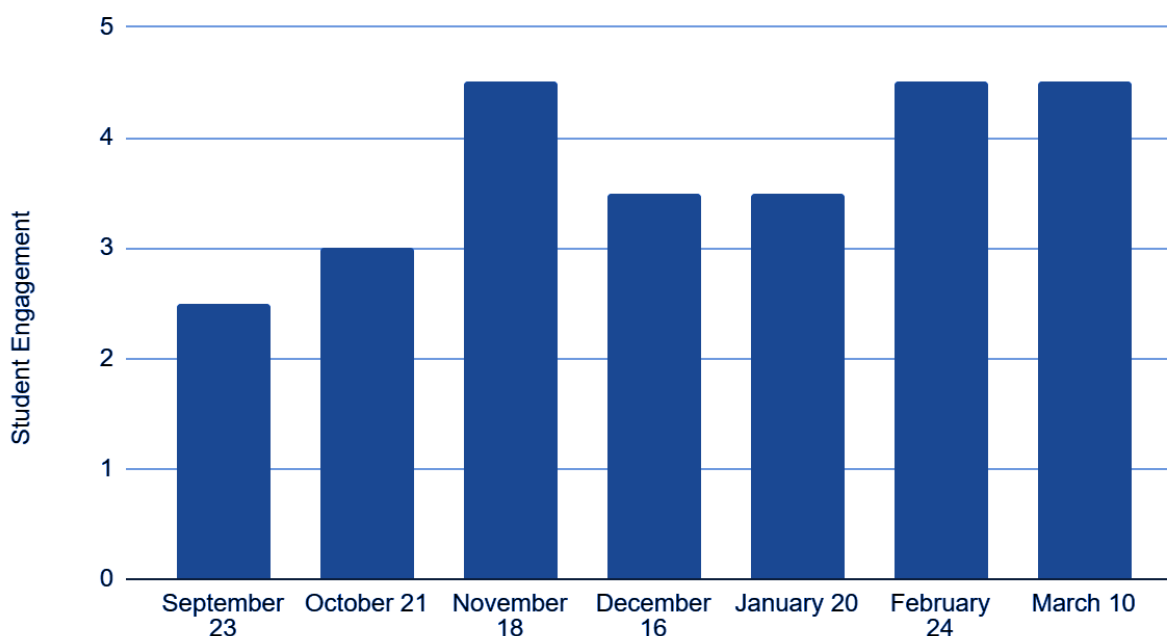
In August, I gave a training and professional development about Family, School Culture and Equity. This was the launching pad for my job as coordinator. One hundred percent of participants believed that the professional development was clear, accessible, interesting and engaging. One hundred percent appreciated the opportunity to discuss our mission and vision. One hundred percent of participants thought it was important to reinvigorate our efforts to improve Family and our school culture. As one teacher remarked, “I loved the pace of the pd and how we were all able to participate. I also enjoyed the conversation about what Family is and what it could be.” The teachers were also thankful for the more practical aspects of the professional development given. “I loved that it reminded me of the tasks at hand.” However, beyond the small details, the staff made a commitment to evolving Family, as one hundred percent of participants indicated that equity was important to them and that there was a need to address sensitive issues in Family activities.

