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Exploring Education Professionals' Perceptions of the Changes in School/Classroom Climate, Students' Experiences, and Educators' Experiences as a Result of Implementing the Secret Kindness Agents Project

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EXPLORING EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHANGES
IN SCHOOL/CLASSROOM CLIMATE, STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES, AND
EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES AS A RESULT OF IMPLEMENTING THE SECRET
KINDNESS AGENTS PROJECT.

By

Ferial G. Pearson

A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

EXPLORING EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHANGES IN THEIR CONTEXTS, STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES, AND EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES AS A RESULT OF IMPLEMENTING THE SECRET KINDNESS AGENTS PROJECT

Ferial G. Pearson, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2017

Advisor: Dr. Kay A. Keiser Ed. D.

This phenomenological study explored the perceptions of 23 educators as related to the implementation of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*. The methodology was comprised of a researcher-designed questionnaire to capture the essence of the participants' experiences with the project. A Conceptual Map developed by researchers at the University of Arizona in 2016 was used as the Conceptual Framework for the study.

Participants reported perceived impacts of the project on themselves, their students, and their contexts. Their responses fell into the following themes: Kindness Focus, Changing Pedagogy and Classroom Management, Improved Work Environment/Morale/Well-Being, Improved Social-Emotional Skills, and Improved School/Context Environment.

The researcher examined the central themes, conducted a data analysis congruent with the literature review, and described the key findings in the concluding chapter. The

researcher synthesized the key findings of the data in order to recommend implications for future research and practices in the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the Original Secret Kindness Agents, who taught me that there is always hope for humanity and for the future, and that true kindness in its profound simplicity is truly transformational for all who are involved.

Much love, Mama Beast.

Acknowledgements

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I am also extremely grateful to the educators who took the time to complete my questionnaire for this study. They are, by their very nature, some of the kindest people in the world, and I am excited to continue my relationship with them on this kindness education journey.

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Table of Contents

Dedication	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents.....	v
List Multimedia Objects	vii
Chapter 1 Introduction to the Study	1
Introduction of the Problem.....	1
Operational Definitions.....	2
Research Study Background.....	5
Study Motivation.....	9
Conceptual Map.....	11
Significance of the Study	14
Purpose Statement.....	17
Research Questions.....	17
Assumptions.....	17
Limitations.....	18
Delimitations.....	18
Outline of Dissertation.....	18
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	20
Introduction: Experiences of Students, Schools, and Educators.....	20
Conceptual Map.....	21
Kindness and Empathy.....	25
Social Emotional Learning and Character Education	32
School Culture and Climate	34
Morale	35
Conclusion.....	37
Chapter 3 Methodology: A Profile of the Data Collection and Analysis.....	38
Introduction.....	38
Research Design.....	38
Phenomenological Research.....	39
Participants.....	40
Confidentiality.....	41
Researcher's Context and Perspective.....	42
Research Question.....	42
Profile of Data Collection and Analysis.....	42
Strength of Claims Made.....	45

Conclusion.....	46
Chapter 4 Results.....	47
Introduction.....	47
Backgrounds and Demographics of the Participants.....	47
Data Analysis.....	50
Phenomenological Themes As Related to the Research Questions....	50
Impact on Educators.....	52
Impact on Students.....	58
Impact on Contexts.....	71
Conclusion.....	80
Chapter 5 Discussion.....	81
Overview of the Study.....	81
Overview of Findings According to the Conceptual Framework and Literature Review.....	83
Key Finding #1.....	84
Key Finding #2.....	86
Key Finding #3.....	93
Implications for Leadership.....	95
Limitations.....	96
Recommendations for Future Research.....	97
Conclusion.....	99
References.....	101
Appendices.....	109
Appendix A: Introductory Email	109
Appendix B: Electronic Demographic Survey/Questionnaire	110
Appendix C: IRB approval letter	112

List of Multimedia Objects

Table 1.....	48
<i>Participant Demographic Data</i>	
Table 2.....	51
<i>Data Analysis Organization</i>	
Table 3.....	53
<i>Kindness and Awareness Focus Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 4.....	55
<i>Pedagogy and Classroom Management Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 5.....	57
<i>Morale and Well-Being Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 6.....	60
<i>Kindness Focus, Awareness, and Empathy Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 7.....	62
<i>Pride, Belonging, and Connection Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 8.....	63
<i>Improved Behavior and Academic Performance Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 9.....	65
<i>Improved Relationships Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 10.....	67
<i>Well-Being and Happiness Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	

Table 11.....	68
<i>Ownership and Initiative - The Ripple Effect Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 12.....	72
<i>Improved Faculty and Staff Dispositions and Morale Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 13.....	74
<i>Sense of Community and Safe Spaces Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	
Table 14.....	75
<i>Improved Climate Themes in Participants' Responses</i>	

List of Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual Map	14
Figure 2. Locations of Participants.....	50
Figure 3. Word Cloud: Perceived Impacts on Educators.....	53
Figure 4: Word Cloud: Perceived Impacts on Students.....	59
Figure 5: Word Cloud: Perceived Impacts on Contexts.....	72
Figure 6: Secret Kindness Agents Conceptual Map.....	76

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” - Aristotle

Introduction of the Problem

An increasingly troubling paradigm shift continues to narrow the purpose of a public education in the United States toward a primarily economic function of preparing students for the workforce (Mehta, 2013). When we look at the purpose of education in such a narrow way, we are missing the opportunity to ensure that our students are reflective citizens who are capable of understanding who they are in relationship to others, particularly those who are from different backgrounds than themselves (Nieto, 1994). This is not a new issue as progressive educators have worked to expand democratic education beyond the idea of “efficiency” for more than a hundred years in the United States (Dewey, 1916).

The corporate-driven creation and adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), have been described as “technical specifications being confused with, but applied to, human learning capabilities” (Tienken & Orlich, 2013, p.44). The CCSS place a high value on the development of workplace skills and so they serve as a powerful bridge between the technocratic logic of policymakers and actual classroom practice (Mehta, 2013). This misguided intersection of paradigm, policy, and practice creates a disturbing scenario in which:

Our children have become akin to new products some “edu-corporation wants to research and develop before bringing to market. Not surprisingly, the product reflects exactly what big business values in its workers – emphasis on analysis, argument and specialization – at the potential expense of beauty, empathy, personal reflection and humanity. (Endacott & Goering, 2014, p. 90)

It is crucial to ensure that the purpose of education in our schools is broad and inclusive so that our students are not just productive workers, but also kind, empathetic, socially and emotionally intelligent human beings (Clonan et al, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman et al, 2009). While there is this paradigm of students as products for corporations, there is also a movement within the teaching world to fight for keeping character education in our schools, for preventing the burgeoning crisis of bullying and school violence through Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and for understanding the link between kindness and overall academic and social achievement in children and youth (Caprara, et al, 2000; Durlak et al, 2011; Schonert-Reichl & Weissberg, 2014; Wang et al, 1997).

Operational Definitions

Kindness. Eisenberg (1986) defined kindness as “voluntary, intentional behaviors that benefit another and are not motivated by external factors such as rewards or punishments” (p. 63). Others see kindness more simply as “doing favors and good deeds for others” (Seligman et al, 2005, p. 412). Aristotle defines kindness as being “helpfulness toward someone in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of

the helper himself, but for that of the person helped” (Book II - chapter 7: “Aristotle’s rhetoric,” n.d.). For the purpose of this study, I will combine these three definitions into a new one of my own: kindness is intentional behavior that benefits others and is not contingent upon any reward or gratitude.

Compassion is defined as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010, p. 352). Therefore, although compassion is a related construct, compassion-based interventions may be different from kindness-based interventions, which usually aim to increase pro-social, kind behaviors even in the absence of witnessing suffering.

Social Emotional Learning and Positive Psychology. SEL is “the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors” (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004, p. 4). SEL aligns with recent research and theory from the positive psychology movement, which focuses on the processes and mechanisms that build students’ social-emotional competence (Seligman et al, 2009). Unlike deficit models that emphasize what is missing or in need of fixing, positive psychology builds on individuals’ existing and emerging strengths (Clonan et al, 2004; Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology changes the focus from a deficit perspective – in other words, what is wrong or not working – to a strengths-based perspective, one in which “resilience is seen as a natural capacity all youth have for healthy development and learning” (Bernard & Slade, 2009, p. 353). Bringing students’

talents, competence and abilities to the forefront by focusing on their strengths aligns with efforts in positive psychology that emphasize positive well-being, including optimism, happiness, and kindness.

School Culture and School Climate. School culture and school climate both offer perspectives on the conditions underlying and supporting both student development and achievement (Thapa et al, 2012). They describe school conditions that contribute to the quality of relationships within the school, and are a reflection of the beliefs about how teaching and learning are supported within the school context. *School culture* is the product of the prevalent norms, beliefs, and practices found within a school, or “the way things are done around here” (Hemmelgarn et al, 2006). Schools operate according to norms, values, and expectations that are deeply rooted in tradition and history, and are maintained both explicitly (e.g., what might be funded or given priority) and implicitly (social status afforded to one group over another). *School climate*, while closely linked to school culture, reflects perceptions of the environment (Thapa et al., 2012) that affect the psychological well-being of school members. Thapa and colleagues (2013) identified five dimensions of school climate that include (1) safety, (2) relationships, (3) teaching and learning, (3) institutional environment, and (5) school improvement.

Morale is seen as the energy, enthusiasm, team spirit and pride that teachers experience in their school (Hart, 1994). Morale has been thought of variously as a feeling, a state of mind, a mental attitude, and an emotional attitude (Mendel, 1987). One source defines morale as the feeling a worker has about his job based on how the worker

perceives himself in the organization and the extent to which the organization is viewed as meeting the worker's own needs and expectations (Washington & Watson, 1976).

When a healthy school environment exists and educator morale is high, educators feel good about each other and simultaneously feel a sense of accomplishment from their work (Hoy & Miskel 1987).

The Secret Kindness Agents Project is defined by the following tenets: (1)

Students and educators together decide on random acts of kindness that can be performed within the community whose culture they are trying to improve, (2) students and educators perform these acts of kindness routinely and anonymously, (3) students and educators routinely and consistently reflect either orally or in written form about their experiences in completing their kindness assignments, and (4) optionally, students and educators choose Secret Kindness Agent names for themselves or each other in order to maintain anonymity (Pearson, 2014; Secret Kindness Agents, 2017).

Research Study Background

On December 12, 2014, six-year-old Avielle Richman was murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School along with 19 other kindergarteners. Avielle's death hit me hard because she reminded me of my own daughter—the same age and curious eyes, loving nature, kind heart, and friendly spirit. Over the past 16 years, I have taught thousands of students and I will admit, there are a small few of whom I have found myself truly afraid. They would put their hands in their backpacks and I would think, “This is it. Today we die.” Luckily, that never happened, but I realized that while I had

grown used to feeling afraid for myself and my students, other teachers' students and other teachers, I was not used to the thought that next time it could be *my* children.

Like many mothers, I had a difficult conversation with my own children after Sandy Hook who asked why someone would murder kindergarteners. Like any other teacher without a good answer, I turned the question back. My nine-year-old son said that whenever he was bullied in school, he would get angry and feel like lashing out, but then someone would be kind to him, and the feeling would go away enough that he didn't feel like lashing out anymore.

My daughter then asked, "What if people had always been kind to the shooter every single day? Maybe he wouldn't have done it." Naïve as it may have been, when I returned to school, my daughter's comment led me to devise a plan to change the culture of the school where I was teaching into a more compassionate one; I could not change what happened in Sandy Hook, and I have no control over what happens in Syria or elsewhere in the world, but perhaps I could prevent violence from happening in my context. My idea was that I would give envelopes to my high school juniors assigning them to specific acts of kindness in exchange for a prize. At my students' suggestion we agreed that we ALL had to draw an assignment every week, including me, and the students emphasized that in order for it to be true kindness, it had to be done without expectation of thanks or rewards. We brainstormed a list of random acts of kindness that could happen at school and that didn't cost any money. My students acknowledged the risk it took to perform these random acts—they didn't want to stick out from their

peers—so we gave each other secret Agent names and kept the acts anonymous. We became Mama Beast and the Secret Kindness Agents.

Every week, we had a ceremony where I would play some cheesy song while each Agent came up to draw an assignment. We wrote an oath, acknowledged the risks we were taking, and at the end of the week we would reflect on what happened, how we felt before, and how we felt after we had completed our assignments. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that not only did I see the culture of our school change into a more positive and compassionate one, but I also saw the change within my students. Teens who I knew had considered suicide more than once held their heads higher and grew excited at how they could make another person feel good. They grew in self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.

When I came across the Cherokee fable, *A Tale of Two Wolves* (Native American Legends), I brought it to class. I asked my students if they had ever been bullied and every hand in the room went up. I then asked if anyone had been the bully and again, every hand went up, perhaps a little less eagerly. We realized that the concept of there being “good” or “bad” people in the world is a myth.

As the grandfather says in the myth, both wolves dwell within us. Through the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*, our good wolves were gaining on our evil wolves; our kind acts were the food for not only our good wolves, but also for the good wolves of the recipients of our kindness. With time now spent acknowledging the bad wolf and feeding the good wolves, I found that when a student reached into their bag, rather than a gun, I

expected a poem, a card, or some other some random act of kindness. My students no longer thought about people - or even themselves - as either good or bad; they recognized the complexities of what it means to be a human being, and that we are all capable of and responsible for which wolves we feed in ourselves and in others.

The project concluded in May of 2013 because I was leaving the school. However, the students wanted to keep the project going, so we started a Facebook page on which we could continue to post assignments, quotes about kindness, stories that highlighted kind acts around the world, and celebrations about what we were continuing to do. Together with the students, I also wrote a book entitled *Secret kindness agents: How small acts of kindness really can change the world* (Pearson, 2014) as a sort of “how to do what we did” project, and in the fall of 2014 I gave a TEDx Talk about what we had done (Pearson, 2014). As a result of these three resources, I have been asked to speak with thousands of students, hundreds of teachers, in person and via online software, throughout the United States and even in Canada, about how to implement the project.

Almost every week, I hear of more educators who have implemented the project in a different part of the continent. According to my personal records, the project exists in over 150 classrooms, from first grade through university, as far south as California and as far north as Canada. Each teacher tweaks the project to suit their own contexts and students, but the core of their projects remains the same as when my students and I originally did it; they are all spreading acts of kindness secretly, and with no expectation of a reward or gesture of appreciation. The hallmark tenets of *Secret Kindness Agents*

Project are the following characteristics: (1) Students and educators together decide on random acts of kindness that can be performed within the community whose culture they are trying to improve, (2) students and educators perform these acts of kindness routinely and anonymously, (3) students and educators consistently reflect either orally or in written form about their experiences in completing their kindness assignments, and (4) optionally, students and educators choose Secret Kindness Agent names for themselves or each other in order to maintain anonymity (Pearson, 2014; Secret Kindness Agents, 2017).

Study Motivation

With more and more educators adopting the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*, I began to wonder whether the educators perceived the same positive impacts in themselves, their students, and their contexts as I did when we first implemented it. I had informal, anecdotal stories about how the educators felt about the project and how it affected the people and the environment around them. One of the most powerful stories was from a fellow classmate in the Educational Leadership program who told me about how she implemented the project with a handful of her students who struggled with behavior issues at a local elementary school. She had a third grader who was angry all the time, and who lashed out verbally and physically often. This young student's mother was dying of cancer, and the student was angry and felt like she had no control over what was happening at home, so she sought control at school in negative ways. My classmate told her about *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*, and the young student became Agent G-

Baby Believe. My classmate recounted to me how, when the student began acting out, she would call her by her Agent name, and her demeanor would completely change right away; she was calling on her kind self, letting her know that she still saw the good in her, even when she was making bad decisions. I saw the same changes in some of my Original Secret Kindness Agents, and so I was motivated to see if these and other changes were common in the other students who had become Agents as well.

While my motivation to do the project was to create positive changes in my students and my context, I also noticed a change in myself while doing this project, which was a surprise to me; I became more aware of kindness around me and began to give more people the benefit of the doubt, including my students. I found myself intentionally performing more acts of kindness. My morale as a teacher increased exponentially, and I felt more hopeful about the future as a teacher, mother, and even as a member of the school and community.

