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A Framework for Studying School Student-Family Reunification: Towards an Empathetic Approach to School Safety

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This theoretical paper proposes a conceptual and methodological framework for educational leadership to contribute to productive student-family reunification practices in school emergencies using politics of education literature and participatory design methods. A critical, scoping review of current reunification literature in disaster and emergency medicine research identified themes and needs in school emergency preparedness research. Findings from the critical review of family reunification literature indicate a need to understand families' epistemologies and ontologies in school emergencies. In particular, reunification researchers should make sense of how families are included in decision making processes and the impact of leaders on reunification policies and practices. As schools and communities design student-family reunification procedures, learning sciences approaches hold promise for ensuring their designs are equitable.

Every school shooting brings to light our continued struggle with protecting students in the United States. In particular, the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012 and Robb Elementary ten years later demonstrate our need to better understand the current practices for student-family reunification during crises (E. Douglas & Beeferman, 2022; Levenson, 2022; Williamson, 2022). Learning from the reunification experiences of the Columbine shooting, Sandy Hook Elementary, for example, had a secondary location off-site where students and families were reunited (Williamson, 2022). However, in both cases, many families of the shooting victims did not know their children had been killed until everyone else had been reunited (Candiotti & Aarthun, 2012; Yipp, 2022). Furthermore, some parents of the Robb Elementary victims were asked to provide DNA samples to help identify the remains of children who could not be visually identified (Levenson, 2022). This repeating of compounded trauma caused by family-student reunification practices leads us to ask how could new, empathic practices be created?

Learning from the history of responses to school shootings, educational leadership scholars and practitioners must consider the trauma families may experience as a result of school safety and crisis response practices if we are to develop more compassionate schools (Polizzi & Frick, 2023). In other words, our goal is to decrease further trauma of children and families from schools' own practices during an already disturbing experience. Truly, school

emergency management requires school leaders to be “tough-minded and tenderhearted” (Yoon, 2017, para. 3) in planning for and responding to school incidents. Instead of balancing between laws and individual liberties, ethical, empathetic educational leadership requires a human-centered approach for creating compassionate school safety practices.

As educational leaders face difficult procedural and axiological questions related to family reunification, schools and communities must learn together to develop new knowledge, perspectives, and practices for more empathetic school safety methods. This theoretical paper puts forward a conceptual and methodological framework for educational leadership to contribute to empathetic family reunification practices in school emergencies using politics of education literature (e.g., López, 2003) and participatory design methods (e.g., Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). Politics of education literature guides our framing for highlighting “who gets what, when, and how” (Lasswell, 1936). In other words, we are interested in who is involved in making decisions about student-family reunification processes, how, and with what consequences. More than simply *being involved*, participatory design methods illuminate and generate new forms of participation in an effort to create new systemic processes. An example of youth participatory action research, Bertrand (2018) demonstrates how youth’s involvement in decision making, project and research design, and research dissemination acted as a means of studying how youth power was or was not taken up by adults within the school. In this way, participatory design methods authentically engage voices who would not typically be involved in decision making processes. The combination of politics of education with participatory design methods allows us to build on the preceding research to imagine a new future of compassionate school safety through student-family reunification processes.

Our framework uses a learning sciences lens to propose studying learning in student-family reunification for impacting school and district crisis planning decision making through an empathetic approach. In this paper, we refer to student-family reunification as the process that schools and districts plan “to take before, during, and after an emergency to ensure students are reunited with their families” (REMS TA Center, 2023, para. 1). This learning approach can empower both the individual and the organizational learning that must occur when creating new social and organizational practices. Critical learning sciences research methods and theories expand the current research on family reunification by centering the experiences of those most impacted and bringing them authentically into decision making processes. This centering frame for reimagining and creating new student-family reunification processes is central for educational leaders and researchers in leading with love (Byrnes-Jimenez & Yoon, 2019). In other words, empathetic student-family reunification processes through a learning sciences lens de-centers organizational needs while deliberately focusing on the needs, goals, and values of the people most impacted by the process.

This paper proposes two frameworks – conceptual and methodological – for studying student-family reunification planning in schools from an ethical and empathetic perspective. The conceptual framework brings together school safety and emergency management literature with family involvement in schools to frame the topic of student-family reunification in schools. Then, we propose a methodological framework for co-designing a student-family reunification plan as a way of empathetically studying learning in school emergency preparedness.

We conducted a critical, scoping review (Sadler et al., 2010; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022) of literature to develop the conceptual and methodological frameworks for centering family epistemologies in school student-family reunification planning. Literature on family reunification, school emergency preparedness, and family involvement in schools was found through searching databases such as Google Scholar and ProQuest. Because there is little literature on this topic, we used terms such as “school safety,” “family reunification,” and “family school involvement” then added relevant terms based on found, peer-reviewed literature. Identified articles were thematically analyzed for similar and unique findings. Based on our politics of education and participatory design frames, articles were critically reviewed based on the groups involved in or missing from decision making, structural or social power dynamics, and the conceptualizations of leadership responsibilities by those impacted by decisions.