Weekly Exit Cards - Post Student Engagement

Figure 4

Average Student Engagement Levels as Reported By Staff per Month

Student Engagement - Monthly Exit Card Feedback

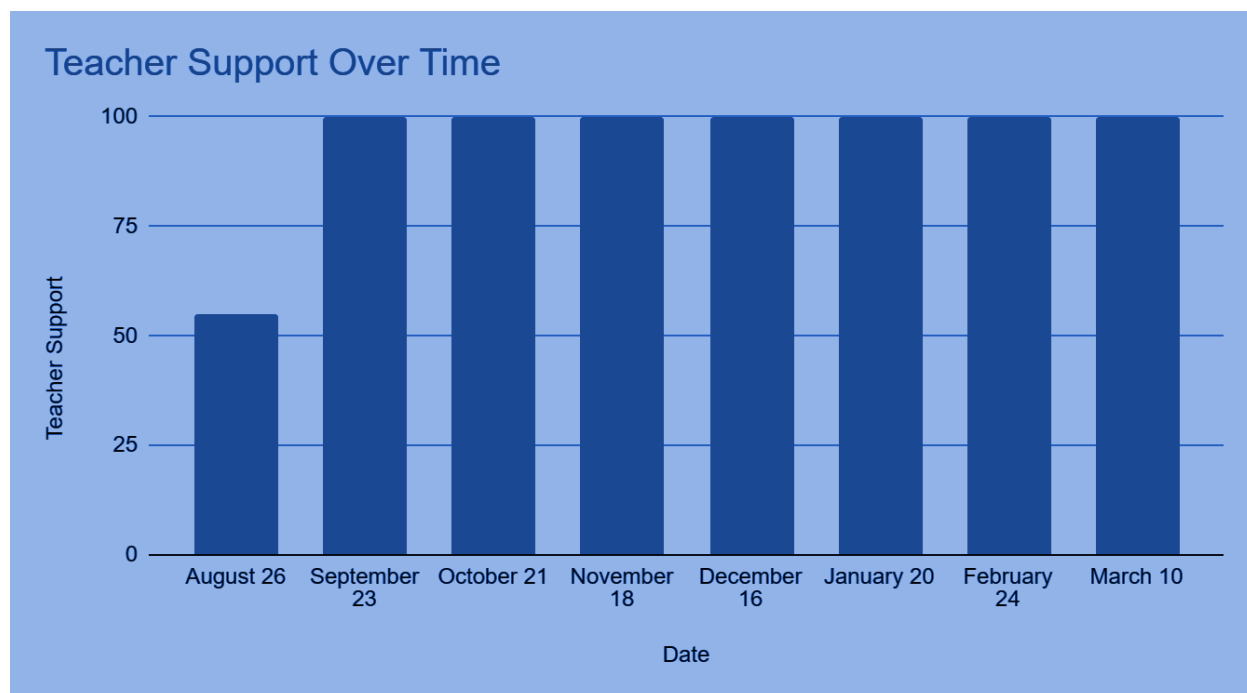


Measuring one Family session per month through an exit ticket for teachers, showed overall improvement in student engagement. In November, students completed a Indigenous Peoples activity that was incredibly popular. In December, engagement dipped back, but still showed some improvement. Based on Student Focus group suggestions, activities were reshaped to include small randomized group activities. The uptick in student engagement during February and March indicates that these activities pulled in students that would normally not participate. Based on Family Head feedback, this included introverted students that were identified earlier in the year as non participatory.

Weekly Exit Card - Teacher Support Measures

Figure 5

Average Level of Teacher Support Felt by Staff as Reported by Staff



It is clear that the implementation of a Family Head Coordinator and prescribed weekly activities has allowed teachers, both inexperienced and experienced Family Heads, to feel supported in their role. The August data was taken during the professional development before the school year started and therefore best reflects how Family Heads felt previous to this year. Hence, the portion of the goals that included teacher support described in my AIM was met with one hundred percent of Family Heads feeling supported in their role.

Qualitative Findings

Initial Professional Development Free Response of Strengths & Weaknesses

In August, part of the survey of the initial professional development was a free response section in which Family Heads were encouraged to think of their own strengths and weaknesses. One teacher remarked that he “has a hard time because of being an introvert” and finds leading Family to often be “uncomfortable emotionally” and that it “takes lots of energy.” Another teacher, who also considers herself someone who “needs to take more risks in challenging students to share their authentic selves.” while also “would like to speak more freely about herself and make more connections with kids of color.” Other teachers also remarked about “not wanting to not seem like an example of white privilege.” These responses confirm the findings that introverted teachers have more difficulty in this role and therefore, having a framework and activities is essential. It also shows that as a school, we must spend more time evaluating our white supremacy culture and its effects on both staff and students. Although we are aware that it exists, there are currently no solidified plans to address it.

