Guidelines for Writing a Problem of Practice (POP) Statement

Chapter I of a dissertation begins with an introduction section that provides background information, explanations and definitions of important terms, and relevant historical or societal information. This is followed by a problem of practice (POP) statement that presents the rationale for a targeted, researchable issue. The POP statement should be a single, succinct paragraph of approximately 200–250 words that outlines the broad problem in society, evidence of this problem within the recent research literature, and how this broad societal problem exists in your context. A POP statement *should not* mention potential interventions, solutions to the problem, opinions on what should be done, background information, or definitions. Instead, try to convince your reader how and why this problem matters. The following sample POPs:

1. state the broad problem in society (i.e., not specific to your setting), with a recent citation(s);
2. provide multiple cited statements (e.g., findings from recent research studies) to show how widespread, severe, or urgent the problem is; and
3. state how this broad problem manifests in the context they plan to study.

The identification of English learner (EL) students as long-term English learners (LTELs)—who are primarily English-speaking, American-born Latinos—results in students remaining in ESL programs that lead to diminished educational opportunities (Callahan et al., 2010; Harklau, 1994; Kanno & Kangas, 2014), poor self-esteem, and low expectations for themselves (Menken et al., 2012; Thompson, 2015). Students who are LTELs are orally, but not otherwise, proficient in English (Brooks, 2015; Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Olsen, 2014); are weak in their home language skills (Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Olsen, 2014); perform below proficiency academically (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Menken et al., 2012; Olsen, 2014; Olvera, 2015); are at a higher risk of dropping out (Holzman et al., 2020; Olsen, 2014); have low personal expectations for themselves (Menken et al., 2012; Olsen, 2014; Thompson, 2015); and are overidentified for special education services (Sahakyan & Poole, 2021; Shealey et al., 2005). In fact, LTELs graduate from high school at a rate of 55%, which is 21% lower than non-LTEL EL students (Kieffer & Parker, 2017). Furthermore, EL students who do not reclassify (i.e., no longer qualify for EL services) before high school are 42% less likely than their non-EL peers to enroll in postsecondary programs (Holzman et al., 2020). Of the 15,467 Grades 6-12 EL students in Tennessee, 6,283—or 41%—were identified as LTEL (Tennessee Department of Education, 2018). Second language acquisition research indicates that English language proficiency can be gained within 4–7 years; however, 51% of EL students in Tennessee will not meet this criterion (Sugarman & Geary, 2018).

For the past several decades, a majority (66%–84%) of college students have reported experiencing trauma (Artime et al., 2019; Bernat et al., 1998; Blanchard et al., 2005). Furthermore, the rate of college students experiencing trauma has been steadily increasing since 2010 (Center of Collegiate Mental Health, 2020). Although trauma directly affects the individuals experiencing the trauma, individuals in helping capacities may also experience negative effects of that trauma (Bride, 2007; Figley, 1995; Greinacher et al., 2019). Resident assistants often experience some form of secondary traumatic stress (Crumpei & Dafinoiu, 2012), as they are often expected to be a first responder in crises, such as the mental and emotional distress experienced by residential students (Canto et al., 2017). Indirect exposure to trauma is connected to distress (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995), negative cognition (Bride, 2007; Greinacher et al., 2019; Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995), and secondary traumatic stress (Elwood et al., 2011). Burnout has continually been identified as a factor preventing students from continuing in their roles as RAs (Hardy & Dodd, 1998; Paladino et al., 2005; Stoner, 2017). The housing department at a public university in the southeastern United States has experienced an increase in resident assistants expressing job-related stress, and they often state "burnout" as a reason for choosing not to return in subsequent semesters.

Rates of reported trauma and mental health disorders in children and adolescents are higher than ever before (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019; Child Mind Institute, 2018) and frequently lead to behavioral challenges in the classroom (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Child Mind Institute, 2018; Dotson Davis, 2019) and academic underachievement (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Dotson Davis, 2019). Exposure to trauma in childhood has also been linked to anxiety and depression, which also make classroom management difficult for teachers (Overstreet & Mathews, 2011; Weist-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). During the 2015–2016 school year, more than 40% of public school teachers indicated that student misbehavior was a barrier to teaching (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017) and teachers are increasingly concerned that behavior problems and academic challenges prevent students from being college ready upon high school graduation (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012). Teacher preparation programs, however, may not include pedagogical strategies to support the social, behavioral, and academic needs of children who have experienced trauma (Cummings et al., 2017; Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016), leaving teachers underprepared to meet students' needs. Similar to nationwide trends, graduates of a Middle Tennessee teacher preparation program are given minimal instruction regarding how to meet the needs of children who have been exposed to trauma and likely experience challenges in meeting the social, emotional, academic, and behavioral needs of their students.

Nationally, over 13% of teachers have less than 4 years of teaching experience (Taie & Goldring, 2020). Early-career teachers, or those within their first 5 years of teaching, have an attrition rate of 40%, which is substantially higher than the experienced teacher attrition rate of 8% (NCES, 2012; Taie & Goldring, 2020). Early-career teacher attrition contributes to the national teacher shortage, as 43% of teachers are eligible to retire over the next 10 years (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Taie & Goldring, 2020). According to recent studies, early-career teachers are retained in their current school 82% of the time, with approximately 8% transferring within or between school districts and 10% leaving the teaching profession (Espel et al 2019; Pratte & Booker, 2014). Teacher attrition is detrimental to districts in hiring costs as well as the time and financial costs of mentoring and professional development (Barnes et al., 2007; Collins & Schaffer, 2020). Students who are economically marginalized, have a disability, or are non-White are more likely to experience teacher attrition (Barnes et al., 2007; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In Tennessee, novice teacher attrition rates resemble those of other states across the nation with 72% being retained in their current school and an additional 8% being transferred to other schools within the district (Collins & Schaffer, 2020). The district under study, however, has a higher novice teacher attrition rate than the state average, which can disrupt student learning and school culture, as well as cost the district human and financial capital.

Only 55% of nurses hold a baccalaureate or graduate degree; doubling the population of nurses with higher degrees is needed to meet the nursing shortage (Institute of Medicine, 2010). Nursing programs are rejecting qualified student candidates because there is not enough faculty to teach them (National League for Nursing, 2016). In fact, 75% of university nursing departments assert that qualified baccalaureate-level nursing candidates are turned away due to a nursing faculty shortage (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2014). Quality nursing faculty retention is vulnerable due to substantial workloads, multiple role responsibilities, and the advanced age of current faculty (Benner et al., 2010). Additionally, nursing faculty earn 10% less than fulltime nurse educators in a hospital setting and 33% less than a bedside nurse (Carlson, 2015; Kaufman, 2017). The transition from bedside nursing into academia is often problematic, as there are not enough nursing faculty preparation programs to provide content and pedagogical instruction (Benner et al., 2010; Esper, 1995). At Ryder Community College, nursing faculty shortages mirror national trends in that faculty are aging out of the workplace, there are not enough nurses with graduate degrees that want to teach, increased pressures to teach in both the classroom and the clinical practice setting are triggering burnout, and recruitment and retention attempts are not meeting projected needs.