Conceptual Framework

Studying student-family reunification in order to both understand the impact of these practices and develop new, compassionate processes requires understanding how student-family reunification practices are situated within schools and the various kinds of roles families play in schools. In our proposed conceptual framework, we explore literature on school safety, family reunification, and family involvement in schools (see [Figure 1](#)). While student-family reunification is an element of school safety, the lack of school student-family reunification research prompted us to explore family reunification during disasters more broadly. Likewise, to understand how families are impacted by and impactful on school processes, family involvement literature sheds light on how these interactions center family experiences empathetically. From the reviewed literature in this conceptual framework, we then present a methodological framework that flows from these findings and centers empathy and compassion in school decision making.

School Safety

School safety is a broad concept for many practices and perspectives such as school resource, police, or security officers (SROs, SPOs, and SSOs, respectively); lockdown drills; social-emotional well-being; and physical accessibility. Although this paper focuses predominantly on the emergency management and preparedness aspect of school safety, we must also

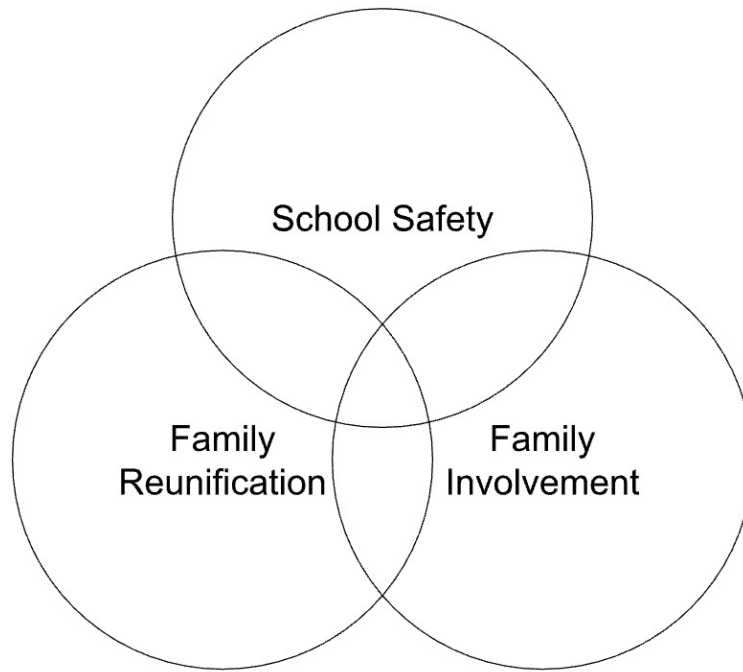


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework for studying school student-family reunification.

acknowledge the difficult history of this topic in the U.S. School safety was the supposed rationale for continuing school segregation even after the Supreme Court determined its unconstitutionality in 1954 (*Brown v. Board of Educ.*, 1954; D. M. Douglas, 2012; *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Educ.*, 1971). More than just keeping weapons out of schools, as has been the current focus of school safety measures, understanding and reflecting on the racist, transphobic, and unethical practices implemented in the name of “keeping children safe” allows educators to think critically and develop new ways of creating safer schools.

More recently, research has shown that some standard school safety programs, such as implementing SROs, may decrease some school crime violence while having no effect on guns in schools and increasing racially and (dis)ability disproportionate school discipline outcomes (e.g., Hoffman, 2014; Lcoe, 2015; Sorensen et al., 2023; Theriot & Orme, 2014; Yang et al., 2021). Despite being an ineffective or negatively effective practice, school leaders may still continue to implement such practices as an “easy” win to demonstrate continued efforts for keeping schools safe (Turner & Beneke, 2020). Indeed, centering race and other marginalized identities reorients how we define and assess school safety (e.g., Edwards, 2021). This reflection, in particular, guides our empathetic perspective towards identifying and developing new ways for student-family reunification. By attending to these cultural and historical power relations and dynamics in school safety, Mirra’s (2018) notion of “critical civic empathy” informs how school leaders and researchers may put themselves “into the perspective of another person” (Mirra, 2018, p. 4) to create ethical school safety practices. However, as

