DIGNITY AND DISCOURSES: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES FROM THE HUMAN DIGNITY CURRICULUM

Mark B. Pacheco, Jared C. McKee, and Yi Lai
University of Florida

This phenomenological study examines the ways in which 55 upper-elementary and middle grades students in the US and Canada frame human dignity after participating in the Human Dignity Curriculum. Using Gee's theoretical framing of *Discourses*, it examines what human dignity is for students, and how student perceptions of human dignity shape views of the self and of others. Analysis of students' semi-structured interviews shows students describing human dignity as *universal,* as *inherent and irrevocable,* and as *differentiating and valuable*. Students further described human dignity as mediating relationships with varied Discourses, thus reflecting students' agency. The study concludes with implications for research and other pedagogies that seek to promote students' knowledge and awareness of human dignity, as well as related concepts.

In recent years, educational researchers across content areas have addressed how classrooms can—and should—recognize students' dignity, including mathematics (Scott & Philip, 2023), science (Sengupta-Irving et al., 2022), and bilingual education (Poza et al., 2022). Though there are differing understandings of what this dignity entails, Espinoza and colleagues (2020) argue that religious and secular viewpoints converge in framing it as critical for cultivating a student's "mind, humanity, and potential" (p. 2). For educators in 21st century classrooms, however, explicit instruction about human dignity faces distinct challenges. Few curricular models directly teach about human dignity (see Hantzopoulos, 2016 for an example), and stakeholders hold a range of views of what should comprise such instruction (Tapola, 2011). Recently, Valdés (2022) notes distinct difficulties in developing students' understandings of dignity in current accountability and testing environments, as well as challenges teachers face supporting learning about this important concept across linguistic and cultural divides.

The present study addresses how teachers might teach about human dignity by eliciting the voices of those affected most by such instruction—students themselves. Given the importance of structuring instruction that responds to and builds on student perspectives and experiences (Gay, 2018), we examine what human dignity entails for upper elementary and middle grades students. We do this by investigating the relationships between human dignity and the varied Discourses, or "ways

• **Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:** Mark B. Pacheco, mpacheco@coe.ufl.edu

Journal of Character Education, Volume 20(1), 2024, pp. 19–32 ISSN 1543-1223
Copyright © 2025 Emerald Publishing Limited All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

of talking, listening, writing, reading, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and feeling" (p. 140, Gee, 2001) that students index within their speech. We examine *what* human dignity is in relation to students' identities, and then, *how* this concept mediates interactions with others. We ask:

1. From the perspective of students, what is human dignity?
2. How do their perspectives on human dignity shape their experiences, if at all?

In what follows, we describe recent work that addresses student perspectives on human dignity, and then detail examples of responsive instruction that build on these perspectives.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN DIGNITY

Scant work addresses the ways that students view human dignity in upper elementary and middle grades (ages 10–15), with most research taking place in secondary and university contexts. Kleindienst (2022), for example, documents how 17- and 18-year-old students in public and private high schools associate human dignity with how one treats and is treated by others, and identify it as "the uniqueness of the human being" (p. 353). In research with undergraduates and professional students, learners have been shown to hold varied understandings of dignity in relation to their specific disciplinary contexts. Nursing students, for example, frame human dignity as essential for not only interacting with patients, but critical aspects of their professional identities (Mullen et al., 2019). King and colleagues (2021) also detail nursing students' distinct perspectives on dignity. They then extend their analysis to capture ways in which undergraduates across varied disciplines—including business, teaching, counseling and law—exhibit differences in their conceptualizations of dignity, but share an understanding of its importance despite challenges in articulating its role.

Though little research captures early adolescents' perspectives on human dignity, a small body of work depicts their complex views on similar concepts. Hagá and Olson (2017) show how 11-year-olds differ from younger children in their perspectives on *humility*, with older students describing it as both desirable and virtuous. Binfet and Passmore (2019) illustrate similarly nuanced views from students, describing how eighth-graders differed from 4th and 5th grade students in their views of *kindness*. Ettekal and colleagues (2015) document the ways in which 7th grade students regard *respect* as multi-dimensional, including respect for others, for culture, and for language. This work highlights the possibility of increasingly nuanced views of human dignity as students progress through school, and moreover, a stark scarcity of attention to students in early adolescence, an important time for students' intellectual and moral development (see Malin et al., 2017; Wagner, 2019).