Finally, I perceived positive impacts on my professional context, as well as in the adults who were a part of it. The adults, like me, seemed to become more kind, aware, and compassionate, even when it came to dealing with the most difficult students in the class. The culture of the classroom became that of a family, of belonging, of love and acceptance, and it truly became a place to which every one of us, adults and students alike, looked forward to going.

This study sought to explore whether the same or similar impacts on students, self, and context were observed by other educators who have implemented the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*.

Conceptual Map

Recent research suggests that school-based kindness education programs may benefit the learning and social-emotional development of youth and may improve school climate and school safety outcomes. However, it is difficult to assess how and to what extent kindness education programming influences positive outcomes in schools in the absence of a conceptual model for studying their effectiveness (Kaplan et. al. 2016). In partnership with *Kind Campus*, a widely adopted school-based kindness education program that uses a bottom-up program framework, researchers Deanna Kaplan, Madaleine deBlois, Violeta Dominguez, and Michele Walsh at the University of Arizona used “Concept Mapping” as their methodology to develop a conceptual model for evaluating school-based kindness education programs. Their model used the input of 123 middle school students and approximately 150 educators, school professionals, and academic scholars (Kaplan et. al., 2016).

This Concept Mapping model proposes that kindness education programs yield both student-level and school-level impacts in large part through making the idea of kindness prominent. This suggests that effective kindness education programs would offer a common language for school students and staff alike to talk about kindness and its positive impacts. It also provides a framework that encourages members of the school

community to acknowledge acts of kindness happening around them and to practice kindness towards themselves and others. The researchers write that these actions would lead to a more positive school climate for students and a positive work environment for adults, while also supporting the development of students' social-emotional skills. In addition, they assert that the effects of improved school climate and student social-emotional skills may positively impact school operations such as achievement, disciplinary, and health outcomes, as well as positively impact students' families and the local community.

As there are many variables that affect school's ecology at different levels - individual students, educators, the classroom, the school overall, the families, and the surrounding community - the effects and impacts school improvement programs can be incredibly complex, and this includes kindness education. Each of these variables interact and influence one another all the time, so the Conceptual Map developed by Kaplan et. al. is an effective way to understand the impact of kindness education programs such as the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*.

The model first looks at school climate, including the work environment as perceived by adults on school campus, and students' social-emotional skills as related to social-emotional knowledge and student dispositions. Second, the model suggests two additional outcomes of kindness educational programming that would be useful to evaluate in more longitudinal designs: improvements in school operational outcomes, and impacts on school families and the surrounding community. Third, the model looks at

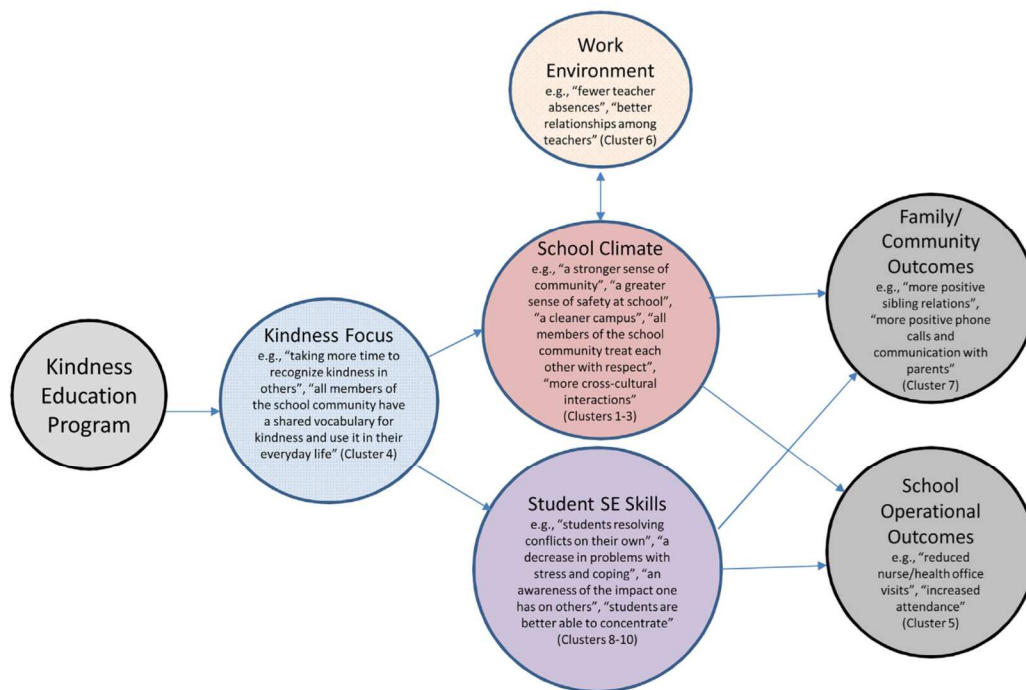
“Kindness Focus” (originally named “Intentionality and Awareness” by their participants), which emerged in the conceptual model as unique and distinctive from the more established domains of school climate and social-emotional skills. This cluster looks at the appearance of an increased focus on kindness throughout the school community and an increased awareness of the nuances of kindness and its positive impacts. The researchers believe that this is a likely mechanism through which kindness education programs create change in schools, and report that participants rated the statements in the “Kindness Focus” cluster as the most feasible results of kindness education programs. Therefore, they assert that measuring change in this area seems crucial for assessing the extent and success of program implementation and whether such programming adds something above and beyond programming that directly influences school climate and student social-emotional skills. Finally, the “Family/Community Outcomes” cluster reinforced the value of thinking about schools as a vital component of their greater community. Integrated strategies that improve physical and social environments within schools and neighborhoods have been found to promote optimal child health and well-being, especially among children living in high-poverty neighborhoods (Komro, Flay, Biglan, & Promise Neighborhoods Research Consortium, 2011). In addition, community involvement and family support also positively impact students’ academic performance, and children who struggle academically experience particular gains from family and community engagement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Therefore, Kaplan et. al. suggest that kindness education program developers consider

how school-based programming could be designed with integrative strategies in mind, and that researchers include family and community outcomes that are relevant to the program, for example a kindness focus at home and family engagement in the school.

This study will study the perceptions of educators who implemented *The Secret Kindness Agents Project* as it relates to this Conceptual Map (Kaplan et. al., 2016) as depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Kindness Education Program Conceptual Map: Processes and outcomes of kindness education programming.



Significance of the Study

A survey of the literature reveals a relationship between teaching kindness and the benefits of Positive Psychology and Social Emotional Learning (SEL); namely, an increase in wellbeing and happiness, quality of friendships, and academic performance for students (Caprara, et al, 2000; Durlak et al, 2011; Schonert-Reichl & Weissberg, 2014; Wang et al, 1997). While the literature focuses on elementary schools, there is very little evidence of kindness being explicitly taught at the middle or high school levels, and there is also a lack of literature studying the experiences of educators who teach kindness.

In a preliminary study about the mindfulness-based preschool Kindness Curriculum, researchers found that the program had positive effects on social competence, social-emotional development, cognitive flexibility and delay of gratification (Flook et al., 2015). However, beyond this study, there is a lack of research focused on school-based kindness education programs, and there has been no systematic evaluation of other existing programs. There is also a lack of research focusing on kindness interventions in youth outside the context of educational institutions, even though literature suggests that compassion and mindfulness training in adolescence may promote prosocial behavior, empathy, perspective-taking, compassionate evaluations of self and other, and enhance self-regulation and emotional awareness (Roeser & Pinela, 2014). In addition, research on a gratitude intervention for youth found that gratitude practice had positive immediate and longer-term effects, and was related to optimism, well-being, life satisfaction, and school experience satisfaction (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). Research on a recent Positive Psychology Intervention that was designed for

middle school students, which included gratitude and kindness as part of the intervention, also found that the curriculum significantly increased life satisfaction among the middle schoolers (Suldo, Savage, & Mercer, 2014).

Equally crucial to examining the effects of kindness programming on school-age children is studying the effects of such programming on the educators who implement kindness education programs. Teaching is an incredibly high-stress profession (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Studies have found that when adults perform intentional acts of kindness and recognize kindness in others, there is an increase in positive mental health outcomes, including reducing depressive symptoms and increasing subjective happiness and life satisfaction (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006; Post, 2005). The benefits of practices that encourage the development of compassion include decreased stress response and negative affect, increased positive affect, feelings of social connectedness, and increases in personal resources such as physical health, sense of purpose in life, self-acceptance, mindfulness, and positive relations with others (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011; Pace et al., 2011).

This review of the literature reveals that kindness education appears to be an under-evaluated, yet beneficial area of school programming as the limited existing research suggests that kindness education programs may improve student and adult social-emotional skills and the overall social environment of schools, thereby having positive impacts on students' and educators' wellbeing, achievement, and success. This

study addresses the gaps in the literature with regard to middle and high school educators and students engaged in the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* by exploring the perceptions of K-16 educators who have implemented the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*. The study seeks to discover whether the experiences of their students who engaged in the Project mirror those of the researcher and in the literature, is an inquiry into whether the project created any change within the educators themselves, and seeks to uncover any change in the environmental contexts the educators attribute to the implementation of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore education professionals' perceptions of changes in contexts, students' experiences, and educators' experiences as a result of implementing the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*.

Research Questions

The overarching research question that guided this research study is: What are education professionals' perceptions of changes in contexts, students' experiences, and educators' experiences as a result of implementing *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*?

Assumptions

1. Ontological: The researcher embraces the idea that there are multiple realities and reported on those realities by exploring multiple forms of evidence from different individuals' perspectives and experiences.
2. Epistemological: The evidence gathered is subjective based on different individuals'

views.

3. Axiological: The researcher's values and experiences may have added bias to the data the researcher gathered.

4. Methodological: The methods the researcher used in the process of research were inductive, emerging, and shaped by my own experiences in collecting and analyzing the data (Creswell, 2007).

Limitations

Since this is a qualitative, phenomenological study, it may not lend itself to replicability or generalizability. Collection of the research was limited to educators willing to participate in the questionnaire. In addition, qualitative data may be subject to a variety of interpretations by the readers, including the researcher, which may lead to bias in interpretation of the data. Finally, participants may have misinterpreted items on the questionnaire and not all participants may be articulate or perceptive.

Delimitations

The study was delimited only to educators who have communicated to the researcher that they have implemented *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*, whose email addresses are available to the researcher, and from that pool, to the educators who responded to the questionnaire.

Outline of the Dissertation

The study is organized into five chapters. This first chapter begins with an introduction of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* and is followed by both the

background of the problem and the statement of the problem. It then outlines the purpose of the study; the research questions; the significance of the study; the operational definitions of terms; the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study, and finally a brief conclusion.

The second chapter is a review of the literature. It introduces the literature review and describes the search for literature. It then covers the Conceptual Map, and finally reviews research, which is organized by theme.

The third chapter is about the methodology of the study. After a brief introduction, it describes the research design, the research questions, the setting, the participants, the data collection, the data analysis, and then a conclusion.

The fourth chapter describes the key research findings, which organizes the data by theme, and then synthesizes the data according to the research questions, the literature review, and the Conceptual Map.

The fifth and final chapter is a summary of the findings, the conclusions that were drawn organized by the research questions, a discussion of the study, and finally, suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction: Experiences of Students, Schools, and Educators

There appears to be a paradigm shift that is narrowing the purpose of public education in the United States toward a business-like model that primarily functions on preparing students for the workforce, while ignoring the education of the whole child (Mehta, 2013). When this happens, educators miss the opportunity to ensure our students are reflective, productive, responsible, and healthy citizens who are able to be in relationship with people from all backgrounds. This is not a modern phenomenon; progressive educators have worked to expand democratic education beyond the idea of “efficiency” for over a century in the United States. But if democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded all. The separation of the two aims in education is fatal to democracy; the adoption of the narrower meaning of efficiency deprives it of its essential justification. (Dewey, 1916, p. 281)

The corporate-driven creation and adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), have been described as “technical specifications being confused with, but applied to, human learning capabilities” (Tienken & Orlich, 2013, p.44). The CCSS place a high value on the development of workplace skills and so they serve as a powerful bridge between the technocratic logic of policymakers and actual classroom practice

(Mehta, 2013). This misguided intersection of paradigm, policy, and practice creates a disturbing scenario in which:

Our children have become akin to new products some “edu-corporation wants to research and develop before bringing to market. Not surprisingly, the product reflects exactly what big business values in its workers – emphasis on analysis, argument, and specialization – at the potential expense of beauty, empathy, personal reflection, and humanity.” (Endacott & Goering, 2014, p. 90)

It is crucial to ensure that the purpose of education in our schools is broad and inclusive so that our students are not just productive workers, but also kind, empathetic, socially and emotionally intelligent human beings. While there is this paradigm of students as products for corporations, there is also a movement within the teaching world to fight for keeping character education in our schools, for preventing the burgeoning crisis of bullying and school violence through Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and for understanding the link between kindness and overall academic and social achievement in children and youth. This study looks at whether implementation of *The Secret Kindness Agents Project* had meaningful impacts on students, educators, and their contexts through the lens of the Conceptual Map developed by researchers Deanna Kaplan, Madaleine deBlois, Violeta Dominguez, and Michele Walsh at the University of Arizona (2016).

Conceptual Map

While recent research suggests that school-based kindness education programs may benefit the learning and social-emotional development of youth and may improve school climate and school safety outcomes, it is difficult to assess how and to what extent kindness education programming influences positive outcomes in schools in the absence of a conceptual model for studying their effectiveness. In partnership with Kind Campus, a widely adopted school-based kindness education program that uses a bottom-up program framework, researchers Deanna Kaplan, Madaleine deBlois, Violeta Dominguez, and Michele Walsh at the University of Arizona used Concept Mapping as their methodology to develop a conceptual model for evaluating school-based kindness education programs. Their model used the input of 123 middle school students and approximately 150 educators, school professionals, and academic scholars (Kaplan et. al., 2016).

This model proposes that kindness education programs yield both student-level and school-level impacts in large part through making the idea of kindness prominent, which suggests that effective kindness education programs would offer a common language for school students and staff alike to talk about kindness and its positive impacts, as well as provide a framework that encourages members of the school community to acknowledge acts of kindness happening around them and to practice kindness towards themselves and others. The researchers write that this would lead to a more positive school climate for students and a positive work environment for adults, while also supporting the development of students' social-emotional skills. In addition,

they assert that the effects of improved school climate and student social-emotional skills may positively impact school operations such as achievement, disciplinary, and health outcomes, as well as positively impact students' families and the local community.

