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Affective Experiences of U.S. School Personnel in the Sociopolitical Context of 2021: Reflecting on the Past to Shape the Future

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the self-reported affective experiences of U.S. school personnel during 2021. This year found school personnel balancing remote learning, health emergencies, a global pandemic, and intense political upheaval. We contextualize school personnel experiences within the current sociopolitical context. In this sample, school personnel (n = 8052) represent all U.S. states and territories alongside representation of diverse racial and ethnic identities (n = 1901). Participants were surveyed before completing a free virtual course on emotion management. The survey included open-ended questions and scale items. Participants reported primary feelings, sources of stress and joy, and perceptions of personal and social and emotional support for themselves and students. Findings are presented in five cohorts of school personnel across the year. The primary feelings were being anxious, stressed, and overwhelmed, the stressors were lack of support, time, and resources, as well as COVID-19, and workload, and the sources of joy were students, coworkers, and teaching. Anxiety and gratitude decreased throughout the year while happiness increased. Responses differed across time and between racial groups, with Black and African American participants reporting the highest percentages of being stressed by COVID-19 and community fluctuated over time as a source of joy. Implications for the education system and opportunities for emotion management are discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19; school personnel; social and emotional learning (SEL); teacher well-being

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1. Introduction

If 2020 was a year that brought tragedy and upheaval to the education system, 2021 was the year school personnel navigated substantial aftershocks, as well as a new set of unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Four years later, we are still managing the aftereffects of those years on student learning, youth development, and school personnel exhaustion [1–5]. A universal concern is how to improve school personnel retention, reduce substantial gaps in learning, and combat poor student mental health outcomes [2,6]. School personnel—broadly including classroom educators, support staff, administrators, and social support providers—are crucial to a healthy school ecosystem [7,8].

Research has shown that school personnel are highly affected by the sociopolitical state of the nation [9]. Schools serve as a battleground for issues of politics, healthcare, economics, and morality, often reflecting the increasingly polarized state of the nation (e.g., Brown v Board, Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Title IX, Critical Race Theory, National School Lunch Act). This was particularly evident during the 2020–2021 school year. School personnel were both challenged and rose to the occasion like never before as they navigated virtual learning, health and safety concerns, and increased workload alongside a surge of sociopolitical controversies [10,11]. Exploring the distribution of affective experiences of school personnel

by considering the social and historical contexts may provide a roadmap for future research to contextualize education research.

The aims of this work are to examine the affective experiences of five cohorts of school personnel, delineated by dates significant to the education system, and compare differences across the year 2021 and by race/ethnicity and state politics. The education system in the United States (U.S.) is intimately linked to systems of government, policy, and healthcare; therefore, contextualizing the affective experiences of school personnel within such systems may support effective interpretations of data in the service of educators, policymakers, and researchers [11].

2. K-12 Education and Politics

Throughout 2021, the education system contended with governmental, societal, and public health crises. The year commenced amidst the polarized reactions to the 2020 presidential election, culminating in the January 6th insurrection [12]. Schools and communities nationwide experienced protests against police brutality, school shootings, and bans against gender-affirming care, abortion, and books [13]. At the same time, school personnel continued to navigate rising mortality rates due to the COVID-19 pandemic, protests against masking in schools, vaccine rollouts, rapidly evolving public health mandates, and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) calling for a return to normal. Political tensions and polarized educational policies continue to impact school personnel [14,15]. Further contextualizing school personnel's experiences continues to be an important consideration for those doing research in education.

School personnel are personally and professionally affected by crises [16,17]. Especially during the challenges and tragedies of 2020–2021, research found individuals working in schools reported elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, to a clinically significant degree. Indeed, school personnel experienced higher rates of depression and anxiety than the average citizen [18]. These findings emphasized the need to support the mental health and well-being of school personnel and provide aff deeper understanding of the present need for intervention and mitigation of risk. Attention should be given to the benefits of adult social and emotional learning (SEL) and teaching school personnel how to understand and manage their emotions [10]. SEL is defined as skills and competencies that teach self-awareness, relationship skills, self-management, responsible decision-making, and social awareness [19].

The school environment differs as a function of state politics, namely Democrat or Republican [15,20]. The pandemic provided an intense case study of this phenomenon. School personnel are influenced by the relevant policies and political stances of the state in which they were employed [15,21]. Although the United States has more than two political parties, and within these two parties there are tremendously broad spectrums of beliefs, Democrats and Republicans account for the near majority of active constituents and Presidential candidates and often represent opposing policies and political stances. Political partisanship is highly relevant for education policies and offers context for the experiences of school personnel, which in turn reflects the overall state of the education system. Consequently, it is important to consider the interaction between school personnel's affective experiences and the politics of the state in which they are employed.

3. Affective Experiences of School Personnel

Affective experiences of school personnel impact psychological well-being as well as the well-being of their co-workers and students [5,22,23]. Prior research establishes a relationship between teacher well-being and psychological distress and student well-being and distress. In one study, the more depressive symptoms teachers report, the worse their students' well-being [7]. This may provide guidance to researchers and policymakers in mitigating the risks for youth. Moreover, when educators do not have their personal well-being needs met, they receive less meaning and purpose from their work which may in turn reduce efficacy and positive impact in schools [24]. Identifying the past affective

experiences of school personnel may identify the mechanisms causing current student and staff-level concerns and support the development of future policy and intervention. In addition, it is useful to benchmark the positive and negative effects of school personnel to understand changes across time and contexts.

One systematic review found teacher burnout is negatively associated with student academic achievement and motivation, a phenomenon highly relevant to post-pandemic learning losses and gaps [25]. Therefore, understanding past affective experiences in context has implications for the importance of additional support impacts burnout, and attrition, as well as personal and professional well-being [26].

Furthermore, it is beneficial to examine the emotional experiences of school personnel within a sociopolitical context. The issues that educators face are exacerbated for school personnel of color, special educators, and others who either serve or identify with historically marginalized groups [26,27]. Bower-Phipps [28], found teachers feel compelled to conceal personal marginalized identities for fear of repercussions and workplace stigma. For many, this is not possible, particularly for those who hold marginalized racial and ethnic identities.

The systemic inequities and barriers that marginalized racial and ethnic groups are subjected to endure within schools. As a result, teachers of color have significantly higher rates of attrition than their white peers [29]. For example, the sociopolitical crises that school personnel contend with are often compounded for school personnel of color [26]. These concerning data are made even more worrisome when considering intersectional identities and educators who may hold more than one marginalized identity and/or work with marginalized students [29,30]. As a result, it is essential to elevate the experiences of school personnel of color and understand how affective experiences may differ across racial and ethnic groups.

Although 2021 brought a new set of evolving challenges, school personnel were already struggling with systemic obstacles to sustaining personal and professional well-being. Educators grappled with exhaustion and stress, high rates of attrition, and a lack of support [10,25]. School personnel report common concerns being an overabundance of paperwork and extreme workloads, particularly for school leadership, which in turn lead to elevated levels of stress and exponentially increasing rates of burnout and attrition [31]. Teachers have identified sources of stress as being coworkers, students, and administration [23,32].