While this empirical literature has not directly examined student views of human dignity, research has explored the various instructional approaches that attempt to cultivate students' knowledge of dignity and awareness of its role within their lives, These pedagogies may approach human dignity as *instrumental*, in which human dignity is one node in a constellation of ideas that inform a larger curriculum (e.g., Helmich, 2009; Reardon, 1995). In Hantzopoulos' (2016) model, for example, human dignity is an "underlying and generative principle that defines the enactment and purpose of human rights education" (p. 20). These pedagogies may also position human dignity instruction as *intrinsic*, or an end in and of itself. Kleindienst (2022), for example, depicts the ways that human dignity is explicitly and implicitly taught as part of Catholic social teaching. For both approaches that teach about human dignity and its importance, student perspectives can be powerful resources in shaping future instruction, as detailed below.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

BUILDING ON STUDENT PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES

Responsive instruction includes ways that teachers can build on the linguistic, cultural, and academic strengths that students bring with them to their learning (Gay, 2018). Over the last 30 years, research has described this as *culturally sustaining* or *relevant pedagogy* (Paris, 2012); as recognizing students' *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al., 2006); and as *student-centered* or *constructivist instruction* (see Handsfield, 2015 for a review), amongst other names. While these pedagogies stem from varied epistemic traditions (e.g., sociocultural or cognitive perspectives on learning), they position students' experiences and epistemologies as integral to learning.

In content instruction, student experiences can be powerful resources in shaping effective instruction, including mathematics, science and literacy instruction. In literacy classrooms, for example, research has long shown how instruction can build on students' experiences using language within different discourse communities (Lee, 1995) to help them make sense of academic language and new literary concepts. Research has also shown how teachers can leverage students' participation and interest in different affinity groups when structuring classroom activities (Moje et al., 2008), and instruction can invite students' literacy practices into the classroom, including religious and family literacy activities (Baquedano-López, 2004).

Along with building on student experiences, Jaber and colleagues (2018) describe the importance of recognizing and building on students' ways of constructing knowledge. They describe *epistemic empathy*, or "the act of understanding and appreciating someone's cognitive and emotional experience within an epistemic activity" (p. 14). The authors outline different ways that understanding student experiences can shape instruction, including noticing and building on patterns in student sense-making, finding merits in students' ideas, and anticipating possible challenges. Warren (2018) describes a similar process of understanding student thinking through teachers' *perspective taking,* a process of "information gathering that can be used to drive subsequent professional decision-making" (p. 175). For example, Mary and colleagues' (2017) research in literacy instruction shows how teachers' elicitation of student perspectives on *courage* in class discussion can shape not only their understanding of this virtue within a text, but within their own character development.

Given the value of building on students' experiences, we seek to understand student perspectives on human dignity, and then, how this concept mediates different activities and interactions in their lives. We align our work with a long tradition of scholarship that elicits student voices to shape future instruction, echoing Dewey (1997) who describes "educators [who] scout ahead 'to see in what direction an experience is heading' (p. 38) and assess its potential for growth toward particular ends" (p. 36). One such "particular end" of learning about student perspectives is the relationship between dignity and agency, which we discuss in the following.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CAPITAL D DISCOURSE AND AGENCY

Varied perspectives of *agency* have informed educational research, including cognitivist framings where agency is self-efficacy in light of personal, affective, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1989); constructivist approaches where agency includes ways that individuals act purposefully within distinct social contexts or fields (Bourdieu, 1991); and critical approaches where agency is the ability to make and remake the self in relation to power (Holland, 2001).

Our framing of agency for this study builds on Gee's (2008) concept of "Capital D Discourse," which are ways of being, talking, thinking, and acting that index a particular

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

identity within a group. Agency includes an individual's ability to act within and shape Discourse communities. On the one hand, this requires an individual's awareness of their own ways of thinking and doing, which have been informed by experiences with prior Discourses (Gee, 2008). On the other hand, an agentic individual is aware of the different ways of acting that are valued within a new Discourse, or the community within which that individual might interact. From this perspective, agency is the ways in which an individual can participate in and shape the varied Discourses that they interact with and participate in. For an upper elementary grades student, this might include interacting with Discourses across peer groups, with new Discourses that characterize classroom learning within different academic disciplines, and with Discourses within families and communities.

Essential to an individual's agency within these Discourses are the resources that mediate their interactions and relationships. Resources may be physical, such as a student's facility with using a number line when learning to add and subtract. Resources may also be conceptual tools (see Grossman et al., 1999 for an extended discussion), such as a students' understanding of place value when adding large numbers. In both examples, resources facilitate the students' participation in a mathematics classroom Discourse community, a setting in which manipulating numbers is critical for participation. In our study, we examine students' perspectives on human dignity with the idea that these perspectives may serve as conceptual tools, or resources for shaping how students might view themselves, and similarly, how they interact with different Discourses.

THE STUDY

This study consists of an analysis of 55 interviews with upper elementary and middle grades students (grades 5–8, ages 11–14) in two schools in the US and Canada. The study uses phenomenological research methods which aim to identify an essence, or what van Manen (1990) calls "the very nature of the thing" (p. 177). We worked towards this goal by eliciting student descriptions of the phenomenon—in this case, human dignity—and then how they experience it (Moustakas, 1994). We first establish a *textural description*, or account of the different descriptions of human dignity offered by students, and then a *structural description*, or account of how human dignity shaped and was shaped by student experiences. All names of schools and students are pseudonyms, and this project complied with all ethical guidelines, including student assent and parent and teacher consent procedures established by our university's Institutional Review Board.

