

# Inclusive Online Learning: An Appreciative Inquiry

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*Abstract— In British Columbia, some families choose online digital or distance learning for their children’s education, and these children encompass students who require special funding to support additional learning or physical needs. An investigation can explore some of the phenomena within online digital and distance learning that may promote inclusive and positive environments for students. The questions within this investigation are derived from a research-based inclusive online digital and distance education framework and an appreciative inquiry framework. Using the methodology of qualitative narrative interviews with online digital and distance teachers, questions created using these frameworks can be analyzed for some of the constructs considered within inclusive and positive education. Within this study, these constructs are strength-based inclusion and self-determination. The research seeks to identify flourishing online practices to develop an inclusive and supportive online learning framework for students in British Columbia, ensuring equitable access to high-quality education for all.*

*Index Terms: digital, distance, online learning, inclusive and positive education.*

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## I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Within British Columbia (BC), the Ministry of Education and Childcare supports a range of learning environments for children and youth. These learning environments may be within schools, online learning, community-based programs, or hybrid programs [1]. The recent BC Online Learning Policy describes the modes of delivery, sets out the roles and responsibilities of public and independent schools providing online learning, and provides the guidelines for delivering this digital or distance education [1]. These guidelines aim to ensure all students have equitable, consistent access to high-quality, flexible education. Approximately 10 % of BC K-12 students choose an online learning school for their education either at home, a learning center, a community-based location, or a hybrid [2]. Within BC during the 2022–23 school year, there were 69 online learning schools, including 21 public, 16 independent, and 32 district schools, enrolling around 68,402 students [3]. There has been a consistent increase within the last ten years of students who require additional social, cognitive, or physical support choosing online digital and distance learning [4].

British Columbia’s special education policy stipulates an inclusive education system where students with special needs are integral members of the learning community [5]. Inclusion ensures all students have equal access to education, achievement, and excellence. It extends beyond placing students in regular classrooms, emphasizing meaningful participation and interaction with others. Further, the policy outlines the placement, planning, evaluating and reporting, accountability, and appeal process for inclusive student learning. A separate special education policy specifies that supplemental funds are available to support the “additional staff, specialized learning materials, physical accommodations or equipment, and assessments” [5]. It further explains that “funds are not targeted to specific

students; however, are provided to boards of education to support the needs of students within their district” [5]. Within the online mode of delivery, this additional funding is utilized within the student’s home or community experiences.

There is a gap in understanding how online learning environments support students requiring additional support. There is a lack of an application of a research-based framework that can identify what practices promote students to flourish. A qualitative narrative inquiry can address the following questions:

- 1) What are teachers' beliefs and experiences about flourishing practices when responding to the questions within the inclusive online digital and distance (IODDE) framework?
- 2) What are some of the phenomena supporting online learning environments that flourish?
- 3) Does the sharing, listening to, and analysis of appreciative narratives reveal practices that will support a flourishing online learning environment?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the intersection of inclusive online distance and digital education, strength-based inclusion, and the role of student self-determination in shaping effective learning environments. As digital education becomes more prevalent, especially for diverse learners, understanding how to foster inclusion through a focus on student strengths is critical. By examining how self-determination can enhance engagement and outcomes, this review highlights strategies for creating supportive and empowering online educational spaces for all students.

### A. Inclusive online distance and digital education

Following the pandemic, as all students within the K-12 systems were required to learn online for an extended time, Rice et al. developed a framework to better support diverse

learners within online learning environments [6]. Rice et al's review of the literature led to the development of a framework for understanding and assessing inclusive online distance and digital education (IODDE) [6]. Rice et al. propose that to provide high-quality online digital and distance education for K-12 students, especially those needing special education, a conceptual framework is required that integrates existing research [6]. This framework addresses learners' biological, psychological, and social needs, alongside policy and direct learner support. It emphasizes both digital and instructional access, ensuring success by comprehensively considering learners' diverse needs. Personalization and differentiation in online learning recognize cognitive differences and diverse learning rates, advocating for multiple pathways to engage and demonstrate learning [6]. Additionally, the framework recognizes the importance of both human and non-human drivers in creating inclusive online learning environments, acknowledging the limitations of traditional linear educational pathways [6].

### **B. Strength-Based**

Strength-based inclusion, rooted in the principles of positive psychology, is becoming widely adopted in K-12 schools in British Columbia, other parts of Canada, and globally. Positive psychology, as developed by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi [7], emphasizes the importance of positive subjective experiences such as well-being, contentment, and satisfaction with the past, fostering flow and happiness in the present, and cultivating hope and optimism for the future [7]. This approach focuses on nurturing individual strengths. Initially, positive psychology centered on human strengths and well-being, creating measures for concepts like life satisfaction and positive emotions [8]. Over time, research has acknowledged the interplay between positive and negative life experiences and the significance of cultural context [8]. There has been a growing focus on understanding well-being within dynamic, multidimensional frameworks, along with post-disciplinary approaches to addressing global challenges [8].