Although extensive research has established school personnel sources of stress, less research has been carried out to understand their sources of joy [33]. Previous studies find that sources of joy for educators include student success, relationships, the act of teaching, making a difference, and community in schools [34]. Establishing the sources of joy for educators alongside sources of stress and frustration is essential to understanding the well-being of educators, and subsequently reducing attrition [35]. It is essential to establish an understanding of the sources of joy for educators alongside sources of stress and frustration [19]. To date, research has not established the sources of joy of school personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social and emotional learning may provide opportunities to emphasize the strengths and joys of school personnel and reduce stressors. The rise and popularity of social and emotional learning in schools may be the opportune avenue to support the well-being of adults in schools [36]. Improving social and emotional competencies for school personnel is a policy goal for global contexts, not only in the United States [6]. Establishing the state of school personnel's emotions, joys, and stressors will in turn provide a foundation to better support their well-being.

4. Prosocial Classroom Model

This investigation is guided by the Prosocial Classroom Model, which theorizes that teacher well-being, as well as social and emotional competencies, affects student well-being and subsequent classroom management [22]. Ample research has shown that adult social and emotional competencies are highly relevant to the positive social and

emotional maturation of students [10]. Barnes and colleagues [37] adapted this theory for paraeducators, and in the current study, we apply the Prosocial Classroom Theory to all school personnel (Figure 1).

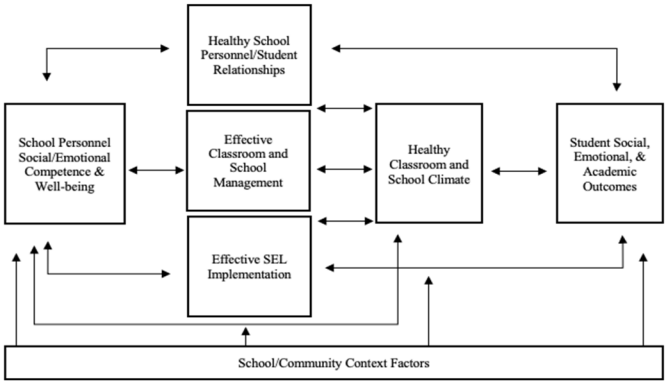

Figure 1. Prosocial Classroom Model.

In this study, we addressed the following research questions: (1). What were the affective experiences of school personnel? (2). What were the sources of stress and joy for school personnel? (3). What were the sources of joy for school personnel? (4). To what extent were school personnel's social and emotional needs supported by schools? In addition, we examined whether the findings differed by time, race/ethnicity, and state politics.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Study Design and Data Collection

Data were collected from school personnel who took a free virtual course developed by a research team that included the authors. The course was developed by masked with support from a funder and was designed to support educator well-being and emotion management. Since its release in 2020, this course has been widely distributed and completed by educators and non-educators alike, on an international scale. School personnel were asked to take the survey before accessing the course, however, they were not required to fully complete the survey or compensated for completion.

This study followed a cross-sectional survey design that collected data at a single time point [38]. Consequently, this study captured school personnel's current beliefs and reports on their experiences in schools at a specific time. To explore the different affective experiences of school personnel as a result of subsequent environmental changes during 2021, we collected data at five time points with different participants in each cohort. The 5 cohorts were defined by Survey Launch (Cohort 1: 12/01/20–01/05/21), U.S. Capital Insurrection (Cohort 2: 01/06/21–02/28/21), Vaccine Rollout for School Personnel (Cohort 3: 03/01/21–05/31/21), Summer (Cohort 4: 06/01/21–08/14/21), and School Personnel Returning to School in the Fall (Cohort 5: 08/15/21–12/01/21). These time points were chosen with the rationale of considering the typical structure of the school year and events that were historically significant and impacted the U.S. education system [12,13,21].

5.2. Participants

The participants in this study, referred to as school personnel, were administrators, athletic coaches, classroom teachers, counselors, nurses, paraeducators, principals, special educators, support staff, and additional school system staff. This range of participants presents a comprehensive picture of the entire school system. Previous research has lacked this degree of representation [39]. Students and the education environment are impacted by all staff, not just traditional classroom educators [40]. All employees in a school ecosystem play a part in supporting student personal and academic well-being and, as such, their experiences must be considered.

A total of 10,390 individuals consented to complete the survey. However, after removing incomplete data and participants not employed within the U.S. K-12 school system, the final analytic sample included 8052 school personnel. Participants were female (79%), male (11.2%), and non-binary (0.2%). The sample included a wide range of racial and ethnic groups including school personnel who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (0.5%), Asian (3.9%), Black or African American (5.0%), Biracial (4.6%), Latinx (7.2%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.2%), Middle Eastern or North African, (0.6%), Multiracial (1.6%), and white (65%), while 902 chose not to report. The average age was 43 years old (*SD* = 12) with 12 years of experience (*SD* = 10). This sample is reflective of the demographic diversity of U.S. educators and has strong representation from historically marginalized groups.

Participants worked in all 50 states and territories with the most represented states being New York (12.5%), California (10.1%), and Connecticut (5.2%) and the least represented states and territory being North and South Dakota, Puerto Rico, and Wyoming (0.1%). In this study, school politics are conceptualized using the U.S. primary political parties, Democrat and Republican. This variable was created by considering the state in which the participant was employed and what political party the state voted for in the most recent presidential election of 2020. School personnel living in states or districts that voted Democrat in the 2020 election made up 79.4% of the sample and 20.6% lived in states that voted Republican. This disproportion may be due to increased funding and policies around emotional competencies in Democrat states. School roles were widely inclusive of general educators (most represented), school principals and administrators, support and maintenance staff, physical and psychological care workers, special educators, and school leadership. About one-fourth of the sample (25.7%) taught online, 20.5% of the population taught in-person, and 46.9% used some combination of in-person and online. See total and cohort-level demographics in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Study Participants.

	Total		**Cohort 1**		**Cohort 2**		**Cohort 3**		**Cohort 4**		**Cohort 5**	
n	8052		2903		1990		925		737		1397	
Individual Characteristics	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age	43.2	12	44	11.27	42.5	11.5	43.1	11.3	42.3	11.7	41.8	12.0
Years of Experience	12.4	10	14.1	10	13.1	9.7	12.0	10.1	10.4	10.1	9.4	9.7
Race and Ethnicity	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
American Indian or Alaska Native	44	0.5	11	0.4	5	0.3	8	0.9	4	0.5	16	1.6
Asian	316	3.9	68	2.3	56	2.8	51	5.5	45	6.1	96	6.4
Black or African American	402	5.0	125	4.3	95	4.8	37	4.0	48	6.5	97	6.5
Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish	581	7.2	184	6.3	135	6.8	57	6.2	75	10.2	130	8.7
Middle Eastern or North African	49	0.6	14	0.5	12	0.6	5	0.5	6	0.8	12	0.8
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	15	0.2	5	0.2	2	0.1	0	0	4	0.5	4	0.3
White	5249	65.2	2167	74.6	1410	70.9	604	65.3	337	45.7	731	48.8
Biracial	368	4.6	142	4.9	88	4.4	37	4.0	31	4.2	70	4.7
Multiracial (more than 3)	126	1.6	36	1.2	36	1.8	14	1.5	16	2.2	24	1.6
Unspecified	902	11.2	132	4.5	138	6.9	112	12.1	171	23.2	317	21.2
Gender	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Female	6376	79.2	2470	85.1	1658	83.3	726	78.5	501	68.0	1021	68.2
Male	900	11.2	310	10.7	205	10.3	105	11.4	83	11.3	194	13.0
Non-binary	18	0.2	8	0.1	4	0.2	1	0.1	3	0.4	2	0.1
Mahu	1	<0.1	1	<0.1								
Genderqueer	1	<0.1									1	0.1
Transgender Male	3	<0.1			1	0.1					2	0.1
Unspecified	757	9.4	110	3.8	121	6.1	93	10.1	150	20.4	227	18.5
2020 State Presidential Election Results	*n*	*%*										
Democratic	6390	79.4	2361	81.3	1634	82.1	734	79.4	561	76.1	1100	73.5
Republican	1662	20.6	542	18.7	356	17.9	191	20.6	176	23.9	397	26.5