The Context

Prior to interviews, students participated in the Human Dignity Curriculum (HDC), a "K–12 curriculum that teaches personal identity and human excellence" through cross-cutting themes (see humandignitycurriculum.org). This curriculum was delivered for approximately 1–2 hours per week over 12 weeks by two teachers at Waterford School and three teachers at Sacred Heart, described in greater detail below. Lessons from the HDC included instruction on the intrinsic value of each person; identifying what it means to treat a person as a subject rather than an object; understanding human abilities to think and choose; and the role of friendship in relation to human excellence. We note that student responses often reflected aspects of their experiences with HDC. We emphasize that our study is not meant to measure *what* they learned, but *how* they articulated their perspectives on and experiences with human dignity.

At the time of this study, the Human Dignity Curriculum had been implemented at multiple sites across grade levels in the United States, Canada, Asia, and the Caribbean. Due to its proximity to the researchers and project collaborators and its focus on the HDC within the elementary and upper elementary grades, a Catholic school in Canada—Sacred Heart—

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

was initially selected to sample participants from. In line with Kleindienst's (2022) work, however, we recognized a need to expand our sample into a public, secular school, and identified Waterford School as a second site for data collection. Given the small student population at Waterford, there were fewer students interviewed at this site in the US Midwest, totaling nine students.

Waterford is a public school that offers academic, vocational, and therapeutic programs that serve students with "life circumstances… which present barriers to their success." Waterford has 51 students, 70% of whom are economically disadvantaged. It is in a rural district with 23% of students proficient in reading and 12% of students proficient in math. The two teachers that delivered the Human Dignity Curriculum each had 10 years of teaching experience. Given the small student population at the school, one teacher taught a combined cohort of 5th and 6th grade students, and another teacher taught a combined cohort of 7th and 8th grade students.

Forty-six of the students that were interviewed attended Sacred Heart, a Catholic, K–8 private school in eastern Canada. Sacred Heart offers a school-based curriculum aimed at "educating the whole child," or the "academic, human, spiritual, and apostolic formation" of students in accordance with the Roman Catholic Church. It serves 112 students and is located in an urban district. The three teachers that delivered the Human Dignity Curriculum have varied levels of experience (18 years, 15 years, 1 year). We include demographic information about the students in Table 1.

Data Collection

The data in this study are part of a larger research project aimed at understanding how teachers implement the HDC. Data sources included semi-structured interviews in which participants were asked to (1) describe aspects of their learning from the HDC, (2) reflect on applications from this learning to their everyday experiences, and (3) describe understandings of human dignity. Our goal was to understand the ways in which young students might articulate their perspectives on and experiences with human dignity; thus, we asked questions that encouraged them to describe takeaways from the HDC, as well as their overall perspectives of human dignity and its role in their lives. Interviews were guided by Spradley's (2016) ethnographic interview guidelines, which included *grand tour questions* (e.g., tell me about what you're learning in Ms. Lynn's class); *example questions* (e.g., can you think of an example of what you learned about dignity that you've used in another class?); and *experience questions* (e.g., how has this affected your interactions?). With the semi-structured format, we also asked follow-up questions that prompted students to clarify or expand on their perspectives (e.g., so in what ways has it helped you change your behavior?). Given the age of the students, we sought to minimize apprehension through building rapport, a process in which the interviewer asked a general question (e.g., what's your favorite thing about school) accompanied by overt displays of interest in a nonjudgmental fashion. While we initially began with a total of 57 students, we excluded two students from our analysis whose

Table 1
Student Demographics Across Schools

	Total Male	Total Female	5th grade (age 10–11)	6th grade (age 11–12)	7th grade (age 12–13)	8th grade (age 13–14)	Total Students
Waterford School	8	1	1	3	2	3	
Sacred Heart	25	21	7	12	13	14	46
Total	33	22	8	15	15	17	55

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

interviews were incomplete. The 55 interviews lasted between 2.5 and 17 minutes, totaling 357.5 minutes, with the average interview lasting 6.5 minutes. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant in person at each site, and then transcribed by McKee. While there is no consensus on the number of interviewees needed for a phenomenological inquiry, our methods aligns with Cresswell's (2013) and Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendations.

Data Analysis

Pacheco and McKee analyzed data after all interviews had been conducted and transcribed. We used three interrelated phases of analysis guided by Gee's (2011) methods of discourse analysis, an approach that examines how individuals index identities, relationships, and social goods within discourse. In Phase 1, we addressed student perspectives on *what* comprised human dignity through the creation of textual descriptions (Moustakas, 1994) within each student's discourse. Fourteen interview transcripts were coded independently and inductively by Pacheco and McKee. From these initial transcripts, the authors established a set of open codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) which McKee then used to recode the initial fourteen transcripts and the remaining 41 interviews, adding new codes new when necessary. We intentionally forewent establishing interrater reliability measures per Krippendorff (2003) and McDonald and colleagues' (2019) recommendations for phenomenological research, where "aspiring to achieve reliability might reduce sensitivity to complex concepts and nuances in data" (p. 5). As such, Pacheco and McKee met regularly during this phase to discuss new open codes and to ensure the fidelity of McKee's coding. Pacheco and McKee then collaboratively condensed these open codes under three axial codes that identified prominent categories for student descriptions of human dignity.