Wehmeyer [9], within the framework of positive psychology, examines the influence of the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (2001). This classification shifted the understanding of disability from an internal pathology to an interaction between an individual's abilities and their environment [9]. This paradigm shift emphasized enhancing personal capacity, modifying environments to support participation, and providing the necessary support for individuals to thrive in typical environments and activities. Taylor and Sailor further discuss the transition from the medical, deficit-based model of disability to a social model [10]. This approach shifts the focus from fixing student deficits to removing barriers in physical, social, and academic environments to promote success [10]. Positive

psychology interventions which integrate pedagogy with a strength-based approach, have been shown to enhance student well-being and academic performance [11]. A strength-based approach aims to increase students' proficiency, frequency, and self-regulation through interventions.

### **C. Self-Determination**

Wehmeyer explains that self-determination provides students the chance to take control of their lives and make decisions independently, rather than depending on others [9]. Students with disabilities who develop self-determination skills tend to experience better academic outcomes, improved quality of life, and higher levels of life satisfaction [9]. Ryan and Deci emphasize the role of competence, relatedness, and autonomy in self-determination theory [12]. They argue that autonomy fosters initiative and ownership in the learning process, which is supported by intrinsic motivation and hindered by external control. Competence involves mastering skills and experiencing growth, particularly in structured environments that provide feedback. Relatedness refers to the sense of belonging and mutual respect within the classroom, including relationships with teachers and peers. Self-determination theory evaluates educational environments based on how well they meet or impede these needs. Krettenauer and Curren further developed a self-determination theory focused on human motivation, development, and well-being [13]. Shogren et al. explore self-initiation, self-direction, and the influence of beliefs regarding the relationship between actions and goals, providing further context for understanding and supporting self-determined behavior [14].

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This investigation will use a qualitative approach as its method. It will gather evidence with appreciative narrative interviews from n=10 online digital and distance teachers. Inclusion criteria for participating teachers is that they are employed with one of the five online schools participating within the research study. The interview questions will be based on the IODDE and appreciative inquiry frameworks. Clandinin's work with narrative inquiry spans decades. She proposes that narrative inquiry emphasizes not only the celebration of personal experiences but also the investigation of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional contexts that shape and express these experiences [15]. An appreciative investigation seeks to identify what practices are promoting inclusion and flourishing so that these practices may be amplified. Narrative interviewing will create the space to appreciate a range of experiences. This narrative data can be analyzed for some of the phenomena supporting online learning environments that flourish. Clandinin shares that qualitative interviews begin and conclude with the narratives of the individuals involved and that narrative

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research investigates how people experience the world by living and telling their stories, employing techniques like listening, observing, participating, and interpreting texts [15]. It is from the experiences of online teachers that we can create a narrative to understand the phenomena within an online digital and distance environment.

Using an ontology rooted in social experience, the narrative interviews will provide a deep scope within the investigation. With an epistemology based on positive psychology, the investigation will highlight positive subjective experiences, including well-being, contentment, and satisfaction with the past [7]. It also emphasizes fostering flow and happiness in the present, while nurturing hope and optimism for the future. Clandinin explains that the goal is to enrich and transform these experiences for both individuals and others [15]. Adherence to these established parameters within qualitative research creates the conditions for the interviews within this investigation to generate credible findings. Within the design of this study, Whitaker's and Atkinson's interview guidelines [16] will be influenced by appreciative inquiry [17] and the compassionate systems approach [18].

Within this investigation, an appreciative approach seeks to uncover what is working within inclusive online learning environments so that these findings may be shared throughout BC online schools and amplify flourishing within this learning environment. A compassionate researcher seeks to create a 'generative social field' during the interview so that the online learning educators have clarity about how their teaching practice is flourishing and amplifies these practices for the benefit of the special needs learner, learning environment, and herself as a practitioner within this environment [19].

This study employs qualitative interviews with an interpretive approach, focusing on making meaning from shared information rather than uncovering absolute truths. The relationships developed between the researcher and interviewees are crucial for producing in-depth descriptive data and fostering empathetic connections to generate detailed descriptions of beliefs, perceptions, and experiences [20]. Each aspect within this robust list may uncover flourishing practice. Further, the relational aspects of interviews for data collection can intentionally mitigate a de-contextual analysis provided by 'big data' that may not capture nuances in inclusive online learning environments that support flourishing. Further, Roulston and Halpin describe interviews as "conversations with a purpose" designed to generate information for research questions [20]. By questioning interviewees, interviewers elicit descriptions often shared as stories.