5.3. Measures

5.3.1. School Personnel Affective Experiences

School personnel answered the prompt: "Think about how you've felt at work over the past few weeks. What are the three feelings you've experienced the most?" The instructions asked participants to type one feeling into each of the three open text boxes. Only the first responses were used in data analysis as this study was focused on the primary affective experience of school personnel and we assumed that the first response reflected a participant's primary affective experience.

5.3.2. Sources of Stress and Joy

Participants were asked to consider their sources of stress and frustration and their sources of joy and inspiration at work. For these open-ended questions, school personnel were asked: "Take a moment to think about your experiences of stress and frustration at work. What are the top three factors that contribute to your stress and frustration at school?" and "Take a moment to think about your experiences of joy and inspiration at work. What are the top three factors that contribute to your joy and inspiration at school?" The instructions asked participants to type one feeling into each of the three open text boxes. Only the first responses were used in data analysis as this study was focused on the primary stressors and joys of school personnel and we assumed that the first response reflected the participant's primary stressor and joy.

5.3.3. Crisis Response Educator SEL Survey

Four items from the Crisis Response Educator SEL Survey were included to understand social and emotional support for school personnel. This 4-point Likert scale consists of 63 items and was developed to understand educator social and emotional practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic [41]. Social and emotional learning skills and competencies that teach self-awareness, relationship skills, self-management, responsible decision-making, and social awareness [19]. Example questions included "How much has your school (or district) supported your social and emotional needs?" and "How much guidance have you received from your school about how to support student SEL?"

5.4. Data Analysis

We analyzed the large-scale survey data using SPSS (ver. 28.0) and conducted frequency analysis and the analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests. First, in the frequency analysis, we counted the number of times school personnel reported primary emotions and sources of stress and joy in their open-ended responses. The first author recoded the text frequencies using a coding scheme established in a previous study [42]. For example, participants' responses were consolidated to the root emotion word (e.g., "anxiety", "feeling very anxious", and "anxius" were all recoded as Anxious); these categorizations of emotion words were based on a framework developed by an author [42].

Next, we analyzed variations in perceived support of social and emotional learning among distinct subgroups: (1) five cohorts, (2) race/ethnicity (i.e., Asian, Black and African American, Biracial, Latinx, Multiracial, and white), and (3) state political affiliations (i.e., Democrat and Republican). Using ANOVA, we explored the perspectives of school personnel on school support for social and emotional needs during 2021. We assessed the variances in school personnel perceived school support between the different groups.

6. Results

6.1. Frequencies

6.1.1. Primary Affective Experiences Research Question 1

School personnel reported more than 800 unique affective experiences while at work. Percentages are presented as the frequency of specific responses, averaged over the entire sample responses. The most frequent emotions reported were *Anxious (15.6%)*, *Overwhelmed (10.7%)*, and *Stressed (10.7%).* The most frequent positive emotions were *Happy (2.7%),*

Excited (2.1%), and *Grateful (1.5%)* (see Figure 2). Primary negative emotions, particularly Anxious, were most reported by participants in the Insurrection Cohort. Primary positive emotions, particularly Happy, were most reported by participants in the Fall Cohort. Stressed remained most stable across all cohorts. Over time, the percentage of school personnel reporting Excited and Happy increased while reports of Grateful gradually decreased. Frequencies presented in Figure 2a examine primary emotions by cohort.