In Phase 2, we attempted to create a description of students' experiences with human dignity in their lives. Our goal was to establish a structural description (Moustakas, 1994), or how student perspectives on human dignity shaped their experiences. Using axial codes from Phase 1, we asked what identities and social relationships, what social goods and activities, and what goals were indexed in speech, per Gee's (2011) recommendations. Pacheco and McKee concluded with a collaborative selective coding process in which we established themes across these codes. We concluded our analysis in Phase 3, in which we established an essence or the "common experiences of participants" (Creswell, 2013, p. 82), thus establishing *agency* as part of this essence.

Trustworthiness

We established trustworthiness in our data collection and data analysis per Guba's (1981) recommendations through three means. First, we worked towards establishing our findings' credibility by triangulating them with teacher perspectives on their instruction relating to human dignity. As part of our secondary data sources, we elicited these perspectives in five interviews conducted with teachers at each school, and in two interviews conducted with each principal at each school. We further triangulated our findings through juxtaposing student responses alongside teacher lesson plans and instructional artifacts.

Second, we worked towards establishing our findings' dependability through regular research team meetings during the analysis process in which we acted as *critical friends* to ensure that we maintained consistency within our interpretations of the data over time (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This was particularly important for preventing coder drift within McKee's open coding process while still permitting him to be open to generating new insights into the data, as recommended by McDonald and colleagues' (2019). We also shared our findings with the two principals and five participating teachers for *peer scrutiny* via email, in which we solicited expert feedback from individuals with firsthand experience and insight into the particular student population and context.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

Lastly, we worked towards establishing our findings' confirmability through a process of reflexivity in which we acknowledged our own bias within the research process. Our research team—which includes two white European-American males and a Chinese female—brought different perspectives to *what* human dignity entails and *how* it informs the human experience. Our regular research team meetings gave us the opportunity to share these perspectives and reflect on ways in which they might shape our data analysis.

FINDINGS

We present our findings as they relate to each research question. We begin by addressing *what* human dignity is from the perspective of 55 upper elementary and middle grades students, showing that they frame dignity as *universal, inherent and irrevocable, and differentiating and valuable*. Though these themes align with aspects of the Human Dignity Curriculum, our findings illustrate how students articulate these complex themes through their everyday activities, relationships, and interactions. We then describe how students' views of dignity relate to agency, detailing how human dignity mediates relationships with different Discourses. Table 2 summarizes these findings.

From Students' Perspectives, What is Human Dignity?

Human Dignity as Universal. We describe the most frequent way in which human dignity was described by students as *human dignity as universal* (64% of students). Students illustrated this universal quality through describing (1) dignity as something shared equally by all people, and that (2) dignity is universally shared regardless of a person's actions or moral status. For example, Thomas, a seventh-grade boy, told us that human dignity is "equal with every other person," and that "no matter how people look, they still have dignity." Clare, another seventh-grader, shared this perspective, saying "everyone has feelings and everyone has dignity," so she is careful not to "hurt other people's feelings."

In the quote below, Chris, a sixth-grader, describes how he views his brother as having a "special value" despite the brother's actions. He told us:

> Human dignity is a special thing that every human has and it's special value that everyone has. Yeah, because I used to see my brother as a, how do I word it? A horrible person because he would always treat me horrible.

Chris constructs human dignity within his discourse as something that "everyone has", even if they are "a horrible person." David, a fifth-grader, shares the perspective that human

Table 2
Student Perspectives on and Experiences with Human Dignity

RQ1: From the perspective of students, what is human dignity?			
	Dignity as Universal	Dignity as Inherent & Irrevocable	Dignity as Differentiating & Valuable
Number of Utterances	77 (59%)	39 (30%)	15 (11%)

RQ2: How do student perspectives on human dignity shape their experiences?			
	Dignity Shaping Views of Self	Dignity Shaping Views of Other	Dignity Shaping Agency
Number of Utterances	42 (32%)	75 (57%)	14 (11%)

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

dignity is universal, as "all people have dignity, even insane murderers and stuff." Other students described this universal quality as something that everyone not only shares, but as something that makes people "basically the same" (John, grade 7).

Human Dignity as Inherent & Irrevocable. The second most frequent way of describing dignity was as something an individual is born with that cannot be given or revoked (29% of students). Jack, a sixth-grader, summarizes this succinctly in stating that "you automatically get it when you're born." Seth, a seventh-grader, echoes this, holding that "human dignity is like something everyone's born with." Part of this perspective on human dignity as inherent included the perspective that dignity cannot be earned or revoked. Lily, an eighth-grader, describes this when reflecting on how dignity changed her perspective on her sister's experiences with bullying, an important issue for students (see Burke & McGuckin, 2022 for a recent example):

She used to have a rough time at school with people bullying, so, it's nice to let her know no one can take away who she is, no matter what people say, you're still going to be you.