Teacher Burnout

Covid. It’s been a different year. Masking, protocols that don’t allow for interaction between

students, constant contact tracing, seating charts, social distancing, and a new schedule all intertwined to create a perfect storm of burnout. Students were feeling disconnected from each other and this has led to classes in which students just aren't engaging. There is very little conversation that is happening, excruciatingly low enthusiasm and drive and a veritable stagnation of all that was joyful at school. Though the students were definitely victims of this, the onus of creating an educational environment that pulled students back in was on the backs of the teachers. Not only do teachers have to maintain all of the above-mentioned Covid practices and protocols, they also need to constantly attempt to elevate the overall classroom experience. Teacher hands were tied, as movement more towards computer learning has been implemented and the inability to provide hands-on activities for fear of illness has been canceled. Teachers are tired. Beyond tired. Tired like I've never seen before in my 21 years of teaching. The repercussions of the three years of the pandemic have been shouldered by teachers who have shifted their practices nonstop in order to meet the needs of students and the demands of their districts. So teachers can't take on any more. They have made that clear.

This project has both asked more of teachers and alleviated stresses on teachers at my school. Initially I planned on providing more consistent professional development to Family Heads to boost our SEL implementation and practices. As Family is our means of providing safe spaces for students, training in social and emotional learning would be paramount in our bettering of the Family experience for students. The excitement from teachers in the initial professional development proved to diminish as the demands of the school year persisted. It was becoming clear that observations of Family Heads and requests for participation in more pd, wouldn't help the already struggling mental health of the teachers in my building.

Burnout from Vic. There are two important days that I would like to share that speak to aforementioned comments in my methods section in relation to staff relationships and power structures. These scenarios truly shifted my experience and solidified the fact that I needed to shift my focus to the student voices. I would like to reiterate that though I am Family Head Coordinator, I do not have any higher positionality than my colleagues. I have no administrative power but do have higher levels of responsibility.

Scenario 1: Mike & Emily. As the Family Head Coordinator and leader of the climate and culture committee, I often have casual conversations with students and use time in my classes to check in with students. I ask how their classes are going and what improvements they would like to see. This has seemed to be increasingly important, as there has been a downshift in enthusiasm and school spirit this year. So I want to know what they perceive as issues at our school. After one such conversation, students made it clear that they understood that many things could not be changed (ie. covid protocols in which all students face forward, the 4 x 4 schedule that has long 95 minute classes, etc.) However, they did in fact have suggestions to bring more diversity to their classroom experiences. They wanted less work on the computer, differentiation in routine and instruction, more hands-on activities to keep them alert and active, ability to move around in the classroom, and integration of more fun activities when the mood is low.

I brought this information to our faculty meeting and had reviewed it ahead of time with my administrator who gave me the opportunity to share it with the other members of the staff. I told the teachers what had been told to me by my students. Staff meeting then went on as normal.

The next morning, I visited Emily in her classroom, as we often do, sipping coffee and preparing for the upcoming day. Mike then saw us and joined. Emily said she needed to tell me something. She really felt attacked at yesterday's staff meeting. She felt that what I had reported was all based on her classes. She then talked about how burnt out she was and that she just didn't have

the energy to do anything differently. Mike joined in and was also incredibly distraught. He mirrored Emily's sentiments and stated that he was just barely holding on. But then he said, "I just can't get feedback from you...the fun teacher...about what students are feeling." Emily agreed. Mike seemed so depressed that Emily and I told him he should go home and take a mental health day. He did. This was a difficult pill for me to swallow, but it was important for me to understand the effects that I was having on my colleagues.

Scenario 2: Chad. At yet another faculty meeting, as we were all entering and taking our seats, Chad came in quite flustered and angry. He and I sat next to each other as part of our Covid assigned seating, so it was very clear that I was within hearing range. He began complaining to our principal about Family, saying that it used to be special but now it's not. It's all prescribed and it "sucks." He was visibly physically upset and it was clear that he was truly unhappy about Family. It really hurt my feelings at first; I did take it personally. He did make it personal at that moment with other comments.