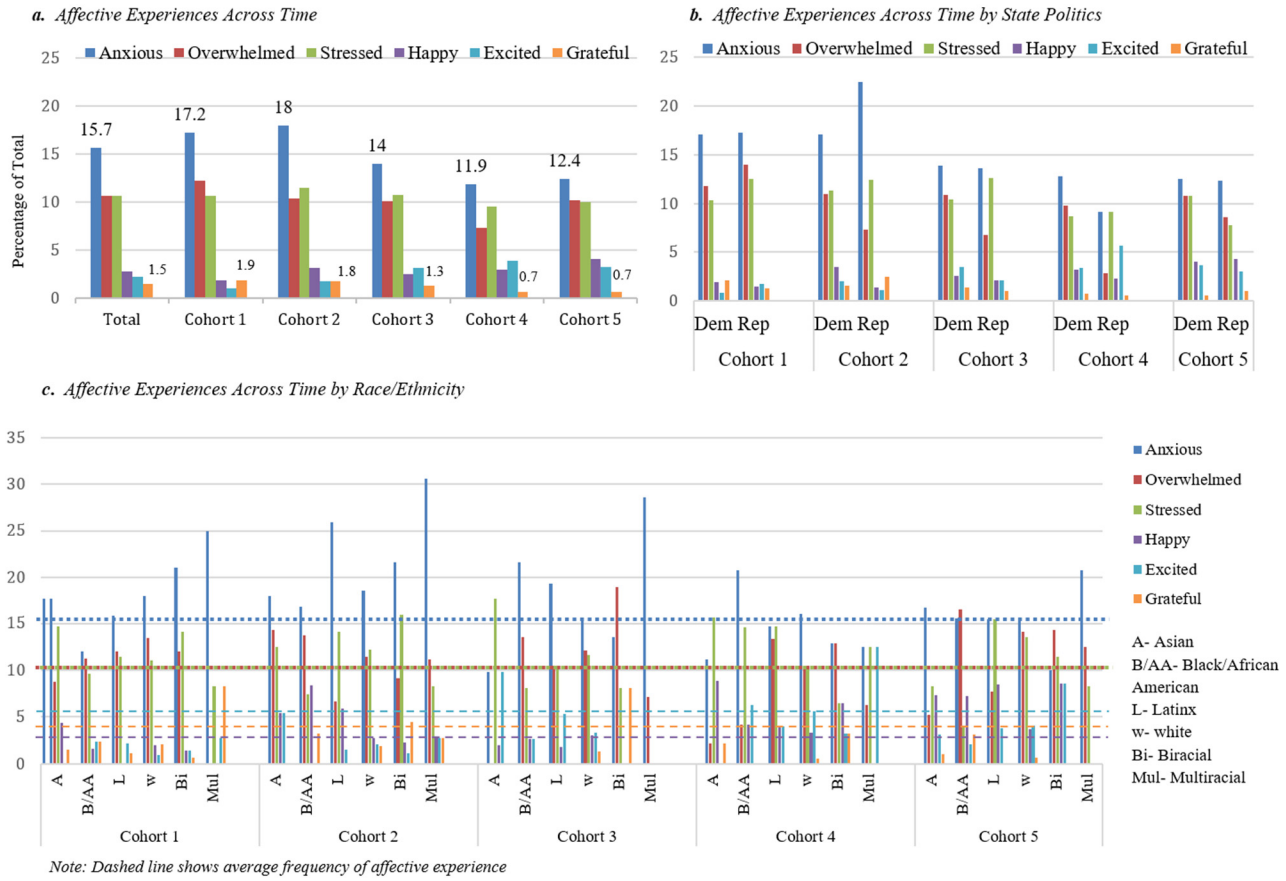

Figure 2. Affective experiences of school personnel across time.

Frequencies presented in Figure 2c reflect the differences between racial/ethnic groups across 2021. For Multiracial participants, Anxious was the most frequently reported emotion, an almost 157% increase compared to the full sample average. Comparatively, Asian participants' least reported emotion was Anxious. However, for both Asian and Latinx participants, Stressed was the most frequently reported emotion while white and Biracial participants most frequently reported emotion was Overwhelmed. Furthermore, reports of Excited varied across time for different racial/ethnic groups. For example, excitement was highest for Asian school personnel in the Vaccine Rollout Cohort. Overall, Asian participants reported the highest frequency of Happy and Excited while Multiracial participants reported the lowest frequency of Happy while at work.

Over time, although reports of Grateful gradually increased on average, gratitude rapidly decreased for Latinx participants while persisting as a primary emotion for white school personnel. Furthermore, Biracial participants reported the highest overall percentage of Grateful. Moreover, white and Biracial participants displayed the most commonalities in their primary emotion frequencies. Multiracial participants both most commonly reported Anxiety and least frequently reported Happy. The findings from these data suggest that school personnel across different racial and ethnic identities report differences in their primary emotions while at work.

Data presented in Figure 2b reflect differences for school personnel working in Democrat- or Republican-voting states. Once again, Anxious was the primary reported emotion. Stressed was reported moderately more for school personnel in Republican voting states while Overwhelmed was moderately lower. Happy, Excited, and Grateful were similarly reported as primary positive emotions across both groups. Overall, the total primary emotions reported were similar across state politics, however, differences emerge when considering the data across time. School personnel working in Republican voting states reported more Anxiety during the Insurrection Cohort and more Excitement during the Summer Cohort. School personnel working in Democrat-voting states reported more feelings of being Overwhelmed and Happy across most cohorts.

6.1.2. Primary Sources of Stress Research Question 2

From more than 5700 school personnel, the primary sources of stress were: *Lack of resources, support, and time (15.7%)*, *Workload (13.1%)*, *COVID-19 (9.2%)*, *Students (7.1%)*, *Technology (5.4%)*, and *Uncertainty (5.3%)*. These seven sources of stress accounted for 72% of the total responses. Examples of school personnel's responses include "Being asked to do more than my job description", "Student's not engaged", "Uncertainty about the future", and "Computers and Internet not working properly". Primary sources of stress were most reported during the Course Launch and Insurrection Cohorts and least reported during the Summer Cohort. The stressor of Workload remained stable over the course of 2021. The stressors of COVID-19, Technology, and Uncertainty steadily became less common over time with Students and Leadership fluctuating (Figure 3a).

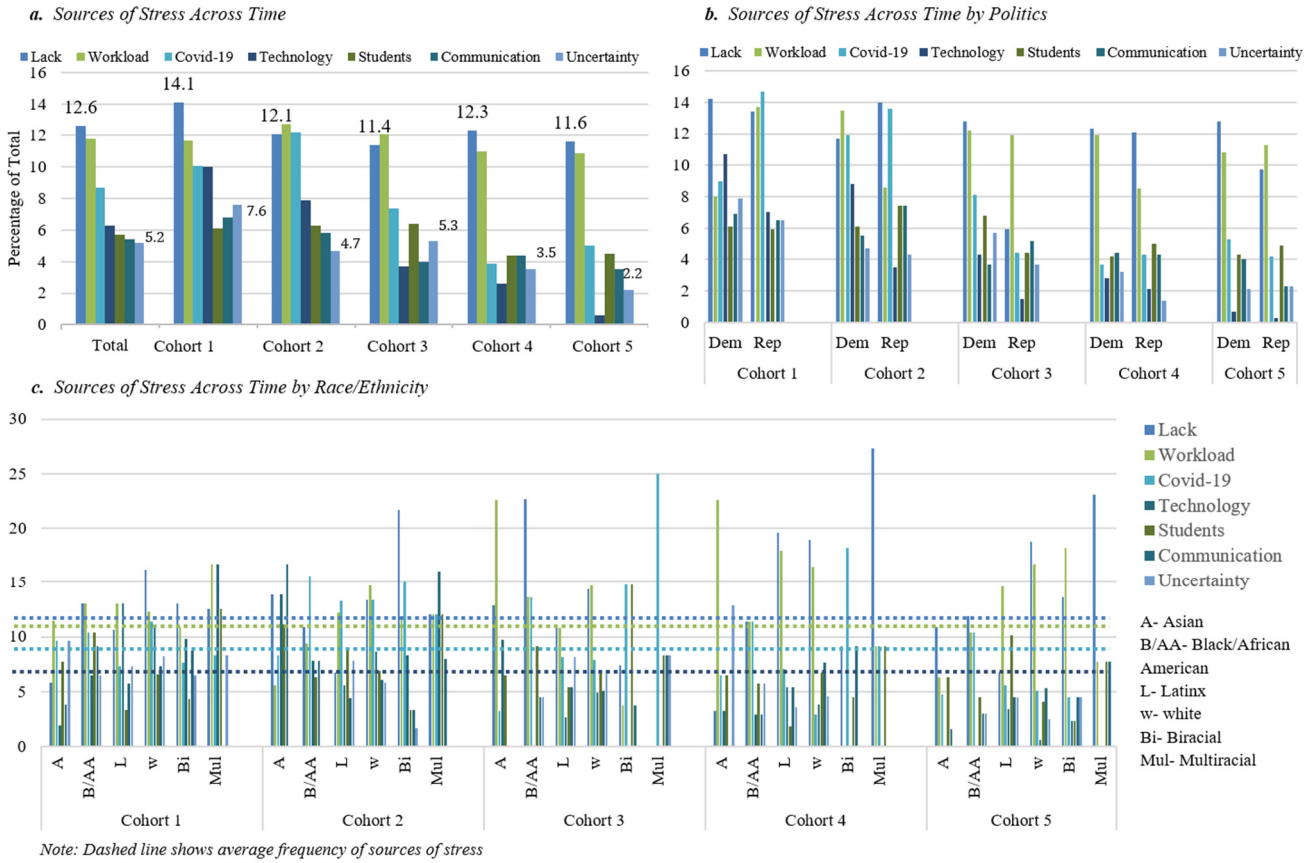

Figure 3. Sources of stress for school personnel across time.