In other words, human dignity is something that remains within an individual despite external constraints. Other students shared this perspective, describing dignity as "inalienable" (Rachel, grade 8), "something you just have" (Iris, grade 5), something that "can't be given or taken" (Mary, grade 8), and "something you'll never lose" (Jack, grade 6).

Human Dignity as Differentiating & Valuable. The final way in which students described human dignity was by framing it as a valuable asset unique to human beings (16% of students). Michael, an 8th grader, framed dignity as something that differentiates humans from animals, as human dignity "makes people human" and "animals can't really choose." Nico, also an 8th grader, reiterated this point, saying "animals don't have the same dignity that we have. They can't have thinking and stuff like that, but we can."

With this differentiation from animals, students also describe how dignity afforded them certain opportunities or "powers" (Elliott, grade 8). For Lily, a sixth grader, she described animals as different from humans, and asserted that this gives her the "power to think and choose." For Lane, an 8th grader, human dignity is resource that gives her "more confidence to do stuff" without the fear of being "torn down." Though human dignity is "a special value" (Chris, grade 6) that can be abstract for younger learners, students were able to describe dignity as a resource or tool that provides utility in their lives.

How do Student Perspectives on Human Dignity Shape their Experiences?

In what follows, our findings demonstrate ways in which student perspectives on human dignity illustrated opportunities for agency within their lives. Consistent with our theoretical framework, this agency includes students' views of themselves, which is critical for then shaping their interactions with other Discourses. Building from Gee's (2001) perspective, we then describe how dignity mediated intentional and meaningful relationships between the two, which we describe as *agency.*

Human dignity shaping views of self. When talking about the role of human dignity in their lives, students described how it helped bolster confidence and changed their self-perceptions. For example, Ashley, a sixth grader, articulated that:

> I've been having more confidence in what I do and stuff and just not really caring about what the other people say and stuff. Probably just that everything that you do in life is okay. And that if you make a mistake, that is fine. You can just try again.

George, a fifth grader, also described the relationship between human dignity and confidence. When asked what he would share with a younger cousin about dignity, he told us:

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

> I'd tell them they can believe in themselves and not be all angry at themselves for doing anything wrong. Because I have a younger cousin, her name is Emma. I think she's four.

George's perspective, along with illustrating ways in which students might "believe in themselves," also illustrates the relationship between human dignity and students' self-directed actions, where people do not need to be "all angry at themselves" when they "do anything wrong." This view was shared by multiple students—similar to how an individual might respect another person due to their dignity, the students spoke of a respect for themselves. Rachel, an eighth-grader, told us:

> Rachel: Because I have dignity and I shouldn't treat myself like I don't. Because I have dignity and I shouldn't treat myself like I don't.
>
> Interviewer: And what does that look like? What would be an example I guess of that in your... If you can tell me. I don't know if that's too-
>
> Rachel: I'm less mean to myself.

Lastly, students described how dignity helped with regulating behaviors and emotions. David, a fifth grader, spoke about a proclivity for getting "pretty mad when I'm mad." He described how he and his sister shared human dignity, which helped him "stay calm." He told us:

> My sister or anyone would call me a mean name, I'd probably just call them back. Yeah, instead I just stay calm and usually just keep my mouth shut and don't get mad at them.

This same perspective is reflected in Benjamin's discourse; rather than reacting negatively to something he doesn't like, he is able to recognize his own feelings and those of others, which helps him "keep [my] mouth shut." The seventh-grader told us:

> If they say something they like doing I always listen and do it. I always am interested in what they're talking about. If I don't like it, I just don't say anything. I just keep my mouth shut. And then I just feel I'm respectful to them and I respect what they enjoy.

We recognize the well-documented challenges adolescent students face in regulating behavior, and how student perceptions of dignity may mediate their decision-making. Kayla, a seventh grader, helps describe these challenges within the pressures of middle school. Her comments below illustrate how she was able to regulate negative actions in relation to her friends:

> Maybe, I don't know. When I'm thinking of my friends, I try to think more positive stuff or just stuff like that. Like, gossiping about other people, or just not giving a lot of compliments to my friends, or saying my feelings to them or something.

Human dignity shaping views of others. While students reflected on how human dignity mediated views of themselves, they also described how the concept shaped their views of others and their interactions with important people in their lives. Two major themes emerged in our analysis, which demonstrate how dignity shaped their views of others as deserving of respect, and how it helped students identify and respond to the feelings of others. Jacob, a fifth-grader, spoke about bullying, a topic that came up in multiple interviews with students. He told us "everybody has dignity, so it's not okay to bully other people because they also have human dignity." Ethan, a sixth-grader, shares a similar view, articulating how dignity is universally shared and it has helped mediate how he views others:

> Because it makes you realize how even a criminal can have human dignity and equal with every other person. Now I consider other things. I used to hate the way people looked sometimes, but now it taught me that no matter how people look, they still have dignity.