Denzin proposes that interviews can be constrained by limitations in understanding and interpretation of narrative stories [21]. Within this study, this limitation is mitigated for two reasons: first, the researcher has experience as an

inclusive online educator and has gained the respect and trust of other online educators. Second, the researcher and interviewee can utilize shared language from within this field and about student support within special education. Further, the researcher and inclusive online teachers within the investigation have a vested interest in uncovering what is at the essence of the flourishing practice. Both the researcher and inclusive online teachers want to move beyond nuanced awareness to tangible observable identification of flourishing practices so that these practices can be used to mentor and benefit all online learners. Clarity for what is nuanced within flourishing practices is the underpinning of this research. Demystifying what works and describing flourishing practices with clear descriptors is essential to the investigation.

Another consideration within the design of this study is the influence of a narrative within the interview process. Rau and Coetzee discuss the role of stories to allow the narrator to make sense of their perceptions and to capture the human experience [22]. As Roulston and Halpin discuss the influence of accounts, beliefs, perspectives, opinions, and lived experiences to create meaning [21], Rau and Coetzee discuss the use of narrative to understand "how people experience their life worlds, including their sensory and emotional experience of phenomena and events; their thoughts, perceptions, and imaginings; their desires, intentions, and actions" [22]. In essence, if the experiences bring meaning, then the telling of these experiences through story has the benefit of further amplifying flourishing.

In addition to these considerations, is Eberle's exploration of the influence of phenomenology in qualitative research [23]. Eberle proposes a phenomenological hermeneutic approach that aims to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' life-worlds than the conventional method of treating interview transcripts as mere data. He emphasizes that phenomenological training heightens awareness of the subtle processes by which we construct meaning, thereby enabling a more profound understanding of others. Eberle's method encourages the collection of rich, diverse data beyond traditional interviews, including daily journals with detailed observations, photos capturing different phases of experience, recordings of interactions both in person and over the phone, personal notes, specialist documents, and deeply inscribed personal recollections [23]. This approach moves beyond simply transcribing interviews; it seeks to foster critical, collaborative dialogue to achieve a deeper comprehension of lived experiences [23]. Assessing teachers' beliefs and experiences about flourishing practices will require descriptive, empirical evidence different from that gathered through precise detailed representation of behaviour.

#### **A. Data Collection Methods**

The data for this investigation will be gathered from an

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interview with each teacher. The interview questions are part of the IODDE framework developed by Rice et al. [6]. The design of the questions will rely on positive presuppositions [17] to appreciate the aspects of inclusive online learning that promote flourishing. Below are the reframed interview questions based on the IODDE framework and appreciative inquiry.

*Biological, psychological, and social needs:* 1) What strengths and resources help learners feel safe and comfortable in their immediate physical environments? 2) How do collaborative efforts between educators, caregivers, and the community foster a supportive and secure environment for the child?

*Digital Access:* 1) What successful strategies has your online school implemented to ensure all students have access to devices and the internet, and how can these be expanded? 2) How can school advocates build on existing initiatives to further guarantee that all students have equitable access to devices and the internet?

*Instructional access:* 1) How have instructional materials successfully aligned with accessibility guidelines, ensuring that all learners can fully engage with the content? 2) In what ways do the instructional materials effectively capture and maintain student engagement? 3) How do the instructional materials positively reflect and celebrate diverse people and cultures with respect and inclusivity? 4) What ethical strengths and considerations emerge from the thoughtful use of these instructional materials?

*Learner support:* 1) Who are the key individuals contributing to the child's learning journey, and how are their efforts making a positive impact? 2) How can families and educators build on their existing strengths to collaborate even more effectively in supporting the child's growth and success?

*Policy support:* 1) What existing policies at various levels have been effective in supporting students, and how can we build on these successes? 2) Which policies offer opportunities for enhancement to better meet students' evolving needs and strengths?

## **B. Data Analysis**

This study will use the guidelines from Whitaker and Atkinson, and Creswell and Poth [24] for data analysis. Whitaker and Atkinson [16] refute the critics who do not support interviews as a reliable data collection method. They propose that interviews, like other social enactments, shape social realities and require performative, faithful analytic methods.