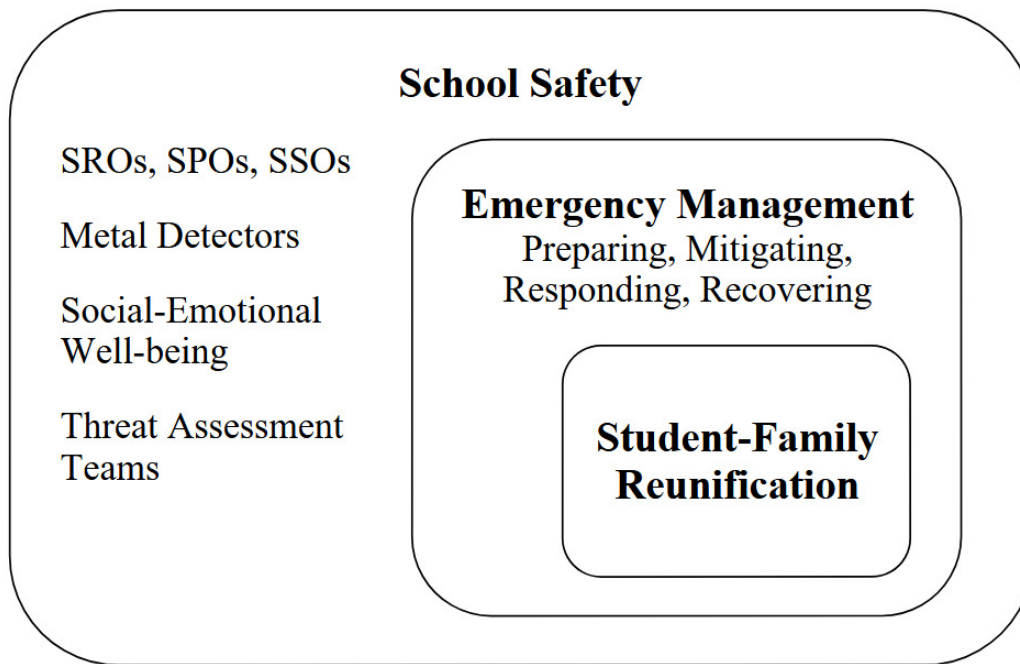


Figure 2. The connection between school safety, emergency management, and student-family reunification.

history has shown, unreflective empathy without considering power dynamics has led to racist, sexist, and transphobic practices for the sake of creating “safer schools.”

Emergency management is a specific aspect of school safety that focuses on preparing for, mitigating, responding to, and recovering from incidents such as fires, tornados, medical crises, or even shootings¹ (Figure 2; FEMA, 2020). An emergency may be as concentrated as a broken leg requiring an ambulance or as wide reaching as a hurricane affecting multiple states and school districts. The bedrock of emergency management is creating and reviewing the emergency operations plan (EOP). Some state-level educational policies refer to these as “safety plans” (e.g., Education Commission of the States, 2022, para. 4). This is the guide around which the emergency response for an organization will focus (Ready.gov, 2021). EOPs should be minutely detailed for all-hazard response and recovery for every organization involved in responding to the emergency: governmental and non-governmental. Furthermore, because emergency management and EOPs come from a firefighting and military lineage, there are specific terms (such as EOPs and mutual aid agreements) and cultural norms (such as neutrality; Sweeting & Haupt, 2023) that are appropriated into schools. Lastly, changes in school safety practices often occur because of a horrible incident, similar to how the 9/11 attack and Hurricane Katrina completely transformed the United

¹ Despite the mediatization of school shootings giving the perceptions that school shootings in the U.S. are regular occurrences, students are still more likely to die from diseases such as pneumonitis than being killed in a school (Kupchik et al., 2022). This does not negate the cultural and societal fear of school shootings, but instead reframes school shootings as a rare, albeit horrific, school emergency.

States homeland security and emergency management structures (Bullock et al., 2021). School safety, leaning into the social and historical aspects of emergency management, often appropriates and implements standard emergency management practices with good intentions.

Drills, for example, started in schools because of the Collinwood School fire disaster in 1908 which killed 175 people (Crosswy, 2016). With the increase in concerns of school shooters, more intense shooting drills and exercises have been incorporated into school emergency practices with conflicting impacts (e.g., ElSherief et al., 2021; Schildkraut & Nickerson, 2020). Drills, an important aspect of emergency preparedness, have become hotly debated due to stories of staff and student injury and traumatization occurring during these practices. Who makes decisions and their experiences, values, and beliefs impact whether or not they choose to implement firing blanks or dressing up as a school shooter during a drill. In other words, the topic of school safety has multiple cultural influences, has changed because of historical events, and is political by decision making power and influence.

A key element that is unique to schools compared to other governmental (and non-governmental) organizations is considering how to reunify students with their families. In their EOPs, schools and districts should have an annex that defines the student-family reunification plan including reunification sites, transportation, and means of authorizing adults for taking custody of students (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). Organizations like the I Love U Guys Foundation have created templates and guides for student-family reunification based on their experiences with school shootings and in collaboration with school emergency management experts (I Love U Guys Foundation, 2018). Beyond anecdotal accounts of student-family reunification during and after incidents, student-family reunification in schools is a significantly under-studied aspect of schools and educational leadership.

Family Reunification

With little empirical research on student-family reunification for schools, literature in disasters and emergency medicine provides a foundation for making sense of general family reunification processes. Children are more likely to have negative outcomes if they become separated from their parents during a disaster (Carney & Chung, 2017; Chung & Blake, 2014; Nager, 2009). Often, separated members connect on their own within a few hours of separation (Richardson et al., 2016). However, interrupted telecommunications and transportation services can make this automatic reunification difficult. Backup means of contact and reunification sponsored by governments (e.g., Richardson et al., 2016) or other organizations (e.g., Toma et al., 2012; Pearson et al., 2012) promote faster reunification. Therefore, organized processes for reunification positively impact reunification rather than strictly relying on organic means. Because schools

retain responsibility for students until they have been physically reunited with their parents/guardians, school leaders must carefully consider their reunification process to decrease time and stress.