Despite Ethan's "hate", he recognizes that others are deserving of respect because they

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

"still have dignity," which would make "even a criminal…equal with every other person."

A second way students' views on dignity mediated relationships with others was through helping students recognize others' feelings. By acknowledging a shared dignity, students could perhaps acknowledge a shared human experience. When asked what he might tell a younger sibling or cousin, Ethan told us about the importance of recognizing others' feelings. He said he would "tell him to pay attention to how people feel and I'd tell them to be more careful when hurting people or saying things out of range, like think before saying things." Sandra, a seventh grader, also articulated the importance of others' feelings, and connects this to the idea that all individuals have human dignity. When asked what she would share with a sibling, she told us:

> Sandra: Probably just how everyone has human dignity and it's important to treat everyone the same, even if you don't like someone as much.
>
> Interviewer: Right. And why do you think that's so important for another kid to know?
>
> Sandra: So that they know that the other person has feelings too, and they know that if you hurt their feelings, they're going to feel bad about it, and they might do the same to someone else.

Sandra simplifies a complex concept for her younger sibling, stating that human dignity demands that individuals should be "treat[ed] the same," and that another "person has feelings too." In one of the most poignant examples from our interviews, Jasper spoke about how human dignity helped mediate his relationship with his grieving sister. The sixth grader told us that learning about dignity:

> had an impact on my family because I'd always argue with my sisters. And now my sister's friend died. I didn't know that until about a year ago. I'd pick on her and be like, „Who's going to save you? Nick?" And she's like, „He's dead." And I was like, „That's not ... I'm sorry." It just proves that people, you never know what they're going through.

Human Dignity and Agency

In our final section, we show how human dignity served as a resource for mediating relationships between the individual and others. Consistent with our theoretical framework, we describe this resource as affording agency in that students demonstrated understandings of themselves in relation to interactions with other Discourses.

Aaron, a sixth grader, spoke about an important topic—choosing whom to befriend—in relation to dignity. Through learning about dignity, he recognized that he was choosing to "hang out with some kids that [he] didn't like" for problematic reasons. He recognized something important about himself, stating that he chose these friends out of loneliness or utility. He told us:

> I would hang out with some kids that I didn't like just because either I didn't have anyone else to hang out with or they could get me stuff, or they're the only person that would talk to another kid that I want to hang out with.

With this realization about his own motivations, Aaron is then able to act with agency in choosing friends. When asked by the interviewer how he acts after learning about human dignity, he shows a new perspective on friendship and his resulting agency:

> Interviewer: And what about now?
>
> Aaron: Now, I only hang out with kids that I actually want to hang out with, instead of just what they can get me.

Similarly, Anna, a sixth grader, demonstrated agency when speaking about challenges trusting others. In the following quote, she recognizes that this distrust may have more to do with her past experiences rather than the quality of her current interactions:

> I've always been, I think, afraid because I never know what's going to happen. I was hurt when I was really young, so that brought trust down. But this is helping me realize you

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

> can't just let that go for everybody. Just try to open up a little bit. Not everybody's rude.

Anna demonstrates an awareness of how her experiences when she was "really young" affected her ability to "open up," as these past experiences "brought [her] trust down." She demonstrates agency in that she is able to use this perspective on her past experiences to reshape her interactions with new Discourses. The interviewer affirms her perspective and Anna describes how she is able to better understand others and contribute to her family:

> Interviewer: That's true. I probably could use that lesson too. And do you think taking the human dignity class has changed how you see yourself?
>
> Anna: I think I see myself more being open more, understanding people better, help a lot of people in my family actually. We don't all do very well with people.

Other students reflected similar agency in descriptions of daily interactions, including their ability to focus on completing school work, where they might "raise up [their] hand…and do [their] work quietly" (Jacob, grade 5); their ability to avoid violence and "not get sent home" (Connor, grade 6) for fighting; and their ability to recognize and reform negative actions. Jack, a sixth grader, told us:

> Because I used to struggle for taking accountability for my core actions that I made, and now actions that I make that are bad, I can still take accountability now and I've changed. So it just helps me see a different part of me that I didn't think I would see. I see other people in a different point of view because I used to judge them by how they act, and now I don't judge because you don't know what they're going through.

This quote from Jack captures how his understanding of human dignity shapes his agency. He understands his own "struggle for taking accountability" over his actions and thus can recognize the challenges that others might face in doing the same. Through understanding himself and the shared experiences of others, he is able to refrain from quick judgments based solely on "how they act."

DISCUSSION

From our interviews with 55 upper elementary and middle grades students in two schools, students' *textual description*—or framing of what the phenomenon is—included dignity as universal, as inherent and irrevocable, and as differentiating and valuable. Students' *structural description*—or framing of *how* they experience the phenomenon—illustrated the relationship between dignity and agency, as human dignity mediated views of the self, of others, and relationship between the two.