Frequencies by race/ethnicity were also run to compare potential group differences (Figure 3c). For the majority of school personnel, Lack of resources, support, and time remained the primary source of stress and did not differ by racial/ethnic group. Notably, Lack increased during the summer timeframe for some groups. For Black and African

American participants in the summer cohort, their most common source of stress was Lack. Over the course of the year, Lack was most commonly reported for Black and African American participants in the Vaccine Rollout Cohort. White and Latinx participants were highest on reported stress due to Workload.

Overall, when looking across racial and ethnic groups, COVID-19 was the largest source of stress for Black and African American participants (11.5%). For Black and African American school personnel, COVID-19 was most frequently reported as a stressor during the Insurrection Cohort (January–February). Conversely, COVID-19 was the lowest source of stress for Asian participants (6.5%). Latinx (7.2%) and Biracial (6.5%) school personnel were least stressed by Students, while Multiracial school personnel were most stressed by Students (10.5%). Overall, considering Leadership as a source of stress, Biracial (7.7%) and white (7.4%) school personnel were highest compared to other racial and ethnic groups, indeed Multiracial participants were least likely to report Leadership as a stressor (4.4%). Multiracial participants were the group that reported the highest levels of stress from Technology (8.8%), almost double the total average. Finally, during the Vaccine Rollout Cohort, Multiracial participants spiked on reporting stressors of COVID-19, Uncertainty, and Leadership.

When considering state politics, for all school personnel, Lack of resources, support, and time and Workload were the primary sources of stress. COVID-19 was more frequently reported as a source of stress for school personnel in Republican-voting states and Uncertainty and Technology were more common stressors for school personnel working in Democrat states. Students were equivalent sources of stress for school personnel across all states. COVID-19 was the most reported source of stress during the Course Launch Cohort for school personnel working in Republican-voting states, much more frequently reported than in the Democrat-voting states. Congruent with the overall sample findings, COVID-19, Technology, and Uncertainty all steadily decreased as primary stressors throughout 2021 (Figure 3b).

6.1.3. Primary Sources of Joy Research Question 3

From more than 5700 school personnel, the primary sources of joy were: *Students (52.3%)*, *Coworkers (12.3%)*, *Teaching/Accomplishments (1.8%)*, *Positive Emotion/Humor (1.1%)*, and *Community (2.1%)* (Figure 4a). These five sources accounted for 80% of the total sources of joy. Examples of school personnel's responses include "A student finally showing up to a session after many no shows", "Co-workers-being there to add fun and to vent to", and "Being part of a community".

Students were clearly the primary source of joy for school personnel across 2021, followed by Coworkers. However, Students and Coworkers as primary sources of joy gradually decreased. Teaching remained stable across cohorts while Community fluctuated during the year. Positive emotions gradually increased across the year as a source of joy. Primary sources of joy were reported to be highest during the Course Launch and Insurrection Cohorts and lowest during Summer and Fall Cohorts. These data are from 5100 school personnel responses.

There were differences between racial/ethnic groups in their primary sources of joy. White participants were highest on reporting Students (57.8%) as a source of joy followed closely by the Multiracial (57.1%) and Biracial (57.0%) participants. While this primary source of joy became less common for all participants across 2021, for Multiracial participants in the Fall Cohort, students as a source of joy dropped to half of this group's original percentage. Comparatively, Asian participants were the group least likely to report Students (41.1%) as a primary source of joy (Figure 4c).

Both white and Asian participants most often reported Coworkers as a source of joy. Black and African American school personnel were the group highest on reports of being brought joy by Teaching and Humor. The lowest sources of joy for Multiracial participants were Teaching, Humor, and Community. Latinx participants reported the highest percentage of being brought joy by Community (2.8%) while Black and African

American personnel were lowest (0.9%). For school personnel in all states, sources of joy were similar. Students were overwhelmingly the primary source of joy although marginally more so for those in Democrat states (Figure 4b). The same pattern followed for Coworkers. However, the remaining primary sources of joy were comparable for both groups and all cohorts. Across the year, common sources of joy gradually decreased.