Chung and colleagues (2012) surveyed emergency management professionals to identify preferred aspects to a child-family reunification tool. 85% of respondents indicated preference for showing unedited photographs of living children (with about half of these respondents also stating a preference for showing unedited photographs of deceased children), thereby showing parents the full extent of injuries for possibly increased identification rates (Chung et al., 2012, p. 159). However, a significant number of the respondents also indicated that viewing these unedited photos may be traumatic for parents, and only 40% of respondents indicated having children themselves (Chung et al., 2012, p. 158). Further research is needed on the goals of families in identification and reunification in addition to alignment or conflict with emergency management professionals' understandings. In particular, aligning goals of families, school leaders, and emergency responders likely promotes safer reunifications and emergency responses. For example, conflicting goals of families and emergency responders during the Uvalde school shooting likely led to families being restrained by police when attempting to enter the school (Kitroeff et al., 2022). Towards creating an empathetic, human-centered reunification process, school leaders must not only consider the impact on families but deeply understand the goals and needs of families for embedding them in the reunification process.

Furthermore, reunification methods may not be known or interoperable – shared amongst partnering organizations – during an emergency. After Hurricane Katrina, a significant number of children were evacuated to shelters in states different from their families (Blake & Stevenson, 2009; Gubbins & Kaziny, 2018). Therefore, partnering organizations such as schools and law enforcement must be aware of and abide by a shared student-family reunification process to avoid increasing undue stress and trauma on families and decrease unintentional interference by parents and guardians (Charney & Chung, 2017). Authentically including families in making decisions about the reunification process further extends how family goals are integrated beyond just school leadership to include first responders and their practices.

Sharing personal information about children may accelerate reunification but with the potential for privacy loss, especially in times of crisis. Charney and colleagues (2019) found that parents were willing to share some of their child's personal information with medical organizations for faster reunification in addition to expressing some concerns about information privacy. However, they found that Parents and Guardians of Color were more concerned about the security or misuse of personal information than White parents/guardians (Charney et al., 2019). Further investigation is needed regarding historically marginalized families and their involvement in

reunification processes to increase trust and ensure equitable and socially just practices, especially for schools with different regulations than medical organizations (e.g., FERPA and PPRA; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Lastly, ethical school safety requires navigating the complexities of laws and regulations with compassionate practices. The goal is always to reunify students and families safely and quickly when an incident occurs in a school. Unfortunately, as the Sandy Hook and Uvalde examples described in the introduction illustrate, student-family reunification is not always possible because of a student's death. Schools must, therefore, prepare for the eventuality of identifying and notifying families that their student has died during an incident on their campus. Laws and regulations regarding identification and notification that surround schools may prevent incorrect notification (e.g., notifying before complete identification) thereby limiting family suffering in these horrifying times. However, the same laws and regulations may also increase family suffering as they remain at the reunification site long after all the other reunited families have left. In the case of Sandy Hook, the Connecticut governor was eventually the one who overrode the regulations and notified the families that their children had died (Williamson, 2022). During an emergency, school leaders could be presented with a similar situation of ethically balancing following regulations with easing the suffering of traumatized students and families. Empathetic student-family reunification plans consider and detail how schools will compassionately notify families that their student has died on campus.

Family Involvement in Schools

Because of the limited student-family reunification literature, we examined studies looking at the effects and processes of family involvement in schools. Family involvement in youth's education, more commonly identified as parental involvement, has been associated with positive academic, behavioral, and social outcomes (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Park & Holloway, 2017), and therefore is considered best-practice for schools (Hamlin & Flessa, 2018; M. Smith, 2022). While the effects of parent involvement appear straightforward, the processes and means of parent involvement are complex, especially when considering the political nature of defining school safety. Parents that are involved in their children's education do so in both informal and formal ways, such as helping with homework, volunteering for field trips or being present in discussions about school policy. However, in a present-day context of attacks on teachers, curriculum, governmental leaders, and books pushed by certain parent groups representing a small number of parents, such as Moms for Liberty, parental involvement has taken on a new connotation; one that can hinder children's education and create inequitable and harmful learning environments for students (Dier et al., 2022). This highlights how the implementation and implications of family involvement can be complicated by the characteristics, decisions, and beliefs of school leaders, teachers, and parents along with broader cultural and socio-economic factors. Empathetic school leadership, through the lens of

critical civic empathy, “is about imaginatively embodying the lives of our fellow citizens while keeping in mind the social forces that differentiate our experiences as we make decisions about our shared public future” (Mirra, 2018, p. 7). With this context, research in parent-school relationships must consider how parents can be involved in ways that support an equitable classroom and school environment.

Overall, literature involved in improving positive parental involvement looks at how parents can become involved in the schools, how students benefit from parental involvement, and ways that educators and policy makers can improve parent-school relations (Epstein, 2008). In connection to school safety and culture, research around parental involvement focuses on two main areas: investigating how parental involvement influences certain aspects of school culture or student life and exploring how and why parents become involved in schools through relationships and policy.