Through these interviews, students articulated both the breadth and depth of their experiences in relation to human dignity. Students spoke about seemingly mundane examples, from trying to sit still in a class, to refraining from using harsh words with a sibling, to delaying gratification when completing a school assignment. Students also spoke about troubling and painful experiences, from confronting childhood trauma, to reconciling with an estranged parent, to supporting a grieving sibling. On the one hand, interviews served as lenses into students' understandings of human dignity, both in how they viewed this concept and how they understood it in their lives. On the other hand, interviews gave an opportunity for students to reflect on meaningful moments that might not typically find their way into class discussion or writing assignments.

We do note, however, that not all students were able to describe what human dignity was or its role in their lives. Six of the 55 students were "not sure," or stated they "don't know" when prompted, despite their participation in the Human Dignity Curriculum. Two other students stated that they didn't learn anything new about dignity, as it related to their prior views of themselves and others. These two examples, paired with our findings, hold important implications for future instruction that seeks to build

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

students' understandings of human dignity. We draw on our theoretical framework to offer implications to instructional approaches like the HDC that seek to build students' understandings of virtue (see Durlak, 2017), purpose (see Malin et al., 2019), and related concepts. Students need opportunities to situate learning of human dignity in relation to their experiences, interests and interactions. Gee and the New London group (Cazden et al., 1996) then suggest that o*vert instruction* and *critical framing* can help students in building a metalanguage, or a way of articulating these experiences as they relate to different social and cultural contexts, or Discourses. Our findings begin to fill out this metalanguage, with students being able to describe aspects of human dignity and its role in their lives. Then, students can engage in *transformed practice*, or the chance to revisit their experiences with new language and perspectives.

LIMITATIONS

We also note certain limitations in our work that could be addressed in future research. While this study elicits student voices, it does not offer other modalities in which students might communicate their understandings. Recent studies in arts-based research, for example, show ways that students might articulate nuanced views through visual and other multimodal products (see Lau, 2016 for an example). Similarly, we recognize the limitation in triangulating our findings alongside other forms of data. While student discourse can index values, relationships, social goods, and identities, it does not fully take into account the role of context in shaping what is indexed, nor does it capture ways in which individuals might construct meaning through activity. Future research could investigate how students negotiate understandings of human dignity within classroom instruction, for example, as they use and adapt resources, negotiate aspects of their identities, and establish goals. Lastly, we recognize that the majority of students interviewed attended a Catholic school—a setting in which discussions of dignity and related concepts may be regularly included in school curricula. More work could investigate student experiences in non-religious educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This research shows students making sense of complex and important concepts. They were able to articulate nuanced ideas about human dignity and were able to describe ways in which this concept informed their everyday lives. With the challenges that students face in the 21st century—from navigating peer culture to navigating social media—understanding human dignity can be a powerful resource for mediating students' sense of identity, as well as their understandings of the communities in which they interact. We reiterate that understandings of human dignity—whether it is viewed as something universal, inherent and irrevocable, or as differentiating and valuable—holds rich possibilities for affording students' agency.

REFERENCES

Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *AmNicoan Psychologist, 44*(9), 1175–1184.

Baquedano-L´opez, P. (2004). Literacy practices across learning contexts. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *A companion to linguistic anthropology* (pp. 245–268). Blackwell.

Binfet, J. T., & Passmore, H. A. (2019). The who, what, and where of school kindness: Exploring students' perspectives. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, *34*(1), 22–37.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Polity Press.

Burke, J., & McGuckin, C. (2022). Bullying and Character Development: An examination of character strengths associated with bullying and cyberbullying in postprimary schools in Ireland. *Journal of Character Education*, *18*(1), 51–67.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

Cazden, C., Cope, B., Fairclough, N., Gee, J., Kalantzis, M., Kress, G., Luke, A., Luke, S., Michaels, S., & Nakata, M. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, *66*(1), 60–92.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design : Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience and education* (1st Touchstone). Simon & Schuster.

Durlak, J. A. (2017). The fundamental importance of effective program implementation for successful character development. *Journal of Character Education*, *13*(2), 1–11.

Espinoza, M. S., Vossoughi, S., Rose, M., & Poza, L. E. (2020). Matters of participation: notes on the study of dignity and learning, *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, DOI: 10.1080/10749039.2020.1779304.

Ettekal, A. V., Gaskin, E. R., Lin, A. R., & Simpkins, S. D. (2015). “You gotta respect”: Mexican-origin adolescents’ perspectives on respect in organized activities. *Journal of Youth Development*, *10*(3), 74–88.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.

Gee, J. P. (2008). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. Routledge.

Gee, J. P. (2001). Reading as situated language: A sociocognitive perspective. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *44*(8), 714–725.