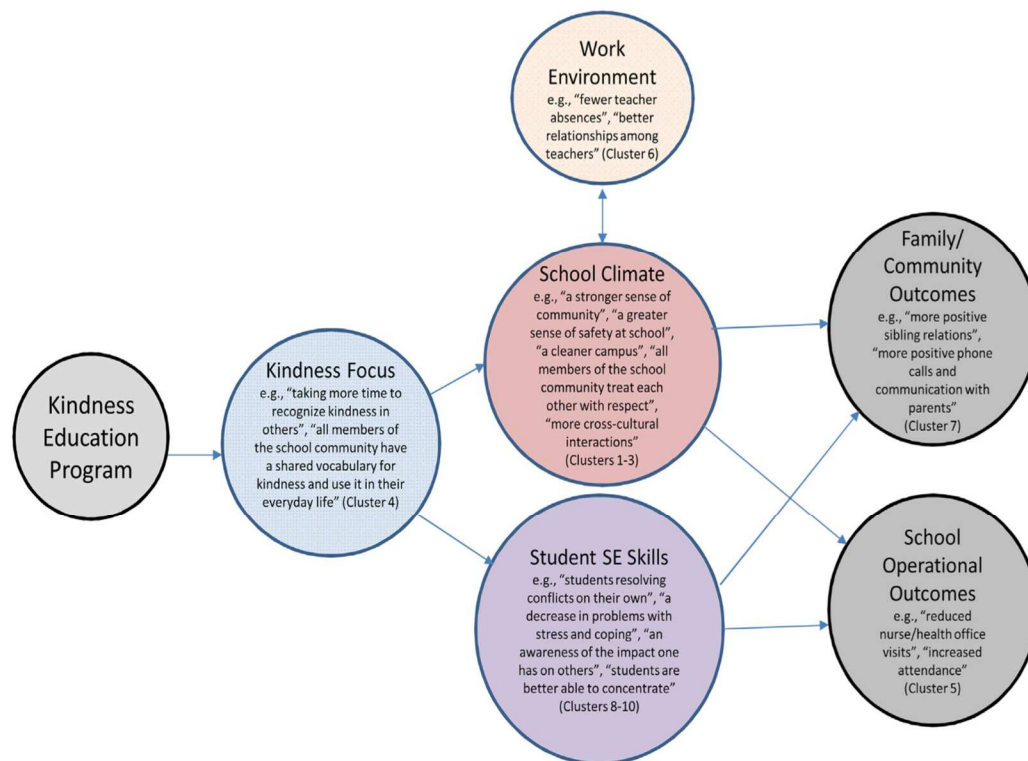
As there are many variables that affect school's ecology at different levels - individual students, educators, the classroom, the school overall, the families, and the surrounding community - the effects and impacts school improvement programs can be incredibly complex, and this includes kindness education. Each of these variables interact and influence one another all the time, so the Conceptual Map developed by Kaplan et. al. is an effective way to understand the impact of kindness education programs such as the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*.

The model first looks at school climate, including the work environment as perceived by adults on school campus, and students' social-emotional skills as related to social-emotional knowledge and student dispositions. Second, the model suggests two additional outcomes of kindness educational programming that would be useful to evaluate in more longitudinal designs: improvements in school operational outcomes, and impacts on school families and the surrounding community. Third, the model looks at "Kindness Focus" (originally named "Intentionality and Awareness" by their participants), which emerged in the conceptual model as unique and distinctive from the more established domains of school climate and social-emotional skills. This cluster looks at the appearance of an increased focus on kindness throughout the school community and an increased awareness of the nuances of kindness and its positive

impacts. The researchers believe that this is a likely mechanism through which kindness education programs create change in schools, and report that participants rated the statements in the “Kindness Focus” cluster as the most feasible results of kindness education programs. Therefore, they assert that measuring change in this area seems crucial for assessing the extent and success of program implementation and whether such programming adds something above and beyond programming that directly influences school climate and student social-emotional skills. Finally, the “Family/Community Outcomes” cluster reinforced the value of thinking about schools as a vital component of their greater community. Integrated strategies that improve physical and social environments within schools and neighborhoods have been found to promote optimal child health and well-being, especially among children living in high-poverty neighborhoods (Komro, Flay, Biglan, & Promise Neighborhoods Research Consortium, 2011). In addition, community involvement and family support also positively impact students’ academic performance, and children who struggle academically experience particular gains from family and community engagement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Therefore, the Kaplan et. al. suggest that kindness education program developers consider who school-based programming could be designed with integrative strategies in mind, and that researchers include family and community outcomes that are relevant to the program, for example a kindness focus at home and family engagement in the school. The Conceptual Map developed by Kaplan et. al. (2016) can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Kindness Education Program Conceptual Map: Processes and outcomes of kindness education programming.



The modules in this Conceptual Map were useful for identifying the types of literature to explore for the purpose of this study. These are explored in depth during the rest of this chapter, and serve as a framework for the organization and analysis of the data in the subsequent chapters.

Kindness and Empathy

Compassion is defined as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon- Thomas, 2010, p. 352). Therefore, although compassion is a related construct, compassion-based

interventions may be different from kindness-based interventions, which usually aim to increase prosocial, kind behaviors even in the absence of witnessing suffering. Being kind requires putting beliefs and values into action, and in addition to kindness being recognized as a value in most cultures and religions around the globe, it is also an observable behavior that teachers can model, see, promote, and reinforce; they just need a reminder to intentionally and explicitly teach what kindness looks like, sounds like, and feels like to both the giver and receiver of it. Eisenberg (1986) defined kindness as “voluntary, intentional behaviors that benefit another and are not motivated by external factors such as rewards or punishments” (p. 63). Others see kindness more simply as “doing favors and good deeds for others” (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 412). Kindness appears throughout philosophy, religion, and literature as a value that has historically been important to human beings across the globe.

Aristotle defines kindness as being “helpfulness toward someone in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of the helper himself, but for that of the person helped” (Book II - chapter 7: “Aristotle’s rhetoric,” n.d.). Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that kindness and love are the “most curative herbs and agents in human intercourse” (Nietzsche, Hollingdale, & Schacht, 1996). In the Bible, kindness is considered to be one of the seven virtues, specifically, the one of the Seven Contrary Virtues (direct opposites of the seven deadly sins) that is the direct opposite to envy. It is also listed as one of the Christian Fruits of the Spirit by Paul of Tarsus in his Letter to Galatians 5:22, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Society & NIV, 1999). The Fourteenth Dalai Lama wrote a book entitled *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight* and wrote that his religion is kindness (Lama, Gyatso, Hopkins, XIV, & Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, 2002). There are two hundred verses about compassionate living in the Muslim holy book, the Quran (Pickthall, English, & Urdu, 1986). *Chesed* is a Hebrew word that is commonly translated as “loving-kindness,” “kindness,” or “love” and is central to Jewish ethics and Jewish theology (Orlinsky, Sarna, & Society, 1992). Kindness appears in every theology across the globe and also in literature across the centuries. It has been suggested that most of Shakespeare’s work could be considered a study of human kindness (Lenker, 2001). The *Tirukkural*, an ancient Indian work on ethics and morality, dedicates an entire chapter on kindness (Translated from Tamil by P.S. Sundaram Valluvar, 1990). It follows that since kindness has existed as a central philosophy and virtue in human consciousness from the beginning of the written word in most of our documented societies, civilizations, and faiths, that it would be important to teachers, parents, and students as well. Maurice Elias, Professor at Rutgers University Psychology Department says:

As a citizen, grandparent, father, and professional, it is clear to me that the mission of schools must include teaching kindness. Without it, communities, families, schools, and classrooms become places of incivility where lasting learning is unlikely to take place...[W]e need to be prepared to teach kindness, because it can be delayed due to maltreatment

early in life. It can be smothered under the weight of poverty, and it can be derailed by victimization later in life...Kindness can be taught, and it is a defining aspect of civilized human life. It belongs in every home, school, neighborhood, and society. (Elias 2012)

Religion, philosophy, and literature make it clear that there are benefits of kindness for those who are the recipients of acts of kindness, however, there are also recent studies that show the multiple benefits to students who are being kind.

Two Penn State Harrisburg faculty researchers argue that adolescent bullying and youth violence can be confronted in America through in-school programs that integrate “kindness – the antithesis of victimization.” They note that national and local legislation and intense awareness efforts have sought to stem bullying, and they point to recent research that suggests a broader perspective is needed to reverse a loss of empathy in society. Their solution is based on reading, discussing, and acting upon the attributes of kindness, which “enables us to be our best selves” (Clark & Marinak, 2010). Berkeley researchers Pinger and Flook argue that the school environment can be very stressful; in addition to any issues they bring from home, many students struggle to make friends and perform well in class. Being excluded, ignored, or teased is very painful for a young child, and it could be impactful to teach kindness, empathy, and compassion, for example, when other children are suffering, can students understand how they might be feeling. Kindness bridges those gaps and helps build a sense of connection among the students, the teachers, and even the parents. Learning to strengthen their attention and

regulate their emotions are foundational skills that could benefit kids in school and throughout their whole lives. In addition, having classrooms full of mindful, kind kids completely changes the school environment. “Teaching kindness is a way to bubble up widespread transformation that doesn’t require big policy changes or extensive administrative involvement” (Pinger & Flook, 2016).

When we think about teaching kindness to children and youth, we must be explicit in defining kindness together with the students. In *The Secret Kindness Agents* project, the students were given a directive to list three acts of kindness each that did not cost any money and that could be done within the school grounds. The students had no problems coming up with their acts of kindness, which suggests that young people already know what kindness is with a little prompting, and writing it down brings it to the forefront of their consciousness. In a Canadian study that investigated perceptions of kindness in 112 young children (ages 5-8) in three schools, students were asked to draw what kindness looked like to them and to draw an example of something kind they had seen done recently at schools. The findings from the prevalent themes in the drawings indicated that students perceived kindness within the context of dyadic relationships, the recipients of kindness were familiar to them, and kind acts were typically found outside; helping physically, maintaining friendships, including people who were left out, and helping emotionally (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). While these students were much younger than the high school students in *The Secret Kindness Project*, it is apparent that no matter what age, kindness is recognizable to all students.

In his article, “Can Kindness Be Taught?” Ron Schachter argues that while children’s home environments have a huge impact on the kind of people they become, their educational environments do, too. He notes that many schools are beginning to realize that it is worth it to spend time on “soft” skills, such as empathy, and that even when educators are not thinking about the tragic consequences of bullying, they know that a classroom full of students who can relate to and understand one another can make a big difference, academically. He maintains that the teaching of trust and empathy takes time, patience, modeling, and practice, and he shares how several teachers are making use of outside programs focused on positive interpersonal behaviors, as well as their own resources and creativity, to help students cultivate kindness. As a result, Schachter strongly asserts that kindness can and must be taught (2011).

Unlike the teachers in Schachter’s article, there are others who argue that teaching kindness should not rely on outside agencies, but should be an integral part of the school’s curriculum taught by the teachers in the building. In “Teaching Kids to be Kind,” Adi Bloom (2013) discusses the increasing interest in teaching children about compassion, empathy, and kindness as a part of the curriculum, without connecting it to rewards. Bloom cites Marvin Berkowitz, professor of character education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, who says that empathy starts developing early, and that the precursors of empathy can be observed in babies, however, Bloom notes that some children simply do not have the skills to display this empathy as no one has taught them to do simple acts of kindness, such as saying “thank you” or holding a door open for

another person. This underscores the need for schools to undertake the teaching of kindness as an integral part of modern education.

Developing a habit of being kind increases children's feelings of well-being, happiness, reduce bullying, and improve friendships with increased popularity and acceptance among peers by teaching them to be givers of kindness. Happier children are also more likely to have higher academic achievement (Price-Mitchell, 2013).

Internationally-renowned author and speaker Dr. Wayne Dyer explains that an act of kindness increases levels of serotonin, a natural chemical responsible for improving mood. This boost in happiness occurs not only in the giver and receiver of kindness, but also in anyone who witnesses it. This makes kindness a natural and powerful antidepressant (2013).

In a longitudinal experiment conducted in 19 classrooms in Vancouver, 9- to 11-year olds were instructed to perform three acts of kindness (versus visit three places) per week over the course of four weeks. Students in both conditions improved in well-being, but students who performed kind acts experienced significantly bigger increases in peer acceptance than students who visited places. Increasing peer acceptance is a critical goal, as it is related to a variety of important academic and social outcomes, including reduced likelihood of being bullied. The researchers recommend that educators build on this study by introducing intentional prosocial activities into classrooms and they also recommend that such activities be performed regularly and purposefully. (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). The *Secret Kindness Agents Project* does just

that, as it explicitly teaches kind behaviors, and purposefully puts kind activities into place regularly and meaningfully (Pearson, 2014).

A study published in the American Journal of Public Health tracked 753 children from 1991 to 2010, from kindergarten to early childhood found that children who showed prosocial or kind behaviors (sharing, helping others, and showing empathy) were more likely to graduate high school on time, complete a college degree, and obtain stable, full-time employment as young adults. They were also less likely to receive public assistance as adults and have a criminal record. The students were not randomly assigned to control and experimental groups, so the relationship is not causal, but the strong correlation suggests that there are long-term benefits to supporting students' social and emotional growth (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). These studies informed the research conducted in this study and support the research question about exploring the effects of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* on the students who were involved in its implementation. The next section, Social Emotional Learning and Character Education is also connected to the impact of kindness education on students.

Social Emotional Learning and Character Education

There is an increasing interest in promoting students' social and emotional learning alongside the traditional academic skills, such as reading, writing, science, and math, that are taught in school. SEL is "the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors" (Zins, et al.,

2004, p.4). While it has been recognized for a long time that SEL programs lead to positive improvements in students' behavior, many are working on identifying the ways in which schools can create the conditions that support students' social and emotional competencies (Caprara, et al., 2000; Schonert-Reichl & Weissberg, 2014; Wang et al., 1997) due to recent findings that demonstrate that SEL not only increases students' social and emotional skills, but also improves their academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011).

SEL aligns with recent research and theory from the positive psychology movement, which focuses on the processes and mechanisms that build students' social-emotional competence (Seligman et al., 2009). Unlike deficit models that emphasize what is missing or in need of fixing, positive psychology builds on individuals' existing and emerging strengths (Clonan et al., 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology changes the focus from a deficit perspective – in other words, what is wrong or not working – to a strengths-based perspective, one in which “resilience is seen as a natural capacity all youth have for healthy development and learning” (Bernard & Slade, 2009, p. 353). Bringing students' talents, competence and abilities to the forefront by focusing on their strengths aligns with efforts in positive psychology that emphasize positive well-being, including optimism, happiness, and kindness. The *Secret Kindness Agents Project* allows for a strengths-based focus on students, and the researcher took this into account during this study as well, with regard to the question of how the impacted those young people. The researcher was also searching for an answer to the part

of the overarching research question of this study, which is an inquiry into the impact of the project on the school culture and climate. This issue is examined next.

School Culture and School Climate

School culture and school climate both offer perspectives on the conditions underlying and supporting both student development and achievement (Thapa et al., 2012). They describe school conditions that contribute to the quality of relationships within the school, and are a reflection of the beliefs about how teaching and learning are supported within the school context.

School culture is the product of the prevalent norms, beliefs, and practices found within a school, or “the way things are done around here” (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006). Schools operate according to norms, values, and expectations that are deeply rooted in tradition and history, and are maintained both explicitly (e.g., what might be funded or given priority) and implicitly (social status afforded to one group over another).

School climate, while closely linked to school culture, reflects perceptions of the environment (Thapa et al., 2012) that affect the psychological well-being of school members. Thapa and colleagues (2013) identify five dimensions of school climate that include (1) safety, (2) relationships, (3) teaching and learning, (3) institutional environment, and (5) school improvement. The researcher experienced a positive change in these areas after implementing the original *Secret Kindness Agents Project*, and therefore, school culture and climate feature in the data analysis of this study with regard to the impact of the project on the contexts in which the project was implemented.

Students are not the only stakeholders who experience the school climate and culture. Educators in that environment do too. Therefore, it is important to explore morale as it relates to kindness education as well.

Morale

Morale is seen as the energy, enthusiasm, team spirit and pride that teachers experience in their school (Hart, 1994). Morale has been thought of variously as a feeling, a state of mind, a mental attitude, and an emotional attitude (Mendel, 1987). One source defines morale as the feeling a worker has about his job based on how the worker perceives himself in the organization and the extent to which the organization is viewed as meeting the worker's own needs and expectations (Washington & Watson, 1976). When a healthy school environment exists and educator morale is high, educators feel good about each other and simultaneously feel a sense of accomplishment from their work (Hoy and Miskel 1987).

Sometimes educator morale drops almost imperceptibly over time, so subtly that teachers may not be fully aware of it happening. However, change cannot happen without awareness. If educators are to raise their morale, they must first recognize that they are feeling discouraged and then take action to become 'courage'd again' (Bolin 1987). This recognition or reassessment, when paired with renewal, can often lead to encouragement. Reassessment involves reexamining something in order to value it again, and renewal means recovery. To become renewed, educators must reopen the case for teaching, looking again at why they chose this vocation (Bolin).