But what I later discovered was that, in his exit card feedback, he gave every activity a high rating. After I calmed down and took some time away, I realized that he has been a very popular Family Head in the past and has taken great pride in that. Our seniors get to choose their Family Heads and he always has a waiting list. So the fact that this year, as I was trying to level the playing field, I did in fact, take away the autonomy of a teacher who had been incredibly successful in this role. Whereas many Family Heads didn't have tremendous competency in the role and needed more direction, Chad in fact, needed to be reprieved of the restrictions imposed on him by my Family agenda. He needed to be given his power back and not feel as though his freedom of choice was taken from him by someone who has no authority over him.

However, the ultimate goal is that every student in our school, regardless of their Family Head, has an enriching experience in Family. Given the total lack of assigned plans in the previous years, it was necessary to provide structures and frameworks for all Family Heads to follow. But strategies needed to be implemented to allow freedom of creativity by Family Heads while also providing equitable experiences within Family.

Thus, these two scenarios made it clear to me that my own collegial relationships were at a fragile place. I needed to be more aware about my effect on others - through the role, the activities I was planning and my approach. Relationships are the heart of our school and while trying to build them for others, I was on the brink of hurting my own.

The AIM Change

So between the Covid burnout of teachers, the lack of enthusiasm, joy and spirit at my school, and the awkward paradigm of my role in relation to staff members, I had to make a pivot and change my aim. Moreso, I had to change the direction of my efforts in two substantial ways.

1. I had to move from focusing my efforts on Family Heads to students.
2. I had to focus my weekly activities on creating fun, joy, and connection rather than heavier topics and social justice issues.

Student Focus Group

Table 7

Summary of Ethic Coding of Student Focus Group Answers

| Student Focus Group Etic Coding | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <u>Connection (35)</u> | <u>Comfort (22)</u> | <u>Ideas (10)</u> |
| Between grade levels | BIPOC | Introduction day |
| Between Family Heads and students | Need more introductions to each other | Competitions (not Family but class) |
| Don't know each other | Needed to build trust | Pods |
| Half of students new in building | Feel intimidated by upperclassmen | Student Creation |
| Don't focus on task; focus on people | Microaggressions | |
| | | |
| <u>Groupings & Structure (30)</u> | <u>Engagement (44)</u> | |
| Grade Level | Hands ons activities | |
| Small mixed groups | Family Head leadership | |
| Randomized groups | Upperclassmen leadership | |
| Family Head management | Same people complete activities | |

Student Empathy Interviews

The three seniors with whom I met echoed the findings of the larger student focus group. These students had a more historical understanding of Family and had experienced a full year, during their freshman year, of a Family without having prescribed activities. Each of these students had different Family Heads during their freshman year. One had an excellent experience, while the other two had poor and/or boring experiences. They had the same longing for connection and felt that it was lacking this year overall in our school. They had a lot more to say about Family Head management and how important it is to create a trusting environment where everyone feels comfortable and open to express themselves. They made a direct correlation between Family Head personality and quality of experience for students. One student said to this possible positive environment, “in my freshman year, [I had a Family Head] that would have impromptu dance parties, talk about deep things, and make a lot of crafts. I’d talk to my friends and they’d be so jealous.” While comparatively another student remarked, “I had a Family Head, who you could tell, just wasn’t into it. He tried at first, but then lost his steam. Once he did, everyone else did too. There was no life, so we all just sat there on our phones.” These examples that show the extreme opposition of student experiences is why this theory of action was implemented. It speaks to an engagement feedback loop in which both the Family Head and the students feed off of each others’ energy.