Investigating the relationship between parental involvement and school safety, studies have shown that parental involvement tends to be associated with lower crime and violence in schools. Hamlin and Li (2020), focusing on “disadvantaged urban neighborhoods” (p. 366) using the School Survey on Crime and Safety, found that formal parent volunteering was associated with lower crime and violence in schools, as well as lower bodily harm. Lesneskie and Block (2017) found in a correlational study that while parental involvement, school climate, and informal community involvement were all associated with lower levels of school violence, school security was associated with higher levels, and formal community involvement was not associated at all.

Research focusing on how and why parents become involved in schools has explored what aspects of individuals, cultures, environments, and school policy influence parental involvement. While school security measures like security guards, metal detectors, or sign-in areas are associated with a decrease in parental involvement (Mowen, 2015), invitations from teachers, parent self-efficacy, levels of resources (Anderson & Minke, 2007), and parent trust (Adams et al., 2009) were associated with an increase in parental involvement. Epstein (2008) and Hamlin and Flessa (2018) have developed policy models for increasing parental involvement in schools, which include communication and partnerships between schools and communities, inclusion in school decision making, and support for family and student well-being. Ishimaru (2014b) suggests a more equity-focused model related to district-community collaboration by including parents’ participation as educational leaders, understanding goals as a shared responsibility between schools and communities, building relationships as a primary method for change, and understanding educational reform as a political process that considers the communities and contexts those schools are in.

When seeking to include parents and communities, school leaders should move beyond an apolitical process of education reform to consider equity issues, including aspects of race, class, and immigration that could affect how

parents are involved in schools, both formally and informally (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). This includes avoiding deficit approaches toward non-dominant parents and students when considering what might impact parental involvement (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013) or how the traditional or normative role of parents within different communities may be in tension with normative methods for building and understanding parent-school trust and involvement (Ishimaru, 2014a). For example, non-dominant groups tend to be more informally involved with their children's education instead of more normative and formal involvement that can be expected from parents (e.g., chaperoning field trips, participating in children's sports, volunteering to help with other school activities). By working with communities and parents to understand the ways they are and want to be involved in their children's school, school leaders can better develop and implement policy toward parental involvement.

Across the literature around parental and community involvement, most scholars seem to agree that encouraging involvement of families in their children's education and school has positive outcomes for both students and schools across academics, safety, and school culture. However, the implementation of family involvement can be complicated by the characteristics, decisions, and beliefs of school leaders (Mowen, 2015), teachers (Anderson & Minke, 2007), and parents (Adams et al., 2009) along with broader cultural and socio-economic factors.

Synthesizing School Safety, Parental Involvement, and Family Reunification

While school safety is one facet of school policy, the increased mediatization of school crises including school shooters has promoted more attention to this aspect of schooling. Every family expects that their students will come home safe and whole at the end of every school day. Indeed, as *in loco parentis*, schools are expected to act in the place as parents until the student is returned or reunified with their family. Because of this, schools cannot, like other organizations, assume that students and families will organically reunify by themselves, but rather must create an explicit process for reunification. As a vital piece of school safety planning, student-family reunification exemplifies the direct impact of school practices on students and families. Considering family norms, values, and equity when designing and implementing a reunification process, builds, or builds off of, a trusting school-family relationship in a traumatizing situation. In this way, the high stress environment surrounding family reunification can magnify already existing relationships or tensions in ways that impact the potential ethical school safety practices. The Uvalde parents arrested for attempting to rescue their children from the building represent potentially disconnected relationships and practices that compounded the suffering and trauma experienced that day. With the research supporting positive outcomes from

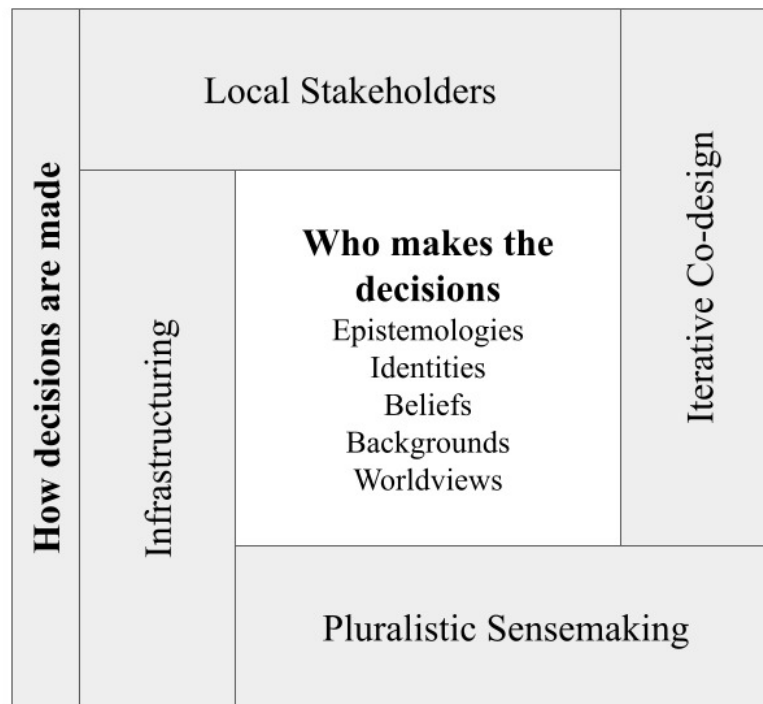


Figure 3. Proposed methodological framework for studying school student-family reunification.

family involvement in schools generally, involving families and students in decision making of reunification practices is consistent with school safety, family reunification, and family involvement literature.