Berman (1987) also emphasizes the need for educators to pay attention to self-care and replenishing of self if they are to be dynamic, sensitive, perceptive professionals who get excited about ideas and people. Educators need to be able to keep the same freshness and spark that most had in their first few years in the field, while simultaneously embedding that freshness in wisdom and thoughtfulness. Berman advises teachers to think about what is uplifting and energizing for them and then work toward integrating those things more fully into their lives. She suggests breaking out of routines and doing the unusual, planning for next steps in professional development, developing a network of individuals to dialogue with, and investing fully in tasks at hand as routes to replenishment. This leads to empowerment, and people who feel empowered tend to have higher morale. As Maehr, Midgley, and Urdan note, people are more personally invested in their work with an organization when they have a voice in what happens to them and also when their work has meaning and significance in contributing to a higher purpose or goal. When educators' sense of self-determination and purpose are supported, they relate to students in a qualitatively different manner (Maehr, Midgley, & Urdan, 1992).

Studies have found that when adults perform intentional acts of kindness and recognize kindness in others, there is an increase in positive mental health outcomes, including reducing depressive symptoms and increasing subjective happiness and life satisfaction (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006; Post, 2005). The benefits of practices that encourage the development of kindness and compassion include decreased stress response and negative affect,

increased positive affect, feelings of social connectedness, and increases in personal resources such as physical health, sense of purpose in life, self-acceptance, mindfulness, and positive relations with others (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011; Pace et al., 2011).

Conclusion

This chapter is a survey of the literature about the themes surrounding kindness education. It introduces the literature, covers the Conceptual Map, and finally reviews research, which is organized by theme. The following chapter is about the methodology of the study. After a brief introduction, it describes the research design, the research questions, the setting, the participants, the data collection, the data analysis, and then a conclusion.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the procedures the researcher used in conducting this study. A phenomenological qualitative approach was chosen because the purpose of the study was to explore, examine, and study the perceptions of educators who had implemented the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*. As each of their experiences and interpretations were unique, the meaning behind these experiences were best extracted from participants utilizing phenomenological qualitative research approaches, as opposed to statistical formulas (Patton, 1990).

Research Design

In qualitative research, the participants are intentionally and purposively selected (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The researcher is interested in the subjects' point-of-view and the identified themes that can be gleaned from within the group. In this sense, qualitative research serves the purpose of shedding light on people's private significant experiences and opinions (Brinkman, 2013).

As opposed to serving to test a hypothesis, qualitative research "is hypothesis-generating" (Flick, 2007). Creswell (2007) has noted ethnographies, grounded theory, phenomenological research, narrative research, and case studies as approaches to qualitative inquiry (p. 14-15). The phenomenological inquiry approach best fit the

purposes and framework of this research study because it is the one that attempts to understand individuals' perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a their situation.

Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological research identifies the essence of human experience about a phenomenon as described by the participants (Creswell, 2009). A phenomenological qualitative research study is designed to explain a phenomenon through human lived experiences (Byrne, 2001). According to Patton (2002), the foundational question posted in phenomenological research is, "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomena for this person or group of people" (p. 104). The tenets of phenomenological research support the belief that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world (Byrne, 2001).

A qualitative researcher uses phenomenology to gain insight into the nature and meaning of everyday experiences. As phenomenology asserts that a particular experience is best told and understood from the perspective of the individual experiencing it, the researcher used the educators' detailed answers on a questionnaire to gain direct insight into what their perceptions were about the impacts of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* during their everyday experiences with it. From the beginning of its time, phenomenological research methods sought essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). Four and a half decades later, phenomenological approach continues to do the same; to explore, study, and examine the everyday lived experience of human beings.

While the individual experience is extremely important, phenomenological researchers also look at the shared experiences of the individuals who have the phenomenon in common. “Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon...” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). This is where the “phenomena” is captured. Patton (2002) also describes the importance of the “shared experience” that emerges as a result of analyzing the multiple experiences that comprise a phenomenon (p. 106). This methodology, therefore, allows the researcher to understand the shared experiences of the individual educators who experienced the phenomenon of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*, as the “essence” of their experiences can only be captured by examining their shared interpretations in their own words (Patton, 2002, p. 106).

Participants

Purposeful sampling is the process of selecting participants that are likely to be “information rich” in terms of the purpose of the study (Gall et al., 2007) therefore, the researcher used this sampling method to gather data from particular participants. In accordance with purposeful sampling, the researcher predetermined the criterion for inclusion before drawing the sample with the intent of achieving a thorough and in-depth understanding of those individuals who are selected for participation (Gall et al., 2007). In addition, Patton (1990) asserts that qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples in an effort to maximize the issues of central importance to the

purpose of the research. He goes even further to emphasize, “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry.” (Patton, 1990, p. 244).

For the purpose of this research study, the researcher emailed fifty educators to ask them to participate in the data collection questionnaire. Participants were recruited through an introductory email (see Appendix A). The email briefly explained the study’s purpose, assured confidentiality, and asked for participants to complete the questionnaire, whose link was included in the email. Twenty-three educators chose to consent to take part in the study by completing the questionnaire.

The sampling was also homogenous, in addition to being purposeful; homogenous purposeful sampling entails intentionally selecting participants that are the same or similar in nature and uniform throughout (Patton, 1990). Homogenous purposeful sampling is used when conducting a study on a specific phenomenon to gain an understanding of the collective (Patton, 1990). This study purposefully sampled participants who were (1) educators (2) had indicated to the researcher that they had implemented the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*, and (3) had provided their emails to the researcher at some point. All participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Confidentiality

The researcher ensured participants’ confidentiality by asking them to use their Secret Kindness Agent names in lieu of their own names, as well as by not asking for the names of the specific contexts in which they teach. Further, the researcher then assigned each Agent a letter of the alphabet as their new Agent name for the purposes of this study

in order to further ensure their anonymity. The researcher also asked that participants use Secret Kindness Agent names for their students instead of their real names in order to protect students' confidentiality.

Researcher's Context and Perspective

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that when conducting qualitative research, personal bias is a factor that should be acknowledged and addressed so that readers can reach their own conclusions regarding the research and how it is related to the author's background and motivation. Like the participants, the researcher is an educator who had implemented the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*. In addition, the researcher is the creator and originator of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* and thus is uniquely qualified to conduct this study as the only person who understands the intricacies of the project as well as the only person who has a database of educators who are participating in it.

Research Question

The overarching research question that guided this research study is: What are education professionals' perceptions of changes in contexts, students' experiences, and educators' experiences as a result of implementing *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*?

The qualitative, phenomenological methodology of this study will aid the researcher in finding deep, rich descriptions from participants that will answer the research question.

Profile of Data Collection and Analysis

Data

The data consisted of detailed answers to a questionnaire from twenty-three educators.

Instrument and Collection

First, a questionnaire was created on Qualtrics© software owned by the University. This questionnaire was then distributed via email to all educators who have implemented the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* according to the researcher's records.

Analysis

The researcher began the process of data analysis with the extraction of data from the questionnaire, after which the data was analyzed, coded, and summarized (Packer, 2011). This process broke the data into meaningful pieces in order to simplify the analysis. There are three main approaches to qualitative data analysis: literal, interpretive, and reflexive (Mason, 2012). The "literal" approach to analysis concentrates on the exact use of particular language and words. "Interpretive" analysis is more focused on making sense of the participant's actual perceptions, based on their own words. Finally, "reflexive" analysis takes into account the researcher's own synthesis of both the perceptions and the words used in the interviews. For the purpose of this study, the researcher used all three of these approaches.

In accordance with the overall phenomenological qualitative research design, the researcher followed an interpretive phenomenological analysis process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). During the first part of this process, the researcher read the data from Qualtrics© numerous times, as the responses were coming in as well as after collection

was complete. In qualitative research and for the purpose of this study, the need to begin the recording and tracking of analytical insights during data collection is due to the emergent nature of phenomenological qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Therefore, data analysis occurred simultaneously with other parts of developing this study; the data collection and the write-up of the findings. As participants continued to respond to the questionnaire, the researcher analyzed their responses, writing notes about what could be included as a narrative in the final report, and organizing the final report. The researcher then copied and pasted the data in sections into a Word Cloud generator for the “literal” approach to the words the educators used. The data that emerged in the Word Cloud was used to “winnow” and aggregate it into a few themes (Creswell, 2009). As this was a phenomenological research study, the researcher analyzed significant statements, generated meaning units, and developed an essence description in both an “interpretive” and “reflexive” analysis process (Creswell, 2009; Mason, 2012). Using Tesch’s Eight Steps in the Coding Process (Tesch, 1990), the researcher was able to form codes from the data. These codes were then organized into a small number of themes or categories, which led to the organization of the findings. The final step in the data analysis was making an interpretation of the findings.

Pseudonyms by way of Secret Kindness Agent names were used by each participant, and the researcher then assigned each of the Agents a letter of the alphabet as their new Agent name in order to further protect their individual identities and maintain confidentiality.

Strength of Claims Made

Validity of the study

Even though this is a qualitative study, as opposed to quantitative, validity is still important to make certain that the data gathered answers the research question. In order to ensure validity, the two different data sources (the questionnaire and the researcher's own experiences with the project) were triangulated by examining the evidence from those sources in order to justify the themes which emerged during data analysis.

Establishing the themes based on two converging sources of data added to the validity of the study.

The researcher used rich, thick descriptions to convey the findings in order to provide many perspectives about the themes, and to make the results realistic and vivid. In order to clarify the bias brought to the study, the researcher underwent honest self-reflection as a narrative. This involved commenting on how interpretations were shaped by the researcher's own background and identity. Additional steps that were taken to ensure validity of the study were to look for any contradictory or discrepant information that came up during data analysis of the multiple perspectives of the participants, asking a peer debriefer to review and ask questions about the study, and finding an external reader who was unfamiliar with the project so that they could provide an objective assessment of the study.

Reliability of the study:

Reliability is crucial to a qualitative study so that the researcher can provide consistency in the data analysis and interpretation. In order to ensure reliability, the researcher checked transcripts thoroughly for any obvious errors, and constantly compared the data with the codes and wrote memos about the codes and their definitions in order to ensure that there was no drift in the definition of the codes, or a shift in the meaning of the codes during the coding process. Finally, another researcher was found who was willing to cross-check the researcher's codes for inter-coder agreement as there needs to be at least 80% consistency in the coding to be considered good qualitative reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Conclusion

This chapter describes the research design, the research questions, the setting, the participants, the data collection, the data analysis, in order to set the stage for the results of the data analysis, which is covered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

The major findings from the data that are presented in this chapter were guided by the overarching research question of the study, which is, “What are education professionals’ perceptions of changes in school or classroom climate change, students’ experiences, and educators’ experiences as a result of implementing *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*?” This research question guided the purpose of the study and focused the actual phenomena being examined. The study was rooted in discovering what participants’ perceptions were about the impacts of the phenomenon of *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*’s implementation were on themselves, their students, and their contexts.

Through a short-answer questionnaire distributed via Qualtrics©, 23 participants provided information about their professional backgrounds and demographics, and described their perceptions of how the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* impacted their students, their contexts, and even themselves. As seen in Table 1 and Figure 2, these participants represented eight different cities across the United States and two in Canada. Their contexts ranged from first grade through university level and they spanned rural, suburban, and urban educational institutions. Most were public schools or universities, one was in a Children’s Museum, and one was a homeschool co-op setting.

Backgrounds and Demographics of Participants

Table 1

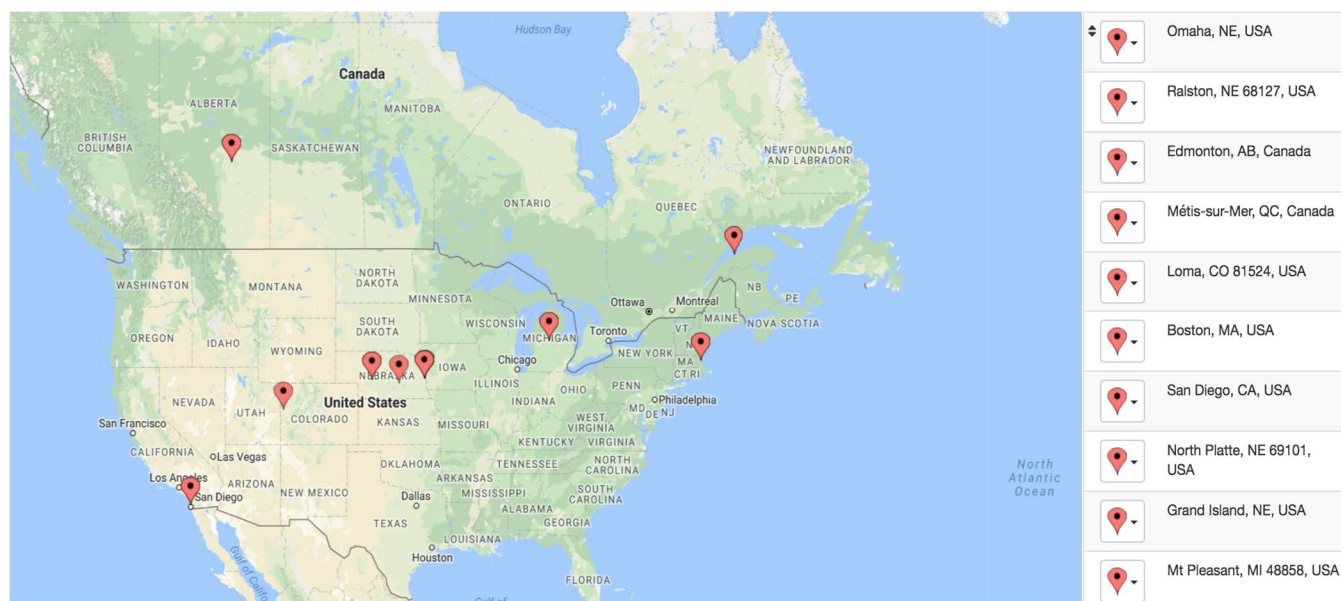
Participant Demographic Data

Participant	Location	Setting	Context	Grade Level
Agent B	Ralston, Nebraska, United States	Suburban	Public Elementary School	1st Grade
Agent C	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Suburban	Homeschool Co-op	Kindergarten through 5th Grade
Agent D	North Platte, Nebraska, United States	Rural	Public Elementary School	Kindergarten through 5th Grade
Agent E	Mount Pleasant, Michigan, United States	Urban	University Honors Program	University
Agent U	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public Elementary School	3rd and 4th Grade
Agent F	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public Elementary School	Kindergarten
Agent Ms. G	Edmonton, Alberta, Canada	Suburban	Public High School	Grades 7-9
Agent H	Grand Island, Nebraska, United States	Rural	Public Elementary School	5th Grade
Agent I	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public Elementary School and Public Middle School	3rd Grade and 8th Grade

Agent J	Boston, Massachusetts, United States	Urban	Children's Museum Learning Space	Adults and Children
Agent K	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public Elementary School	1st Grade
Agent L	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public University	University
Agent M	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public High School	9th through 12th Grade
Agent N	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public High School	9th through 12th Grade
Agent O	San Diego, California, United States	Urban and Suburban	Public High School	11th and 12th Grade
Agent P	Loma, Colorado, United States	Rural	Public Elementary	4th Grade
Agent Q	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public Elementary	Preschool through 5th Grade
Agent R	Métis-Sur-Mer, Quebec, Canada	Rural	Public Kindergarten through 11th Grade	2nd Grade through 11th Grade
Agent S	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public Elementary	4th and 5th Grade
Agent T	Ralston, Nebraska, United States	Suburban	Public Middle School	7th and 8th Grade

Agent W	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public Elementary School	5th Grade
Agent V	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public Middle School	5th through 8th Grade
Agent A	Omaha, Nebraska, United States	Urban	Public High School	11th and 12th Grade

Figure 2

Locations of Participants**Data Analysis****Phenomenological Themes As Related to the Research Questions**

The researcher conducted a literal analysis of the words and phrases that were in the participants' responses by creating three word clouds from the actual text that

respondents typed into the questionnaire. Each word cloud is comprised of the answers to three of the research questions: Question 7, which read, “Describe any changes you perceived in yourself as a result of doing the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*,” Question 8, which read, “Describe any changes you perceived in your students who participated in the Project. Were there any students in particular who were affected strongly in any way by the project? Please use the students’ Secret Kindness Agent names to protect their anonymity;” and finally Question 9, which read, “Describe any changes you perceived within your classroom or school/university during and after implementing the Project.”