Teacher Empathy Interviews

In addition to the teacher burnout conversations described above, I took the opportunity to speak informally with teachers during lunch. The discussion revolved around school culture, the

disconnect seen in students, and which activities worked the best in Family to pull as many students into work as possible. Two of these staff members felt incredibly burnt out and overwhelmed by their current workloads. One of the main themes that arose was that they understood that their lack of enthusiasm was contributing to less engaging Family sessions and that students felt it and mimicked their disillusionment with the activities. The second main theme was that overall in the school there is a lack of connection; some of which is due to Covid protocols and the virtual year backlash. However, there was acknowledgement that the entire school had not invested enough in relationship building this year.

Student Representative Proposal

As a long term solution to keeping students at the center of the activities, a proposal was made to incorporate a Family Committee into our Student Representative Group (REPS). The student REPS received the proposal and voted to confirm the committee. Since the formation of the Family Committee, they have only participated in “brainstorming” ideas, but have not integrated more clear, meaningful weekly activities. It is clear that if this is to be implemented more effectively, another adult must sponsor REPS to ensure that the same level of quality exists as it does now. My administrator would like me to consider doing this next year, as to help create a more foundational method through which the students can help plan activities and write the plans clearly.

Key Themes

Covid Chasm

The effects of Covid and the isolation of online learning carried through to this year even though we had in-person school. Both teachers and students suffered from a lack of enthusiasm and overall burnout. Though the initial intentions were to create spaces within Family that addressed sensitive issues, it was clear that Family was needed more as an escape than of seriousness. Family was an opportunity to provide light, fun, and engaging activities that promote connectedness.

Structure & Content

Providing clear and structured activities each week is necessary to ensure equity of experience for students. It also provides a framework for Family Heads that eases potential difficulties that arise from personality traits, such as introversion and extroversion. In addition, within these structured directions, a variety of team building, connection and small group activities had the greatest impact on overall engagement by both Family Heads and students.

Engagement Feedback Loop

Students discussed the importance of an engaged Family Head to create enthusiasm for Family time. If the Family Head was disengaged or feeling lackluster about the activities, this was deeply felt by the Family as a whole and interrupted a smooth group dynamic. However, Family Heads felt this was a two way street and looked for students to step up to bring engagement to the space. It is clear that there is a feedback loop between students and Family Heads. So inclusion of student voice into the creation of Family activities has the highest positive impact for both parties.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Open High School students benefit from the inclusion of Family as a part of our school culture. Whether or not the individual weekly sessions have high engagement levels, the very incorporation demonstrates to students that relationship building is at the core of what we envision for our students. The process of elevating the practices within Family has illuminated that mission and vision for this time each week needs to be flexible and reflect the needs of teachers and students.

The massive impact that Covid had on all stakeholders, shifted what Family stood for this year. Though the intentions were to create SEL driven safe spaces in which students could tackle difficult subjects within a trustworthy space, they soon fell by the wayside, in order to truly meet the social and emotional needs of both staff and students.

However, this does not dispute the need for a more structured experience in which teachers are trained and there are suggested activities. The desire for every student to receive loving, safe, fun and inspiring experiences is still very much at the core and in order to create this, we will have to continue to learn, bend, and reflect.

Though Family is a uniquely Open High tradition, the lessons of trust and relationship building can be applied to any organization. If one does not create a foundation that is humanized and empathy centric, change will not happen authentically. Nor can any one leader come in and make sweeping changes without first establishing this first line of trust. Relationships must be built over time and an environment in which individuals feel heard and given voice and choice must be maintained. Most importantly, everyone's health and wellbeing should be at the forefront of the steps made in any organization. Below the three main tenets of change management are discussed in more detail in reference specifically to our school; however, these again, can be utilized in a larger context in both corporate and educational settings.