Methodological Framework

Student-family reunification processes are one aspect within school emergency preparedness (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, 2019). Building on the conceptual framework of school safety, family reunification, and family involvement in schools, we propose a methodological framework for studying the development of student-family reunification practices. This methodological framework has two parts: who makes the decisions and how decisions are made (see [Figure 3](#)). Based on the scoping review in the conceptual framework, whether or not families are included in the decision-making process likely impacts the kinds of student-family reunification practices that are implemented. Likewise, how the decision-making process occurs, such as including families authentically or in an advisory capacity, impacts the resulting practices. Specifically, co-design methods using participatory design research (e.g., Bang & Vossoughi, 2016) and design-based implementation research (Fishman & Penuel, 2018) frame our approach to studying the decision-making process. In this way, we propose studying the development of who is involved and how decisions are made for understanding the social and organizational learning in student-family reunification.

Developing ethical and compassionate school safety practices means developing something new. This requires individual and organizational change, or learning. Learning sciences provides a productive approach not

only to studying that learning, but also to developing new practices in an empathetic and ethical way. We view individual and organizational learning (Huber, 1991) through collaborative design (co-design) as a form of learning through changed perspectives, knowledge, and practices. This understanding of learning also encompasses the relationships and interactions (Barab & Duffy, 2000) amongst all those impacted by decision making. Because of the limited research on school student-family reunification, we lean on the broader school emergency preparedness literature in addition to family involvement and the politics of education research – which focuses on who is involved in educational decision making and with what subsequent effects (López, 2003) – to inform this framework. Findings from the scoping review of family reunification literature, as described in the conceptual framework, indicate a need to understand family epistemologies and ontologies in school emergencies. Indeed, there is a strong need to authentically bring historically marginalized families into school emergency preparedness decision making for organizational learning.

More than just the demographics of decision makers, learning sciences literature provides a lens for understanding the cultural and epistemological heterogeneity of individuals and organizations in the creation of policies and practices that have farther reaching impacts. In this way, educational leadership and school student-family reunification research benefits from synthesis with learning sciences concepts and methodologies when centering trauma-informed practices in order to decrease student and family suffering in schools.

Who Makes Decisions

Best practices for school emergency preparedness recommend that “all stakeholders be part of the [planning] process from the beginning, including first responders, community partners, parents, students, staff, and those who represent the interests of persons with disabilities and others with access and functional needs” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, p. 3). Regular and sustained meetings between individuals can increase willingness to share new learnings (Redding et al., 2018). Indeed, the code of ethics for emergency managers further undergirds this point by highlighting the importance of having trusting relationships in planning for and responding to emergencies (FEMA, 2022; S. M. Smith & Feldmann-Jensen, 2024). More than just right and wrong or legal and illegal, school safety ethics, therefore, embraces empathetic and human-centered approaches to caring decision making.

As Barab and Duffy (2000) note, “Work is collaborative and social. Meaning is a process of continual negotiation” (p. 97). Participants interact with each other and with materials such as policies, processes, and artifacts. Participants bring personal experiences (Chen, 2020; Rosebery et al., 2010), prior knowledge (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2018), epistemologies (Marin, 2020), and culture (Lee et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020) into this social space. Participant identities influence the interactions and sensemaking negotiation. These identities are further developed

throughout interactional negotiation such as adjusting shared understandings of the role of law enforcement, school staff, and even parents in school emergencies. By including parents in decision making, new school safety practices may create new ways in which school staff and parents collaborate, thereby re-defining the identities of being a “parent” or “school staff member.” In other words, an individual’s identity cannot be disentangled from their interactions and decision making while concomitantly changing throughout those interactions.

School leaders do not make decisions in a vacuum even in an emergency. Beliefs (Trujillo, 2013) and understanding of content (Spillane, 2000) influence decision making by school and district leaders. A leader’s sensemaking is further complicated by the social context in which it occurs (Rinehart Kathawalla & Mehta, 2022; Spillane et al., 2002). Consequently, who is involved in the decision-making influences policies, initiatives, and how they are implemented within a school or district (Kano & Bourque, 2008). Therefore, interactions between school and non-school individuals involved in the student-family reunification process will impact how a leader understands and makes decisions about this process. Likewise, larger organizational contexts and interorganizational negotiations add to this complex decision-making situation (Spillane et al., 2002). School leaders may lean strongly on emergency management and law enforcement knowledge and practices under the belief that those organizational actors have more “expertise” in school emergencies.