The words that appeared the most often in the data are represented by their bigger size in the Word Clouds, while words that appeared less often are smaller in comparison. The bigger words in each Word Cloud were used to identify themes or meaning units in an interpretive and reflexive analysis. These are organized in the tables that follow each Word Cloud. Each theme that came from the Word Clouds is organized into a separate table with quotes from the data that pertain to that particular theme.

Table 2

Data Analysis Organization

	Literal Analysis	Interpretive & Reflexive Analysis Themes
Impact on Educators (Question 7)	Word Cloud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kindness & Awareness Focus - Pedagogy & Classroom Management - Morale and Well-Being
Impact on Students (Question 8)	Word Cloud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kindness Focus, Awareness, & Empathy

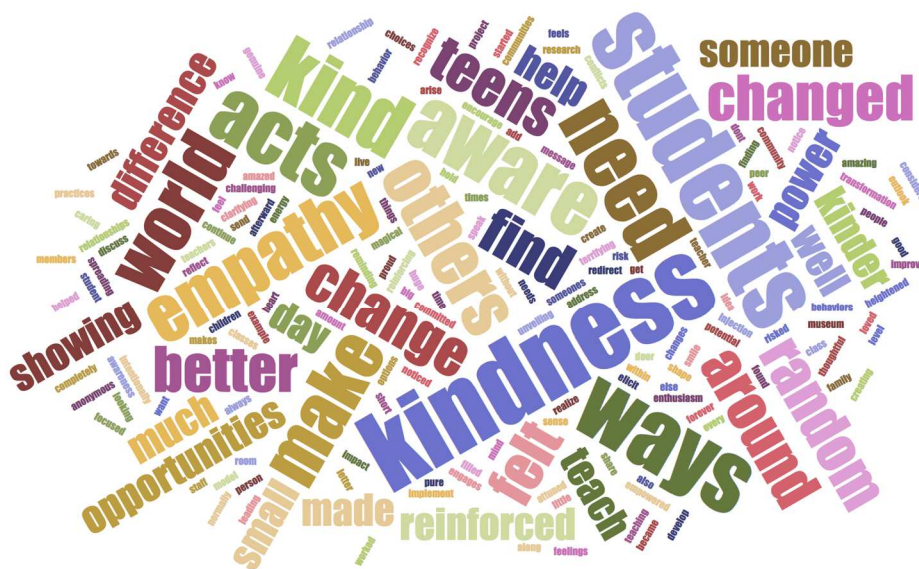
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pride, Connection, & Belonging - Improved Behavior & Academic Performance - Improved Relationships, - Well-Being & Happiness - Ownership and Initiative - The Ripple Effect.
Impact on Contexts (Question 9)	Word Cloud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved Faculty & Staff Dispositions & Morale - Sense of Community & Safe Spaces - Improved School Climate

Impact on Educators

The first word cloud, depicted in Figure 3, is about the impact of the project on the educators themselves. The Word Cloud was created by inputting all of the text from the participants' responses pertaining to their perceptions of the impact of the project on themselves into a Word Cloud Generator.

Figure 3

Word Cloud: Perceived Impacts on Educators



The biggest words that appeared in the Word Cloud were “kindness/kind,” “aware,” “students/teens,” “change/changed,” “ways,” “empathy,” “make,” “others,” and “world.” The researcher looked more deeply into the responses that brought up these words to find the themes that they described. These themes are described in Tables 3, 4, and 5 below.

Theme 1: Kindness and Awareness Focus

Table 3 below details the quotes from the educators' responses as they pertain to the theme of Kindness and Awareness Focus.

Table 3

Kindness and Awareness Focus Themes in Participants' Responses

Agent Name	Kindness and Awareness Quote
Agent A	“Being more aware of being <i>kind</i> to others at all times”

Agent B	"I find myself being much more <i>kind</i> more intentionally. I have always considered myself to be a thoughtful and <i>kind</i> person, but now I try to really focus on not only teaching it to my class, but also leading by example."
Agent U	"I feel like I need to live what I teach, so it makes me more <i>aware</i> to do random acts of <i>kindness</i> "
Agent F	"I'm more <i>aware</i> of the choices I make, especially around students."
Agent I	"I found myself more <i>aware</i> of those around me and needs that need to be filled without any request for them to be filled."
Agent K	"I have noticed that I try to smile more at people I don't know. I feel like I speak of <i>kindness</i> more to my own children and also to my students."
Agent L	"Heightened <i>awareness</i> of the need for, and the impact of, random acts of <i>kindness</i> ."
Agent M	"Looking for ways to be <i>kind</i> . Hold a door, send a letter, be a friend, help someone in need. Being more attuned for opportunities that can arise all around us."
Agent O	"I became more focused on others...it completely changed my outlook."
Agent P	"I recognize opportunities for <i>kindness</i> and find myself showing more <i>empathy</i> to others."
Agent Q	"Doing the project with students made me reflect on ways I could be more <i>kind</i> every day...both big and small."
Agent R	"I also found myself showing more <i>empathy</i> towards staff members who I normally do not get along so well with."
Agent S	"I became <i>kinder</i> and started doing small random acts of <i>kindness</i> ."
Agent T	"I was much more <i>aware</i> of the little things I could do

	throughout my day to improve the world!”
Agent W	“I’m more <i>aware</i> of others’ feelings and notice how good it makes me feel to help someone else.”

In none of the participants responses to the question about their motivation to do the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* was there any indication of a need or a want to create change in themselves with regard to their personal or professional lives. However, overwhelmingly, most of them wrote that the impact of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* on themselves was that they became kinder, more aware individuals who carried the kindness on into their homes and communities in addition to their work environments.

Theme 2: Pedagogy and Classroom Management

Table 4 below details the quotes from the educators’ responses as they pertain to the theme of Pedagogy and Classroom Management.

Table 4

Pedagogy and Classroom Management Themes in Participants’ Responses

Agent Name	Pedagogy and Classroom Management Quote
Agent B	“Now I try to really focus on not only <i>teaching</i> it to my class, but leading by example.”
Agent C	“I used the SKA Manual in conjunction with the “How Full Is Your Bucket” book/concept.
Agent U	“I feel like I need to live what I <i>teach</i> so it makes me more aware to do random acts of kindness.”
Agent F	“I’m more aware of the <i>choices</i> I make, especially around my students.”

Agent Ms. G	<p>“Taking a risk and doing this project reminded me of the power I had as a <i>teacher</i> to reveal a world of options to my students in which they shape their world for the better of all. My teens were SO proud of their weekly activities and it also reinforced the need for community when we <i>teach</i>. This project made me more committed to clarifying and spreading my message of transformation and empathy to elicit behavior changes. The project was an injection of energy to continue to encourage <i>teachers</i> to find ways to create communities within their classes and schools so all students can realize the potential they have...It was such a short time period that I believe so much more could have been done but the change in our classroom was the grade 9's asking for their writing reflection time. It was getting to the end of the year and we had so many projects on the go that I forgot about the Secret Agents of Kindness project one week. The class held me to task and so I had to stop the lesson I had planned, let them create the jobs for the week, pick their jobs and then they made me promise to get writing time at the end of the week. Students in June are not supposed to care about school anymore or so teachers sometimes claim. My students weren't shutting down at all. I was so, so proud of them. I did have grade 8's start to ask me if they were going to be in my class next year and if they got to be part of the Secret Agents of Kindness project so I guess the word got around in a short amount of time.”</p>
Agent I	<p>“I have also changed how I <i>redirect student behaviors</i> in the classroom. I try to address their peer relationships and conflicts to get the students thinking about how they can be better, be kinder.”</p>
Agent J	<p>“[I started to] <i>research</i> more about empathy and kindness and how to <i>implement such practices</i>.”</p>
Agent K	<p>“I feel like I <i>speak of kindness more to my students</i>...we had a different kindness act every week that we were all trying to work on. We reflected on these acts the next week in our journals and discussed how these acts made us feel and how it made others feel.”</p>
Agent M	<p>“Students were given the opportunity to express their gratitude and positive thoughts.”</p>
Agent O	<p>“It completely changed my <i>outlook</i>. I felt <i>empowered to make a</i></p>

	<i>difference</i> in small ways that add up.”
Agent R	“[It] helped develop a <i>new level of relationship with my students</i> , where we discuss and share acts of kindness, creating a more caring environment...students’ projects reflect the change in mindset, with the students’ choice of topics and topics of discussion. Other <i>teachers</i> have asked to become involved this year.”

The kindness focus experienced by the educators appears to have manifested itself in more compassionate attitudes and behaviors with regard to classroom discipline, and the educators described themselves as wanting to be kindness “role models” and “examples” for their students. Many of the educators created lessons and activities centered around kindness, even taking the lead from their students, and spreading the idea of teaching kindness to other teachers in the building.

Theme 3: Morale and Well-Being

Table 5 below details the quotes from the educators’ responses as they pertain to the theme of Morale and Well-Being.

Table 5

Morale and Well-Being Themes in Participants’ Responses

Agent Name	Well-Being and Morale Quote
Agent H	<i>“I am forever changed</i> by these amazing students. I am amazed at the enthusiasm, kindness, and change that a few students have been able to make in a short amount of time!”
Agent M	<i>“Improved morale</i> occurred.”

Agent N	“I loved the idea of being anonymous. It made the acts feel more genuine. Pure. <i>I appreciated the power of kindness during a year where I struggled quite a bit.</i> ”
Agent O	“I took a risk and it worked. <i>That felt amazing...it completely changed my outlook. I felt empowered to make a difference in small ways that add up.</i> ”
Agent W	“I’m more aware of others’ feelings and <i>notice how good it makes me feel to help someone else.</i> ”
Agent V	“ <i>I felt better</i> afterward.”

Finally, many of the participants described improved well-being, of “feeling better,” “feeling good,” and “feeling happier” in a time when educators felt that they were struggling. The educators also reported a renewed sense of purpose and empowerment, and one identified morale as being something that improved. Overall, the educators’ sense of well-being and happiness improved noticeably.

Impact on Students

The educators who responded to the questionnaire reported that the positive impacts of the project on their students matched the positive impact of it on themselves. They described witnessing their students showing more empathy, acting kinder and less egocentric, being more aware of others and even being more polite inside and outside the school, all of which led to a better sense of community - a sense of family - in the classroom. This improvement in behavior seemed to also be echoed in students’ improved academic focus, having a sense of pride in and belonging to their school

The words that made an appearance most often appeared as the largest in the Word Cloud. These words included “kindness,” “students/student,” “Agent,” “school,” “secret,” “others,” “positive,” “aware,” “change,” and “SKA,” which stands for Secret Kindness Agents. Many of these were similar to the words that were the biggest in the Word Cloud about the impact of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* on the educators themselves. Therefore, it was not surprising that the researcher found similar themes about the impact of the project on students upon deeper analysis of the data. These themes are depicted in Tables 6 through 11 below.

Theme 1: Kindness Focus, Awareness, and Empathy

Table 6 below details the quotes from the educators’ responses as they pertain to the theme of Kindness Focus, Awareness, and Empathy.

Table 6

Kindness Focus, Awareness, and Empathy Themes in Participants’ Responses

Agent Name	Kindness Focus, Awareness, and Empathy Quote
Agent B	“My kiddos have been much more <i>aware</i> of <i>kindness</i> all around them. I simply hear more “please and thank you” and I typically see more of them helping each other out and others around the school, and I love when they come back to school and tell me a story of <i>kindness</i> they did outside of school.”
Agent U	“I believe it does help them develop more <i>empathy</i> for each other.”
Agent F	“One particular student, Agent Batman, took it upon himself to find kids that weren’t playing with anyone at recess and go play with them. You don’t see that kind of initiative in a 5 year old unless they are very aware of other people and their

	own actions.”
Agent G	“My students were so proud of the little gestures. They <i>started to see how little things each of us do makes a difference</i> . Some of our grade 9 boys, who were the known bullies, starting walking down the halls saying hi to everyone and focusing on victims of bullying. I remember these boys saying some of the kids would move to the side, and just stare when these older students spoke. The grade 9 boys think the kids were waiting for a bullying episode to occur. I saw an excitement to talk about how their choices were making a difference and that surprised me.”
Agent I	“They were more <i>aware</i> of each other’s feelings and were beginning to complete acts on their own, at home, in school, everywhere they saw them. Agent Ice Cream very much wanted to be <i>kind</i> to everyone and made it their mission.”
Agent R	“Our students...show more <i>empathy</i> towards those who are different than they are. Students have been taking more notice of the media, sharing events, YouTube videos, etc. of acts of kindness, but also discussing current events where intolerance and hatred has come up, where they will discuss various solutions or ways the situations could be handled while also trying to <i>understand others' points of view</i> .”
Agent V	“[Students are] <i>more sensitive to the needs of others, less egocentric</i> .”

Regardless of the different age groups represented by the students, where they were geographically located, or the type of context they were in, the participants reported that there appeared to be growth in awareness, an increase in their capacity for empathy, and a noticeable focus on kindness within their students overall. This bled through into students wanting to talk about and focus on kindness in school as well as in their homes and communities.

Theme 2: Pride, Belonging, and Connection

Table 7 below details the quotes from the educators' responses as they pertain to the theme of Pride, Belonging, and Connection.

Table 7

Pride, Belonging, and Connection Themes in Participants' Responses

Agent Name	Pride, Belonging, and Connection Quote
Agent G	"My students were so <i>proud</i> of the little gestures...I saw an excitement to talk about how their choices were making a difference and that surprised me."
Agent L	"Increased sense of <i>community</i> and <i>responsibility</i> for making our campus a more positive place to be."
Agent O	"They made <i>positive differences in the school community</i> . As a class, we became much more unified and felt like a <i>family</i> ."
Agent Q	"The students who participated had so much fun getting their "assignments", which we brainstormed together. I would type up their assignments and put them in envelopes marked top secret. <i>They looked forward to receiving them each week and were so excited to tell me about how they pulled off their acts while keeping their identity and motives a secret.</i> It was super fun and adorable."
Agent R	"Our <i>students have grown closer...an increase in connectedness between older and younger students.</i> "
Agent S	"Agent Angry, was like her name...angry at everyone and everything. She refused to participate in SKA when I first introduced it, <i>about a month after seeing everyone in the class participating and having fun, she stuck a paper on my desk with her agent name.</i> "
Agent T	"Overall, I noticed the same with my kids... <i>they were willing to watch out for one another more and do the little things that make our school a great place to be.</i> "

Agent V	<i>“Students were more proud of themselves and the school.”</i>
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Students who participated in the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* appeared to develop a sense of pride, belonging, and connection with regard to their schools. Their educators wrote about how proud they were of themselves and of what they were doing for their schools, how they felt a sense of responsibility in making their spaces kinder for everyone in them, and how they felt like they were connected to others with whom they normally would not have felt any kinship.

Theme 3: Improved Behavior and Academic Performance

Table 8 below details the quotes from the educators’ responses they pertain to the theme of Behavior and Academic Performance.