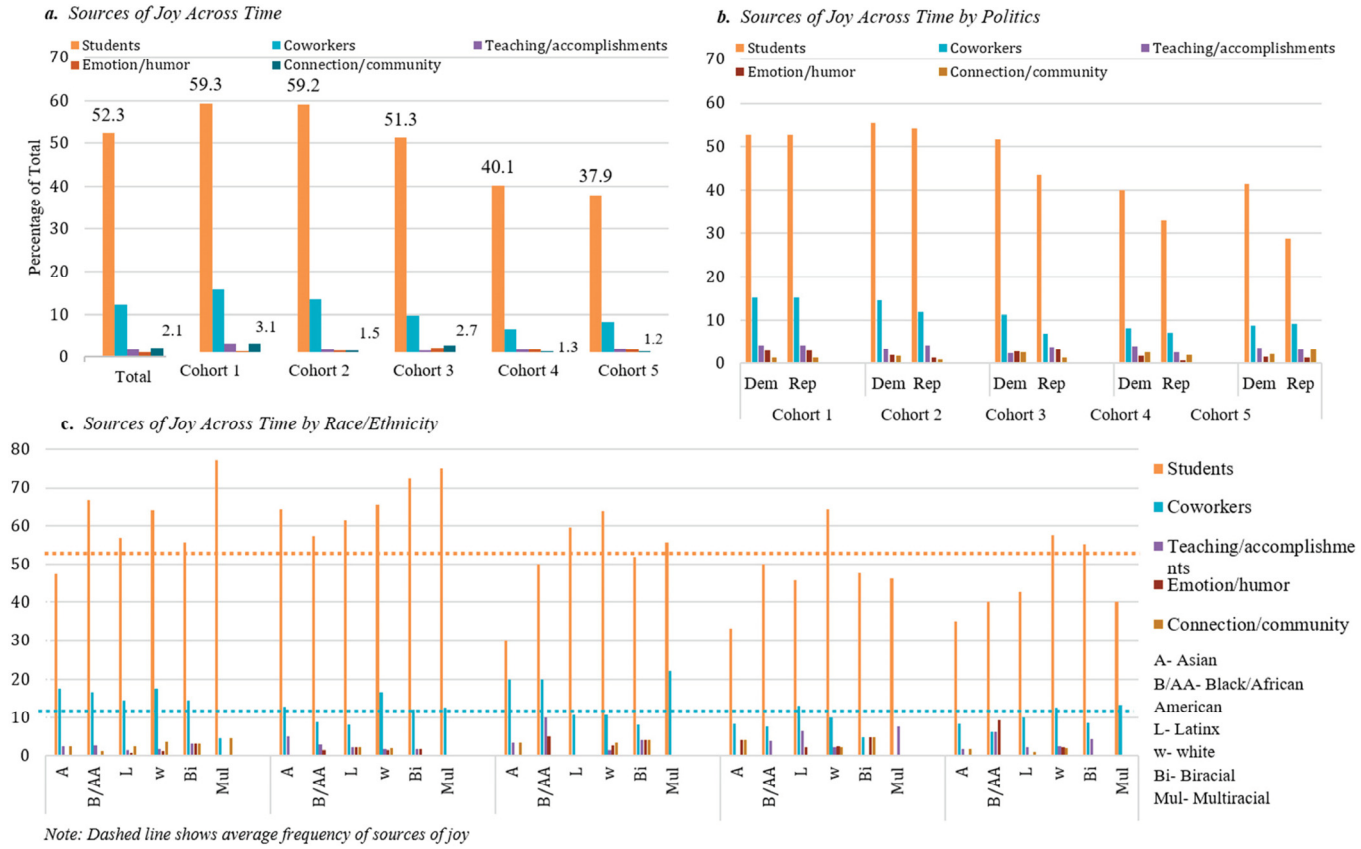

Figure 4. School personnel sources of joy across time.

6.1.4. SEL Supports Research Question 4

Across 5789 school personnel, the average level of individual social and emotional support at school was 3.10 (Range 0–5, SD = 1.26) and the average level of support for student social and emotional learning was 1.87 (Range 0–3, SD = 0.77). Table 2 reports the descriptive results of the two constructs in each cohort. Across the 2021 school year, school personnel reported slightly decreasing levels of both educator and student social and emotional learning support. We found that the two constructs, school personnel social and emotional support and SEL support for students were positively related to each other ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$). Also, there was a statistically significant difference between educator SEL ($F4, 5820 = 14.58$, $p < 0.001$) and support of student SEL ($F4, 5798 = 8.17$, $p < 0.001$) across the five cohorts. There was also a statistically significant difference between state politics and educator SEL ($F1, 5823 = 9.48$, $p = 0.002$) and support of student SEL ($F1, 5801 = 99.00$, $p < 0.001$). There was a statistically significant difference between race/ethnicity and educator SEL ($F10, 5814 = 6.01$, $p < 0.001$) and support of student SEL ($F10, 5728 = 2.51$, $p = 0.005$). When analyzed at the cohort level, support for educator SEL significantly differed between racial/ethnic groups only for the Course Launch Cohort. Within these participants, Asian (3.36%), Multiracial (3.33%), and white (3.18%), school personnel reported the highest levels of support for personal SEL while Native American (1.84%), Hawaiian (2.70%), and Middle Eastern (2.68%), participants reported the lowest levels. For the remaining four cohorts, no significant differences were found between racial/ethnic groups. Support for student SEL significantly differed by state politics for

all cohorts except the Summer Cohort. Reported levels of student SEL support were not found to significantly differ between racial/ethnic groups for any cohort.

Table 2. Cohort Means, SDs, and ANOVAS of Educator SEL and Student SEL Support.

		M(SD)	*df*	*F*	*p*
Cohort 1 12/01/20-01/05/21 Survey Launch	Edu SEL	3.18 (1.18)			
	Race/Ethnicity		10	3.24	<0.001 ***
	State Politics		1	0.42	0.515
	Support for Stu SEL	1.96 (0.69)			
	Race/Ethnicity		10	1.36	0.191
	State Politics		1	11.07	<0.001 ***
Cohort 2 01/06/21–02/28/21 U. S. Capital Insurrection	Edu SEL	3.18 (1.24)			
	Race/Ethnicity		10	1.01	0.428
	State Politics		1	2.31	0.130
	Support for Stu SEL	1.93 (0.75)			
	Race/Ethnicity		10	2.02	0.028
	State Politics		1	21.35	<0.001 ***
Cohort 3 03/01/21–05/31/21 Vaccine Rollout	Edu SEL	3.05 (1.27)			
	Race/Ethnicity		9	1.87	0.054 †
	State Politics		1	2.37	0.124
	Support for Stu SEL	1.81 (0.77)			
	Race/Ethnicity		9	1.18	0.306
	State Politics		1	12.24	<0.001 ***
Cohort 4 06/01/21–08/14/21 Summer	Edu SEL	3.01 (1.20)			
	Race/Ethnicity		10	0.56	0.844
	State Politics		1	0.97	0.323
	Support for Stu SEL	1.78 (0.82)			
	Race/Ethnicity		10	0.87	0.559
	State Politics		1	3.81	0.052
Cohort 5 08/15/21–12/01/21 Returning to School in the Fall	Edu SEL	2.82 (1.32)			
	Race/Ethnicity		10	1.10	0.362
	State Politics		1	3.67	0.056 †
	Support for Stu SEL	1.79 (0.81)			
	Race/Ethnicity		10	1.01	0.436
	State Politics		1	17.28	<0.001 ***

*** $p < 0.001$, and marginal † $p < 0.10$.

7. Discussion

We discuss the research questions in order of initial presentation and then move into a general discussion to provide a cross-sectional review of the affective experiences of school personnel during 2021.

7.1. Research Question 1: What Are School Personnel's Feelings at Work?

School personnel reported a wide variety of emotions, which emphasizes the diversity of affective emotional experiences of school personnel. This finding encourages further exploration of the nuance of the emotional experiences of school personnel. The study results mirror the literature base, as the majority of school personnel primarily experienced negative emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic [17,43]. However, as 2021 unfolded, the percentage of negative emotions such as anxiety slowly declined as emotions such as excitement and happiness slowly increased. This finding suggests a potential relationship between school personnel's emotions and schools improving their responses and commu-

nication around COVID-19 as well as initiatives such as the COVID-19 vaccination rollout for this population.

Importantly, for every cohort, the majority of school personnel's primary emotions were negative. In particular, due to the extreme levels of stress and anxiety school personnel experienced during 2021 compared to other professions, this population remains ideally positioned to benefit from emotion management training and skills [10,24,44]. These findings confirm the importance of supporting school personnel's mental health and call attention to the ways in which the challenges of 2021 may have foreshadowed the current alarming mental health trends emerging for both school personnel and students [25,45–47].

The findings in this study align with previous research carried out on school staff during 2021, which found educators experienced extremely high levels of anxiety and stress [18,44]. In alignment with previous research, school personnel struggled with being overwhelmed, stressed, and dealing with burdensome workloads [31]. Although stress is a historically consistent emotion that educators experience, the high levels of anxiety, particularly reported during the beginning of 2021, likely reflect unique concerns and crises of the day. In addition, educators' feelings of stress and anxiety may be due to concerns about personal health and safety as well as concerns for the physical safety of their students [11,48].

Although school personnel's responses to the tragedies and challenges of 2021 may be unsurprising, given the affective state of the nation during this tumultuous year [49], it is well documented that the consequences of prolonged stress and negative arousal contribute to unproductive and damaging physical and psychological consequences [18]. Therefore, there is a pressing need to understand the affective experiences and stressors of school personnel. It is unsurprising that student depression and anxiety skyrocketed both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic; aside from direct factors, this reflects evidence that has shown students will be impacted both psychologically and academically by the well-being of their teachers, as well as the well-being of all school personnel [22,25]. Directing interventions toward school personnel may be an effective way to support student well-being.