Creswell and Poth highlight that applying Moustakas's data analysis methods enhances the credibility of phenomenological research by thoroughly describing personal experiences through interviews and data sources [24],[25]. This involves identifying significant statements, grouping them into themes, and creating detailed textual and

structural descriptions of participants' experiences [24]. Key considerations for assessing the study's quality include the researcher's grasp of phenomenology, clear definition of the phenomenon, appropriate data analysis, and reflexivity throughout the research process [24]. These practices of credibility can provide an expectation for transferability which as noted by Connelly and Clandinin can replace validity and reliability in appreciative narrative research [26].

Kim outlines a systematic method for narrative analysis based on the work of multiple researchers [27]. This method will start with a color-coding approach, where similar information is grouped and marked with distinct colors. These codes will then be organized into broader categories representing various aspects of the data [28]. From these categories, the researcher will identify key themes, which will be examined for patterns to connect them to the research questions [27].

Following the thematic analysis, a narrative analysis will be conducted, first with a broadening approach that focuses on the participant's character, values, and social, cultural, and historical contexts, while also considering political, economic, technological, environmental, and legal factors [27]. The researcher will apply their broader knowledge [28] and place the findings within a historical framework [29]. Drawing from narrative methodologies, the analysis will explore participants' feelings, dilemmas, and significant life events. Finally, storytelling and retelling will trace the participant's narrative across time, enabling a deep understanding of the phenomena from the individual's viewpoint [29]. Kim acknowledges that in the process of distilling narrative evidence, researchers often shift back and forth within a document, weaving multiple threads together, as the sense of the whole story drives both the writing and the reading of the narrative [27]. A narrative can encourage others to engage, with shared insights inspiring fellow researchers to investigate similar perspectives [29].

## **C. Ethical Considerations**

Key ethical considerations for this research include obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring their confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study, and addressing potential researcher bias. The researcher will share the data analysis process with the interviewees to maintain transparency. This approach upholds ethical standards and promotes trust in the research process.

## **IV. DISCUSSION**

Investigating online learning environments for students requiring additional learning and health support through the lens of positive organizational scholarship can yield significant insights. Positive scholarship focuses on fostering dynamics like flourishing, resilience, and thriving [30]. In educational contexts, this approach encourages reframing challenges faced by students with additional needs as

opportunities for growth, creating an atmosphere where students can excel despite barriers. Educators and administrators can create more supportive, adaptable, and compassionate online learning environments by emphasizing virtuous practices and processes, such as institutionalized forgiveness and human sustainability. Appreciative inquiry, a key component of POS, helps identify and amplify the strengths within these environments, enabling the development of a positive framework that not only addresses challenges but actively promotes student well-being and success.

The concept of Compassionate Systems, as discussed by Boell and Senge further supports the investigation of online learning environments by highlighting the generative social fields that emerge when researchers and educators interact [19]. These fields, as Pomeroy and Herrmann explain, go beyond individual relationships, creating socio-psychological environments that shape collective experiences [31]. In the context of online education, acknowledging these relational fields allows for more intentional, compassionate engagement between teachers and students with additional learning and health needs. By fostering generative interactions and reciprocal relationships, educators can better understand and address the unique challenges faced by these students, leading to more inclusive and flourishing online learning environments.

#### **A. Expected Outcomes**

The study aims to develop an interview process tailored for online and distance educators to better understand effective practices for supporting students who need additional assistance. By identifying these practices, the research seeks to enhance the learning experience for these students in virtual environments. The study can contribute to improving educational outcomes and inclusivity in online learning.

#### **B. Dissemination Plan**

After conducting an initial series of semi-structured appreciative interviews, a refined methodology will be developed for broader application to other online education stakeholders. Once the teacher interviews are completed, the researcher can extend the process to include administrators, students, and families. This method, with an emphasis on its compassionate and generative qualities, can be mobilized through academic conferences or publications. The research findings, particularly those identifying practices that promote student flourishing in online learning environments, will be valuable for knowledge mobilization so students requiring additional support may flourish in all learning environments.

### **V. FUTURE RESEARCH**

As the study advances, the researcher aims to extract promising practices through appreciative narrative interviews, which will then inform the development of a

comprehensive rubric outlining criteria for quality and proficiency in online teaching. This rubric, grounded in the insights gained from the interviews, can be disseminated across provincial online schools to guide and enhance educational strategies for students requiring additional learning and health support. Moreover, this research opens the door for future comparative analyses, particularly between the inclusive online learning experiences of students in northern and rural British Columbia and those in more urbanized regions of the province. Such comparisons could reveal geographic disparities in access to resources, support systems, and overall student outcomes, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how location impacts online education. Ultimately, the findings could drive tailored interventions that address the unique needs of students across diverse regions, fostering equity in online learning environments.

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