Table 8

Improved Behavior and Academic Performance Themes in Participants’ Responses

Agent Name	Improved Behavior and Academic Performance Quote
Agent A	<i>“[There were] more positive attitudes and students who were previously mean to others became kinder.”</i>
Agent B	<i>“I simply hear more ‘please and thank you’”</i>
Agent C	<i>“I was very pleased to hear reports from parents - many of them said that their children came home and made thank you letters for people they care about.”</i>
Agent D	<i>“I think students were looking for the positive in each other instead of the negative.”</i>
Agent U	<i>“They all love participating in it. I believe it does help them develop more empathy for each other. In turn, their behavior improves.”</i>

Agent F	<p>“The group of students that used the secret kindness agents project all year was <i>the most well-behaved, thoughtful, considerate class that I have ever had in my 11 years of teaching.</i>”</p>
Agent G	<p>“Some of our grade 9 boys, who were the known bullies, starting walking down the halls saying hi to everyone and focusing on victims of bullying. I remember these boys saying some of the kids would move to the side, and just stare when these older students spoke. The grade 9 boys think the kids were waiting for a bullying episode to occur...<i>Students in June are not supposed to care about school anymore...my students weren't shutting down at all. I was so so proud of them.</i>”</p>
Agent H	<p>“One student in my original group, Agent Star seemed to be particularly impacted. Agent Star had been known to be "catty" with other girls, often teasing them or putting them down. Agent Star was also a resource student that received added support in reading and math. After about a semester being a part of the SKA, <i>Agent Star's classroom teacher noticed that she was no longer "catty" with other girls in her class, but rather volunteering to help others and would perform RAKs in the classroom without prompting. Agent Star's academic performance improved considerably</i> by the time her next IEP was due. Agent Star wrote me a letter thanking me for getting to be part of the SKA, and still emails me from time to time now that she is in middle school.”</p>
Agent I	<p>One student in particular <i>went from being very reserved to one of the most outgoing students I have ever had.</i></p>
Agent P	<p>“Princess Van Gogh was a selective mute, lost because her older siblings had gone off to middle school. She wrote me a letter stating she <i>‘doesn't mind speaking now, but I prefer to choose who I talk to,’ she volunteers answers in class and talks to adults in the school without problem.</i>”</p> <p><i>Another, Agent DragonMaster was an often overbearing only child who interrupted others and lacked empathy. She now is just the opposite at school, quickly volunteering to help other students, bringing treats from home to share, and a</i></p>

	<i>leader among her peers. She also credits the SKA group.”</i>
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Repeatedly, participants described improved behavior and academic performance in answering questions about how the project impacted their students. Students who were mean, bullies, or “catty” became more friendly and kind. Negative behaviors stopped and were replaced by empathy and positive behaviors as reported not only by the classroom teacher, but also by the parents and other staff and faculty in their spaces. A selective mute began speaking, and students became leaders amongst their peer groups.

Theme 5: Improved Relationships

Table 9 below details the quotes from the educators’ responses as they pertain to the theme of Behavior and Academic Performance.

Table 9

Improved Relationships Themes in Participants’ Responses

Agent Name	Improved Relationships Quote
Agent F	<i>“One particular student, Agent Batman, took it upon himself to find kids that weren’t playing with anyone at recess and go play with them.”</i>
Agent G	<i>“Saying hi in the hallways to unknown peers was a huge hit and that totally surprised me. It forced these top-of-the-food-chain students to step out of their world and I watched younger students smile from ear to ear after these older school mates acknowledged them.”</i>
Agent K	<i>“My students worked really hard to be kind to others.”</i>

Agent O	<i>“My students bonded as a group. They were more connected and more thoughtful of each other and of students they didn’t know...other students ate with new friends. A very very shy student found this challenging to be pushed out of her comfort zone, and actually loved that push. She gained new friends from this.”</i>
Agent P	<i>“My students demonstrated increased self-confidence and made more friends. Princess Van Gogh was a selective mute, lost because her older siblings had gone off to middle school. She wrote me a letter stating she ‘doesn’t mind speaking now, but I prefer to choose who I talk to,’ she volunteers answers in class and talks to adults in the school without problem.”</i>
Agent R	<i>“Our students have grown closer.”</i>
Agent T	<i>“They were willing to watch out for one another more.”</i>

One of the side effects of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* identified by the participants was an improvement in students’ relationships with one another. Students who would ordinarily be alone or lonely made new friends or had Agents befriend them. Younger students felt more acknowledged by older students. Students looked out for one another and bonded with each other. A shy student gained confidence and made friends she ordinarily would not have. Students grew closer to each other within the classrooms. Perhaps more extraordinarily, a student who was a selective mute began to speak to select people and even to adults, and she credited the project with that change in her life.

Theme 6: Well-Being and Happiness

Table 10 below details the quotes from the educators' responses as they pertain to the theme of Well-Being and Happiness.

Table 10

Well-Being and Happiness Themes in Participants' Responses

Agent Name	Well-Being and Happiness Quote
Agent E	"Despite the derailing of the project some students carried it forward and really <i>enjoyed it.</i> "
Agent U	" <i>They all loved participating in it.</i> "
Agent H	" <i>My students weren't shutting down at all...also, self-esteem and self-awareness has improved for some students.</i> "
Agent J	" <i>Their positive emotions</i> they expressed and then how their adults proudly reacted to their kids' emotions are very much visible in the space."
Agent O	"My students <i>gained confidence. They were happier</i> and they made positive differences in the school community...a very, very shy student found this challenging to be pushed out of her comfort zone, and <i>actually loved that push.</i> She gained new friends from this."
Agent S	"Over the school year <i>Agent Angry became very dedicated to SKA and was no longer as angry.</i> I tried to get her to change her name, but she wouldn't."

Many of the participants perceived a positive change in their students' sense of happiness and well-being. They wrote about their students' enjoyment of the project, of

an increase in self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-confidence, as well an increase in the amount of positive emotions that were present. An angry student lost her anger and became dedicated to the project.

Theme 4: Ownership and Initiative - The Ripple Effect

Table 11 below details the quotes from the educators' responses as they pertain to the theme of Ownership and Initiative - The Ripple Effect

Table 11

Ownership and Initiative - The Ripple Effect Themes in Participants' Responses

Agent Name	Ownership and Initiative Quote
Agent A	"Students take <i>ownership</i> , even creating <i>their very own SKA projects</i> ."
Agent B	"I simply hear more 'please and thank you,' I typically <i>see more of them helping</i> each other out and others around the school, and I love when they come back to school and tell me a story of <i>kindness they did outside of school</i> ."
Agent C	"I used the SKA Manual in conjunction with the 'How Full Is Your Bucket' book/concept. <i>Agent Squish YT still refers to filling buckets with Random/Secret Acts of Kindness on a regular basis</i> ."
Agent D	"Secret Agent Oreo <i>kept asking for more and more Secret Acts of Kindness. He couldn't get enough. He was determined to change everyone's life with secret acts of kindness</i> ."
Agent F	"One particular student, Agent Batman, took it upon himself to find kids that

	<p>weren't playing with anyone at recess and go play with them. <i>You don't see that kind of initiative in a 5 year old unless they are very aware of other people and their own actions.</i>”</p>
Agent G	<p>“Another of the surprises was the kindness tasks that would get repeated but the <i>kids did not want to stop doing them...</i>It was such a short time period that I believe so much more could have been done but the change in our classroom was the <i>grade 9's asking for their writing reflection time. It was getting to the end of the year and we had so many projects on the go that I forgot about the Secret Agents of Kindness project one week. The class held me to task and so I had to stop the lesson I had planned, let them create the jobs for the week, pick their jobs and then they made me promise to get writing time at the end of the week. Students in June are not supposed to care about school anymore or so teachers sometimes claim. My students weren't shutting down at all. I was so, so proud of them. I did have grade 8's start to ask me if they were going to be in my class next year and if they got to be part of the Secret Agents of Kindness project so I guess the word got around in a short amount of time.</i>”</p>
Agent H	<p>“After about a semester being a part of the SKA, Agent Star's classroom teacher noticed she was no longer ‘catty’ with other girls in her class, but rather <i>volunteering to help others and would perform RAKs in the classroom without prompting.</i>”</p>
Agent I	<p>“Agent Ice Cream <i>very much wanted to be kind to everyone and made it their</i></p>

	<i>mission.”</i>
Agent J	<i>“They took seriously reading the oath and were very excited on their kindness tasks. Some adults wanted to know more about it so that they could continue after going home.”</i>
Agent K	<i>“As we’ve grown in numbers, the impact has also grown. More students are seeking this type of opportunity to positively impact others.”</i>
Agent O	<i>“One student started an anonymous twitter page for our school giving positive shout-outs to students. She focused on students who had been mean to her or who she didn’t know, and tried to give them a positive praise. Students were so excited about this, and loved that they didn’t know who created it.”</i>
Agent R	<i>“Students have been taking more notice of the media, sharing events, YouTube videos, etc. of acts of kindness, but also discussing current events where intolerance and hatred has come up, where they will discuss various solutions or ways the situations could be handled while also trying to understand others’ points of view...students’ projects reflect the change in mindset, with the students’ choice of topics and topics of discussion.”</i>

By far, the theme of Ownership and Initiative came up the most in the participants’ responses about the effect of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* on their students. They wrote about students becoming so excited about the project that they carried it on by themselves, even when they did not have to. They could not seem to get

enough of the project, and they took it upon themselves to create positive change around them. Kindness became infused in their personal and academic lives, even extending into their future plans and into what they talked and learned about in class.

Impact on Contexts

Participants responses gave evidence of positive impacts of the *Secret Kindness Agents Projects* on their contexts, whether it was their classroom, school, museum, or community. The educators described feeling unified, like a family, more peaceful, happier, more collaborative, improved morale, and a kinder overall climate. There were reports of less bullying, improved relationships amongst the adults, teachers' perceptions and treatment of difficult students improving, their context becoming a safer space for students to take risks. The literal analysis that was conducted through putting the text from the participants' responses pertaining to the impact of the project on their contexts into a Word Cloud generator created a Word Cloud depicted in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5

Word Cloud: Perceived Impacts on Contexts

Agent B	<i>“I think teaching kindness is just much more on the mind of everyone, more and more people are realizing the importance of teaching kindness.”</i>
Agent C	<i>“I noticed a big change in the ADULTS supervising the co-op! There were some disagreements regarding how the co-op should be run and I observed parents who attended the SKA training supporting each other - having each other’s’ backs when things got heated.”</i>
Agent G	<i>“Teachers’ perceptions of some students have seemed to change in some circumstances. Stigmas that follow some students from grade to grade has been changed.”</i>
Agent I	<i>“As staff members, we talked more about kindness and empathy.”</i>
Agent M	<i>“Improved morale occurred.”</i>
Agent P	<i>“Our school is more welcoming and kind to one another, and all are more aware of opportunities to be kind.”</i>
Agent S	<i>“[Our school became] more collaborative.”</i>

The project appeared to inject a more positive disposition into the adults in the contexts where the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* took place. The participants felt that the project reminded the adults in these spaces of the importance of kindness as something that should be taught and also modeled; they looked out for one another and disagreements did not go awry. There was more collaboration, and adults began to give students and each other the benefit of the doubt. As a result, it appears that their morale improved as well.

Theme 2: Sense of Community and Safe Spaces

Table 13 below details the quotes from the educators' responses as they pertain to the theme of Community and Safe Spaces.

Table 13

Sense of Community and Safe Spaces Themes in Participants' Responses

Agent Name	Community and Safe Space Quote
Agent D	"I think the students were looking for the positive in each other instead of the negative."
Agent E	"This was a pretty <i>tightly knit class</i> to begin with (I was lucky) and they just <i>stayed that way</i> ."
Agent F	"My class was very well behaved and emotionally supportive to each other. They all got along. They all work together. <i>It was a peaceful year</i> ."
Agent G	"The project was an injection of energy to continue to encourage teachers to find ways to <i>create communities within their classes and schools</i> so all students can realize the potential they have."
Agent L	"[There was an] <i>increased sense of community and responsibility for making our campus a more positive place to be</i> ."
Agent N	"The school <i>community</i> seemed to appreciate the gestures. My students bonded as a group. They were <i>more connected and more thoughtful of each other and of the students they didn't know...other students ate with new friends</i> ."
Agent O	"My students gained confidence. <i>They were happier and they made positive</i>

	<i>differences in the school community. As a class, we became much more unified and felt like a family.”</i>
Agent P	<i>“Our school is more welcoming and kind to one another, and all are more aware of opportunities to be kind.”</i>
Agent R	<i>“Our students have grown closer.”</i>
Agent S	<i>“[They were] more collaborative.”</i>
Agent T	<i>“They were willing to watch out for one another more and do the little things that make our school a great place to be.”</i>
Agent V	<i>“Students were more proud of themselves and school.”</i>

One of the themes that kept surfacing in participants’ responses was that of an increased sense of community, and of creating safe spaces in order for students to be themselves, and to take risks in order to learn and grow. They described students getting along well, looking out for each other, feeling like a family, having a sense of belonging to the school or classroom community, and taking pride in that community.

Theme 3: Improved School Climate

Table 14 below details the quotes from the educators’ responses as they pertain to the theme of Improved Faculty and Staff Dispositions and Morale.

Table 14

Improved Climate Themes in Participants’ Responses

Agent Name	Improved Climate Quote
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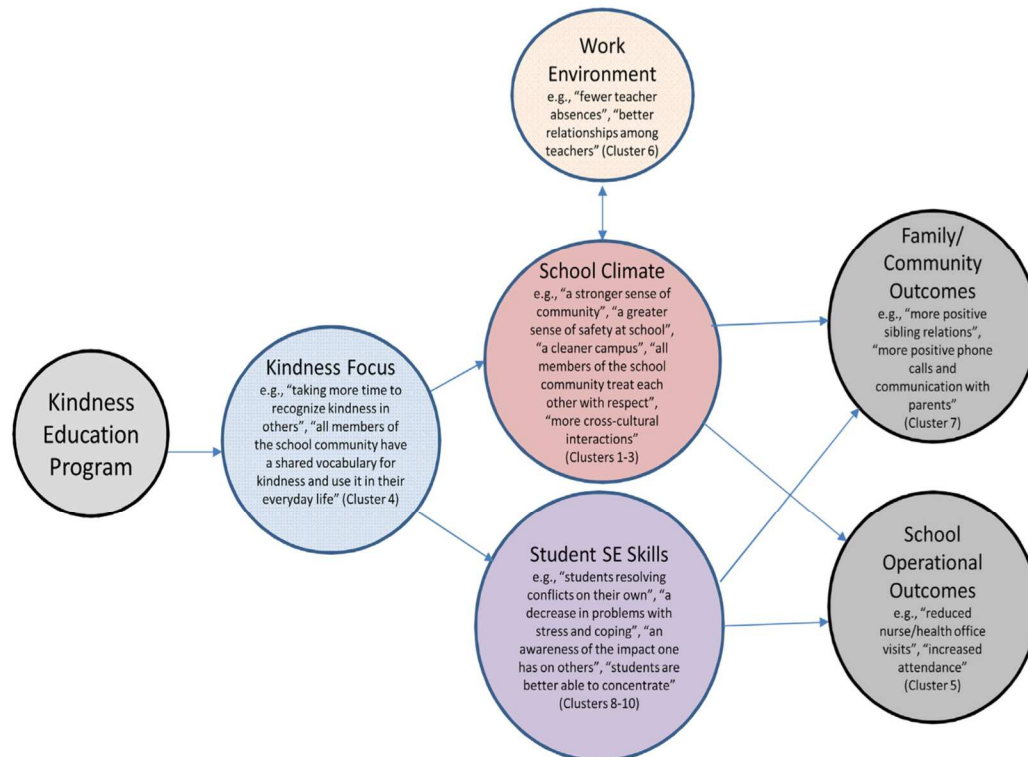
Agent F	"It was a <i>peaceful</i> year."
Agent H	"I watched younger students smile from ear to ear after these older school mates acknowledged them."
Agent M	"Improved morale occurred."
Agent O	"[The students] were happier and they made <i>positive differences</i> in the school community."
Agent P	"Our school is more welcoming and kind to one another."
Agent R	"The whole school just became a happier place, we are a small school so SKA had a big impact. The younger grades were happy to get notes or other random acts of kindness and the SKAs of the school were happy to do it."
Agent S	"[We became] more <i>collaborative</i> ."
Agent V	"Kinder climate."

Several participants described an improved or happier school or classroom climate when reflecting upon the impact of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* with regard to their contexts. Not only did they perceive students being happier, but they also described better other people in their contexts contributing more positively to the community.

Phenomenological Themes from the Data as related to the Conceptual Map

Figure 6

Kindness Education Program Conceptual Map: Processes and outcomes of kindness education programming.