Parent/guardian participation presents an under-researched aspect of school safety and emergency preparedness. Increased parent involvement in schools is correlated with decreased school crime and violence (Hamlin & Li, 2020). Parents may be more involved in advisory committees or developing safety plans but may not be involved in training or actual exercises (Kano et al., 2007). Simultaneously, public knowledge of a school safety plan, including the student-family reunification process, is feared by many school and emergency response leaders to decrease the overall safety of a school or district (discussed more later). However, not including families in the preparedness process goes against recommended best practices; potentially misses out on important information from parents/guardians; and may further the marginalization of certain groups of students and families. In terms of empathetic school leadership, then, the exclusion of parents in school safety decision making directly contradicts leading with love (Byrns-Jiménez & Yoon, 2019). Authentically including parents in making decisions about school safety practices, then, likely has a positive and equitable impact on the whole school climate in addition to which and how school safety practices are implemented.

School leaders influence implementation throughout the whole district including deciding who is involved (e.g., Honig et al., 2017; Leithwood et al., 2004). Interaction with and inclusion of students and parents/guardians renegotiates their involvement by reshaping policy and practices for future

decision making, even beyond school safety and emergency management. More than just school leaders *putting themselves in the shoes* of students and families (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022), the direct inclusion of families in decision-making may result in decreased school violence and increased positive school climate and culture. Therefore, studying student-reunification plan implementation through understanding who is at the table, their backgrounds and worldviews, and who is missing from the table, allows researchers and practitioners alike to study and reflect on the messy, complex nature of school decision making through an empathetic, equity-oriented frame for building more compassionate practices.

In our current research project interviewing school safety leaders, they have openly talked about the desire and difficulties of including families in updating Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) generally, including student-family reunification plans. While they often collaborate with their local emergency response agencies such as fire, police, and emergency management, they struggle with finding the time and space for bringing parents to the table for reviewing and revising the safety plans. This exclusion is not through any malicious attempt of their own, but their own difficulties in balancing the requirements to have a safety plan in place, their understanding of the best practices for including stakeholders as discussed above, and the regret about not being able to find a timely, responsive way for including parents because of work and school schedules. Their unhappiness about the imbalance of these three pieces supports our argument that who is authentically at the decision-making table is a necessary requirement for any compassionate school safety plan.

How Decisions are Made

Participatory design methods provide a way for authentically supporting equity-oriented decision-making processes for school emergency preparedness research. We draw upon both participatory design research (e.g. Bang et al., 2010; Bang & Vossoughi, 2016) and design-based implementation research (DBIR; Fishman & Penuel, 2018) as methods of inquiry in student-family reunification processes. We weave these two sets of methods together through four methodological principles (see [Figure 3](#)): local stakeholders, iterative co-design, pluralistic sensemaking, and infrastructuring.

Participatory design research is the family of research that includes (youth) participatory action research (PAR/YPAR; e.g., Bertrand, 2018), research-practice partnerships (RPPs; Farley-Ripple et al., 2018), and even community-based design experiments (Bang et al., 2010). Broadly speaking, participatory design research deliberately brings traditional research participants into the research decision making process. This strategic restructuring of power is consequential towards creating new relationships, practices, and futures that were previously unimaginable in the traditional research dynamic. While similar to participatory design research, DBIR typically focuses on the systemic implementation for organizational change and learning (Fishman & Penuel, 2018). Infrastructuring, as a key element of

DBIR, examines the ways in which a newly designed change can be effectively brought into already existing organizational processes or if those processes must also be modified. The cohesion of upending power dynamics with organizational learning provides the foundation for the four principles of our framework, as explored below.

Local Stakeholders. First, school emergency preparedness is a horrifically persistent problem of practice in United States schools. Compassionate school leaders planning for school emergencies will seek to understand and alleviate their communities' suffering during a future incident (Polizzi & Frick, 2023). As the social context of each school and district is unique, the design of the student-family reunification plan must be situated in the knowledge and interactions of the local stakeholders (Fishman & Penuel, 2018). Not including families — particularly historically marginalized families — authentically in the design process at best perpetuates that historical marginalization and, at worst, increases stress and trauma in the event of a school emergency. Therefore, this methodology must understand and seek to disrupt traditional power dynamics whereby those most impacted (e.g., families) by decisions are not part of the decision-making process (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Engeström, 2011). In this disruption, decision making participants then imagine new futures and infrastructure both within existing or reimagined processes (Penuel, 2019b).

Iterative Co-design. Second, as with all school initiatives, this co-design process must be tested, reviewed, and re-designed iteratively (Fishman & Penuel, 2018). Knowledge about emergencies and relationships amongst school, families, and emergency partners will change over the design process. Similarly, as other changes occur within schools and emergency partner organizations, new and redesigned processes will impact emergency preparedness generally and the student-family reunification process specifically. Therefore, ensuring continued collaborative re-design requires utilizing equitable access to involvement such as for working parents/guardians (Ishimaru, 2014; Penuel et al., 2020). Iterative co-design not only brings partners together authentically, but also reifies the perpetual process of individual and organizational learning necessary for (re)building ethical school safety practices.