Roles, Training, Power Dynamics & Trust

As the appointed Family Head Coordinator, creating a means to train my fellow colleagues in addition to creating activities and plans for each week, became more and more difficult as the year progressed. Certainly Covid and its overall disastrous effects on the health and wellbeing of everyone had enormous repercussions on teacher burnout rates, but beyond that, the role of peer to peer power dynamics showed its face. In the essay, *Coaching for equity: Conversations that change practice*, Aguilar discusses how in adults teaching adults, it is necessary for the coach, in this case, Family Head Coordinator, to him or herself as a learner to create trust. This trust must exist because there tends to be a perceived power differential that can inhibit authentic adult learning (Aguilar, 2020). It is crucial to be reflective of these potential pitfalls. The role of Family Head Coordinator at first seemed to provide surface level support to teachers, but as the year progressed, and the prescription of activities and expectations became cemented, there was push back from staff members. Though an appreciation of the clarity of directions and variety of activities, an underlying issue surfaced. It is imperative that the Family Head Coordinator consistently works towards creating a trusting relationship with each and every Family Head so that individual training and development can occur - but even more importantly, a connection can be solidified in which allows each person to share their experiences and strengths. This will yield a greater foundation for future training and alleviate issues with power structures.

For wider and important trainings, such as SEL practices, these should be given by professionals; not one of the staff members. All the professionals should be trained through a

proven methodology such as CPD or CASEL. This will too show earnestness in relative capabilities and distinction in roles and responsibilities.

Reflection, Relationships, Personality & Voice

Fostering respectful and sharing relationships with colleagues will also help incorporate differentiated ideas to connect with all students. Having introverted faculty members serving as Family Heads creates an understanding of how personality shapes experience and that should be part of the learning of both Family Heads and students. There is an opportunity in Family to illuminate differences and teach acceptance of all types of learners; this, in turn, should contribute to an increase in participation and engagement of those that felt less likely to contribute in the Family space.

It has been through consistent reflective practices that an understanding of true authenticity comes from the incorporation of voice; even if that voice is one expressing doubts and worries. This year, the greatest shifts came from listening. In this slog of a year, hearing the frustrations of lack of energy and connection from both students and teachers helped foster a new path for Family. It is through these conversations that it became clear that this year, Family needed to be an escape from the tremendous stresses that each of us have been holding.

Using these conversations and jumping off point for real reflection, allowed for the incorporation of new tactics that were aimed at increasing relationships, connection and culture. Developing a consistent reflective practicum is essential in the roles of Family Head Coordinator and Family Heads. In order to move forward with any truly transformative work, the incorporation of disciplined and relevant reflection is crucial (Slovak, P., Frauenberger, C., & Fitzpatrick, G. (2017). As Smyth states, “The intention is to critique and uncover the tensions that exist between particular teaching practices and the larger cultural and social contexts in which they are embedded.” (1989, p.11) In future years, the Family Head Coordinator should practice weekly, transparent reflections and share them with their colleagues and students in order to provide a space in which co-creation exists so that Family reflects the needs of everyone.

Joy & Fun

Though there is hope that as we move beyond the clutches of Covid, Families can begin incorporating social justice issues and provide safe spaces for students to tackle difficult topics with the aid of their Family Heads and peers, it has become clear that joy must be incorporated into each and every weekly experience. Family should not only be a place of exploration of deep topics, but also a place in which every student can experience, if even momentarily, joy.

After the PDSA cycles were over, I continued to move our Family activities towards facilitating fun and joy. We went outside, played kickball, made silly crafts, and played games. Immediately there was an overall lightness that was palpable in our school. Our culture was lifting and connecting. Joy was essential in creating the culture we wanted and perhaps we had overlooked that too much at the beginning of the year.

In a research study conducted in 2017, it was found that experiencing joy was innately associated with an increase in Subjective Well Being. Incorporating activities that help foster gratitude regularly can increase a person’s likelihood of developing joyous life practices that increase life satisfaction. (Watkins, Emmons, Greaves & Bell, 2017). In addition, in Georganta’s study of the implementation of fun at work, she found that it “really does have significant impact in reducing emotional exhaustion and need for recovery from work, while decreasing chronic social stressors. In the present study, people having fun at work not only reported being in better moods and more

engaged but also reported positive wellbeing.” (2017 p. 199) Though this study looks more specifically at corporate environments, it is easy to see the correlation between schools and work.