Data from the participants in the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* align quite directly with Kaplan et. al.'s model. The "Kindness Focus" domain was prominent in both the students and their educators; most described a focus on and awareness of kindness in their everyday lives. The themes that emerged from educators' perceptions of the impact of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* on the educators as well as on the students included Kindness Focus and Awareness, as well as Empathy. This "Kindness Focus" was also linked to all three of the same domains that it was linked to in the Kaplan model. The first, "Work Environment," represented the themes that the researcher found of improved Morale and Well-Being in the participants. The second, "School Climate," was represented by the researcher's themes of Improved

Relationships, Well-Being and Happiness in the students, Faculty and Staff Dispositions and Morale, Sense of Community and Safe Spaces, and of course, Improved School Climate. Finally, the third, “Student Social-Emotional Skills” was represented by the themes of Improved Relationships, as well as Improved Behavior and Academic Performance.

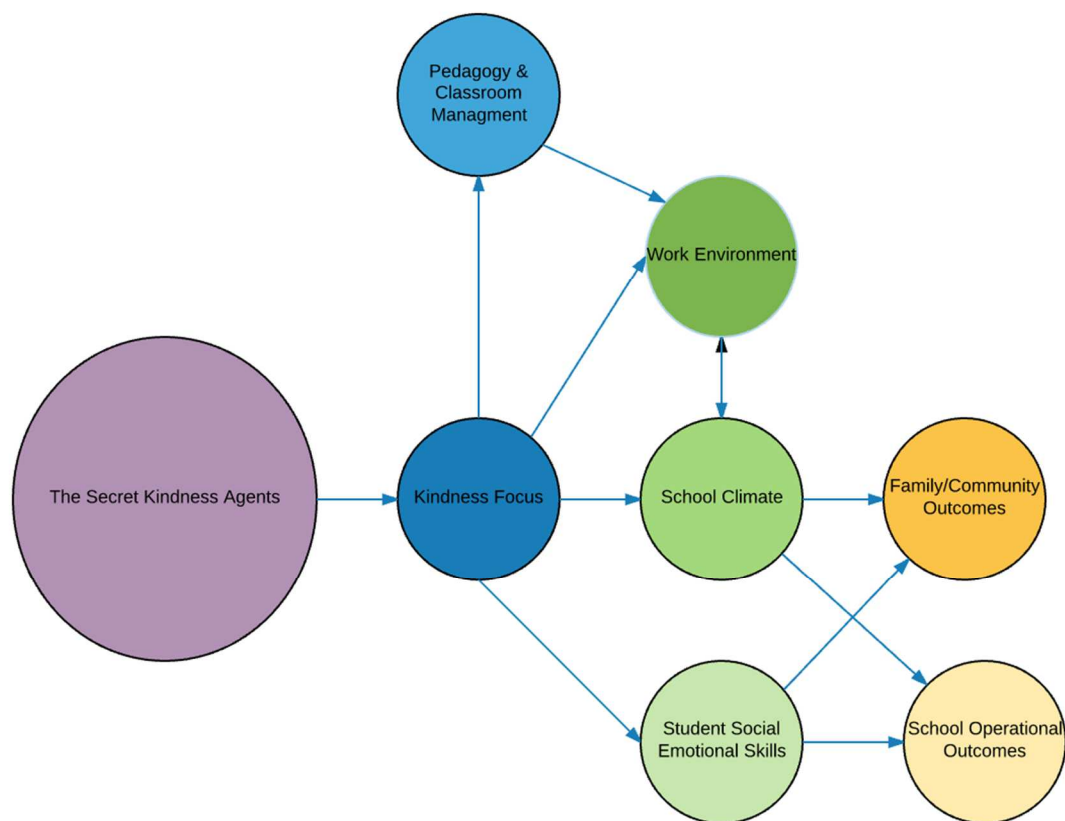
Since the scope of this study was limited, however, the researcher was unable to ascertain whether the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* aligned with the “Family/Community Outcomes” and the “School Operational Outcomes” modules, although there were reports about parents noticing better behavior at home and participants’ descriptions of improved behavior and academic performance in their students, as well as their increased sense of belonging and connectedness to the school likely affected their families, communities, and possibly even school operations. A longitudinal study with a broader scope would be needed to see if these two modules were in alignment as well.

The researcher proposes that an additional domain is added to this Conceptual Map entitled “Pedagogy and Classroom Management,” which would be linked to the “Kindness Focus” and the “Work Environment” domains. This is because many of the participants reported a change in pedagogy and classroom management - their own as well as their colleagues’ - as a result of implementing the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*. The researcher also proposes adding an arrow from the “Kindness Focus” module to the “Work Environment” module as the educators reported their kindness focus affecting the

way colleagues related to one another. The updated researcher-designed Conceptual Map is depicted in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6

Secret Kindness Agents Conceptual Map



This new Conceptual Map allows for the idea that educators themselves are impacted by the implementation of kindness education programming in ways that affect their own work environment as well as their classroom management, dispositions, and pedagogy.

Conclusion

The results of the data analysis yielded clear answers to the overarching research question. The participants who implemented the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* reported multiple examples of the positive impacts of the project on themselves, their students, and their contexts. Through literal, interpretive, and reflexive data analysis, the researcher found that the data fell into the following themes: Kindness Focus, Pedagogy and Classroom Management, Work Environment, School Climate, Social Emotional Learning, Academic Performance, and Morale and Well-Being. The following, and final, chapter discusses these results and synthesizes them into key findings as they relate to the research question, the literature, and the conceptual map, and concludes by providing recommendations for future research about the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Overview of the Study

This study explored education professionals' perceptions of changes in contexts, students' experiences, and educators' experiences as a result of implementing the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*. In using a qualitative phenomenological approach to this study, the researcher was able to examine the descriptions of twenty three educators who had experienced the phenomenon of the project in order to accurately and responsibly describe it. The participants in this research study represented urban, suburban, and rural schools in ten cities across the United States and Canada, and were situated in contexts that served students from Preschool through University. The participants were eager to share their experiences, perhaps because the researcher was the originator of the project and therefore was uniquely positioned to be able to understand the phenomenon the participants were experiencing.

The researcher represented the data from the responses on the questionnaire in multiple ways in Chapter Four for the purpose of displaying the results of data analysis. First, a table showing summary of the demographic data of the participants, second, a map displaying the cities from which responses came, and finally tables summarizing the themes across the interviews in response to each of the research questions. The data describing the participants' experiences revealed the following themes about the impact of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*: 1) Impact on Educators: Kindness and Awareness

Focus, Pedagogy and Classroom Management, and Morale and Well-Being. 2). Impact on Students: Kindness Focus, Awareness, and Empathy, Pride, Connection, and Belonging, Improved Behavior and Academic Performance, Improved Relationships, Well-Being and Happiness, and Ownership and Initiative - The Ripple Effect. 3). Impact on Contexts: Improved Faculty and Staff Dispositions and Morale, Sense of Community and Safe Spaces, and Improved School Climate.

The researcher used the themes as a foundation for understanding the phenomenon of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*. This chapter describes the findings and themes of the phenomenon in more detail as they relate to the proposed Conceptual Map and the Literature review that was detailed in Chapter II. These themes and findings are synthesized into key findings in this chapter, which also discusses how these findings can inform current leadership theory development and current practices. Finally, the chapter proposes some recommendations for future research on the phenomenon of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*.

The overarching research question that guided this research study is: What are education professionals' perceptions of changes in contexts, students' experiences, and educators' experiences as a result of implementing *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*?

This chapter describes three key findings that emerged from this study and follows this with a discussion of the findings in relation to previous literature, the implications of the findings of this study as they pertain to leadership theory, and the implications for the practice of educators in diverse contexts who implement the *Secret*

Kindness Agents Project. The chapter concludes with a description of the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and the final thoughts of the researcher.

Overview of Findings According to the Conceptual Map and Literature Review

The ecology of a school is complex because of the many layers of issues and the multiple stakeholders that affect a student's educational experience. The implementation of any project will affect this ecology in multiple ways, so a conceptual framework is useful in understanding how this happens. The Conceptual Map developed by Kaplan et. al., introduced in Chapter 1 of this study, is a helpful depiction of how kindness education programming is linked to the various parts of a school's ecology, so while the map does not explain the phenomena, it is a way to view the pieces within it. The researcher used the three data analysis procedures described in Chapter Three in order to amalgamate the core of the data: literal, interpretive, and reflexive (Mason, 2012). During the literal data analysis process, responses to the interview questions were put into a Word Cloud format. These clouds enabled the researcher to identify words and phrases that were prominent in participants' responses in order to create themes for the next data analysis step, which was interpretive in nature. The researcher then used a coding process to identify central themes in an interpretive analysis, during which each response was examined and placed into one or more themes. Finally, the data was synthesized in relation to the Literature Review and the Conceptual Map. Three key findings emerged from this meta-synthesis of the data and are discussed in the subsequent sections. The

findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* is fairly consistent with both the Conceptual Map and the Literature Review.

Key Finding #1: The *Secret Kindness Agents Project* positively impacted the experiences of the faculty who implemented it.

This finding directly answered the first part of the research question, namely, what was the impact on the educators who implemented the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*? A crucial part of the project requires that the adults perform acts of kindness with the students, and participants' responses described positive changes in their morale, well-being, outlook, performance, and sense of empowerment. Overwhelmingly, they reported a strong focus on kindness, which is completely aligned with the Conceptual Map that shows a link directly from kindness education programming and what they call a "Kindness Focus" (Kaplan et. al. 2016).

The literature shows that when adults perform intentional acts of kindness and recognize kindness in others, there is an increase in positive mental health outcomes, including reducing depressive symptoms and increasing subjective happiness and life satisfaction (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006; Post, 2005). The benefits of practices that encourage the development of compassion include decreased stress response and negative affect, increased positive affect, feelings of social connectedness, and increases in personal resources such as physical health, sense of purpose in life, self-acceptance, mindfulness, and positive relations with others (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Hofmann,

Grossman, & Hinton, 2011; Pace et al., 2011). Agent V stated that as a result of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*, “I felt better afterward.” Agent W reported, “I’m more aware of others’ feelings and notice how good it makes me feel to help someone else.” As Maehr, Midgley, and Urdan note, people are more personally invested in their work with an organization when they have a voice in what happens to them and also when their work has meaning and significance in contributing to a higher purpose or goal. (Maehr, Midgley, & Urdan, 1992). Agent Data claimed, “Improved morale occurred.” Agent N’s response indicated the power of the project in improving the way she felt: “I appreciated the power of kindness during a year where I struggled quite a bit.” Agent O said, “I took a risk and it worked. That felt amazing...it completely changed my outlook. I felt empowered to make a difference in small ways that add up.”

The educators also reported a change in the way they taught and related to students, something that again is supported by the literature. The project’s impact on the educators’ feeling of empowerment and morale meant that their pedagogy and management styles changed as well. When educators’ sense of self-determination and purpose are supported, they relate to students in a qualitatively different manner (Maehr, Midgley, & Urdan, 1992). Agent B said, “I have always considered myself to be a thoughtful and kind person, but now I try to really focus on not only teaching it to my class, but also leading by example.” Agent U and Agent F’s responses also indicated a similar need to be a role model: “I feel like I need to live what I teach, so it makes me more aware to do random acts of kindness” (Agent U) and “I’m more aware of the

choices I make, especially around students” (Agent F.) Agent I described a change in classroom management: “I have also changed how I redirect student behaviors in the classroom. I try to address their peer relationships and conflicts to get the students thinking about how they can be better, kinder.” Agent J started to “research more about empathy and kindness and how to implement such practices.” Agent G’s response spanned a change in her own outlook on the teaching profession and even in the amount of energy she had for her job:

Taking a risk and doing this project reminded me of the power I had as a teacher to reveal a world of options to my students in which they shape the world for the better of all...this project made me more committed to clarifying and spreading my message of transformation and empathy to elicit behavior changes. The project was an injection of energy to continue to encourage teachers to find ways to create communities within their classes and schools so that all students can realize the potential they have. (Agent G)

This is consistent with the modules Kaplan et. al. identify as “Work Environment” and “School Climate” (2016) in the Conceptual Map, however, the researcher suggests adding another module to the Conceptual Map entitled “Pedagogy and Classroom Management” that connects to both the “Kindness Focus” and “Work Environment” modules.

Key Finding #2: The *Secret Kindness Agents Project* positively impacted the experiences of the students who were involved in it.

The participants were the most in-depth in their descriptions of the impact of the project on their students and these descriptions were overwhelmingly positive. The first theme was that of a kindness focus, an awareness of kindness, and an increase in

empathy. This was consistent with the “Kindness Focus” module in the Conceptual Map.

In Agent B’s first grade class, she says,

My kiddos have been much more aware of kindness all around them. I simply hear more ‘please and thank you’ and I typically see more of them helping each other out and others around the school, and I love when they come back to school and tell me a story of kindness that did outside of school. (Agent B)

Agent F describes similar behavior in Agent Batman, a 5-year-old student. Agent V reports students being more sensitive to the needs of others and being less egocentric, while Agent I also talked about students being more aware of each other’s feelings.

Agents 5 and R described empathy as being a key focus in their students as well.

The Conceptual Map links the “Kindness Focus” to “School Climate” and this is evident in participants’ responses as well. They report their students as having developed a sense of pride, belonging, and connection with regard to their schools. Agent T describes students being “willing to watch out for one another more and make our school a great place to be.” Agent G and Agent V both describe the pride their students felt in their contribution towards making their schools better places to be. Agent O said, “They made positive differences in the school community. As a class, we became much more unified and felt like a family.” Agent R spoke of an increased connectedness between younger and older students, and a decrease in bullying between them. Agent L saw an “increased sense of community and responsibility for making our campus a more positive place to be.”

Improved behavior and academic performance also contributed to the School Climate. Students who used to be bullies or who had been “catty” became more friendly

and kind. Negative behaviors stopped and were replaced by more empathy. Positive behaviors were reported to the classroom teacher by staff, parents, and other staff and faculty in their spaces. Agent A observed “more positive attitudes and students who were previously mean to others became kinder.” Agent B and Agent C heard from parents and saw through observation that students were more polite, and were even coming home to write thank you letters. Agent F asserted that, “The group of students that used the secret kindness agents project all year was the most well-behaved, thoughtful, considerate class that I have ever had in my 11 years of teaching” and Agent D’s students were “looking for the positive in each other instead of the negative.”

Bullying prevention was another strong theme within the module of School Climate that is also linked to the module of Social Emotional Skills on the Conceptual Map. Agent G’s description illustrates this:

Some of our grade 9 boys, who were the known bullies, started walking down the halls saying hi to everyone and focusing on victims of bullying. I remember these boys saying some of the kids would move to the side, and just stare when these older students spoke. The grade 9 boys think the kids were waiting for a bullying episode to occur...I was so proud of them. (Agent G)

Agent H had a more specific example:

One student in my original group, Agent Star seemed to be particularly impacted. Agent Star had been known to be “catty” with other girls, often teasing them or putting them down. Agent Star was also a resource student that received added support in reading and math. After about a semester being a part of the SKA, Agent Star’s classroom teacher noticed that she was no longer “catty” with other girls in her class, but rather volunteering to help others and would perform RAKs in the classroom without prompting. Agent Star’s academic performance improved considerably by the time her next IEP was due. Agent Star wrote me a letter thanking me for getting to be a part of the SKA, and still emails me from time to time now that she is in middle school. (Agent H)

Agent P had a similar story:

Agent DragonMaster was an often overbearing only child who interrupted others and lacked empathy. She now is just the opposite at school, quickly volunteering to help other students, bringing treats from home to share, and a leader among her peers. She also credits the SKA group. (Agent P)

These examples of bullying prevention are mirrored in the literature as well. Penn State Harrisburg faculty researchers argue that adolescent bullying and youth violence can be confronted in America through in-school programs that integrate “kindness – the antithesis of victimization.” They note that national and local legislation and intense awareness efforts have sought to stem bullying, and they point to recent research that suggests a broader perspective is needed to reverse a loss of empathy in society. Their solution is based on reading, discussing, and acting upon the attributes of kindness, which “enables us to be our best selves” (Clark & Marinak, 2010). Berkeley researchers Pinger and Flook argue that the school environment can be very stressful; in addition to any issues they bring from home, many students struggle to make friends and perform well in class. Being excluded, ignored, or teased is very painful for a young child, and it could be impactful to teach kindness, empathy, and compassion, for example, when other children are suffering, can students understand how they might be feeling. Kindness bridges those gaps and helps build a sense of connection among the students, the teachers, and even the parents. Learning to strengthen their attention and regulate their emotions are foundational skills that could benefit kids in school and throughout their whole lives (Pinger & Flook, 2016).