Gee, J. P. (2011). *An introduction to discourse analysis : Theory and method* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Grossman, P. L., Smagorinsky, P., & Valencia, S. (1999). *Appropriating conceptual and pedagogical tools for teaching English: A conceptual framework for studying professional development* (Technical Report No. 12011). National Re search Center on English Learning & Achievement, University at Albany, State University of New York.

Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *ECTJ*, *29*(2), 75–91.

Hagá, S., & Olson, K. R. (2017). ‘If I only had a little humility, I would be perfect’: Children’s and adults’ perceptions of intellectually arrogant, humble, and diffident people. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *12*(1), 87–98.

Handsfield, L. J. (2015). *Literacy theory as practice: Connecting theory and instruction in K–12 classrooms*. Teachers College Press.

Hantzopoulos, M. (2016). *Restoring dignity in public schools: Human Rights Education in action*. Teachers College Press.

Helmich, J. (2009). What is comprehensive sexuality education? Going waaaaay beyond abstinence and condoms. *AmNicoan Journal of Sexuality Education*, *4*(1), 10–15.

Holland, D. (2001). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Harvard University Press.

King, O., Davis, C., Clemans, A., Coles, J., Crampton, P., Jacobs, N., McKeown, T., Morphet, J., Seear, K., & Rees, C. (2021). Dignity during work-integrated learning: What does it mean for supervisors and students?. *Studies in Higher Education*, *46*(4), 721–736.

Kleindienst, P. (2022). The role of Catholic schools in promoting human dignity. *British Journal of Religious Education*, *44*(3), 348–360.

Krippendorff, K. H. (2003). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

Lau, S. M. C. (2016). Language, identity, and emotionality: Exploring the potential of language portraits in preparing teachers for diverse learners. *The New Educator*, *12*(2), 147–170.

Lee, C. D. (1995). A culturally based cognitive apprenticeship: Teaching African American high school students skills in literary interpretation. *Reading Research Quarterly, 30*, 608−630.

Malin, H., Liauw, I., & Damon, W. (2017). Purpose and character development in early adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *46*, 1200–1215.

Malin, H., Liauw, I., & Remington, K. (2019). Early adolescent purpose development and perceived supports for purpose at school. *Journal of Character Education*, *15*(2), 1–20.

Mary, K. N., Menickelli, K., & Scales, R. Q. (2017). Courageous voices: Using text sets to inspire change. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *60*(5), 527–536.

McDonald, N., Schoenebeck, S., & Forte, A. (2019). Reliability and inter-rater reliability in qualitative research: Norms and guidelines for CSCW and HCI practice. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *3*(CSCW), 1–23.

Moje, E. B., Overby, M., Tysvaer, N., & Morris, K. (2008). The complex world of adolescent litera-

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026

cy: Myths, motivations, and mysteries. *Harvard Educational Review*, *78*(1), 107–154.

Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (2006). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. In *Funds of knowledge* (pp. 71–87). Routledge.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.

Mullen, R. F., Kydd, A., Fleming, A., & McMillan, L. (2019). Dignity in nursing care: What does it mean to nursing students?. *Nursing Ethics*, *26*(2), 390–404.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, *41*(3), 93–97.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology* (pp. 41–60). Springer.

Poza, L. E., García, O., & Jiménez-Castellanos, O. (2022). After Castañeda: A glotopolítica perspective and educational dignity paradigm to educate racialized bilinguals. *Language Policy*, *21*, 451–474.

Reardon, B. (1995). *Educating for human dignity: learning about rights and responsibilities.* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Sari, M., & Doganay, A. (2009). Hidden curriculum on gaining the value of respect for human dignity: A qualitative study in two elementary schools in Adana. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice, 9*(2), 925–940.

Scott, M., & Philip, T. M. (2023). "We ask so much of these tiny humans": supporting beginning teachers to honor the dignity of young people as mathematical learners. *Cognition and Instruction*, *41*(3), 291–315.

Sengupta-Irving, T., Vogelstein, L., Brady, C., & Phillips Galloway, E. (2023). Prolepsis & telos: Interpreting pedagogy and recovering imagination in the mediation of youth learning. *Journal of the Learning Sciences, 32*(2), 211–249.

Spradley, J. P. (2016). *Participant observation*. Waveland Press, Inc.

Tapola, A. M. (2011). Human dignity within teacher education: A matter of individualism, competitiveness, and strategic rationality. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *27*(8), 1245–1254.

Valdés, G. (2022) Towards educational dignity: translanguaging y la preparación de maestros. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, *21*(3), 212–216

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy.* State University of New York Press.

Wagner, L. (2019). Good character is what we look for in a friend: Character strengths are positively related to peer acceptance and friendship quality in early adolescents. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *39*(6), 864–903.

Warren, C. A. (2018). Empathy, teacher dispositions, and preparation for culturally responsive pedagogy. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *69*(2), 169–183.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/jced/article-pdf/20/1/19/11630342/jced-10-2024-0003en.pdf by guest on 23 June 2026