Gratitude was the third most frequent positive emotion reported by school personnel and emphasizes prosocial emotions as relevant and integral to the education system [49]. This may raise further questions, such as what are the factors, situations, or experiences common among school personnel who are primarily reporting positive emotions while at work. Gratitude for health, for example, may result in this emerging as a strong primary emotion for school personnel as a function of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the gradual decrease may be a response to the immediacy of the crisis lessening. Alternatively, school personnel may have felt grateful to begin returning to in-person teaching or grateful for the increased support from the community as a reaction to COVID-19 pandemic burdens. Although strong patterns according to race and ethnicity did not emerge for feeling grateful, the results indicate a need for additional research into why Latinx participants reported the comparatively lowest feelings of gratitude while at work. Differences according to identity group may reflect differences in levels of support and subjective experiences for school personnel.

Emotional patterns differed due to racial/ethnic identities and political contexts. School personnel of color—particularly Black and African American and Multiracial school personnel—endorsed exponentially higher feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed and experiencing a lack of resources, support, and time. This is an essential area of consideration when examining disparate rates of mental health concerns, burnout, and attrition [11,28,30]. Correspondingly, Multiracial school personnel reporting the highest levels of anxiety and lowest levels of happiness while at school bodes additional research while also demonstrating that Multiracial school personnel may be at higher risk of threat and therefore may benefit exponentially from increased emotion management support. When whole school systems expand their emotional intelligence, the result may be increased awareness and social support for historically marginalized school personnel.

Regarding state politics, although there were general similarities across all participants, those working in Republican states reported being more stressed than overwhelmed, which may be indicative of differences in state-level policies [50]. In addition, the findings that school personnel working in Democrat states report more feelings of being overwhelmed while also feeling more happiness may also be indicative of differing levels of support. For example, previous studies pointed out that the emotional exhaustion of school personnel could be impacted by different administrative support in schools [44]. Those working in Republican-voting states reported more frequent anxiety during the Capital Insurrection period, which may reflect the influence of world events on systems of education [51]. In addition, the increase in feelings of excitement for those working in Republican states during the summer may reflect more positive expectations considering the return to in-person teaching and the repeal of mask mandates [14,20,50]. These findings emphasize that regardless of personal political affiliation, state-level politics, and subsequent educational policies may indeed impact the affective experiences of school personnel. This encourages a better understanding of how school personnel align or differ from a state's political affiliations and how that impacts their professional well-being.

7.2. Research Question 2a: The Primary Stressors of School Personnel

Although it has previously been found that school personnel were highly stressed during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been less work carried out to determine the specific sources of stress. While workload, a lack of resources, support, and time, and students and leadership are all consistent when comparing pre-pandemic stressors [32], there may have been unique motivators for these stressors in 2021. In addition, the novel stressors of COVID-19, change, and uncertainty emerged.

Workload and a lack of resources, support, and time remained consistent primary sources of stress for school personnel while COVID-19 fluctuated throughout 2021 from starting at corresponding levels to eventually falling far behind workload [11,43,48]. Stress caused by uncertainty spiked during the transition from 2020 to 2021 and also spiked during the period of vaccine rollouts. Technology as a source of stress performed as may be expected, falling with a potential learning curve perhaps as school personnel became proficient with new virtual tools and learning environments or as schools returned to in-person learning.

Across all racial/ethnic groups and state politics, school personnel reported coworkers and students as being stressors, furthermore, sources of stress were additionally in alignment with previous research as leadership emerged as a primary source of stress [23,30]. Although previous research well documents that for educators of color, poor administration and leadership are primary drivers for leaving the field [29], during 2021, white participants were more likely to report leadership as a source of stress, a finding that may emphasize the differences in self-reporting or that school personnel of color, especially Multiracial participants, were comparatively exponentially more stressed out by the alternative stressors such as COVID-19 or a lack of resources, etc. Black and African American participants' highest source of stress was COVID-19. This stressor remained high throughout 2021, which may exemplify systematic health disparities and risks this population faces [30,46]. Once again standing out, Multiracial participants reporting the highest percentages of stress from uncertainty and technology invites further research into the potential determinants of these outcomes. For instance, the increase in Multiracial participants' stressors in the Vaccine Rollout Cohort being caused by COVID-19, uncertainty, and leadership could reflect vulnerabilities or concerns this group of school personnel contended with during 2021, concerns that fluctuated with the year's crises. The findings across time emphasize that the experiences of school personnel of color differ both across 2021 and between different racial/ethnic groups [29,30]. For example, these findings show that white participants report the highest stressor due to their workload, which inspires thinking about whether or not this is due to disparities in experiences or disparities between reporting for school personnel.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, masking, in-personal learning, and vaccinations all became highly polarized issues and subsequently impacted school personnel [17]. These issues are tied to the state where the school is located as education and health policies change as a function of political party. COVID-19 was a greater stressor for those working in Republican states, which may reflect differences in state health and safety policies [51]. In addition, this finding may reflect Republican state school personnel's feelings of upheaval and concern as a result of political rhetoric and the interaction between education and politics. Uncertainty and Technology were more common stressors for school personnel working in Democrat states. Feelings of uncertainty being a high stressor for those working in Democrat states may reflect differences in communication regarding future plans from either school or state-level leadership [50]. In addition, we may hypothesize technology being a high source of stress for these school personnel reflects a lack of resources or an increase in technology use as a function of student need. Moreover, school personnel may have experienced different stressors related to how states differed on student-identity-related bans and policies around teaching practices [20]. Primary stressors highly connected to the COVID-19 pandemic lessened throughout 2021 and may imply that the stressors of school personnel were slowly diversifying as they returned to in-person teaching [23].

One potential response to the stressors buffeting school personnel is to explore emotion management. School personnel benefit from emotion management support, training, and resources, and may benefit particularly when facing sociopolitical crises. Prior research verifies that emotion management can improve the social, professional, and mental well-being of school personnel [42].

7.3. Research Question 2b: The Primary Joys of School Personnel

In this study, students were the most common source of joy for school personnel in 2021. This emphasizes that the very nature of working in the education system is a source of delight and inspiration for school personnel. This indicates that a positive relationship with students can impact school personnel's mental health [22,35]. Students as a source of joy was generally consistent for all school personnel regardless of demographic group or state politics; future directions may be interested in exploring the minor differences between groups or instead may focus on the less-obvious sources of joy such as the community found in teaching and the positive experiences and strengths teachers receive from teaching [22,34].

Emotion and humor were additional primary sources of joy for educators, as they were brought joy by feelings of gratitude, love, and kindness, and their students' feelings of joy [35]. Although these findings should not perpetuate the myth that school personnel should feel perpetually positive and happy, hopefully, this sparks further investigation into how school personnel experience well-being and emphasizes the importance of positive emotions as a protective factor in contending with crises [34].