Another strong theme throughout the School Climate and Social Emotional Skills modules is improved relationships, which surfaced multiple times in the participants' responses. Agent F described Agent Batman who would go and play with children who were alone at recess. G described "top-of-the-food-chain students" acknowledging younger students in the hallway and making them "smile from ear to ear." Agent K's students "worked really hard to be kind to others." Agent R said their "students have grown closer" and Agent T's students "were willing to watch out for one another more." Agent O noticed improved relationships in the classroom as a whole as well as outside of it:

My students bonded as a group. They were more connected and more thoughtful of each other and of students they didn't know...other students ate with new friends. A very, very shy student found this challenging to be pushed out of her comfort zone, and actually loved that push. She gained new friends from this. (Agent O)

Perhaps the most powerful report came from Agent P:

My students demonstrated increased self-confidence and made more friends. Princess Van Gogh was a selective mute, lost because her older siblings had gone off to middle school. She wrote me a letter stating she 'doesn't mind speaking now, but I prefer to choose who I talk to,' she volunteers answers in class and talks to adults in the school without problem. (Agent P)

More within the Social Emotional Skills module in the Conceptual Map was the theme of Well-Being and Happiness. Agent H described an improvement in "self-esteem and self-awareness" and Agent J stated, "Their positive emotions they expressed and then how their adults proudly reacted to their kids' emotions are very much visible in the space." Agent O said that her students "gained confidence. They were happier and they

made positive differences in the school community.” Agent S’s student, Agent Angry, “became very dedicated to SKA and was no longer as angry. I tried to get her to change her name, but she wouldn’t.”

Recent studies are in alignment with these findings; they show that there are multiple benefits to students who are being kind. Developing a habit of being kind increases children’s feelings of well-being, happiness, reduce bullying, and improve friendships with increased popularity and acceptance among peers by teaching them to be givers of kindness. Happier children are also more likely to have higher academic achievement (Price-Mitchell, 2013). Dr. Wayne Dyer explains that an act of kindness increases levels of serotonin, a natural chemical responsible for improving mood. This boost in happiness occurs not only in the giver and receiver of kindness, but also in anyone who witnesses it. This makes kindness a natural and powerful antidepressant (2013). In a longitudinal experiment conducted in 19 classrooms in Vancouver, 9- to 11-year olds were instructed to perform three acts of kindness (versus visit three places) per week over the course of four weeks. Students in both conditions improved in well-being, but students who performed kind acts experienced significantly bigger increases in peer acceptance than students who visited places. Increasing peer acceptance is a critical goal, as it is related to a variety of important academic and social outcomes, including reduced likelihood of being bullied. The researchers recommend that educators build on this study by introducing intentional prosocial activities into classrooms and they also recommend that such activities be performed regularly and purposefully. (Layous, Nelson, Oberle,

Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). The *Secret Kindness Agents Project*, like this study, allowed intentional kindness activities to be performed regularly and purposefully, and saw the same types of results.

The final theme that emerged from the data aligns again with the Social Emotional Skills module, and that is the theme of Ownership and Initiative. Social Emotional Learning is “the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors” (Zins, et al., 2004, p.4) and so this ownership of kindness that leads to initiative is indicative being a part of Social Emotional Skills.

Participants described, multiple times, students wanting to carry on the project, even after it was over, taking ownership of it inside and outside of their educational contexts, and even holding their teachers to task to keep going on with the project. Agent G wrote,

It was getting to the end of the year and we had so many projects on the go that I forgot about the Secret Agents of Kindness project one week. The class held me to task and so I had to stop the lesson I had planned, let them create the jobs for the week, pick their jobs and then they made me promise to get writing time at the end of the week. Students in June are not supposed to care about school anymore or so teachers sometimes claim. My students weren't shutting down at all. I did have grade 8's start to ask me if they were going to be in my class next year and if they got to be part of the Secret Agents of Kindness project so I guess the word got around in a short amount of time. (Agent G)

Agent D describes Agent Oreo, who “kept asking for more and more Secret Acts of Kindness. He couldn't get enough. He was determined to change everyone's life with

secret acts of kindness.” Agent O describes a student who “started an anonymous twitter page for our school giving positive shout-outs to students. She focused on students who had been mean to her who she didn’t know, and tried to give them a positive praise.”

Agent R’s students took the project further with a social justice lens:

Students have been taking more notice of the media, sharing events, YouTube videos, etc. of acts of kindness, but also discussing current events where intolerance and hatred has come up, where they will discuss various solutions or ways the situations could be handled while also trying to understand others’ points of view...students projects reflect the change in mindset, with the students’ choice of topics and topics of discussion. (Agent R)

The ripple-effect of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* showed in the way it spread because students took ownership in it, they carried it on into their own lives and communities, and inspired others to do the same.

Key Finding #3: The *Secret Kindness Agents Project* positively impacted the contexts in which the project happened.

Having classrooms full of mindful, kind students completely changes the school environment. “Teaching kindness is a way to bubble up widespread transformation that doesn’t require big policy changes or extensive administrative involvement” (Pinger & Flook, 2016). Thapa and colleagues (2013) identify five dimensions of school climate that include (1) safety, (2) relationships, (3) teaching and learning, (3) institutional environment, and (5) school improvement. Participants who carried out the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* described positive changes in their contexts, that included improved faculty and staff dispositions, an increased sense of community and creation of safe spaces, and an overall improved school climate. This aligns with the modules

entitled “School Climate” and “Work Environment” on the Conceptual Map (Kaplan et. al. 2016). An improvement in faculty and staff dispositions and morale was theme that appeared in many of the participants’ responses. Agent B felt that kindness was much more on the mind of everyone, and that “more and more people are realizing the importance of teaching kindness.” Agent I’s response mirrored this: “As staff members, we talked more about kindness and empathy.” Agent P stated that, “our school is more welcoming and kind to one another, and all are more aware of opportunities to be kind.” Agent C wrote, “I noticed a big change in the ADULTS supervising the co-op! There were some disagreements regarding how the co-op should be run and I observed parents who attended the SKA training supporting each other - having each other’s’ backs when things got heated.” Agent G’s perception was perhaps the most powerful: “Teachers’ perceptions of some students have seemed to change in some circumstances. Stigmas that follow some students from grade to grade has been changed.” The educators also described an increased sense of community and belonging within their contexts. Agent F wrote, “My class was very well behaved and emotionally supportive to each other. They all got along. They all work together. It was a peaceful year.” Agent G talked about the larger context: “The project was an injection of energy to continue to encourage teachers to find ways to create communities within their classes and schools so all students can realize the potential they have.” Agent L described an “increased sense of community and responsibility for making our campus a more positive place to be.” Agent N said that “The school community seemed to appreciate the gestures. My students bonded as a

group. They were more connected and more thoughtful of each other and of the students they didn't know...other students ate with new friends." Agent O' class "became more unified and felt like a family." Agent P described the school as "more welcoming and kind to one another." Agent F described "a peaceful year," Agent M said "improved morale occurred" and Agent V said, simply, "Kinder climate." Agent R's description was that "The whole school just became a happier place, we are a small school so SKA had a big impact. The younger grades were happy to get notes or other random acts of kindness and the SKAs of the school were happy to do it."

Implications for Leadership

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, states may decide to account for the social-emotional learning happening in their schools, and to use that data to make decisions about how best to support schools. For example, many states are considering using social-emotional learning indicators, like school climate, in their new state accountability systems (Every Student Succeeds Act).

State standards determine what Social Emotional Learning (SEL) looks like in each state. Every state has comprehensive, free-standing standards for SEL with developmental benchmarks in preschool, however, only six states have standards for SEL development for early elementary students and six more expand their standards to K-12 grades (State Scan Scorecard Project, 2017). This number could change, especially with emerging literature underscoring the need for SEL and related programming. As of October 25, 2017, National Conference of State Legislatures has identified 11 states that

have introduced 19 bills around SEL. These states are Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Oklahoma, New York, Tennessee, and Washington (National Conference of State Legislatures).

Given the national landscape in legislature and education standards, as well as the emerging literature that gives evidence of the positive effects of kindness on so many layers of schools' ecology, the researcher recommends that school leaders incorporate kindness education programming, such as the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*, into their contexts.

Limitations

Since this is a qualitative, phenomenological study, it may not lend itself to replicability or generalizability. Collection of the research is limited to educators willing to participate in the questionnaire. In addition, qualitative data may be subject to a variety of interpretations by the readers, including the researcher, which may lead to bias in interpretation of the data; researcher bias is especially likely as the researcher was the creator of the project. Finally, participants may have misinterpreted items on the questionnaire and not all participants may be articulate or perceptive.

This study may have been biased towards the adult educator perspective, and future research could attempt to validate the data with students through the use of focus groups and short answer questionnaires. There may also be discrepancies between what educators believe are the important and valuable components and outcomes of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*, and what students feel are the most important and valuable

components and outcomes, which calls for a more refined and student-centered study from the student point of view. Finally, tone can often be lost in text, so face-to-face in-depth interviews with various stakeholders including leadership in educational communities, parents and caregivers, and community members, would be valuable.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited in scope and methodology and therefore would warrant further research in order to more deeply probe the effects and impacts of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* on students, educators, educational contexts, families, and communities. The topics that follow would validate and further develop the findings of this study:

This study examined the answers of twenty-three educators who responded to the questionnaire; this study could be deepened by purposefully sampling three to five of those participants (or others who have implemented *Secret Kindness Agents Project*) for an in-depth interviews, focus groups, or case studies in another phenomenological study.

One of the emerging themes from the data was the issue of educator morale; the researcher recommends this theme as the focus of a study on the impact of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* on the morale of the staff and faculty of educational contexts in which the project has been implemented.

As the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* has only recently come to the attention of the national education community, it would useful to implement longitudinal studies on

school operational outcomes, as well as the impact of the project on families and surrounding communities.

Many participants alluded to improved behavior, happiness, and well-being of the students who participated in *Secret Kindness Agents Project*. For example they described shy students becoming more outgoing, a student with selective mutism beginning to speak again, an angry student becoming less angry, students who were “catty” becoming kinder and more understanding, and older students who bullied younger students becoming their friends. Therefore, the researcher proposes case studies about the impact of the project on students who live with behavior disorders, anger management issues, students living in difficult circumstances, and students from high-risk demographics in general.

This study was a purely qualitative, phenomenological study, so a mixed-methods study - both quantitative and qualitative - to explore the impact of the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* on various stakeholders and spaces would provide richer data.

The researcher recommends a more refined and student-centered study from the student point of view as the study may have been biased towards the adult educator perspective. There may also be discrepancies between what educators believe are the important and valuable components and outcomes of *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*, and what students feel are the most important and valuable components and outcomes. Therefore, future research could attempt to validate the data with students through the use of focus groups and short answer questionnaires.

The participants in this study were all educators who were in charge of implementing the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*. Replicating the study allowing for responses from other members of the school community, such as students, parents, caregivers, support staff, and administration would provide more validity and reliability to the study.

Conclusion

Regardless of geographical context, age group, or type of educational setting, it appears that educators are passionate about educating the whole child; they care about the hearts of their students as well as their minds. As varied as the participants in this study were in their geographical locations, the age groups of the students with whom they worked, and their educational settings, they were all united in the belief that kindness must be taught and modeled in schools, and they reported observing positive changes in themselves, in their students, and in their contexts.

This phenomenological research underlines the importance of teaching kindness in simple and profound ways, and shows that the *Secret Kindness Agents Project* was successful in positively impacting the experiences of students, educators, and others in their communities. The project's alignment with the Conceptual Map as well as the themes in the Literature Review suggest that it falls in step with other successful kindness education models. Therefore, there is also a call to explore in further depth and detail and in longitudinal studies the impact of this project from the perspectives of as many stakeholders in a school system's ecology as possible.

In a time when educators are regularly engaging in active shooter drills, going to trainings about cyberbullying, attending funerals of students who die by suicide, learning how to be trauma-informed educators, and spending chunks of time managing negative student behaviors, it is easy to succumb to hopelessness, fear, and negativity. Fortunately, there is another choice; that of looking for the positive in those around us, working from a strengths-based perspective, and preventing acts of bullying, violence, and dysfunctional behavior *before* they happen through kindness education programs like *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*. Kindness does not have to be a big production and it does not have to cost much time or any money. Educators and students, together, can change lives simply by performing random acts of kindness, from their hearts, anonymously, everywhere. According to the researcher's current records, there are over 350 schools, and hundreds of classrooms across the United States and in Canada, whose Secret Kindness Agents number in the thousands today. Every week, on average, someone else reaches out to say that they, too, have implemented the project, or to ask for guidance in starting their own SKA chapter. The *Secret Kindness Agents Project* has been acknowledged by Lady Gaga's *Born This Way Foundation*, by Hallmark's *Care Enough Initiative*, by *Teaching Tolerance Magazine*, the TEDx Talk has reached over 16,000 viewers, the Facebook page has more than 6,000 followers, and the book has sold several hundred copies. With so many kind souls of all ages making positive changes in the hallways of our school and amongst our neighborhoods, how can we not have hope for the future?

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Appendix A

Introductory Email

Greetings,

My name is Ferial Pearson (also known as Secret Kindness Agent Mama Beast) and I am working on my dissertation about *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*. I am studying education professionals' perceptions of changes in school or classroom climate change, students' experiences, and educators' experiences as a result of implementing *The Secret Kindness Agents Project*. The IRB Protocol is IRB # 440-17-EX.

I am emailing you because my records indicate that you are an educator who has implemented the project in the past, or whose staff members have done so, and I would like to invite you to participate in the following questionnaire about your experiences. Participation is voluntary, and your answers and identity will remain anonymous. You may share your Agent name if you'd like. If you are describing a student, please use the student's Agent name in order to protect their anonymity as well. The questionnaire should take approximately thirty minutes to complete.

If you have any questions at all, I can be reached at fpearson@unomaha.edu.

Thanks in advance for your help,

Ferial.

Appendix B

Electronic Questionnaire

1. What is your Secret Kindness Agent name?
2. How and when did you hear about the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*?
3. Describe what motivated you to implement the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*.
4. What is the age range or grade level of students with whom you work?
5. In what type of school/university/college did you implement the *Secret Kindness Agent Project*?
6. What is the city, state/province, and country where you implemented *Secret Kindness Agent Project*?
7. When and for how long did you implement the *Secret Kindness Agent Project*?
8. Describe how you implemented the project and customized it to fit your particular context.
9. Describe any changes you perceived in yourself as a result of doing the *Secret Kindness Agents Project*?
10. Describe any changes you perceived in your students who participated in the Project. Were there any students in particular who were affected strongly in any way by the project? Please use Secret Kindness Agent names to protect their anonymity.
11. Describe any changes you perceived within your classroom or school/university during and after implementing the Project?

12. Would you be interested in a follow-up interview in person, by telephone, or via Skype/Zoom/Facetime? If so, please share your email address below.

Appendix C

IRB Approval Letter ☺



NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

August 18, 2017

Ferial Pearson, M.S.
Education
UNO - VIA COURIER

IRB # 440-17-EX

TITLE OF PROPOSAL: Exploring educators' perceptions of implementing the Secret Kindness Agents Project in their schools

The Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) has reviewed your application for *Exempt Educational, Behavioral, and Social Science Research* on the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46.101b, category 2. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable HRPP Policies. It is also understood that the ORA will be immediately notified of any proposed changes for your research project.

Please be advised that this research has a maximum **approval period of 5 years** from the original date of approval and release.

If the research is completed prior to 5 years, please notify the Office of Regulatory Affairs at irbora@unmc.edu. If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

Signed on: 2017-08-18 14:29:00.000

Gail Kotulak, BS, CIP
IRB Administrator III
Office of Regulatory Affairs