If our school’s overall mission is to develop responsible, resilient, creative, and compassionate students who value intellectual inquiry and social responsibility we should certainly strive to help our students live lives they love. Afterall, if we lead with love we can’t lose.

Personal Leadership Reflection

You can’t lead without reaching inward. Reflection was the most difficult and rewarding part of this leadership journey. Listening without climbing the ladder of inference and taking time to process and react from a place of compassion was the biggest takeaway. It doesn’t matter what your personal opinions may be, you must be open and accepting of the differences of others, incorporate the ideas of all and be transparent in your practices. In order to help others adapt and grow, you must first adapt and grow and be unafraid to consistently lean into discomfort.

I’m not sure I had these qualities before this program. Perhaps some, but surely moving through improvement cycles and encountering barricades, both practical and emotional, helped embolden my reflective practices. I had to learn to be quiet and listen more, but to use my strengths as a facilitator and coordinator to lessen the burden on others while maintaining an environment of co-creation.

I still have a ways to go, but I learned so much about my growth edges and have accepted that it is a lifelong process. But in the meantime, I am committed to remain full of gratitude, be authentically myself and to continue to listen to the wisdom of others.

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Appendix A

Teacher Empathy Interviews

Empathy Interview Questions:

- What do you think is the purpose of Family at Open High?
- What do you think is the purpose of Family at Open High?
- How would you define the role of the Family Head?
- What kinds of activities do you enjoy doing in Family?
- What are your strengths as a Family Head? Why?
- What are your weaknesses as a Family Head? Why?
- Would you say that your Family experiences have been fun? Why or why not?
- Would you say that your Family experiences have been emotional? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that you have been successful in developing deep relationships with ALL of your Family kids?
- What barriers do you often feel exist that may get in the way of that?
- Are there “types” of students that you tend to connect with more than others? Explain
- Are there “types” of students you often have more difficulty with in developing relationships? Explain
- If not given specific activities to complete in Family, how successful have you been at creating activities on your own that are enjoyed by your students?

Appendix B

Teacher Initial Professional Development



Full slide deck available [here](#)

Appendix C

Teacher Self-Evaluation Survey after Initial Professional Development

FAMILY HEAD SELF-EVALUATION

NAME:

1. What do you think is the purpose of Family at Open High?
2. How would you define the role of the Family Head?
3. What kinds of activities do you enjoy doing in Family?
4. What are your strengths as a Family Head?

Why?

5. What are your weaknesses as a Family Head?

Why?

6. Would you say that your Family experiences have been fun?

Why or why not?

7. Would you say that your Family experiences have been emotional?

Why or why not?

8. Do you feel that you have been successful in developing deep relationships with ALL of your Family kids?

9. What barriers do you often feel exist that may get in the way of that?

10. Are there “types” of students that you tend to connect with more than others?

Explain

11. Are there “types” of students you often have more difficulty with in developing relationships?

Explain

12. If not given specific activities to complete in Family, how successful have you been at creating activities on your own that are enjoyed by your students?

Use a scale of 1-5 (one being low, 5 being high) with the following questions.

What is your level of comfort on speaking with students about the following topics:

Race/White Supremacy Culture

Gender/Sexuality

Ethnicity

Mental Health

Socioeconomics

Body image

Personal relationships

Trauma

Disabilities

Your personal life

Students' personal lives

Politics/Current Events

What is your level of understanding on the following topics, in light of speaking with students:

Race/White Supremacy Culture

Gender/Sexuality

Ethnicity

Mental Health

Socioeconomics

Body image

Personal relationships

Trauma

Disabilities

Your personal life

Students' personal lives

Politics/Current Events

Family Head Self-Reflection

Take a moment to reflect on your answers to the above questions. What patterns do you see the most? What would you like to improve as a Family Head? How can I help you do that? What resources do you need?

Appendix D

Example of Weekly Exit Card

Exit Card - November 17th Family

Please fill out this quick survey about today's family experience.