Furthermore, the work of teaching itself makes up a comparatively small proportion of joy for school personnel in our sample. Out of that proportion, teaching, alongside humor, was reported to bring the most joy to Black and African American participants while they were less likely than white participants to report coworkers and community as sources of joy. This may imply that Black and African American school personnel were receiving diminished levels of social support during 2021 [46]. Asian participants' sources of joy may not have been represented by the primary five categories as students and community were both less reported compared to the average sample. For Asian school personnel, future work should be carried out to ensure their sources of joy and stress in schools are represented in the literature.

Students are a universal source of joy for all school personnel, in general, this did not change when considering state politics [33]. As this data is not causational, there is not a clear reason as to why school personnel working in Democrat states would report more joy from students, however, such a finding may bode further investigation. As the primary sources of joy decreased throughout time for all participants, this could suggest that sources

of joy diversified and became less congruent as 2021 progressed. These findings provide a benchmark for understanding the sources of joy for school personnel during 2021 and may prove useful for understanding the current assets and opportunities for strengthening the education system and encouraging retention.

7.4. Research Question 3: Are Schools Supporting Student and School Personnel SEL?

School personnel reported average levels of SEL support from schools. Research has found this support is imperative for the successful implementation of social and emotional programming in schools [42]. Although this is encouraging, due to the nature of this sample in self-selecting into a course on managing emotions and stress, there may be unaccounted-for biases that make this population higher on SEL support than the typical school personnel.

Finally, support for school personnel SEL significantly differed between racial/ethnic groups only within the Insurrection Cohort. This may indicate a relationship between the heightened socio-political tension in the nation and school personnel's feelings of personal social and emotional support, a relationship not evident during the rest of the year. Notably, school personnel's race/ethnicity was not found to affect reported levels of student SEL support. This finding suggests perception of student SEL support is not affected by the reporter's racial/ethnic identity. Furthermore, although self-reporting of school personnel SEL support did not differ by race/ethnicity given the previously well-established disparities for school personnel of color [26], further research should examine potential differences that may have been confounded by the size of the sample or the majority of the participants identifying as white.

Interestingly, support for student SEL significantly differed by state politics for every cohort except the Summer Cohort. This finding highlights a strong relationship between state politics and school support of student social and emotional learning [36,52]. The recent politicization of social and emotional learning was apparent in the study's findings [53]. State politics resulted in significant differences between support for student SEL in all but the Summer Cohort. As educators' well-being affects their students, and as policies banning the teaching of social and emotional learning proliferate, we must be vigilant to understand how these policies may be affecting school personnel's well-being [6,51].

However, research also found that educator stress during the COVID-19 pandemic may be moderated by self-efficacy. Therefore, school personnel may decrease psychological distress when they feel capable of handling their mental and emotional state. This, in turn, emphasizes the potential benefits of adult social and emotional learning and teaching school personnel how to understand and manage their emotions. Social and emotional learning is defined as skills and competencies that teach self-awareness, relationship skills, self-management, responsible decision-making, and social awareness [19].

7.5. Concluding Discussion

The findings from this study confirmed that school personnel report varying emotions, joys, and stressors across time. These results suggest the sociopolitical events school personnel encountered had a meaningful impact on their emotional state [40]. School personnel, given their work environment, are more affected by a nation's sociopolitical crises than those not working in schools [15]. These impacts can have detrimental consequences on their personal well-being [16], which subsequently influences the students they interact with [4,40]. These findings provide initial guidance for future research into education to consider sociopolitical context and how that may impact findings, both for schools in the United States and globally.

As more than 8000 school personnel in the United States consented to take this survey, and more than 27,000 individuals enrolled in this free course on managing emotions, this is evidence for the urgent need for emotion management support. School personnel are eager to find training and education on emotion management.

Across the board, school personnel are affected by those they work with; this finding was confirmed as students and coworkers were both primary stressors and primary sources of joy. This was consistent across 2021 for all participants. School personnel are essential to the school ecosystem and are active participants in each other's and their students' well-being [5,22,39]. According to these data, establishing clear evidence for the state of school personnel's joys and stressors may have an impact on understanding the concerning rates of burnout and attrition, as well as leveraging current assets to improve the mental health of school personnel [46].

This study offers a unique contribution to the field of education due to the nature of the sample being inclusive of all states, territories, and all roles of school personnel as well as including a representative sample of race, ethnicity, gender, and age. As a whole, understanding the affective experiences of school personnel is essential to continue to combat the effects of the challenges experienced during 2021. One area of future research into the well-being and retention of school personnel may be years of experience; in this sample, the average years of experience decreased from 14.1 to 9.4 across 2021 and this is indicative of more-experienced educators retiring and less-experienced educators making up a larger majority of school personnel.

To improve systems of education for students, society, and all those who work within, emotion management support for all school personnel, not just classroom teachers, should be further explored [37]. As value continues to be established for understanding emotions and for social and emotional learning, and as such concepts continue to rapidly grow, research must continue to take into consideration the influences of the varied sociopolitical contexts on a state and national level [4,52].

7.6. Limitations

This study is limited by potential confounding factors, such as the fact that it is self-reported and participants self-selected into taking the survey. It must be noted that this data is neither causational nor directional and does not substantiate a specific relationship between educator affective experiences, time, and demographic group membership. Examination and breakdown of these data by school personnel role, and additional marginalized identities such as gender or sexual orientation, could offer further valuable insight into educators' emotional experiences while at work [48]. Notably, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern/North African school personnel were not represented proportionately across the five cohorts. Therefore, we note these participants were not included in the racial/ethnic group analyses to avoid generalization.

Furthermore, given that the current data were collected from teachers participating in a virtual course focused on supporting their emotion management, this sample may potentially be overrepresented by participants from Democratic states, where there is greater interest in social and emotional learning support in schools. This bodes further exploration of the challenges related to a lack of support for SEL that school personnel working in Republican states may experience and emphasizes the value of research in education that takes into consideration the political environment school personnel are operating within. In addition, employing a binary variable of states being either assigned Democrat or Republican fails to account for the nuance within cities, municipalities, and counties, and to consider the graduations of the U.S. diverse political spectrum. Further research should take this under advisement when considering the intersection between affective experiences, social and emotional learning, and politics.

Lastly, as the subgroups of school personnel described in the current study were analyzed based on basic external demographic information, there is a potential limitation in not sufficiently reflecting the diverse psychological and experiential differences of individuals. Individual differences in emotional experiences and perceptions can vary not only by demographic information but also by other factors such as teaching experience, type of school, and personal experiences during the pandemic. Therefore, additional participant-related details need to be further analyzed based on diverse profile groups. Future directions may

investigate the affective experiences, stresses, and joys of school personnel at multiple time points and examine effective experiences by years of experience to further understand how sociopolitical events affect school personnel over the course of their careers.

8. Conclusions

As a cross-sectional review of the emotions, joys, stressors, and support of school personnel in the United States, hopefully, this study inspires an abundance of future directions into a deeper understanding of the affective experiences of school personnel. There is value in contextualizing educational and emotional research within the upheavals and crises that school personnel contend with across systems of health, policy, and politics. By further understanding where we have been and the impact of 2021, we may better understand where to go next in supporting the well-being of school personnel.

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