Pluralistic Sensemaking. Third, school personnel may lean strongly into emergency partners' knowledge and epistemologies as this work is not the typical day-to-day of schools. School leaders, like all people, actively make sense of their world. Spillane (2000) presents one framework for unpacking how an individual makes sense for decision making. This sensemaking theory triangulates individual cognition (e.g., prior knowledge and experiences), the local social situation (e.g., social interactions and community), and the policy environment (e.g., regulations) as the primary lenses through which a school leader makes sense of their world. However, in the situation of school safety, where a school leader may not have a strong background, leaning on others' expertise (e.g., social situation) in connection with state law

(e.g. policy environment) makes sense for understanding and implementing various practices. This approach risks funneling school emergency preparedness through one epistemological lens rather than developing pluralistic sensemaking (Rosebery et al., 2010). For example, leaning strictly on the view that the best school safety drills are those closest to a real situation perpetuates engaging in practices such as having a fake shooter which may exacerbate unnecessary trauma for students, staff, and families rather than promote positive readiness. Therefore, careful attention must be paid to fully understanding families' epistemologies and ensuring their decision-making power within the co-design process (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). This process will require intense relationship- and trust-building (Denner et al., 2019), especially with populations of historically marginalized communities or with a history of government distrust. Therefore, schools and their partners must be prepared to take the time necessary for building an authentic partnership with families (Penuel, 2019a). By emphasizing pluralistic sensemaking, particularly of family epistemologies, human-centered school safety practices holistically synthesize the understandings, goals, and needs of all the stakeholders involved in school crises.

Infrastructuring. Fourth, co-designing the student-family reunification process with an eye on infrastructuring the process into existing practices or by redesigning existing practices promotes sustainability (Fishman & Penuel, 2018) and disrupts systemic inequities (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). Deliberately designing a new practice to fit into existing practices or redesigning those existing practices is not limited to technical organization processes such as a particular curriculum or bell schedule. More nebulous social infrastructures such as school climate and culture or student-teacher-family relationships both impact and are impacted by implementing something new. Therefore, reflectively analyzing the current social, technical, and organizational infrastructures that support or hinder new efforts is necessary for developing a new, compassionate school safety future. During an emergency, staff, students, families, and emergency response partners must be able to quickly activate all necessary processes with only a moment's notice. This activation requires shared knowledge and trusting relationships amongst individuals for collectively engaging in the processes (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). For example, parents and guardians who do not understand or do not trust school or emergency personnel may inadvertently create interference. Concurrently, implemented practices that are not compassionate may compound already occurring trauma and suffering for students and families. The co-design process, then, promotes creating new processes systemically so as to minimize trauma and increase effectiveness.

One important ethical consideration of studying decision making in student-family reunification is keeping safety and emergency plans secure. Keeping school safety plans secure comes from the fear that public access to these plans will soften schools as potential targets and make potential

incidents more deadly and damaging. This perspective has been particularly highlighted after the Parkland shooting, where a false narrative² about the shooter using knowledge of the school's security plan for his attack spread (Schildkraut et al., 2022). This consideration, however, must remain responsive to family involvement in school safety planning rather than overshadowing any authentic, deeply impactful family interactions thereby reinforcing harm and suffering either in the case of school incidents specifically or general notions of family involvement in schools. Ultimately, school leaders should ask themselves, "Are we addressing the needs of others with empathy and compassion?" (Smith & Feldman-Jensen, 2023, 2024, "Utilizing and Ethical Lens" model) during school safety decision making. This self-reflection question reframes the security versus rights debate of balancing liberties (Kettl, 2014) to a compassionate stance that emphasizes human-centered, trauma-informed approaches for researchers and practitioners alike.

Significance and Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed a conceptual and methodological framework for studying empathetic student-family reunification practices and their development in schools. The conceptual framework brings together literature in school safety, family reunification, and family involvement in schools to unpack each of these elements and their interaction in school student-family reunification practices and implementation. By considering the impacts of school culture, safety policies, families, and school leaders within each of these bodies of literature, researchers can help build new compassionate student-family reunification practices. Building from our conceptual framework to expand this literature, we developed a methodological framework that studies creating new, compassionate school safety practices.

In particular, the cultural and historical nature of school safety, the role of emergency professionals in decision making, and the impact of family involvement in schools launched our methodological framework in two ways. First, to study student-family reunification, we must understand who is involved in the decision-making process for implementing these practices. Second, how decisions are made through a co-design process can particularly promote empathetic school leadership and decision making. Understanding the traumatizing impact of school practices during a school emergency empowers more compassionate school leaders to decrease the suffering already occurring during these events.

This framework is anticipated to generate practical lessons for supporting student-family reunification for all students and families both for schools and in emergencies more broadly. Through the interaction and negotiation

² Like implementing school safety practices that have not withstood research evaluation (see our discussion of SROs in the School Safety section of this paper), we believe that this narrative is influential because it is "easy" to see someone using a school safety plan for planning an attack, thus reaffirming this fear.

of sensemaking in co-design, educational leadership literature is extended to studying how beliefs, epistemologies, knowledge, and values are infrastructured in organizational learning. Furthermore, this framework provides a novel way of studying the influence of school leaders and how they situate their own knowledge and experiences for ethical and compassionate decision-making regarding partnerships and non-standard activities such as emergency preparedness. Lastly, recentering who and how decisions are made in student-family reunification planning promotes leading through love (Byrnes-Jimenez & Yoon, 2019) and reifies the central role schools play in supporting physically, mentally, and socially healthy communities.

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