The respondent's email (**null**) was recorded on submission of this form.

1. Email *

2. Name

3. What worked well in Family today?

4. What didn't work well in Family today?

5. How engaged were your Family members?

Mark only one oval.

| | | | | | |
|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Bored to death | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> Super engaged and active |

6. Were your introverted students (the ones you previously identified) engaged? *

Mark only one oval.

- All
- Some
- None

7. Were the directions I provided clear?

Mark only one oval.

| | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | |
| I was totally confused | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> Clear as a bell |

8. How supported to do you feel as a family head? *

Mark only one oval.

| | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | |
| Lost and on my own | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> Totally and completely supported |

9. Anything I should know? Ideas, suggestions, complaints?

Appendix E

Example of Weekly Family Activities Plan

Family Plan

Please take attendance [here](#).

Complete your Opening Ceremony!

Then, watch the student announcements:

Business & Announcements

We will have Decision Day & Day in the Park on May 19 and an End-of-Year Picnic on June 9!!!

What do REPS have to say?

Next week we'll take pictures of the kids that won the superlatives for their families. So be sure to look the way you wanna! See the list [here](#)!

Nominations for Prom Court! Starting **tomorrow, 4/29**, you can nominate your 12th grade classmates for prom King and Queen and your 11th grade classmates for Prince, and Princess. To nominate someone, please write their first and last name and what position you would like to nominate them for (king, queen, prince, or princess) on a piece of paper and drop it in the nominations box located in the main office. Nominations close on **Thursday, 5/5** when ticket sales close. Final voting will take place via a Google Form that will be posted on the whole school Google Classroom.

Restorative Activities

Discussion about Testing

Please go over the AP Testing schedule and the expectations. Be sure to identify any students who may need a ride to the testing site and give those names to Clary. They should arrive no later than 7:45 a.m. This is hard but we really need them to be on time. Let the students vent and be sure to let them know that we understand the pressures of doing well, but that their mental health is the most important thing. Please give out the letter/schedule from Clary including permission forms for travel to/from Norrell.

Ok, here we go. We will be playing a game for the entire year...

Dollar Dollar Bills

Give each kid 10 of the bills. They are going to try to win as many as possible from their peers by challenging them one on one, by doing one of three things: **thumb wrestling, rock, paper, scissors, or flipping a coin**. You must accept any challenge. All games are sudden death (not two out of three). Each win is one dollar. Play this for at least 20 minutes in Family - but **THIS GAME WILL LAST ALL YEAR!** Students can do this at any time (of course not during instruction). The student with the most money as of June 9th will win a **\$.n50 cash prize and** their Family will win **20 Family Points!!** They must have all their bills together and counted for Family on June 9th. Let the games begin!

This is an honor code game. If you run out of money, you are out. You don't have to accept challenges anymore. However, if someone wants to invest in you and challenge you, as a way of perhaps getting you back in the game, you can choose to accept or deny that challenge.

Family Heads: IF YOU HAVE EXTRA DOLLARS FOR SOME REASON, PLEASE DESTROY THEM!

If students want to spend some time challenging other members of other families, that's fine. Let them battle!

If you have more time and/or your kids aren't into the money game.

Create A Mood Checker

Have each student create a mood checker using something they are interested in. Here are some examples: They should put their finalized mood checker on these [google slides](#). This link can be shared with your kids. Be sure to have them put their name on their slide, so we can give them credit. I then encourage teachers to use these in their classes as an opening to class.

On a William Shakespeare scale from **1** to **9**,
how are you feeling today?



What Do You Wanna Do When You Grow Up?

Give each student the list of careers. Have them put a star next to things they would REALLY be interested in pursuing. Have them circle things they WOULD do if they had to. Have them also pick out 2-3 careers that they ABSOLUTELY WOULD NOT do. Then discuss everyone's top and bottom career choices.

If you **STILL have time...and** we will continue this next week (unless we play outside).